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A Continuous Adjustment: The Impact of COVID-19 on International Graduate Students

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A CONTINOUS ADJUSTMENT: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

A Dissertation

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Abstract

International graduate students have endured unique obstacles during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explored the experiences of eight international graduate students from various countries and academic backgrounds. The following questions guided this study: (1) What were the experiences during the 2020 school year for international students throughout COVID-19?; (2) What were the day-to-day experiences of international graduate students during COVID-19?, and (3) How did the international graduate students cope and adjust as they lived through a pandemic? Analysis of the data demonstrated the impact on the international graduate students' preconceived expectations of the academic and socio-cultural experiences, as well as their overall quality of life. This study also indicated that international graduate students are in fact resilient and are willing to succeed regardless of the challenges they encounter.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Arriving in a new country comes with challenges including adjusting to living and learning in a new environment. The adjustments an individual face may vary by origin, race, ethnicity, and English language proficiency, among others. Some of the challenges occur during the initial transition, while others last longer. In addition to the typical obstacles faced by international students, however, 2020 was like no other year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 changed everyone's lives on a global scale.

The disease was commonly known as "2019 novel coronavirus" or "2019-nCoV". The virus has been linked to some types of common cold, in addition to causing Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), it was estimated that as many as 10 percent of the world's population had the virus and some 1.7 million individuals died from it (Davidson & Katopodis, 2020).

There are various reasons as to why students pursue international studies, including the opportunity to explore a different culture, and opening to new ways of thinking, learning, and behaving. Many experiences are not limited to academics but also are social, and include developing relationships and overall friendships with individuals of other cultures. Regardless of the reason, it is evident that choosing to be an international student involves additional stress and anxiety and requires the strength to cope with a diverse range of circumstances.

On a personal level, an international student develops their self-esteem, confidence, and maturity, due to their independent lifestyles and unique capabilities. The current global environment enhances key cultural skills and increases international students' need to search for higher education around the world. The decision to study overseas is significant and costly, and,

therefore, when an individual is in the process of choosing an area of study and a country in which to reside, they are not only buying into the education system but are acquiring a plethora of services– including but not limited to the image of the brand and the institution. Additionally, they must consider the following about the host country: safety, security, cultural activities, international background, university environment, quality of life, and visa entry requirements (Cubillo et al., 2006).

It is vital to understand that international students not only pursue an academic degree but the benefits that degree may provide. For example, employment and status play important roles in the personal motivation and, thus, the quality of the chosen program, the prestige of the institution, and the overall image of the host country are variables that influence degree benefits. Recommendations from family, friends, or acquaintances who have had past experiences are also important, as are the attraction of experiencing living and immersing oneself in a different culture, meeting new individuals, making international connections, and improving language skills. An international student also looks at the image of the chosen country, including its reputation, its stereotypes, and its image in higher education. The dimensions of a country/city, such as its historical background, are others reason students are attracted of the idea of studying abroad (Sherry et al., 2009).

COVID-19 changed the educational landscape for students around the world. It brought uncertainty, coping, and adjustments for the 2020 school year. Beginning in March 2020, more than 1,100 colleges and universities shut down in the United States (Gutterer, 2020). International students especially felt the stress and anxiety of COVID-19, in addition to unique experiences that they experienced and at times, they appeared to be left out; the unforeseen

pandemic brought additional stress, adjustments and ways of coping to an already hectic life. International students experienced and endured difficulties in their new environment and facing a global pandemic was yet another challenge.

Statement of the Problem

There is much information on how COVID-19 interrupted the operations of schools, colleges, and universities (Duong et al., 2020), and there are additional sources on how to cope with the stress and trauma of the pandemic (Lund, 2020). Teachers and students have shared their experiences during COVID-19 (Kim, 2020) at local or global scales; Pham and Shi (2020) shared their report on the study on mental distress of Vietnamese students in the U.S. amid the pandemic. Another study indicated the personal resilience and influence of COVID-19, and yet how it induced stress, anxiety, and fear among graduate students (Oducado et al., 2020). Muacevic & Adler (2020) explored the impact on education and the mental health of students and academic staff. According to Misirlis et al. (2020), the role of social media and the host university played a role in international students' loneliness, depression, and stress levels in the COVID-19 crisis. Although this study does not represent all international students, it explored the experiences of international graduate students who endured COVID-19 in the U.S. This study informs COVID-19's impact on education, its influence on the news and media, Dis/information, immigration, living in the U.S. amid a pandemic, and the mental health challenges undergone by eight international graduate students.

Theoretical Lenses

Drawing upon the theories of coping, the framework for this proposed study is that of the transaction model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1987). Their coping theory aided in understanding the experiences of international graduate students coping with the adjustments and stresses of COVID-19. Lazarus and Folkman identified eight strategies that function as a coping mechanisms and they vary depending upon on the emotional role relative to the problem;

1) Self-control: Controlling emotions in response to stress.

2) Confrontation: Retaliating and facing the pressure to change the situation.

3) Social support: Talking to other and seeking social connection to survive a difficult time.

4) Emotionally distancing: An act of indifference to what is around, to prevent the distress from the controlling one's actions.

5) Escape and avoidance: Denying of the existence of stress as a coping mechanism.

6) Radical acceptance: Adapting to the adversity by looking into unconditional self-acceptance.

7) Positive reappraisal: Finding an answer to the struggle and growing from the experience.

8) Strategic problem-solving: Redirecting actions and attending to specific solution-focused strategies to push thru the harsh times.

The eight coping mechanisms and understanding of stress, coping and adjustments vary from individual to individual. Life changes require some adaptation, whether positive or

negative (Martz & Livnhe, 2007). Coping was defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1987) as a continuous change in cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage targeted external and internal demands, which are assessed as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Biggs et al., 2017). In this study, stress will be considered a reaction to critical life events— whether positive or negative—, in addition to helplessness, uncertainty, lack of control, anxiety, threat, and overall conflict (Krohne, 2002).

Experiencing too many changes in a short time creates a sense that we are no longer in control and can contribute to elevated levels of physical breakdowns and illnesses (Pierce et al., 1996). For instance, losing a job or a loved one, getting married or having a child, marital separation, becoming disabled or incapacitated, loss sense of self, loss of independence, sexual problems, infidelity, problems with coworkers, family turmoil, major changes in conditions of work, mortgage or loan foreclosure, major decision regarding an immediate future, alterations in finances and changes in social activities, among others, are events with which an individual might cope, stress, and adjust over time (Krohne, 2003).

Evidence has shown that international students have their share of events with coping, stressing, and adjusting when entering a foreign country, including language barriers, cultural differences, transitioning to a different system of teaching and learning, financial issues, feeling of unsafety, homesickness (Myles & Cheng, 2003), loneliness, adjusting to a new way of life (Mo, 2013), and academic or personal competition/expectations. Confronting an unexpected global pandemic brought its own set of challenges, with which international students coped, stressed, and adjusted.

Purpose of the Study

The study provided an open, safe space for conversations and the untangling of events and experiences unique to international graduate students from abroad who were living and studying in the United States during a pandemic. Additionally, this study gave voice to the international community by hearing their experiences, challenges, stresses, and adjustments. International graduate students are unique in that they excel and bring diversity to a classroom and a campus environment.

Furthermore, international graduate students' economic impact is more than tuition dollars, food, clothing, transportation, and other living expenses. They contribute to the United States in science, technology, politics, and education, become ambassadors of their countries, and have a competitive edge for global careers. I believed that international students who coped with the stress of jumping into unknown territory could navigate the adjustments of COVID-19. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the overall experiences of international graduate students and to understand how they coped and adjusted during a global pandemic. This investigation was accomplished through the following approaches: (1) Analyzing the life of international graduate students prior to COVID-19; (2) Contextualizing life in a pandemic, news, media, Dis/information, living with COVID-19 and living in the U.S. amid the pandemic; (3) COVID's impact on academics, including visa & immigration; and (4) COVID's impact on living, including lack of social engagement and mental health.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1) What were the experiences during the 2020 school year for international students throughout COVID-19?

2) What were the day-to-day experiences of international graduate students during COVID-19?

3) How did the international graduate students cope and adjust as they lived through a pandemic?

Organization of the Dissertation

The five chapters of this dissertation include the Review of Literature, the Study Design, the Findings, and Discussion and Conclusion.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

This literature review examines international students, the history of COVID-19, higher education's academic response to COVID-19, and theories of coping.

The International Student

The following distinctions are important to consider:

1) International student or foreign student- an individual who is enrolled for credit at an accredited higher education institution in the U.S on a temporary visa and who is not an immigrant—permanent resident with an I-51 or green card—, or an undocumented immigrant or a refugee.

2) Temporary visa holder- an individual who enters the U.S for employment lasting a fixed period and it is not considered permanent nor indefinite.

3) Immigrant- a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence (Nada & Araujo, 2018). For this study, I used the term international graduate student as someone who had already earned a bachelor's degree and was pursuing additional education in a specific field.

According to the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP, 2017), the number of international students enrolled in U.S. universities declined by approximately 4% between 2016 and 2017. The analysis done by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security indicated that more than half of the decline in enrollment was attributed to individuals coming from India studying computer science and engineering at the graduate level. An October 2017, NFAP policy brief indicated that for many universities, various majors and graduate programs might not be

maintained without international students. For example, 93% of full-time electrical engineering graduate students and 88% of full-time computer science graduate school programs were international students.

Selecting a University

International students select an institution based on the academic reputation, quality and expertise of the teaching faculty, and the atmosphere of the campus. Some of the services that international students consider are library facilities, laboratories, availability of computers, quiet areas— either study rooms or areas of self-study. International students go through a detailed process when selecting and deciding to study abroad. They experience a unique set of challenges including language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, interpersonal issues, racial discrimination, loss of social support, alienation and homesickness, anxiety about returning home, emotional challenges, and perceiving an insufficient commitment on the part of the educational institution (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Nonetheless, international students come equipped to thrive and succeed, as well as serve as an inspiration to others despite unprecedented challenges, which in 2020 included a global pandemic COVID-19.

Visa and Immigration

International students must be concerned with visa status as it must be always legal and active, and thus they must have an unexpired passport. They also must be concerned with optional practical training (OPT), a special work permit that allows international students to work 1-3 years after graduation, depending on the field of study, as well as curricular practical training (CPT) (Nott, 2020).

Financial Concerns

Work was limited for international students outside of campus, since universities/colleges shut down during the summer of 2020 and resulted in financial struggles for international students (Quinton, 2020). Far away from family, feeling isolated, lacking a strong support network, and having to find a place to live, various international students struggled with where to go during the pandemic since dorms were closed. In addition to language barriers, especially for those international students starting to grasp a command of the English language, and cultural differences were two of the many situations with which international students had to cope (Redden, 2020).

International Student Mobility

Choudaha (2017) identified three key events and trends, or waves, that have impacted international student mobility. The first period was prior to the terrorist attacks of 2001 and involved enrollment of international students looking into research areas and students in science, technology, and engineering. The prime motivator to study abroad were the economic rewards in their respective home countries. Throughout this period, funding was key to retain talents in the areas of science and technology, due to the research opportunities; the U.S. was considered a top choice by master's and doctoral students (National Research Council, 2005). After 9/11, visa requirements made the process more difficult for students to study in the U.S.

The second period was during the global financial recession; international students were recruited by U.S. colleges and universities during the global financial crisis that began in the U.S. According to Eggins & West (2010), major budget cuts occurred in higher education in

various countries around the world. Interest in recruiting international students was at an LL high, as international students' tuition fees and housing tended to be higher than in and out of state students, and thus increased revenues.

The third period included three events; the first one was the slowdown in the Chinese economy. The second one included the UK's referendum to leave the European Union and the third event was the American Presidential elections in the year 2016. The economic slowdown in China decelerated the number of Chinese students studying abroad. According to Choudaha & Hu (2016), Chinese students investigated the value of investing in education abroad, especially when host countries' immigration policies and institutions did not support career services or provide pathways for experiential opportunities.

Challenges of Cross-Cultural Interactions

There is rich higher education literature related to international students, much of which focuses on the challenges of fostering cross-cultural interactions (Redwood & Cindyann, 2010), learning challenges and preferred pedagogies of international students (Pramila, 2017), understanding East Asian graduate students' socio-cultural and psychological adjustment (Xiong & Zhou, 2018), the experiences of international female students in U.S. graduate programs (Contreras et al., 2017), analyzing the anxiety of international students in U.S. higher education (Khoshlessan & Das, 2017), the complexity of attempting to remain in the U.S. or return home after graduation (Han et al., 2015), as well as research that attempted to understand the role of policy that may hinder engagement for international students and the implications of such hindrance (Garcia & Villarreal, 2014).

History of COVID-19

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pneumonia pandemic, which, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) caused a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), was declared a public health emergency. The initial description came from Wuhan, China, and Italy was the first country in Europe to be impacted. Local institutions and healthcare systems were forced to face various challenges, including an order of a nationwide lockdown. Spain declared a state of emergency on March 14, 2019, and other nations followed (Chowell, & Mizumoto, 2020).

The pandemic led to a massive campaign of increased hand washing, reduced face touching, wearing masks in public and physical distancing. Travel worldwide was not allowed and COVID-19 brought uncertainty worldwide, including the infectiousness and lethality of the virus, the time needed to develop and deploy vaccines, whether a second or third wave of the pandemic would emerge, the duration and effectiveness of social distancing, the near-term economic impact of the pandemic and policy responses, the speed of economic recovery as the pandemic receded, the extent to which business travel and working from home would persist, and the overall impact on business formation, research, and development (Dashraath et. al, 2020).

As of March 19, 2020, 191,127 cases, including 7807 deaths worldwide, were attributed to COVID-19, an infectious disease with high transmissibility (Rome & Avorn, 2020). Due to national emergencies and to help combat the spread of COVID-19, social distancing interventions, including closure of schools, bars, cinemas, restaurants, cancellation of large public gatherings including cultural and sporting events, discouraging gatherings of more than 10

people, and employees working remotely helped to reduce the transmission of the virus and the risks of deaths for most vulnerable populations. Countries that enforced strategies that included early surveillance, testing, contact tracing, and strict quarantine maintained low COVID-19 per-capita mortality rates (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020).

COVID-19 and its overall consequences continue to develop, thus, for the purpose of this research, I looked at the stresses of, coping with, and adjustments to the global pandemic endured by international graduate students.

Being an International Student During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic obstructed the lives of international students both academically and personally. COVID-19 had an impact on the "traditional" college experience as it brought about a series of changes. Most notable were the facemasks required strict social distancing measures and ongoing COVID-19 testing (Retta, 2020).

Academic Impact

The global pandemic changed things in the educational field and international students worked to adjust and keep up. These major changes included switching to 100% online or virtual instruction, delayed immigration paperwork, restrictions on international travels and relocating, and struggling with finances.

Online Instruction

The global pandemic was an unexpected event leading to various changes in a social, cultural, and educational setting. As discussed, the most significant impact to the academic experience was the necessity for classes to be taught 100% online. Initially, universities offered

both hybrid classes or fully virtual classes (Sayler & Rosebrugh, 2020); however, as the pandemic continued, there was a move to 100% online classes (Soisson & Hugg, 2020) to keep new and returning students and faculty and staff safe. Those attending in person classes were broken into smaller groups. Demuyakor (2020) found that slow internet connectivity meant a disruption studies and students had to buy data to get connected or explore other areas to complete assignments or to follow a class. Distant learning became the immediate "fix" for numerous schools and universities. International students had their share of challenges, and some found themselves with the additional struggle of understanding social cues, made more difficult viewed from a screen (Bouranova, 2020).

On July 6, 2020, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) instituted a policy mandating that international students planned at least one-in person course for the semester. If the university was considering a full virtual semester, the international student had to return to their home country. On July 14th, 2020, former President Donald Trump and his administration rescinded the policy after Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology took legal action (Rothenberger, 2020). International students were able to remain on campus and continue taking classes like U.S. students—even if those classes were fully online. An international student had to consider travel concerns to either go back home or enduring uncertainties in the U.S. The closing of various campuses left some international students stranded without housing options, and others who were graduating were hit with the consequences of withdrawn job offers (Reardon, 2020).

International students who decided to leave the U.S. and went back to their home countries had to deal with slow or disconnected network, and, for many, live lectures were

interrupted. Additionally, students dealt with a discontinuation from online exams with systems crashing or being unable to attend a class at a "normal" schedule; if an online class started at 10:00 a.m. in the U.S., for some it meant to be up at 3:00 a.m. Some international students sent requests for a few classes to be recorded but their respective colleges declined (Beckstein, 2020).

Housing

Student housing was reduced, and separate housing was designated for those students who became ill and needed to be isolated. In some instances, dorms were emptied and students were sent home. Larger spaces on campus, such as student centers, limited entrance of students to maintain safe distances (Moody, 2020). Large communal student life events were also limited to a certain number of students or were nonexistent, depending on the measures of the college/university (Huether, 2020). Sports teams, for example, continued to play but with either no spectators or limited seating of spectators (Stanton, 2020). Students who expected to defend dissertations had to adjust to an online platform. Other students who were preparing to graduate in 2020 had to settle for virtual graduations, meaning they saw their names on a screen from home. These were some of the ever-changing measures brought about by the global pandemic in the college setting.

International Travels & Relocating

The global pandemic caused the closure of borders either permanently or temporarily as each country set up its own government health official prevention programs. The situation caused three scenarios: first, international students were unable to return to their home countries because the borders were closed and flights were expensive to countries with open borders, or

there was a shortage of flights to certain countries. The second situation encountered by international students was the dilemma that even if they were able to find a flight home, their return could cause problems for the epidemic prevention work of their designated home country. The third case was that traveling raised the possibility of being exposed to the virus (Li, 2020).

Visas and Immigration

When COVID-19 hit, many international students were concerned about their legal status. For example, the U.S State Department planned to adjudicate student visa applications, but it was not clear how that would be possible if consulates and embassies affected by the pandemic were closed for extended periods of time. Such concerns were left unanswered and left a number of international students stranded and anxious (King et al., 2020). Also, some international students dealt with their housing leases ending, causing additional stress because of the lack of access to international travel, and that most universities had asked their students to vacate their dorms. Additionally, some international students dealt with the issues of their visa statuses readying to expire; they had to request an extension, since some of their home countries were under health-related travel advisories, and they were unable to go anywhere (Durrani, 2020). When the global pandemic started, some international students were ready to graduate or had already graduated and had expired visas; they were stuck in the U.S., leaving them as "illegal immigrants". Due to COVID-19, numerous services went remote or were closed, so they were not able to process extensions or renew their visas in a timely manner (Firang, 2020).

Financial Impact & Work

Many international students who had just arrived and were expecting to work on campus did not have the proper paperwork. For instance, obtaining a social security number is a requirement in order on campus; those unable to acquire one were left with financial concerns (Hess, 2020). Due to the pandemic, many countries suffered economic losses, and families were unable to send money overseas, since the banks and many other services were either shut down temporarily or the services being offered remotely caused serious delays (Redden, 2020).

Some international students are given an opportunity to work for a certain period of time to gain experience in their field in a program is called "Optional Practical Training (OPT). Universities help with the application process, but the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has the final say if the international student is granted a temporary work visa after they graduate (Mewett, 2019). When COVID-19 hit, there were delays in the process of OPT applications. Numerous international students who left the U.S. but had submitted their paperwork and paid a fee were denied (Mewett, 2020). Other international students had job interviews lined up and maintained contact with their respective organizations, but with the economic impact of the pandemic, companies froze the hiring process. International students worried about whether they would receive official job offers and make good use of their OPT benefits (Lesley, 2020).

Personal Impact

In addition to the academic stresses of COVID-19, the pandemic also impacted the personal lives of international students. Many of them found themselves concerned about their healthcare, mental health, job opportunities, and feeling homesick.

Healthcare

COVID-19 was distressing, and an international student had to navigate academic and personal challenges and concerns and deal with possible exposure to the virus. Some of the concerns were, if an international student did not have health insurance, could they be tested? If a college/university, did not provide testing pods, where could an international student be tested? If an international student found themselves living with an individual who was exposed and had no possibility of relocating, what should they do? To whom should have they reach out? Such questions were answered by colleges/universities but others received little to no response from their facilities (Andrew, 2020). Many international students arrive in the U.S. without friends or family and had to deal with being sick on their own during the pandemic, which affected both their physical and mental states (Wang et al., 2020).

Homesickness & Mental Health

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was handled by and felt different to everyone. The three common scenarios were to socially distance, quarantine, or isolate. These three situations could make one feel anxious, fearful, concerned, frustrated, depressed, stressed, or even lonely. International students who were in the U.S. had to consider being away from friends and family and that their relatives were also at risk of getting the virus (Song et al., 2020). Some expressed high concerns for a relative being at the hospital due to COVID-19 and that they are unable to help because they were many miles away. Other international students expressed sentiments of loneliness because they were either shy or kept to themselves; online learning affected not only their academic studies but mental health since they had a hard time reaching out to others (Li et al., 2020). For instance, Zhai & Du (2020) reported that international Chinese

students worried about their families being vulnerable and at risk of the infection. There also were the problems of facing discrimination and the feeling of isolation and reported incidents of hate-crimes, especially when other individuals considered them contagious. Moreover, countries such as China, Pakistan, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and India reported and researched the psychological impact of COVID-19 in their higher education institutions, the overall attitudes of students towards compulsory digital learning, and distance learning at university settings (Cheng et.al, 2020). Surveys indicated an increase in depression and anxiety among university students during the pandemic; one report cited a student from India who committed suicide due to the COVID-19's impact on the education crisis (Lathabhvan, 2020). Overall, technology adaptation, teaching, learning, students' engagements, and life experiences were worldwide amid the disruption of COVID-19.

Summary

Various international students were trapped in the United States and faced discrimination, feelings of isolation as learning and life moved online, limited social interactions were, and the disruption of studies because of mental health issues. Others questioned the affordability to study overseas, and those already in the U.S faced a roadblock to pursuing employment upon graduation to extend their experiences in their respective fields. Some students were stranded by travel bans and various immigration policies, while others struggled to get visas to return home as embassies and consulates as well as borders were either closed or slow to respond; for some their status as international students were at risk. Thus, the future of international students' education was tentative. The world was affected by COVID-19 and international students were impacted by new or different financial stresses, preventing them from completing their studies in

the U.S. (Whalen, 2020). The situation for international students varied from school to school and from student to student but the uncertainties remained— full online education, an impact on the economy, issues with homesickness and mental health, little to no social interactions, borders partially or completely closed around the globe, limited international flights, and a virulent disease that continued to spread.

Higher Education's Academic Response to COVID-19

Educational Response to a Pandemic

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), there is a checklist for an education response to the global pandemic that established representation to various constituents in the educational system, including teacher education, information technology, teacher, and parent and students' representatives. The checklist includes: creating a schedule that will entail frequent communication whenever social distancing took place; protecting the health of students, staff, parents, and providing services of emotional support; defining and educating in advance about COVID-19 and helping prevent it and explaining measures taken to ensure everyone's safety; general analysis of the curriculum in response to the pandemic including defining and setting objectives as to what needed to be taught in the "classroom"; providing flexible opportunities for interaction, for staff, students, and parents, including reaching out to other institutions to develop other forms of partnerships to help close the gap; assisting and collaborating on an alternative education plan; creating proper tools of assessment, which included supporting new and incoming students to this new modality of learning and continuously revising the support given to the students, staff and families, such as providing alternative solutions to distribute those food goods; attending to students' well-being

and mental health during these enduring times. And finally, building network systems that meet the needs of students, staff, and families, and communicate effectively.

Actual Academic Response

Azorin (2020) looked at 20 countries' responses to COVID-19 and found that the responses of higher education providers were diverse, from social isolation to curriculum re-development to hybrid classes in response to the global pandemic The virtual and physical transition to hybrid schooling took place during the pandemic. an education system had little choice but to accept the digital measures. Education shifted to home-based, technology-enabled, remote activity with zero physical contact. Others gathered information on how to safely reopen colleges and universities in their home countries amid the global pandemic. Some of the struggles with online learning for international students were language-related challenges. For instance, one study found that international students were impacted by the multilingual resources that enhanced their access to the crisis of communication but did not help to build a shared community (Li et.al, 2020). Additionally, the global pandemic led schools to temporary closures, interrupting children's and youth's access to education. Remote learning presented itself as a possible solution to manage and cope with the crisis (Crawford et.al, 2020).

The disruption of remote learning created an even more noticeable disparity between the upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, and low-income families. Students with access to the internet, digital devices, support of a higher parental education, and the availability of books clearly had an advantage, while those students with little access to remote learning tools and materials fell behind in the educational system (Muhammad, & Kainat, 2020). To help mitigate the gap, individuals created a network of collaboration between their local schools and the

community. The connection began by understanding the context, cultural nuances, and partnerships with various institutions, including sharing experiences, information, challenges, and expressing ideas and solutions to strengthen the educational community. One example was neighborhood schools that delivered and distributed, pens, notebooks, computers, and printers, and other school materials to those who did not have access to them or were in vulnerable situations (Flores & Gago, 2020). In the college and university setting, funds were raised to provide to students who had severe economic difficulties during the pandemic (Sobaih et al., 2020). The funds were allocated to support paying rent, tuition, and teaching materials. Strategic plans also were set in motion to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

With the prediction of a second or third outbreak, health and hygiene issues were top priorities in schools and colleges. Institutions considered a set of steps on how to protect, students, staff, and their families (Masri, & Sabzalieva, 2020). The re-opening of schools, with a hybrid model, included physical distancing, handwashing, and mask protection.

Educational systems around the world adjusted to the requirements that the pandemic brought and embraced the changes that came with it. The pandemic brought changes in various educational systems, which teachers, staff, families, and government officials are still unraveling, including ensuring the continuum of academic learning for students, giving professional support to teachers, and ensuring the well-being of the educational community and its medical care. Thus, collaboration and adaption are two essential tools needed to endure this crisis.

Theories of Coping

There are two parameters to understanding Coping Theory proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1987):

1) Trait-Oriented Theories: The primary focus is on the early recognition of a person's resources and tendencies. State-Oriented Theories emphasize the coping of an individual and the outcome of the methods or strategies.

2) Micro-analytic approach is the study of specific and targeted coping strategies, while the Macro-analytic approach focuses on the fundamental and abstract coping methodologies. Overall, both parameters lead to behavior modification, such as gathering information on the causes of stress, and identifying and effectively accessing assistance to stress inducing situations; the main idea is to understand the process that causes stress and identify the many ways to reduce negative stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1988).

It is important to understand that coping mechanisms will vary per individual and over time. A person may experience the same event as another, but use vastly different coping strategies to adapt to the stressor. For the purpose of this study, I focused on the transactional model of stress and coping; key constructs form the base of an active emotional coping and controlling the core of someone's behavior while experiencing stress.

A stressor can be of primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, problem-intensive coping, emotion-focused handling, or reappraisal. Stressors are major life events, as well as ongoing, every day chronic stressors or even lack of events called non-events. Primary appraisal is when an individual internally analyzes the severity of a situation and then determines whether there is

a deep threat depending on their past experiences and knowledge. If there is a perceived threat then they move on to a secondary appraisal, which involves determining how much control they have over the stressor. For example, if an individual has a high amount control over a situation the stressor is lower. The level of control determining secondary appraisal sets the basis for the actions taken to navigate the stressor, which is known as coping. Coping has two focuses, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused results in direct change of the stressful situation and emotion-focused coping leads to changing the emotional response to the stressor. In the final stage, reappraisal, one is thrown to a feedback loop that determines if the effects of the stressor have been successfully directed. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1990), the stressful event leading to coping implies an intricate process of thinking and allocating meaning to it.

Chapter 3. Study Design

The experiences of international graduate students during the pandemic in this research are not meant to oversimplify the population of international graduate students, but rather to elucidate on the experiences of eight international graduate students in a southern university in Louisiana through focus groups, individual interviews, and debrief forms. This chapter includes a description of the general setting, detailed information about the participants, data sources, data collection and analysis, storage and security of data sources, validity & reliability, role of the researcher, ethical considerations, and the timeline of this study.

Setting

The location for this study was a southern university in Louisiana, which, according to College Factual, was in the top 150 of 1,279 institutions as a popular U.S. college and university destination. The university had approximately 1,645 international students representing a total of 49 countries. The majority of international students came from China, India, and Iran. International students comprised roughly 5.3% of the student body.

The university provided English Language Orientation Programs, International Services, International Student Organizations, International Cultural Center, an International Hospitality Foundation, and an Office of Multicultural Affairs, Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion that assisted international students with events, programs, seminars, and overall resources relevant to the diverse international student population. The university offered a medium sized community of international students that allowed for direct access to the participants.

Virtual Setting

For a time, the Corona Virus affected the method by which studies were conducted; this was true for this study regarding how data was collected. Focus groups and individual interviews for this study were conducted virtually through the use of the web-based Zoom platform. Zoom was provided through the university and was the accepted means of conducting all scheduled classes and meetings virtually. For best practices using Zoom, it was recommended to record in the Cloud to leverage audio conference and to limit the use of audio bridge.

I invited prospective participants through their university email. For security purposes, I was required to set up a passcode or a waiting room for each meeting that was sent individually to the participants. The personal Zoom account had the capacity to host up to 300 people but for this research, I had eight participants. Zoom was not used for any purposes related to telehealth or meetings that potentially contained health related information; it was exclusively used for the experiences of the pandemic of the participants that led to various topics of discussion. The Zoom meetings were restricted only to the study participants and had accounts to the university. In terms of recording, the participants had previous knowledge from the consent form that the Zoom sessions were to be recorded. At the beginning of each session, I reemphasized being recorded by asking participants to provide additional consent to the recording.

Having virtual sessions helped with time as the times of the sessions were set up previously and there was more than once instance for the participants to join and share their stories; if the Zoom session was scheduled to last 30 minutes but it went longer, the platform gave the option to extend its time.

In terms of geography, some participants were not in the same location so they participated regardless of where they were. Flexibility was an advantage; for example, if a

participant was unable to connect through their computer, but they wanted to participate, they could connect through their smartphone. Another advantage was media; the virtual platform—in this case Zoom— gave the participants the chance to share files or make comments in the group chat throughout the session. Additionally, to obtain written statements from the participants, I collected debrief forms electronically; I did not meet with the participants in person because of health regulations. Each participant received a debrief form in a Word Document that provided information about the focus group sessions and individual interviews. Once a participant returned the response, I downloaded the document and moved it to the Cloud for security and confidentiality purposes; I removed names from the document and used a pseudonym for each participant.

Selection Criteria, Recruitment, and Informed Consent

The criteria for selection were as follows: (1) An international graduate student in a masters' or doctorate program; (2) Enrolled in courses at the southern university during Spring 2020, Summer 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021; (3) Living in the general vicinity of the state of Louisiana. The exclusion criteria included international students who were not in a graduate program. The participants received a stipend of $10 for the time invested in the study.

Recruitment was facilitated through snowball sampling. I started with indirect referral contact by email, seeking participants who fit the research criteria and who were willing to partake in this study. Contact information was minimum and only asked for the name and email of potential participant. The participants willing to volunteer initiated contact.

The research study involved minimal risk to the participants. Emails, the recruitment tools, were used to communicate and provide effective and logistical information about the non-

clinical research study. The content created for the recruitment materials and the method of communication did not unduly influence or contain any misleading or exculpatory language. The purpose and procedures of the study informed the individuals how to contact the researcher if they had additional questions/concerns. The compensation was applied toward the time the participant invested in the non-clinical research study. If a participant wanted to withdraw from the non-clinical research study at any given point, they still received compensation.

The informed consent process began when I collected names and emails of potential participants through referrals. when a participant initiated contact, I sent them the information about the study, which included the purpose of the research, the primary investigators, phone numbers, email and hours of contact, the time commitment, and answers to additional questions that were posed.

In a Word document, I recorded potential participants' name and email, saved them to my personal computer, and ensured that the participants had enough time to consider all the options before participating in the study. After a participant committed, I sent them the informed consent before starting the focus group sessions, follow up interviews, and debrief forms. Participants were contacted personally through email and sent the Zoom invitation to consent orally and to confirm with the written statement (see appendix A for consent script).

Because of the virtual platforms, the overall setting of the research, and the pandemic, the participants and I met from our living spaces. I asked the participants if they were in a safe, comfortable, private setting within their spaces to review the informed consent. I considered the subjects' reading abilities; if the consent was done orally, I sent the consent script to their email, and we read the consent form out loud to ensure clarity. I assured that the participant consented free from coercion or any other undue influence. I provided new information to the participants

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when it presented throughout the study, and I re-affirmed subjects' consent to participate throughout the research study.

Participants

The participants were eight international graduate students who were actively enrolled in graduate programs during the pandemic. The participants were from China, Nigeria, Colombia, Germany, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Pakistan. There was a total of four women and four men; two of the female participants were from China but from different cities. Each participant had a culturally and academically diverse background. All participants' names were changed to a pseudonym to protect anonymity although their home countries were identified. The participants' demographics and background are outlined in Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Participants Demographics

	Gender	Age	Country	Position	Degree
Noah	Male	30	Germany	Doctoral Candidate	Education
Bao	Male	29	Vietnam	Doctoral Candidate	Education
Badawi	Male	45	Pakistan	Doctoral Student	Education
Adli	Male	29	Malaysia	Master's Student	Music
Isabel	Female	31	Colombia	Master's Student	Agriculture
Daluchi	Female	27	Nigeria	Doctoral Candidate	Science
Chen	Female	30	China	Doctoral Student	Education
Jun	Female	30	China	Doctoral Candidate	Education

Data Sources

  The global challenges brought by the pandemic were experienced differently by each participant. For the collection and analysis of qualitative data, I used focus groups, individual interviews, and debrief forms. Each data source is discussed in the following sections.

Focus Groups

  There was a total of four focus group discussions. The purpose of the first focus group session was to gain insights into the experiences as an international graduate student prior to COVID-19. This first session illustrated the participant's lives were like and their expectations before the onset of the pandemic. The second, third, and fourth sessions focused on the different experiences during the pandemic. Each focus group occurred virtually through Zoom, as this was the safest way to conduct group meetings based on CDC guidelines. The participants were given a week's notice via email of the time and meeting invitation so they could add it to their calendars. Whenever a participant was unable to attend, they either sent an email or a text message to my contact information provided in the consent form.

  Each group session lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour. I served as moderator and initiated the focus group sessions with open questions and then let the participants take over (see Appendix B for sample focus group prompts/questions). Each focus group session had a variety of participants; for example, some were unable to attend the second session but were available for the next one. In each focus group session, I let the participants engage with each other and helped them to feel comfortable speaking with their peers. Some of the participants knew each other previously, while others were new.

Individual Interviews

The individual interviews were useful at a more personal level for obtaining the stories and the experiences of the participants during the global pandemic. Participants were sent a Word document with a list of three weeks with dates and times for the interviews. I gave the participants flexibility to ensure that they were available. Once a participant confirmed, I added them to the calendar, created a Zoom meeting, and sent it to them. If a participant was unable to meet at a specific time and/or date from the three weeks that were listed, I arranged a time that accommodated them.

There was a total of eight interviews, one per research participant. They lasted 30 minutes to one hour. The semi-formal individual interviews included a set of 20 questions; some participants answered all of them or just a few, depending on the extent of the conversation and relation to the study (see Appendix C for sample questions). Some participants went in-depth about their experiences while others shared more meaningful experiences in the focus group session or vice versa.

Debrief Forms

To gather written statements from the participants, I sent debrief forms after each focus group session and individual interview. The participants were told the purpose of the study in the debrief form and if they needed extra clarification, they had the researcher's contact information. The participants listed or described their thoughts on whether the focus group discussion was insightful or not. The debrief form offered an opportunity for the participants to report any additional information associated with the study or the format of the focus groups and/or

interviews. Additionally, they could also list or describe possible recommendations for future

discussions/topics. See Figure 1 below for a sample of the debrief form used.

A Continuous Adjustment: The Impact of COVID-19 on International Graduate Students.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study will be to examine the overall experiences, stresses, coping and adjustment that international graduate students have gone through, during the global pandemic.

1. List or describe what you thought was insightful and helpful in the focus group.
2. List or describe what you thought was NOT insightful nor helpful in the focus group.
3. List or describe possible recommendations for future discussion/topics
4. List or describe what you thought worked well in the focus group (the flow of the conversations, topics discussed, etc.)

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to ask the researcher now. If you have

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Figure 1.1. Sample of Debrief Form.

The estimated time to complete the debrief form was no more than 10 mins. The

responses were written in a Word document and sent electronically and the debrief forms were

kept confidential.

Data Collection

The data collected was throughout the month of March and first week of April 2021. The

data collection included focus groups, individual interviews, and debrief forms.

Focus Group Data Collection

The main data source came from the focus group sessions, which consisted of having the

participants coming together via recorded Zoom meetings. The sessions were also audio-

recorded on my personal phone as a backup. The sessions helped to obtain firsthand experiences

to better understand attitudes, behaviors, opinions and/or information related to the study.

The Zoom sessions began Saturday at 10:00 am during the month of March and ended the first week of April 2021. The overall focus group sessions' length included the icebreakers, introductions, initial prompts/questions, occasional connectivity interruptions, and wait time to join of 2-5 minutes to ensure that everyone was able to participate. In focus group sessions one and two time was spent on introductions among the research participants, since not everyone in the group knew each other; the total count of the codes section included introductions of participants and their educational fields. The participants from Nigeria, Colombia, Malaysia had backgrounds in science, agriculture, and music, whereas the participants from Germany, Pakistan, China 1, Vietnam, and China 2 came from the education field.

Focus Group 1

The first focus group session was on March 6, 2021. There was a total of five participants, two women and three men: Isabel, Daluchi, Adli, Bao, and Badawi. The overall time of the first focus group was 48 minutes. The main discussion was about life as an international graduate student prior to COVID-19. See below for the general questions/prompts for the group discussion.

1) How was the experience as an international graduate student prior to COVID-19?

2) Pre-COVID as an international graduate student, what made you decide to pursue studies in a foreign country?

3) Did you come to the U.S. by yourself or did get here with a family member? friend ?

4) Did you have a support system?

5) In your journey prior to COVID-19, did you have any experiences that made an impact in your life, whether in school, personal, church, community, mental, spiritual, or even physical.

6) How your life would have been prior to COVID-19 ?

Focus Group 2

The second focus group session was on March 13, 2021. All eight participants, the four women and four men, were in attendance. The time of the second focus group discussion was 69 minutes. The discussions centered on life as international graduates during COVID-19. The following general questions/prompts were used for the group discussion:

1) What has your experience been so far living in the U.S as an international graduate student during the pandemic?

2) What has been the hardest experience you have had to deal with because of COVID-19?

3) How have you dealt with these experiences because of COVID-19?

4) Have you had or lacked support systems?

5) Have you struggled with online classes or travel restrictions? Or any other factors that may be affecting your situation during the pandemic?

Focus Group 3

The third focus group session was on March 20, 2021, and included seven participants: Badawi, Bao, Chen, Jun, Daluchi, Isabel, and Adli. It ran a total of 46 minutes. The conversations were directed at the overall struggles as international graduate students during the pandemic. See below for the general questions/prompts for the group discussion.

1) Last week some of you shared your experiences about the pandemic, and others did not have much time to talk. Who would like to begin and talk a little bit about their experiences?

2) How has that been ?

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3) Have you noticed a difference between prior to the pandemic and now?

Someone mentioned this fear of going out now. Can anyone else relate to that?

Focus Group 4

The fourth group session was on April 10, 2021 and there were two males and one female participants: Bao, Adli, and Isabel. The session lasted for 48 minutes approximately. The discussion served as closure of the study and looked more positively at the pandemic. See below for the general questions/prompts for the group discussion.

1) Do you think the pandemic is going to be a one-time event in history or will this continue?

2) What are your thoughts on going back to "normal"?

3) What advice would you give to someone in future about dealing with the pandemic?

4) What is a positive consequence of the pandemic?

5) What is a negative consequence of the pandemic?

6) What could have been done differently to handle the Pandemic? For example, g*overnments/schools/society*

Table 1.2 provides data sources of all four focus group sessions.

Table 1.2. Participant Information for Focus Groups

Focus Group	Type of Data	Number of Participants	Countries	Participants
1	Zoom - Virtual-Recorded	5	Nigeria-Malaysia-Vietnam-Colombia-Pakistan	Daluchi, Adli, Bao, Isabel, Badawi.
2	Zoom-Virtual-Recorded	8	Nigeria- Malaysia-Vietnam-Colombia-Pakistan-China (x2)-Germany.	Daluchi, Adli, Bao, Isabel, Badawi, Jun, Chen, Noah
3	Zoom - Virtual-Recorded-Zoom	7	Pakistan-Vietnam-China (x2)-Nigeria-Colombia- Malaysia	Badawi, Bao, Chen, Jun, Daluchi, Isabel, Adli.
4	Zoom-Virtual-Recorded	3	Vietnam-Colombia-Malaysia.	Bao, Isabel, Adli.

Note: There were two participants from China and both were females. Not every participant was in every group session.

Individual Interviews Data Collection

During the month of March 2021, I individually interviewed each participant. The individual interviews started after the second focus group session and were conducted via Zoom and recorded. The individual interviews were semi-structured, lasted from 30 minutes to an hour, and had a total of 20 questions; some questions were not related to the participant's experience, so they went unanswered. Daluchi and Jun requested the questions ahead of the interview. The individual interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants to ensure member checking within a span of 2-3 days. See Table 1.3 for detailed information of the individual interviews.

Table 1.3. Information of Individual Interviews

Participant	Date of Interview	Length	Country
Noah	March 13, 2021	37 mins approximately	Germany
Bao	March 26, 2021	40 mins approximately	Vietnam
Badawi	March 15, 2021	60 mins approximately	Pakistan
Adli	March 17, 2021	26 mins approximately	Malaysia
Isabel	March 16, 2021	45 mins approximately	Colombia
Daluchi	March 15, 2021	30 mins approximately	Nigeria
Chen	March 19, 2021	46 mins approximately	China 1
Jun	March 26, 2021	54 mins approximately	China 2

Note: There were two female participants from China but from different cities.

Debrief Forms Data Collection

The debrief forms were sent to the participants either before or immediately at the end of each focus group meeting; the same occurred with the debrief forms for the individual interviews. The debrief forms allowed written statements on the following aspects: (1) technicalities of the focus group discussion, what to improve, synthesis of the participant's feedback of how the focus group discussions went, the researcher's role (2) recommendations for future discussions, the variety of topics mentioned throughout the focus group discussions and individual interviews (3) reflections, sharing and relating to other participant's experiences, and the opportunities to speak. Participants returned the debrief forms at various times; some participants who took a week to send back the debrief forms of the group sessions. Before the

next focus group session, I sent an email reminder to return the debrief form if they had not yet

done so. See Table 1.4 for details of the debrief forms.

Table 1.4. Debrief Forms Metadata

Session	Number of Participants	Countries	Participants	Number sent/Number returned
Session 1	5	Nigeria-Malaysia-Vietnam-Colombia-Pakistan	Daluchi, Adli, Bao, Isabel, Badawi.	5/5
Session 2	8	Nigeria- Malaysia-Vietnam-Colombia-Pakistan-China (x2)- Germany	Daluchi, Adli, Bao,Isabel, Badawi, Jun, Chen, Germany.	8/8
Session 3	7	Pakistan-Vietnam-China (x2)-Nigeria-Colombia-Malaysia	Badawi, Bao, Jun, Chen, Isabel, Adli, Daluchi.	7/7
Session 4	3	Vietnam-Colombia-Malaysia.	Bao, Isabel, Adli.	3/3
Individual interviews	8	Nigeria- Malaysia-Vietnam-Colombia-Pakistan-China (x2)-Germany.	Daluchi, Adli, Bao, Isabel, Badawi, Jun, Chen, Germany.	8/8

Member Checking

During the months of May and April 2021, I emailed the final transcriptions and recordings to the participants for member checking to establish validity and to verify that there were no problems with what was written and/or stated. The participants responded within a few days to a couple of weeks to approve the written statements. Jun and Daluchi requested that corrections be made to the transcripts of their individual interviews. Jun sent back a Word document and highlighted in pink statements that were unclear in relation to the audio file. I downloaded her document, reviewed the video, and made the corresponding changes. Daluchi sent back the Word document commenting that she wanted the same statements in the individual interview but wanted more appropriate wording. I made edits that Daluchi requested with respect the participant's voice. Upon receiving confirmation from participants, I interpreted the data.

Preparing the Data for Analysis

This section describes how the focus-group sessions, individual interview transcripts, and the participants' responses on debrief forms were prepared for analysis.

Focus-Groups and Individual Interview Transcription

Transcription of the focus-group sessions and individual interviews occurred during the months of March and April 2021 respectively. Once the focus group discussions were completed through Zoom, I downloaded the recordings, saved the files to my desktop-personal computer, and uploaded the files to Cloud storage for backup. Initial transcription was facilitated using the Otter.ai application; I did not use Zoom's live transcription because I would have had to purchase the premium version. Otter uses live transcription and it provides the option of sharing

and/or exporting the files once they are done. It took 15-20 minutes per recording and once it is finished, I was sent an email notification.

The first step was to upload the individual files to Otter and wait for the email notification indicating the transcription process was completed. The second step was to go to the Otter website to download the transcript. Each transcript was saved to my personal computer in a file and backed up in the Cloud. The transcripts downloaded from Otter.ai were received in a note type file.

The third step was copying and pasting the transcript to a Word document. The Otter transcripts were treated as initial attempts at transcribing the participants' discourse, so the next step was to take each initial transcript and compare it to the video-recordings to ensure the accuracy of what the participants had said. Additionally, the Otter transcripts were unable to identify who was speaking, so each time a different person spoke, Otter indicated "unknown speaker" in each transcript; however, the video-recordings were referred to so I was able to identify which participant was speaking. In some instances, where the video recording was unclear, the backup audio-recordings were used to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. Once all the transcripts were verified, they were sent to the respective participants for member checking. The transcription metadata can be found in Table 1.5 and Table 1.6.

Table 1.5. Transcription Metadata for Focus-Group Sessions

Session	Participants	Duration	Date	Word Count
1	Daluchi, Adli, Bao, Isabel, Badawi	49 minutes approximately	March 6, 2021	6853
2	Daluchi, Adli, Bao,Isabel, Badawi, Jun, Chen, Germany	60 minutes approximately	March 13, 2021	7171
3	Badawi, Bao, Jun, Chen, Isabel, Adli, Daluchi.	46 minutes approximately	March 20, 2021	4732
4	Bao, Isabel, Adli.	48 minutes approximately	April 10, 2021	5171

Table 1.6. Transcription Metadata for Individual Interviews

Participants	Duration	Date	Word Count
Daluchi	31 minutes approximately	March 15, 2021	5224
Isabel	46 minutes approximately	March 16, 2021	6133
Chen	47 minutes approximately	March 19, 2021	6309
Jun	55 minutes approximately	March 26, 2021	9924
Badawi	60 minutes approximately	March 15, 2021	12291
Noah	38 minutes approximately	March 13, 2021	6650
Bao	41 minutes approximately	March 26, 2021	6947
Adli	27 minutes approximately	March 17, 2021	4347

Preparing the Debrief Form Responses

There was a total of 31 debrief forms from the focus group sessions and individual interviews. To analyze them, I manually reviewed the word processed statements. First, I separated each question per session. For example, I designated focus group one, debrief form 1, questions 1-4, focus group 2 debrief form 2, question 1-4, and so on, and then copied and pasted the comments in an Excel spreadsheet. Preparing the data this way allowed me to proceed with the coding process that was used for analysis.

Analysis of Data Sources

This section describes how the focus-group meeting transcripts and individual interview transcripts and debrief form responses were analyzed to reveal emerging themes. This section begins with a discussion of the coding process employed. Next, the analysis of the transcripts for both the focus-group meetings and interviews is explained. Then the discussion moves to how the written responses from the debrief forms were analyzed.

The Coding Process

For the development of codes, categories, concepts, themes, and overall assertions I used Saldaña's (2015) analytical process. I specifically used in Vivo coding, in that I went through the words or short phrases from the participants' transcripts in the data and recorded them as codes. For example, the first cycle entailed the in vivo codes, and going over them twice. The coded data was organized by about what the participants had discussed. To search for patterns in the coded data, I grouped those that had similar statements; a participant's comment was sometimes broken up and labeled under more than one code. The pattern used throughout the coding process was similarity, frequency, and correspondence. The portions of the transcripts that included

introductions, participants' educational background, and general information were not considered for the revelation of themes.

The second step was to cluster or categorize, and finally outline the in vivo codes. Any interpretation involves sorting data so I grouped all the codes from the focus group sessions and individual interviews. Using Saldaña's (2013) second cycle method, I grouped the codes into categories and then analyzed themes or constructs. Theming the data was the last step of the analysis, which helped to understand what the finding was about and/or what it meant. The theme according to Saldaña (2015) is a drawn-out phrase or sentence which helps gather a unit of what the data implies. Additionally, it serves to categorize the repetition of ideas, and, finally, it initiates the process of discussion of what has been found throughout a study. See Table 1.7. for an example of the coding process.

Table 1.7. Example of Coding Process

Participant	Comments	Code	Code Category
Noah	"Yeah, my study plan was delayed a complete year because of the COVID-19. I was supposed to defend I was supposed to complete my proposal in spring 2020. I am doing it in spring 2021. So a complete year."	Delayed Study Plans	Education
Badawi	"I think I think I would have I would have made more progress at my dissertation in summer. If we didn't, if we weren't struggling with COVID."	Interruption of study plans	Education

There are four important functions in the process of a "theme": (1) It reduces huge amounts of data into a smaller unit; (2) It helps the researcher in the analysis; (3) It supports an integrated understanding of what has been found; and (4) It is geared towards a more directional process (Saldaña, 2015).

Analysis of Transcripts

This analysis was conducted on the transcripts for both the focus-group sessions and the individual interviews. As the first focus-group session was intended to reveal the participants' experiences and expectations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the transcript of the first focus-group session was analyzed first and the set of codes was not used for the analysis of the remaining focus groups or the interviews.

Analysis of Focus-Group Session 1

The first focus group session was exclusively related to the life of the eight international graduate students prior to COVID-19. I took what each participant said and copied and pasted their comments into an Excel Sheet. I then went over the participant's statements and coded according to what was said.

Analysis of Focus-Group Sessions 2-4

 The approach to analyzing the transcripts for sessions 2-4 followed the same procedures as those used for analyzing focus group session 1. Focus group sessions 2-4 were related to the various experiences that the eight international graduate students underwent during the pandemic. For those focus group sessions, I copied and pasted the participants' comments to an Excel sheet, looked at what was said and generated codes; some codes were like those from analysis of focus group session 1, but they were not a continuation of the codes. To obtain the

total number of words in each of the focus groups and individual interview transcripts, I used the

Word document count. Once the instances of codes were set, I used an additional Excel sheet and

grouped all the instances of codes in one row. I then moved on to set code categories and lastly,

checked on the emerging themes.

Analysis of Individual Interviews

Analyzing the transcripts of the eight individual interviews followed the same

procedures as the focus groups. Each participant came from a different country, they were

different ages, and, although some are in the same field of study, they all experienced the

pandemic in unique ways. Throughout the analysis, some similar codes appeared so I grouped

them together. See Table 1.8. for detailed information of each individual set of codes per

participant.

Table 1.8. Individual Interviews

Participant	Country	Instances of codes	Number of words in transcript
Noah	Germany	100	6650
Daluchi	Nigeria	57	5224
Badawi	Pakistan	241	12291
Chen	China 1	135	6309
Isabel	Colombia	130	6133
Jun	China 2	138	9924
Bao	Vietnam	82	6947
Adli	Malaysia	63	4347

Note: It is important to note that some individual interviews lasted for an hour. The total number of words in the transcripts include introductions, questions, and moments of silence.

Analysis of Debrief Forms

Lastly, I went over the 31 debrief forms submitted between the focus group sessions and the individual interviews. The report on the written statements was different from the debrief forms of focus groups 2-4 because the information was related to the experiences prior to COVID-19. For both debrief forms of the four focus groups and individual interviews, the participants gave additional written feedback on the overall set up of the Zoom sessions, general insights of the individual interviews, the researcher's role, and recommendations for future topics. Overall, the analysis of the debrief forms followed the same process of in vivo coding

(Saldaña, 2015) of the focus group and individual interviews and utilized the same set of established codes.

Storage and Security of Data Sources

The following section discusses the electronic and physical storage of all data sources, how they were and will be kept secure, and how the data sources were prepared for analysis.

Once the transcriptions were completed and verified by the participants. I made a digital copy of each transcript to put on a flash drive, along with the recordings. Each focus group session and individual interview had its own set of files, which were the original, untouched transcriptions. The recordings of the focus groups, individual interviews, debrief forms, and transcriptions were kept in folders in a flash drive, and secured in a cabinet to which only I have access. Additionally, they were stored on the university's OneDrive platform.

The data collection process and the risks of data reach were made clear to the research participants individually and as a group, both during and after the consenting process. Participants were recorded in a private setting, and the chances of non-research individuals being accidentally recorded–i.e., individuals who did not consent- were minimized as much as reasonably possible. The data was not obtained from or shared with a "covered entity", as defined by DHH & HIPAA.

Physical and digital data was secured against unauthorized access including authorization, authentication, passwords, and physically restricted access and locks on servers, storage, and cabinets. I also changed the password of my computer every 10 days.

Validity & Reliability

It is imperative to have an understanding of the elements of validity—trustworthiness, reliability, and consistency—in a qualitative study. To establish credibility in the study, I assured triangulation by prolonging contact with the participants, member checking, saturation, flexibility and peer review—the end focus was to correspond to internal validity (Pathak & Kalra, 2013). All of this was done through email and additional zoom meetings due to COVID-19 and health regulations. I did not meet with the participants in person to avoid the spread of infection nor did I organize physical group meetings. To ensure valid generalizable results, the population—participants— were from a specific targeted group, as was the geographical locations of the participants' residences, and the sample was representative of different countries. Each participant was given the same information, and each was found under the same conditions (Middleton, 2021).

The external validity was appropriated by "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), including variation in the selection of participants. To establish dependability, I followed a rigorous "audit trail" by explaining in verbal and written forms the steps following up the analysis of data and triangulation. Confirmability was met through a reflexive process in each step of the research; for example, I corroborated the research instrument- the sample questions- with the participants and assured accuracy of the responses. Member checking was done throughout the process of the research to indicate consistency and trustworthiness (Gibson et al., 2004).

The intention of the study was to enhance transparency— validity and reliability— and decrease the chances of introducing bias in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Although an international graduate myself, I also experienced the global pandemic with its set of challenges, but I maintained neutrality throughout the research by giving the participants a safe

space to express themselves; I did not impose my judgement on the overall topics of visa and immigration, mental healthcare, teaching and online learning, political concerns, and other topics that came up during the sessions.

Role of the Researcher

My perception of international students has been shaped by my personal experiences, since I am an international student from Chile. The role of personal experience is a commonly acknowledged basis by which to frame a qualitative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Clandennin & Connelly, 1994; Merriam, 2002; Carter & Littler, 2007). I also am not a citizen of a country that has had tense times with the United States. I understand some of the advantages and disadvantages those statuses entail in terms of my ability to pursue a higher education abroad, specifically in terms of the economic, emotional, and even cultural aspects of my experience.

My epistemological positioning combined both emic and etic standpoints, though the larger umbrella of my identity was positioned as an international student—emic to that experience. I did not have a common experience with students who came from a country that had difficult relationships with the U.S. (etic to that experience; Morris & Leung, 1999; Ruof, 2004). My understanding of the contexts and role of being international, and other, enhanced my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to many of the challenges, decisions, and issues that other international students faced, although I also acknowledged that I likely saw things differently than another researcher who is positioned in an even more etic space from international students.

I brought subjectivities to this study (Lee, 2015; O'Boyle, 2018). My subjectivities shaped not only my interest in this topic but also likely shaped the way I viewed and understood

the data I collected, and the way I interpreted data for this study (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). One of the ways in which I intended to balance this was to have some data coding and confirmation sessions with participants from the group session, individual interviews, and debrief forms to help me think through what validity and reliability might mean for my study (Leung, 2015). Where alignment and inter-coder reliability was high, that alignment was noted, and where there were differences, those differences themselves served analytically when positioning the intersections of our own identities (Haberfellner & Fenzl, 2017). Part of the information collected throughout this study included a practice of summarizing and re-presenting data, meaning, and linking the data with the theory (Allen, 2017). To monitor bias and to prevent it from influencing the re-presentation of the findings, I asked the participants to check if the interpretations were aligned with their beliefs; additionally, interviewer bias was minimized since the outcome of interest was not yet disclosed (Pannuccci & Wilkins, 2011). Another aspect considered in this study was question-order bias; the questions presented were in general terms, leading to specific ones that targeted the research itself (Sarniak, 2015).

In conclusion, I am aware of the potential blind spots of my identity and the subsequent subjectivity, but I also actively considered those blind spots in this research. The foundation of this study accepted the face value articulation that higher education in the U.S. is constructed to be, or at least intended to be, an open and welcoming space for a diverse population, including international students (Smith, 2015). Another underlying assumption was that, despite this articulation of inclusivity, the experiences of students may not have proven to be as welcoming nor as open as they intended; social, political, and cultural forces impacting all students shape the complexity of international students' experiences (Knight, 2015; Madge et al., 2015). Even more so, the global pandemic affected every aspect of someone's life.

Ethical Considerations

For this study, I obtained approval from Louisiana State University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix D). The research participants were informed about the study prior to signing the consent form. Via a scheduled Zoom meeting, the participants and I reviewed the consent script to ensure understanding of the study. Once it was agreed upon and understood, the participants sent the consent script electronically. To maintain the participants' privacy and confidentiality I used pseudonyms but kept the country of origin in each file. The study did not pose any risks or danger beyond a daily life activity. Lastly, there were no vulnerable populations in this research.

Timeline

The timeline for my study was a total of six months from beginning to end. Initial contact with the participants was made in February 2021, in which I introduced the research study by referrals, flyers and/or emails. I answered any additional question/comments from the participants, and I virtually set up the consent form process. The participants responded; the paperwork was then sent electronically, I downloaded it, and saved it in a folder.

The four focus group sessions and follow up interviews were completed during the month of March and the first week of April 2021. The debrief forms were sent and received after each focus group session and follow up interview; some participants took one or three days to send back the written statement. The follow up interviews were set up after each focus group session. Each focus group session was a week from the other and lasted 30 minutes to an hour. It took two to three days to do the transcription.

The peer review consultation occurred during the month of April and member checking of the coded transcriptions in May of 2021. The interpretation of the data and drafting of the findings were also done in May 2021. Revisions for the final draft were done throughout June 2021. Table 1.9. outlines the timeline of research for this study.

Table 1.9. Timeline of Research on the experiences of International Graduate Students during COVID-19.

Activity	January	February	March	April	May	June
Literature Review	X					
Begin Research		X				
Data Collection			X	X		
Analyzing Data				X		
Findings				X	X	X

Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter describes the findings from the analysis of the focus group sessions, individual interviews, and debrief forms. As the research questions place prominence on the experiences of the participants, this chapter discusses the basic coding results and the four themes that were revealed as the results of the synthesis. As previously discussed, the purpose of this research study was to gain insight into the life of eight international graduate students in a southern university in Louisiana, by understanding their experiences during the pandemic. The research questions that informed this study were:

1. What were the experiences during the 2020 school year for international students throughout COVID-19?

2. What were the day-to-day experiences of international graduate students during COVID-19?

3. How did the international graduate students cope and adjust as they lived through a pandemic?

Initial Findings from Coding Data

This section discusses the initial findings from the coding analysis. It provides the codes identified, the number of instances the codes were used, and the categories into which the codes were condensed to reveal the themes. The full discussion of each theme and evocative examples are discussed in the following section of this chapter.

Focus Group Session 1

       The first session concentrated on revealing the expectations and experiences of international graduate students prior to COVID-19. The first focus group session had a total of 8 codes, 32 coded instances, 3 categories, and 1 theme. See Figure 2.1 below for detailed information.
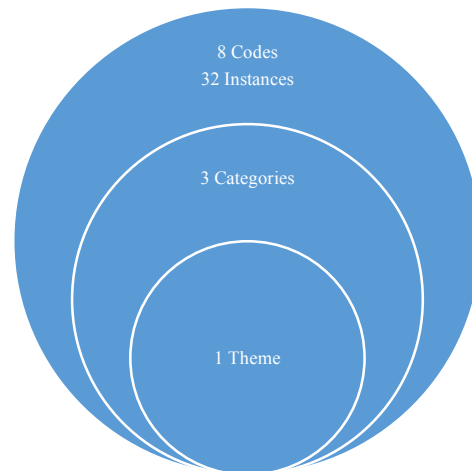

Figure 2.1. Translation of Focus Group Session One into Codes, Instances, and Theme

Focus Group Sessions 2 through 4, Interviews, and Debrief Forms

       There was a total of 38 codes with 477 instances of coding. The 38 codes were grouped to form eight categories, and from the categories three separate themes emerged. These findings were in addition to the analysis of the first focus group session that had its own set of codes, categories, and the revelation of a separate theme that talked about the Pre-COVID-19 experiences of the participants. See Figure 3 for the organization of categories developed into themes. A complete list of the codes, instances, categories and themes can be found in Appendix G.
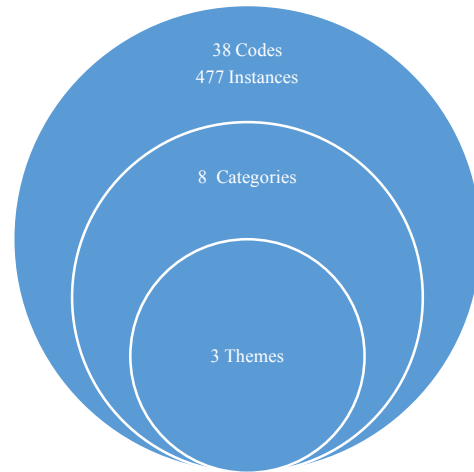
Figure 2.2 *Translation of Focus Group Sessions Two through Four, Interviews, and Debrief Forms into Codes, Instances, and Themes*

Themes

As previously discussed, four themes emerged from the data analysis in this study: (a) Expectations of international graduate students prior to COVID-19; (b) Contextualizing life during the COVID-19 Pandemic; (c) COVID-19's impact on academic life; and (d) COVID-19's impact on quality of life. Each of these themes are discussed in the following sections and supported with evocative examples from the participants.

Expectations of International Graduate Students

The first theme, expectations of international students, represents the reasons and expectations that many international students embark on studying abroad in a foreign country. This theme is important because it helped to identify what the participants were hoping and expecting to get out of the life-changing experience of being an international student prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the codes, instances, and categories that revealed this theme.

Table 2.1. Codes, Instances, Categories, and Theme for Focus Group 1

Codes (Instances)	Instances	Categories	Theme
Educational experiences (9) Job opportunities (1)	10	Educational benefits of studying abroad	*The expectations of international students studying abroad*
Diverse cultural experiences (6) Improve speaking English (1) Experience a different way of living (4) Life before COVID-19 (1)	12	Socio-cultural benefits of studying abroad	
Struggles/challenges (6) Support systems (4)	10	Struggles and supports	
Total Coded Instances	32		

The first two codes of educational experiences and job opportunities had 10 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category of educational benefits of studying abroad. The four codes of diverse cultural experiences, improving the speaking of English, experiencing a different way of living, and life before COVID-19 had 12 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category of socio-cultural benefits of studying abroad. The codes of struggles/challenges and support systems had a combined total of 10 instances and were grouped to form the category of struggles and supports. In considering the three categories of educational benefits of studying abroad, socio-cultural benefits of studying abroad, and struggles and supports, the theme of expectations of international students studying abroad was determined.

This theme of expectations of international students was the culmination of academic intentions, the desire to engage in a different socio-cultural environment, and the

acknowledgement that being an international student was challenging but having a support system could make it possible. It was the intention of this theme to establish what being an international student could have—and should have—been like to be juxtaposed with the other three themes that emerged from this study.

Educational Benefits of Studying Abroad

The main reason for choosing to come the United States and pursue a graduate degree is grounded in academic intentions. Some of the participants' comments relative to academic intentions were about accountability on academic performances, overall experiences in graduate school, and opportunities of scholarship funding. Badawi for example commented the following:

> As an international student, the USA, is the most popular destination for higher education, particularly the country where I'm from, Pakistan. So, the U.S., is the top priority for anyone. I decided to do my PhD. And I applied for that in a couple of universities.

Similarly, Jun commented, *"So where I did my master's like several years ago in 2016; I got the chance to be to be an exchange student to study in the university of North Carolina at Capitol Hill. It's a high ranking university."*

For others, it was not so much the opportunity to study in the United States, but instead it was about having the same experience as an influential educator from their homeland. In fact, this was true for Adli who shared that "because of my teacher, so he studied here for around eight years, with my current teacher, so he recommends me to come to the U.S. to learn with that professor."

For Daluchi, her home country was not well equipped with hands-on training so coming to the U.S. gave her that opportunity; "my country, isn't that well, equipped with like, some

practical hands on training… I'm a chemistry PhD student and analytical chemistry is something that you need to learn with the instruments. So I know that the US has… good facility."

Another aspect touched upon ware the job opportunities and career progression by getting a degree from the U.S. Badawi shared his sentiments that "[the] USA is the leader in the world so a degree from U.S. university is highly respected and highly regarded when there is job opportunities and career progression."

Other international graduate students looked for opportunities based on scholarships to pursue an academic area of study. Bao commented, "I saw some scholarships that offer between university in Vietnam and university in the U. S. so I applied for one. And I got a scholarship and I came to a southern university."

An additional motive for education in the U.S. was improving and learning English as a second language. For example, Julia stated that her primary reason was to have better experiences with how to learn a new language. She said, "Well, the main reason that I moved to the United States was you know, to improve my English and how these experiences help to learn a new language."

The participants mentioned different reasons as to why they decided to become an international graduate student in the U.S., such as it was a popular destination, they were influenced by other academics, and opportunities for exchange programs. The reasons to pursue academics in a foreign country varied per individual.

Socio-Cultural Benefits of Studying Abroad

Opportunities to engage in a different and diverse social and cultural environment was also of great importance. Many of the participants chose to study abroad to engage with different people while in the United States. For example, Isabel, shared that she "was expecting to have more interaction with people … who don't speak English, they're one of the main sources and means to learn another language." Badawi also spoke to this, stating "I used to go to meetup groups, a lot of meetup groups, we would go sailing, biking, hiking, and do different activities."

Another important aspect expressed by Badawi was to learn about other cultures and expand their understanding of what the world looks like. She "wanted to come to the US to learn about other cultures …to get away from [her] own niche and just see the world from another point of view." Furthermore, Adli commented on the joyous times he would get together with friends, "enjoying hanging out with my friends, we sing together, we make music together and everything's fun."

Another opportunity to connect to the local environment was through a service provided through the university that was exclusively for international students. Badawi explained that "the International Cultural Center used to send us some emails. I attended a couple of programs and events." Badawi talked about other occasions to explore different areas, such as the mall and to experience the ever-popular cultural event of Mardi Gras. The chances to engage with others are offered through a university platform and local events; a simple gathering with friends is another expected opportunity that international graduate students participate in while studying abroad.

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Struggles and Supports

At the same time, international graduate students also expected the experience to come with struggles and tensions, but they were prepared to use their support systems to be successful, even if those support systems were family members who were far away. It is understood that challenges vary per individual and each struggle is different. One challenge was the poor access to transportation. Isabel commented:

> Also, if you don't have a car here, you have to know how the buses work…how transportation system works... You have to wait one hour, maybe more. So you have to plan your day. So that is another thing that you have to adapt to your life.

Another challenge was dealing with issues of the weather. Badawi stated:

> The weather, I hate the humidity…it is okay if it is hot because you live in closed rooms, even your car is fine, they are air conditioned but remember just stepping outside… even if its not hot you are just dealing with horrible humidity, and I hate it because I go out all the time and it catches on my clothes or I don't know what's going on with me but basically is continuous…..and that doesn't only affect your performance, your curricular class it affects your health when you are coming outside so hot and it is just opposite to that inside.

An additional struggle that Isabel described was her language barrier and the difficulties that came with it. She said, "Well, for me, probably the main struggle…. was the language…So I try to, you know, speak without fear that I'm going to be judged by people because my English is not perfect."

> Yet, despite the disadvantages, they would study abroad. Adli commented:

> I believe, from my point of view, I am lucky enough to be here and pursue my doctorate program. So, whenever I have a negative kind of thinking or anything that doesn't go right according to plan, I will rethink about how lucky I am to be here. And then the rest of the stuff is not a problem anymore.

Challenges and struggles are part of the study abroad experience and international graduate students learn to navigate life with all the changes that come with it, whether the program is two, four, or seven years depending on their graduate studies.

One of the reasons that international graduate students are willing to study abroad despite the challenges is because there are also a number of supports in place to help them. For example, many local churches organize events for international students to feel connected and to provide support. Adli shared how this was true:

> They have in that church, a sub small group, it's called Church of the nation. It's for international people. So they will organize a feast every month for internationals. And then they also have an English conversation group on every Friday. So I will go there, chat and they will have a topic and then we'll just mingle.

Bao also expressed a similar sentiment about the support system created through church saying, "and usually religious organization are really caring. So they are open, they talk to us, and they feel like you know, like they welcome us, like our family members. So I feel fortunate."

Both Badawi and Isabel expressed how they had a friend already in the U.S. that gave them insight as to how life would be in the South or helped them move across states, and ended up being their support system. Badawi said, "when I came here, I had support of my friend, so I didn't feel any problem, he guided me with everything", and Isabel commented:

> So when I moved a very good friend came with me. And he helped me with everything, finding an apartment and get everything organized to start the semester. Even my family, you know, sent me things and well, so I guess that is my main support.

Daluchi, on the other hand, found support in her Nigerian community. She talked about how everyone was brought together:

> We have some sort of community of Nigerian students. We have a WhatsApp group where you're added on. We organize events, maybe once a month, we just come together on people's birthdays. So with that I kind of had my mini country here, some sort of community. So yeah, that was my major support system.

International graduate students can find support from friends, churches, and other nationals. It is important to make those connections and create those networks to help the challenges and struggles when one is far away in a foreign land.

Contextualizing Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The next theme is that of contextualizing life during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was important to discuss this theme next since the first theme established the expected experiences of the international students prior to COVID-19. The codes of family dynamics, living apart from family, life during the pandemic, living with COVID-19, society and the virus, post-pandemic, masks, vaccine, COVID-19/virus, personal responsibility, and poor vs rich had a combined total of 186 instances of coding and were grouped to form the category living with COVID-19. The three codes of news, handling of pandemic, and government combined to produce 38 instances of coding and were grouped to form the category information/disinformation overload. The theme of contextualizing life during COVID-19 emerged from the coding. Table 2.2 provides the codes, instances, total of group instances, and the categories that revealed the theme.

Table 2.2. Codes and Categories for Contextualizing Life during COVID-19

Codes (Instances)	Total Grouped Instances	Categories	Themes
Family dynamics (10) Living apart from family (16) Life during the pandemic (37) Living with COVID-19 (22) Society and the virus (14) Post-pandemic (11) Pre-COVID life (6) Discrimination/racism (13) Vaccine (10) Masks (15) COVID-19/virus (15) Personal Responsibility (13) Poor vs. rich (4)	186	Life during the pandemic	*Contextualizing life during COVID-19*
News (19) Handling of pandemic (14) Government (5)	38	Information/disinformation overload	
Total Coded Instances	224		

Life During the Pandemic

The pandemic brought a series of changes that were life-altering; some continue to be used and some have resurfaced. Guidelines to help slow the spread of the virus included wearing a mask to cover the nose and mouth to protect others and oneself, staying six feet apart from others, getting a COVID-19 vaccine when it was available or being COVID-19 tested if one believed they had been exposed to the virus. It was highly recommended to avoid crowds and poorly ventilated indoor spaces and, most importantly, repeated hand washing with soap and water was emphasized.

Bao commented on what *"normal"* life was and/or would look like in the future due to the changes that the pandemic brought:

> I mean, none of this is normal, if we mean that the situation becomes contained, we can come back to normal in some way, for example, we don't need to use a mask, we can continue to gather in public spaces and our normal activities will come back to life like before the pandemic, but it would not be normal in some ways, for example, breaking some bad habits, for me, I'm now very conscious about going out and needing to wash my hands, and my face before doing some stuff.

Isabel agreed with Bao, "I mean, returning to normality is something that I don't know if its going to happen soon. I think maybe, I don't know, two-three years maybe?" Adli shared a similar sentiment, expressing, "I'm not sure how long the coronavirus will be extended, but …it will happen again, and if its not this virus it will be another one." Isabel pushed the conversation about the virus and vaccine a little further, as she shared:

> Because there are a lot of variants of the virus, there is not a 100% certainty about the efficacy of the vaccine. So I think based on that, probably it can be extended until more vaccines come or having everyone take on the responsibility to manage and keep dealing with restrictions in their lives. So I think it could be even longer than we are expecting.

Daluchi shared her frustrations with those who were desperate and lying about their health to get access to the vaccine "because society is changing and we have to be more

empathetic and more conscious of others who may need it more. Everyone needs or should get

the vaccine but just wait your turn and be patient."

Adli expressed uncertainty about the pandemic and talked about how there were

individuals who did not believe in vaccines. He said:

> I think this whole situation will last for at least another year. If not, I think there's no way
> that everybody's taking this vaccine. So I think we'll just do whatever we can to get through
> this. I don't know whether there's another way to deal with it. Because there are some
> people that are against this vaccine.

Badawi, on the other hand, talked about the role that we have on this planet and how some of this

changed people's lives.

> We have to be more conscious about our role in this planet, we are not superior to
> nothing I mean, we are interconnected, we have to respect everything and at the same
> time I don't believe we have the control of everything so that means we have to be more
> flexible in this kind of situation, just follow some mandatory things and it might change
> our behavior but we have to follow it in order to improve or at least survive with this
> situation.

Jun agreed with Badawi:

> Life is not the same, in school, work, my relationships with others, even how I talk to my
> parents has changed… So I think emotions really influenced our behavior and our
> thinking patterns with other daily stuffs. So the next thing I learned most is to stay
> optimistic, never give up and to try to find a way out to be to face this terrible situation.

Life during the pandemic brought changes socially, physically, emotionally, and whether

those circumstances will last or not, an opportunity arose to face and navigate a different reality.

The pandemic created an interruption of how everyone lived in their day-to-day circumstances.

Living with COVID-19.

COVID-19 had negative and positive impacts on various aspects of someone's life. One participant in this study did get the virus not once, but twice. Noah commented, "I had COVID, two times…my wife contracted the virus from her workplace and passed it on to me. We were contained here. Nobody checked up on us." Noah had to regulate phone calls with family members who were back in his home country:

> My family was very far away, and they couldn't do anything. Because they never, really traveled to a country very far away. They don't speak English very well…if I had told my family that my wife and I had COVID in July. I'm sure my mother would have done something very unreasonable and put herself and my father in danger…and I didn't want that. We didn't want that. So we we kept it to ourselves…

The experience was devastating to Noah and demonstrated on how the lifestyle of an international graduate student was disrupted. The details of Noah's struggles with the virus helped to clarify his experiences and what he endured and overlapped with what the other participants also went through. Badawi, for example, mentioned the fear of getting the virus in a foreign country without family and living alone:

> Because of the COVID my life has been really limited. So the fear of getting it in a foreign country without my family, living alone. As a student who may or may not have people to take care of me, if I get it…like the fear, the fear is there, it's real. I have got my first shot now. So I feel protected somehow…but I would still wear a mask.

He mentioned not wanting to get the virus nor wanting to be responsible for someone else getting it. Badawi said, "I would not want to transfer it to anyone else. I don't want to be the reason for someone to get it and that person may transfer it to someone who is vulnerable." Contracting the virus or the fear of being responsible for spreading the virus were two of the challenges presented throughout the pandemic.

Another aspect that participants talked about throughout the sessions and individual interviews was the life lessons and/or consequences that the pandemic brought to their lives. Isabel said, "This time helped me to understand more things about my personality, how I face some aspects of my life because we had to interact in other ways." Badawi, shared a similar thought:

> I'm facing and going through some tough times but I now know how to face it, how to accept it, and know how to try to fight it. I think its up to us to see how we will take on the future instead of living in our past. We need to be looking forward.

Adli said, "I learned to cherish my life more and the people around me even if they were not physically present at the time." Daluchi also agreed with Adli, commenting "I learned that, a lot of things that we take for granted are actually so important. Life is so different from when there was no pandemic."

Chen agreed with the overall comments; she said, "We take it for granted. For things in our back to normal days, we didn't really realize that and we didn't cherish that much." The international graduate students had the opportunity to talk about the pandemic and they reflected on the challenges presented to them.

Information/Disinformation Overload

The most frequently discussed issue was that of misinformation. The current news cycle runs 24/7, meaning that the consumption, distribution and production was ongoing. When COVID-19 arrived unexpectedly, the main source of information came from the news and other social media outlets. Negative news and communications created consequences. Chen commented, "You only can get this information from the news. And the news is bad, so then the world is scary, other peoples hates us Asian people." Bao talked about how he dealt with the news and media about COVID-19:

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As international student, I need to be very well informed and attentive to the situation. Observe the situation we are facing, act and react with news media situation, filter the news and see the way things are really happening…we need to be very selective choosing the news.

Isabel, on the other hand, talked about the news and receiving official information regarding the vaccine. She said, "Well, I think, based on the news. I mean, official information, because there are a lot of variants of the virus. There is no certainty about the efficacy of the vaccine."

Another factor that influenced the news was the responsibility or lack there of from governments or officials regarding the pandemic. Isabel said, "talking about health is also a responsibility of governments. I was listening to some news and until government and society don't respond in a global way, we are going to be repeating this again." Bao expressed a similar sentiment;

I wish the government especially from those big countries, to be very transparent about the way it communicates a message to its citizens. Because, for example, if the US president or like Prime Minister of Britain, they came up on stage and say something globally, it could play a very big influence and impact on people's life. Especially, psychologically, so I wish there could have been some kind of transparent communication.

Participants received information from their home countries and could see how the pandemic was handled here in the U.S. Although the guidelines were similar for every country, it appeared that it was handled differently. Some countries succeeded in controlling the virus, others struggled and continue to struggle with containing it. Overall, communication and the spread of the news was immediate and it caused panic among citizens.

COVID-19's Impact on Academic Life

The next significant theme revealed was COVID-19's impact on academic life. The first three codes of visa issues, immigration, and traveling had 27 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category visa and immigration issues. The six codes of online/hybrid

learning and teaching, in-person classes, failed expectations, university life, reasons to study in the U.S., and negative impact on education had 42 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category educational experience. The two categories revealed the theme of COVID-19's impact on academic life. The codes, instances, and categories that contributed to the development of this theme are provided in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3 Codes, Categories, and Themes for Focus Group Session 2- 4 and Interviews

Codes (Instances)	Total Grouped Instances	Categories	Themes
Online/hybrid learning or teaching (15) In-person classes (4) Failed expectations (6) University life (12) Reasons to study in the U.S. (2) Negative impact on education (3)	42	Educational experience	*COVID-19's impact on academic life*
Visa issues (14) Immigration (5) Traveling (8)	27	Visa and immigration issues	
Total Coded Instances	69		

Students either were unable to make progress in their research or dissertation, or used the pandemic to get ahead in their studies, as they did not tolerate the stress of the unknown future. Additionally, education for an international graduate student is connected to their immigration status and travels. During the pandemic, international services operated remotely and political

unrest in some countries had the potential to affect the immigration status of thousands of international students.

An international graduate student goes through various processes, including selecting a university, applying, waiting for a letter of acceptance, figuring out where they are going/moving, setting up a list of required entry exams, and connecting with international services. Additionally, they must go through additional interviews with a U.S. embassy in said country, obtain a passport, and report the corresponding credentials. The process is tedious, somewhat slow, and the pandemic was not helpful.

Educational Experiences

International graduate students may pursue a master's degree or a doctoral, or both, degrees that involve a combination of research and coursework. The overall graduate education has a characteristic of in-depth training and specialized instruction. The pandemic brought a series of interruptions to the overall experiences of graduate school. Noah, for example, commented on the lack of progress in his dissertation: **"I think I would have made more progress at my dissertation in summer. If I didn't struggle with COVID."** Badawi expressed a similar sentiment regarding his studies: "Yes, it was pretty hard and horrible for me. I did my general exam in October 2019. I was supposed to do my proposal in 2020 and I targeted spring 2020 to get rid of my proposal, but COVID struck when COVID came everything just stopped."

Isabel dealt with interruptions of her fieldwork and research and she had to ask for special permission to hold her assistantship during the summer. She took two classes that were not related to her work to keep her assistantship to pay rent and other expenses. During that time, she should have gone back to her home country to gather data for her research but she could not. Her thesis was exclusively related to certain movements in Colombia. She shared, "When I

realized that I couldn't go. I took classes, because I had to work and pay rent here. During the summer. It was not my plan. I was working, I was taking classes, I had to take six credits, and it was very intense." She also expressed, "because the time that I was assuming that I had to write my thesis, and to do my fieldwork, basically, regarding my thesis, well, I didn't have it."

Daluchi shared her experience of having to adjust her overall studies for a full year including her graduation. She recounted, "I received an email saying that graduation has been adjusted by a year to accommodate for the COVID-19."

Online Learning & Teaching

Some participants expressed various sentiments regarding changes to e-learning and teaching, especially during the pandemic as there was a transition period from fully online classes to hybrid; they compared how the classroom set up was better for them prior to COVID-19. Bao talked about his struggles with online learning that affected his progress to advance with his general exams. He said, "I suffered a lot with the online learning, I feel more lazy about doing it. I did not continue to do my general exams." He added, "when you study online, they just send you some kind of file, a pdf file to read and you continue at home with no direction." Adli, on the other hand, stated two different perspectives; he said, "Although, its convenient to have online classes because I don't have to run around campus looking for classes, I did not enjoy online classes, it was frustrating actually."

Daluchi worked at a lab as a chemistry student so her classes and work routine changed drastically:

> Now everything is online, and it is hard to bring my work home because I need the lab as a chemistry student. Before COVID, everything was great, I could ask for help in person and we would work together…now all that changed, at first having to experience working and studying everything from home was very difficult and then I had to change everything again because I had days I could go to the lab in person and other times I had to stay home

home. I struggled to focus with working from home, studying and taking classes all online. It was too much.

Isabel had an experience like Daluchi:

> I don't know why attending classes in person was good but online was a total nightmare. The experience was not great, the class itself was good and the professor was understanding but having to prepare everything for the online classes was too much. I had to set up a space in my apartment, prepare the camera, take notes, organize the time for each class and seminar, I was motivated at first but it was very hard and very demanding.

> Chen's attitude and experience were quite different from the other participants. She took

one class, did not set foot on campus during the first half of the year, and struggled with a

language barrier, as well as having a hybrid class where the professor wore a mask. She went

back and forth between going to campus and studying from home:

> My study experience during the COVID-19, I think it was a disaster. If we interact in person, we had to wear our masks and my English and listening and speaking skills are not very good. So when people wore masks in class, it killed me, I could not see or hear properly.

Throughout the pandemic, to prevent the spread of the virus, wearing a mask was mandatory, as

was keeping at least 6 feet apart from others especially when participating in hybrid classes.

> Isabel was another participant who had issues with language barriers, besides following

the safety guidelines that interfered with her studies. She said:

> I'm not very good at English, so if people are wearing masks and talking to me that makes it even more difficult for me to understand and if we are on the Zoom, sometimes the other voice makes the class much more difficult.

> Badawi talked about another frustrating experience at a seminar class and the changes

that came about because of the pandemic. He expressed:

> The experience for me was terrible because we had one class of 10 people, so we were supposed to sit together and discuss, because it was a seminar, but then we could not stay together because of COVID-19 we had to sit apart from each other and the professor was wearing a mask, everyone too and totally suffered from this, I only got half of the message or the content.

As a whole, the pandemic brought various changes to education, including interruption of study plans, research work, graduation modifications, and struggles with online learning and hybrid classes.

Immigration & Travels

International graduate students must be enrolled full-time and taking nine graduate credits to comply with their immigration status. There are exceptions for international graduate students with only the thesis/dissertation remaining or for students in their final semester; both exceptions require approval from the Office of International Services. Chen shared her struggles with visa immigration issues at the beginning of the pandemic: "It's a visa thing because I got admitted to enroll… but then COVID-19 happened. I cannot apply for a visa outside of America."

Jun commented on the restrictions her family faced when they wanted to travel to the U.S. and be with her. She shared, "My family in China wanted to visit me right now, but they will have to do it in the future because of the increases in COVID-19 cases. I will apply for a traveling visa for them to come visit me again."

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries and regions around the world implemented quarantines and entry bans among other restrictions for nationals, who were affected the most. Some countries implemented global restrictions. Guidelines were implemented to help reduce the spread of the virus. As international graduate students tended to go home during the summer or during fall break, the implementation of certain restrictions limited their options to travel during the year 2020. Jun commented on the travel ban placed only to China:

> I know there is a travel ban on China. I have other international friends they have opportunities to go back to home, to travel back to their home country and come back to

the U.S. without restrictions. But for me, as a Chinese student, if I choose to go back to China, then I will not have the opportunity to return back.

Daluchi commented on her worries about travel and the restrictions she faced, as: "I actually traveled to the UK in December. So when I was coming back, I was worried to even travel. I wasn't sure the U.S. was going to let me in because the pandemic had just started." Badawi shared his concerns with traveling:

> Sure, you can leave the U.S. that is not the problem, the problem is who knows for sure that immigrations in the U.S. will let you back in? I'm an international graduate student from Pakistan and the U.S. has some difficulties with people like me, and now with the COVID thing, nobody has a safe re-entry back.
>
> Immigration, visas, and travels are components of the experience of an international

graduate student and the pandemic brought even tighter restrictions to an already complex living situation, and much uncertainty to certain nationals.

COVID-19's Impact on Quality of Life

The final theme describes COVID-19's influence on the quality of life for the international students. The three codes of mental health issues and services, anxiety/stress, and coping and adjusting had 61 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category mental health and coping. The three codes of health insurance, healthcare and healthcare system had a total of 22 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category limited access to healthcare. The five codes of finances, support system, issues related to international students, living in the U.S., and living situation had 44 combined instances of coding and were grouped to form the category living in the U.S. Lastly, the two codes of isolation and lack of social engagement had 57 combined instances of coding and were grouped under the category lack of social engagement. COVID-19's impact on quality life emerged as the theme.

The participants expressed concerns throughout the focus group sessions and individual interviews regarding health insurance and living in the U.S., the overall lack of social engagement during the pandemic, and the toll of mental health on some of the participants. The specific codes, instances, and categories for this theme are presented in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4. Codes, Categories, and Grouped Instances for COVID-19's Impact on Quality of Life

Codes (Instances)	Total Grouped Instances	Categories	Themes
Mental health issues and services (37) Anxiety/Stress (4) Coping and adjusting (20)	61	Mental health and coping	COVID-19's impact on quality of life.
Health insurance (14) Healthcare (3) Healthcare system (5)	22	Limited access to healthcare	
Finances (9) Support system (16) Issues related to IS (4) Living in the U. S. (10) Living situation (5)	44	Living in the U. S.	
Isolation (37) Lack of social engagement (20)	57	Lack of social engagement	
Total Coded Instances	184		

Mental Health and Coping

This study found that solation to anxiety were some of the experiences of international graduate students during the pandemic. Being physically distanced from home, family, and others led to some individual's experiences of social isolation and resulted in mental health issues. Badawi, for example, said, "and at that time in the beginning, it was I think, for two to three months from March to May, especially during the first lockdown. It was so horrible for me. I was so mentally disturbed."

Isabel commented on her mental health and how she tried to control troubling times. She expressed, "For quite some time, I was not okay, everything was too much. I practiced or I tried to practice mindfulness. There's meditation yoga sessions. It helped me a lot to monitor my anxiety or my feelings."

Bao and Daluchi explained how the pandemic affected their psychological selves due to the consequences of the virus and the restrictions that came with it. Bao shared:

> So at first I felt it was okay because I had a swimming pool in the complex so I could go swimming and then I realized when they closed a swimming pool; the situation became very tense, all about the virus, and just staying inside, so many cases increasing. It affected my psychological self.

Daluchi shared about her mental health prior to the pandemic and that once COVID-19 happened, her mental changed. She commented:

> I mean my mental health, I feel like all my mental abilities when I was coming to America before COVID happened, I was so strong. Right now like, it's not, it gets me. I feel depressed sometimes when I used to be fine. Things didn't used to get to me so easily.

Coping and Adjusting

Some participants talked about how previous experiences helped them to cope and adjust to the pandemic. Noah expressed:

> It's a part of the experience of going someplace else to just figure it out yourself and having to adapt to the pandemic was something that I had to do…I did not have a choice. I'm coping with stress by suppressing it…if you suppress something and replace it with something more worthwhile, you keep forgetting all the details that contributed to the problem or that contributed to something that caused you suffering at a certain moment.

Isabel, on the other hand, shared the various coping skills she used to endure such troubling times:

> I started to meditate, practiced yoga at home three times a week and music, music really helped. I felt less lonely and less stressed when I was practicing those three things, it kept

my mind busy and I tried to be calm as much as possible because the situation was very difficult.

Chen talked about two of her strategies to cope with any stressful situation, but she emphasized that it helped even more through the pandemic:

> I was like okay, I tried to maintain the habit to do a regular exercise, like every day or at least five times a week. I didn't do this to be honest, even before I started my PhD program. When I was in China, I was not a sports person like I never like to exercise but this was so stressful and I really needed to do something to release the stress.

Her second strategy to cope with the pandemic was praying and using her religious group. Chen expressed:

> Because I'm a Christian, not too religious but my second strategy to cope with the COVID-19 was to pray, especially when I felt down or feel hopeless about the future. Talking to other Christian friends, really makes me feel very hopeful.

Daluchi expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "this situation got to me many times, so the first thing I did was to pray, I believe in God so I prayed about what I wanted to do and it helped with leaving my worries behind." She also added that cooking was another source that helped her to think about something else rather than the situation in which she was living:

> So for me, cooking is therapeutic, so when I'm thinking about a problem that I can't change, I cook…I try out new recipes, it gets me thinking about something else other than my problem and I needed that to get out of my head of what was going on around me and the world.

Bao mentioned his way of dealing with difficult circumstances was different from Daluchi and Chen. Bao shared:

> I have a very close friend of mine, so I usually talk to him in a very difficult situation and then I gradually spend some time for myself, reflecting, and maybe, I will go running, or go for a walk. Something that will get me back to normal and not get overwhelmed by too much sadness because I am worried about this pandemic.

Adli, on the other hand, commented that to endure stressful times he did hands on activities or focused his energy on a gratifying activity, which helped during the lockdowns. He said:

> I'm not into working out that much. I'm not into like physical exercise and all that but I watch a lot of series when I feel stress and I do craft. During the lockdowns it was great for me because I could watch a lot of shows.

The participants found ways to cope with and deal with the stress of troubling situations such as the pandemic, through suppression, physical exercise, praying, reaching out to a friend, watching television, and doing crafts.

Limited Access to Health Care

Many universities around the United States require students who are enrolled at their schools to obtain health insurance. The overall cost and policies of said health insurance vary per institution, and some offer their own plans to students. Some campuses offer international students a waiver to be exempt from the mandates of having a health insurance. With the onset of the pandemic, however, having access to healthcare was never more important.

Noah, who contracted the virus along with his partner, said, "Our insurance is very crappy. It's very cheap… it didn't help us when we had COVID. We didn't see a doctor, and we just went through it and that was the hardest part." Similarly, Chen shared "for me and my husband, we could not afford the insurance on campus because that's very expensive."

Bao, on the other hand, took matters into his own hands and looked for health insurance companies and gathered medicine at home in case anything happened. "I try to in some ways to prepare looking for health insurance companies and then like equipping some medicine or something like that at my house, to get ready if something happens," he said.

Living in the U. S.

Coming to a new country and adjusting as an international graduate student is an overwhelming experience. Dealing with culture shock, navigating a social life, learning the ways of transportation, having concerns with finances, deciding where to live, and, for some, having safety issues are on the list of students' concerns. A global pandemic was not expected to be endured by many individuals, especially international graduate students. The pandemic brought a series of changes to the lives of various individuals. Social distancing was one aspect that led to isolation for some, a measure put in place to reduce the spread of the virus. Living in the U.S. throughout a pandemic was quite a different scenario than anticipated by international students.

Lack of Social Engagement

One of the consequences of the pandemic was social distancing. The safety guidelines stated to keep distance at events social gatherings, to avoid crowded spaces and if you happened to be in one, and keep 6 feet of space between others and yourself. The lack of social engagement tended to create loneliness and emotional distress.

For example, Daluchi missed the pre-COVID life, the in-person interactions and conversations: "I miss the pre COVID. Because I'd like to interact with people like one on one more, I love to have conversations with people." The pandemic interrupted those type of instances. Badawi also emphasized the lack of social engagement, saying, "So I was kind of stuck. I could not, I tried to go out to have some fresh air at that time but I did not have anyone in person to talk to."

Working remotely and attending virtual classes were factors brought upon the pandemic. Staying home was intended to help stop the spread of the virus. Daluchi commented, "Now everything is remote… everyone is trying to be as socially distanced and physically distanced as possible."

The pandemic was a worrisome situation; as the consequences of the virus unfolded, the routine for many individuals changed. Bao, for example, stayed at home for almost six months. He said:

> When the COVID happened we were really worried about the situation, so we usually stay at home for like five or six months…the only time we usually went out for just like half an hour at 6 or 7pm to go for a walk by a parking lot and then we came back home after a walk that's it.

Isabel also commented on experiencing much uncertainty when the pandemic first started. She expressed, "Honestly, I didn't go outside for two months. I was really scared…"

It is important to understand that part of being an international graduate student involves being away from friends and family for a period of time. Nonetheless, the experiences of isolation and lack of social engagement were events exclusive to the pandemic. The troubling times were especially difficult because of the unknown consequences of the virus, which seemed to affect anyone who came in contact with it.

Bao and Isabel commented on another lifestyle adjustment throughout the pandemic, namely how they bought their groceries, stocked medication, and did their best to socially distance. Bao said, "I tried to be very cautious about the way I went out, did groceries, I went to the pharmacy, stocked medicine at home, if something happened, I could use it. I tried my best to avoid people." Isabel was even more cautious, explaining that "I ordered everything online, my food, everything. I didn't even see people for two months so it was hard." And Badawi said, "So having interactions on the phone all the time with different people, does not substitute nor compensate the in person human connection."

The lives of international graduate students either became more difficult or challenging during the pandemic regarding their personal relationships, their struggles with their mental

health, their overall living situations, and worrying about following the safety precaution guidelines.

Summary

This study revealed the emerging themes of the expectations of international graduate students prior to COVID-19, contextualizing life during the COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-19's effect on academic life, and COVID-19's impact on quality-of-life shed light on the distress that the participants endured. Efforts should be made to create a more supportive environment for international graduate students. For example, the educational experience was interrupted and the pandemic brought additional stress to an already complex situation. Additionally, international graduate students faced the decision to either obtain health insurance or to waive it during COVID-19, insurance that was necessary since the virus affected those who came in contact with it. Also, the fears of catching this virus in a foreign country, far away from family and friends, took a toll on their mental health. Life brought unexpected changes to daily life activities including the use of a mask, getting a vaccine, and social distancing, some of the measures necessary to prevent the spread of said virus. Additionally, international graduate students dealt with delayed study plans, financial concerns, limiting communication with family and friends, struggling with English as a second language through remote learning, losing opportunities to be enrolled because of immigration and visa status, and negative remarks from the news & social media. After a year of enduring the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to make international graduate students feel welcomed, safe, and supported.

Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This section includes discussion, limitations, implications for further research, and conclusion. The questions that guided this study were:

1. What were the experiences during the 2020 school year for international students throughout COVID-19?

2. What were the day-to-day experiences of international graduate students during COVID-19?

3. How did the international graduate students cope and adjust as they lived through a pandemic?

The research questions emphasized the participants' experiences and were answered by four themes.

The Educational Experiences of International Graduate Students During COVID-19

The first theme of expectations of international graduate students prior to COVID-19 and the third theme of COVID-19's impact on academic life were used to answer the first research question:

1. What were the experiences during the 2020 school year for international students throughout COVID-19?

As revealed in the theme of international graduate student's expectations prior to COVID-19, educational benefits were the main reasons of studying abroad, including the socio-cultural benefits, and the struggles and supports of the study abroad experience. In 2020, however, every experience and every expectation was disrupted due to COVID-19. This study

revealed the impact of the pandemic on the academic experience, including visa and immigration issues.

Foremost, the educational advantages of studying abroad, the socio-cultural benefits that it provides, and the overall supports and challenges were some of the aspects mentioned by the participants. According to Pop (2020), students choose to study in the U.S. for various reasons, including the international reputation that U.S. degrees have once they are earned. U.S. universities attract students from all over the world. Additionally, international students are drawn to U.S. higher education institutions that focus on making cultural diversity central to enrollment and admissions; having access to varied cultural backgrounds in terms of nationality, religion, or ethnicity opens windows of opportunity to make the experience more global. Israel and Batalova (2021) wrote of how U.S. universities include facilities such as workshops, English-language practice courses, orientations, and trainings. Kim (2015) stated that the classroom experience in the U.S. has developed around technological innovation, including allowing students access to web-based classes, applying computer based-tests, and the use of various labs and resources. As exciting and appealing the opportunity to study in the U.S. may be, however, it comes with challenges. Alzahrani (2017) wrote about common academic challenges such as the language barrier, adjusting to a new way of life and culture, and the emotional distress of families being at a great distance.

The educational experience throughout the global pandemic came with changes that disrupted the academic routine. This study found that international graduate students had issues making progress in their research, dissertations, had struggles with the online learning and teaching, and with their immigration status, visas, and travels. According to Azorin (2020) one common aspect was the re-development of the curriculum to online modules and the adaptation

to hybrid classes. Bouranova (2020) added that some individuals had issues understanding the social cues relative to attending online classes. Bishop-Monroe (2020) stated that assessing the challenges for specific student populations, especially international students, would help to mitigate the stress for the student and the teacher in charge, indicating that discussion of the expectations, flexibility, and proper etiquette of the online set up was imperative.

It is important to note that, aside from the academic challenges, the experience of an individual studying and/or living abroad involves concerns with immigration issues, visas, and travel restrictions, issues that were ever present during the pandemic. As cited by Chirikov and Soria (2020), maintaining an immigration status is a concurrent worry; the primary issues reported that most stressed individuals was their current visa status and travel restrictions between the U.S. and their respective home countries. To help stop the spread of the virus, global travel was restricted. Krsmanovic (2021) researched the impact of the pandemic on those who were enrolled in institutions around the U.S.; results found poor support for those who arrived during the onset of the pandemic, and specifically in processing immigration paperwork, work visas, and social security cards. McCarthy (2020) emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted immigration and visa processes including travel bans assigned to certain countries and rigidity on entry requirements, which complicated the restrictions placed upon foreign students. Regardless of visa status, the COVID-19 related travel restrictions for numerous countries did not allow a foreign national to travel to a U.S. campus if they left the U.S. territory. It is clear that academic life for an international graduate student was disrupted by the pandemic.

The Expectations and Realities of Studying Abroad During COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19 the participants had certain expectations of their academic life. There were various benefits of studying abroad that the participants discussed throughout this study. The most common reason to come to the U.S. was to obtain an academic degree. For some nationals, the U.S. was top priority for those interested in pursuing a higher education; applying to more than one university in the U.S. was a must. Another priority was the opportunity to participate in exchange programs, which was particularly true for one participant who was eager to come back to the U.S. and start graduate school through an exchange program between her university in her home country and the college she chose in the U.S. Influence by professors from the U.S. who travelled to other countries and connected with foreign students also led to opportunities to come to the U.S. and earn a degree in their respective fields.

Additionally, advanced technology and hands-on training that the U.S. offers in certain subjects were factors that motivated the participants. Moreover, the job opportunities and career progression of earning a U.S. degree are highly regarded and respected in other parts of the world. Furthermore, seeking national or international scholarships were primer motivators to study in the U.S. Finally, improving and learning of English as a second language and learning other languages were incentives to go after an academic degree in the U.S.

Nonetheless, some of the aforementioned connections were missed for an unknown time because of COVID-19. Life changed drastically, especially for academics, which were the international students' primary reason to be in the U.S. Every participant experienced an interruption in their academics; they were unable to make progress in their research, dissertations were paused, graduations were delayed, general exams were deferred, and some used the lockdown time to get ahead in their studies because of their fear of their unknown academic

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future. Also, an international graduate student's connection with education coincides with their immigration status and travels and, amid the lockdowns, travel was restricted worldwide, working and studying were remote, and later classes became hybrid.

In addition to many of the participants' expectations being unmet, being an international student during COVID-19 also meant that they experienced some unexpected issues. Specifically, participants expressed negative educational experiences. Considering online learning and teaching, participants expressed sentiments of suffering with the online learning, feeling lazy, continuing to study at home with no sense of direction, and feelings of frustration. Switching back and forth between full online classed and hybrid classes was difficult, and feeling unable to focus on studying and working from home were stressful for some of the participants.

Some participants took hybrid classes, and they talked about how challenging it was. Two participants specifically had previous issues with English as a second language and the transition from online classes to hybrid classes impacted their learning experience. They both shared sentiments that their academic life was a disaster. Zoom virtual classes were demanding and they did not have enough time to understand the message or the content of what was taught. With the hybrid class, it is crucial to understand that classes and seminars were limited to a number of students, there needed to be at least 6 feet between the students, and masks were required for professors and students. The participants expressed that they were unable to understand what the professor was saying because of the mask, and some professors also wore a face shield. Learning a second language is hard and complicated and adding face masks and/or shields made basic communication difficult.

Immigration Procedures and Travel

Immigration and travel are associated with academics. For an international graduate student to comply with their immigration status, they must be enrolled full time and take nine credit hours for graduate studies. There are some exceptions for those who in their final semester or their thesis/dissertation studies, which requires approval from the Office of International Services; this is common practice for universities that enroll international graduate students.

When the pandemic happened, work became remote. Embassies and consulates around the world closed, and at the beginning and throughout the summer of 2020, world travel was not permitted and airports were basically ghost towns. The participants shared instances of frustration and worries about their immigration status. For instance, one participant could not be enrolled during her first semester because she was unable to apply for a visa outside of the U.S. She was accepted by the university but without a student visa, one cannot be enrolled. She arrived in the U.S. at the beginning of COVID-19 and had to figure out how to obtain her student visa. Another participant commented on how worried her family was; they wanted to travel to the U.S. and be with her, but they could not, and they had to wait until there was global clearance.

It is important to understand that international graduate students have the option to travel home whenever possible; it is quite common for students to leave during the summer since most students do not hold assistantships. The pandemic changed that dynamic and travel was no longer possible for a period of time. At one point during the pandemic, travel bans were placed on travel to China, which was difficult for the two Chinese participants. Overall, every participant expressed uncertainty about traveling; if they had been given the chance to travel

back home, no one reassured them when, if at all, that they would be be allowed back into the U.S., and even then, for certain nationals, it was already a difficult passage.

Socio-Cultural Expectations and Realities

The socio-cultural benefits of studying abroad were another aspect that the participants discussed, and how they had the opportunity to engage in social and cultural environments. The participants also considered this factor because it opened the door to learn and hear from others, and they grew and had a better understanding of how the world operates. Every participant had their own idea as to why they wanted to come to the U.S. Inopportunely, the global pandemic altered their academic lives, leaving them in an ill-fated situation, and their expectations/motivations were unmet for a year.

The participants stated that the socio-cultural benefits of studying abroad were suddenly interrupted due to the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the participants mentioned that they connected to others through the help of international cultural centers, but amid the pandemic, the invitations stopped. They no longer had interactions with people, which meant no more attending meetup groups or doing activities that included specific events related to the culture in which they were living. More simply, gathering with a friend to study was no longer an option.

Increased Struggles and Decreased Supports

An experience that requires studying abroad inevitably comes with struggles and some type of support. Challenges varied per individual but none of them expected a global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the participants dealt with poor access to transportation, weather issues, and language barriers. The pandemic decreased their support, as individuals were used to help from churches that organized events for international students, and local communities that invited nationals from certain countries to participate and join their activities; additionally, some

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participants had close friends who were a constant presence. The pandemic interrupted social gatherings, closed spaces that were exclusive to international students, and altered interactions with the others. Despite appearing to be a negative situation, the participants were willing to continue their study abroad and stated how lucky they felt to be given such a wonderful opportunity to be here.

The Day-To-Day Experiences of International Graduate Students During COVID-19

The second theme of contextualizing life during COVID-19 was used to answer the second research question:

2. What were the day-to-day experiences of international graduate students during COVID-19?

First, we need to contextualize life throughout the pandemic. There was a nationwide and worldwide lockdown, there was a strong emphasis on cleaning and sanitization, travels were canceled, working and studying from home became the new norm, social outings, ceremonies, and sports events were limited or restricted for a time (Schallom & Staff, 2021). This study found that the international students' day-to-day experiences were influenced by navigating life apart from family, dealing with the 24-hour news cycle, and the effect of information and disinformation on all aspects of their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Distance from Family Magnified

It is essential to understand that part of studying and living abroad comes with dealing with the consequences of being away from family and loved ones for a time. Nonetheless, individuals can travel back to their home countries whenever possible or to have their family members visit them. During the global pandemic, travel was restricted and this limitation magnified the distance between the students and their families. Having family and loved ones on

the other side of the world generally can be problematic, and it was a bigger obstacle when the pandemic hit. For instance, if an individual became ill, they did not have family help them, which meant no comfort foods, no presence of a loved one, and no help for a quick run to the drugstore. Family members worried about their student being away, and the frustration of not being able to do anything due to restricted travel and the fear of this virus, were additional burdens that were not part of the "normal" experience of studying and/or working abroad. Additionally, the individual who was in the U.S. was also concerned for their family members on the other side of the world; keeping in touch on a daily basis tended to be counterproductive and some participants limited the number of calls and certain topics of conversations were off the table because they created panic for both parties. Compounding this situation was that there was no clear understanding of when the pandemic would be over or when borders would be open again.

Navigating the 24-hour News Cycle

Another aspect that came to light throughout this study was that of information/disinformation overload; when the pandemic hit, the main source of information was the news and social media outlets. Negative news affected the study participants and especially produced a sense of panic among those of Asian descent, who filtered out much of what was being said. Some individuals limited certain topics of conversations with their family members because much of the COVID-19 information was negative. Islam et al. (2020) found that social media played an important role during the pandemic, which led to social media fatigue and sharing unverified information created health issues such as cyberchondria or increased anxiety. The worrisome state of "fake news" had an impact on the relationship between misinformation

and the health of the population. Although there was access to information about the pandemic, it was not always clearly structured, organized, or even processed well by individuals.

One of the aspects of the global pandemic was communication and filtering relevant information. Health officials continually provided information about the number of cases as they increased, the impact that the virus had all over the world, and the health safety guidelines that became mandatory. Nonetheless, some of the information shared was unauthenticated and/or incorrect and had a negative impact on a national or global scale. For instance, one aspect of misinformation was directed towards those of Asian descent. Asians were confronted with an increase in acts of discrimination and racism. The participants in this study talked about how the media portrayed nationals of China, and how the virus was called the "Chinese Virus"; this created a sense of panic and frustration because they did not think that it was not their fault that this virus came from their country, and yet, they were left dealing with the consequences of what was being said and/or misinformed.

A New "Normal" During COVID-19

Among the disruptions due to COVID-19, this study revealed what participants understood and observed about how society as a whole handled the virus. There were general conversations about the vaccine, the mandatory use of masks, and overall personal responsibility to help halt the increase of the COVID-19 virus. Participants expressed how the "normal" way of life was disrupted by such things as making a conscious decision of whether to go out or not, and talking about how the future seemed hopeless since there were no clear signs as to when the pandemic would be over. In addition to an unknown future, there were concerns of the efficacy of the vaccine and that it was everyone's responsibility to manage and deal with restrictions.

An additional concern of the vaccine was with those who were anti-vaccine and how that could delay going back to how life as it once was. Emphasis was also placed on how we must respect and be conscious of the role we play as human beings on this planet. Besides following the mandatory rules, one had to be flexible and adapt to the situation to survive such unexpected event. Life was not the same in regard to school, work, interactions with others, and avoiding topics in conversations with family members; all of these changed the dynamic of the day to day experience for an international graduate student. Nonetheless, the participants in this study commented that learning and trying to stay optimistic was how to face the situation.

Discrimination and Racism

Another factor found in this study that impacted the lives of international graduate students were the occurrences of discrimination/racism. The role of the media and China's role in the virus sparked conversations as participants touched upon this subject. The concerns and struggles discussed dealt with how social media and other news portrayed nationals from China, and this caused stress and pressure to the participants. Three participants talked about how this was particularly difficult and how they used the mask to hide their identity from others. The fear of attack, the worries of not belonging, and having family members telling them how they were scared for them exacerbated the situation. Blame for the virus could not be placed on the Chinese nationals and the non-Asian participants shared sympathy and words of encouragement to their peers; this understanding of the other was a crucial moment among the participants.

International Graduate Students Cope and Adjust Through a Pandemic

The third theme of COVID-19's impact on quality of life was used to answer the third research question.

3. How did the international graduate students cope and adjust as they lived through a pandemic?

This study found that the pandemic had an impact on several areas of the quality of life of the international students: coping with lack of healthcare and coping with isolation.

Coping with Lack of Healthcare

One area in which international graduate students coped and adjusted during the global pandemic was limited access to healthcare while living in the U.S. Health insurance in the U.S. can be pricey and international students are given a few options: (1) To waive health insurance; (2) To find a health insurance company that suits them best according to their budget; (3) To buy the universities' health insurance. During the pandemic and considering the unknown effects of the virus, having health insurance should have been a priority; however, the experiences of the study participants was a negative one.

One participant and his wife had the virus. He had health insurance from his respective university, but he commented that it was very cheap and that it did not help when they caught the virus. They did not seek medical attention and treated themselves at home with no medical guidance, and they both survived. Another participant could not afford the health insurance offered on campus because it was expensive and decided that she would deal with the consequences if she ended up at the hospital. Additionally, another participant desperately decided to look for other health insurance companies as he had waived it at first, and decided to get basic medication to prepare in case he became ill. The participants agreed that even if they

had health insurance, and caught the virus, they would have had to pay large hospital bills, and that was a risk they were not willing to take. The fears and worries of catching the virus were additional stressors and the participants adjusted to the situation in their own ways. The reality of living abroad amid a pandemic was gruesome and tiring.

Coping with Isolation

The study participants expressed feelings of isolation and high levels of anxiety, as well as the consequences of social isolation that led to depression for some of. them. One aspect of the pandemic was the lockdowns, and the participants talked about how it was horrible for them and how mentally disturbing it was. Being in isolation for an extended period of time brought anxiety and overall sadness to the participants. It is quite common for those who experience being and/or living abroad to feel alone and lonely from time to time, but the pandemic brought an aspect of isolation that was especially frustrating for those who lived by themselves, did not have a close connection to roommates, or had not found a support group. This was particularly true for some of the participants who voiced being uncomfortable, upset, and longing for a personal, human connection. The lack of social engagement created emotional distress for some of the participants; missing the in-person interactions with others was a consequence of the pandemic. Part of the experiences of studying and/or working abroad is to create meaningful relationships with others and being socially distanced disrupted those relationships. This finding was like the work of Chirikov et al. (2020), that graduate students' mental health was affected throughout the pandemic, resulting a significant rise in major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety.

The situation became worse when certain restrictions were imposed on their living spaces. For example, swimming pool access were shut down, lobby areas were closed, one had

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to report to the main office to protect others if someone contracted the virus, cases of COVID-19 rose, and it seemed that there was no way of controlling it. These were influencers that led to participants having poor mental health.

The participants found ways to cope and adjust to the situation. The participants talked about how they went outside and did some type of physical activity but were cautious when others were close to them and moved away. Going outside but not having an in–person opportunity to engage in social events was difficult. Some participants stayed in complete social isolation from one to three months, while others decided it was best to stay inside for six months. It was intense but the experiences of isolation and the lack of social engagement were events particular to the pandemic.

Referring to the transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), the participants used various strategies in response to stress—in this case, the unexpected pandemic. For example, escape and avoidance and denying the existence of the stress were true for the participant who contracted the virus. He suppressed it and decided that by not talking about the experience or thinking that he endured tough times helped him to move on. Two participants used positive reappraisal, which meant to be at peace with the uncertainty of the situation; they found an explanation that worked for them to grow and have a more positive outlook at what had happened. Additionally, using self-control and strategic problem-solving, implying control of the emotions in response to the stress and re-directing certain actions to attend to a specific solution helped three other participants to cope with the pandemic.

Radical acceptance and confrontation were also strategies used by the participants to endure the pandemic in all its aspects; academically, quality of life, mental health distresses, and

deal with unexpected and unmet expectations of what graduate school was supposed to be like. The yearlong global pandemic left a mark by interrupting their lives.

Recommendations to Higher Education.

Moving forward and considering the findings of this study, I recommend the following to support international graduate students:

(1) Access to mental health services related to the pandemic and targeted specifically to international graduate students.

(2) Access to health insurance and healthcare and better assistance to help students access both.

(3) Communicating and checking on the welfare of the international student community via email or phone, especially in times of uncertainty and duress.

(4) Creating a list of resources pertaining the international student community, such as housing, information about immigration status, and local communities, that are willing to help and/or reach out to the international community.

(5) Raising private funds for international students who are in extreme need of financial assistance.

(6) Providing consistent communication from the college/university so that the international student community is heard and considered.

Limitations

The findings have some limitations. The first limitation was the sample size; there were eight participants, which did not represent the general population of international graduate students. The second limitation concerned manual entry data; the analysis of coding, categories and themes were done manually. The third limitation was in the lack of previous studies in the research area; COVID-19 was influential thus far for one year and was a recent phenomenon so little to no research was available. The fourth and the final limitation was the lack of time. The study could have also had a section that compared or found similarities among international graduate students around the U.S. and different campuses to better understand their experiences during the pandemic.

Implications for Future Research

This study, being qualitative and interpretive in nature, raised opportunities for future research, both in terms of the theory used and validation of the findings. More research will in fact be necessary to refine and further elaborate the findings in this study.

First, given the techniques used to explore the experiences of eight international graduate students, little can be said of the applicability of the information to a larger population of international graduate students in the U.S. who experienced the pandemic. Study could be extended to find more analytical generalizability of the findings.

Second, the study offered the opportunity to refine and validate the concepts and constructs that emerged from the analysis. For example, the idea of an international graduate student dealing with stress and coping with adjustments throughout COVID-19 emerged in the

analysis; one could ask whether some of those stresses, coping, and adjustments will be found post-pandemic.

Third, this study could also be extended in longitudinal and comparative ways. For example, throughout this research it was found that each participant underwent unique challenges, but a local student from the U.S. might have had similar or different experiences during the pandemic. Further research could elaborate on those similarities or differences among a U.S graduate students and international graduate students.

Finally, as discussed in the limitations of the study, further work is necessary to examine the stress, coping and adjustments strategies of international graduate students from the perspective of the pandemic COVID19, rather than from the perspectives of the eight study participants alone. Further research can thus shed light on the dynamics of knowledge in higher education, administration, recruitment of future international students, and exchange information by asking individually and as a group how to handle unexpected situations in the future.

Conclusion

While this study drew on the experiences of only eight international graduate students, their stories helped to understand how COVID-19 differentially affected their journey of living abroad. Researchers found that the main disruption for international students was the academic impact—including delayed graduation, interruption of research studies, advancing in their doctoral dissertations, and issues with online teaching & learning (Adnan et al., 2020). The eight international graduate students of this study also had different experiences with disinformation/information overload, limited access to healthcare, lack of social engagement, immigration, and visa and travel restrictions that were products of the pandemic. Indeed, all of

the participants dealt with mental health issues including anxiety, coping, and fears associated with the pandemic: living far away from family and loved ones in a challenging and uncertain situation, such as the pandemic, not having to worry about their own safety and that of their loved ones far away, and not knowing when the pandemic would be over added additional stressors to an already complex journey.

Nonetheless, these international graduate students' stories showed resiliency. Despite the living in an overwhelming situation, they used various coping mechanism to endure the pandemic and, in some instances, reflected on the positive aspects that this experience brought them.

Appendix A. Consent Script.

Study Title: A continuous adjustment: The Impact of Covid-19 on International Graduate Students.
The study procedures are the following:
Timeline: 1 month (approximately).
The purpose of the study will be to examine the overall experiences, stresses, coping and adjustment that international graduate students have gone through, during the global pandemic. Key words to consider throughout this research: International Graduate Student-Covid-19-Coping Theory-Experiences/Challenges-Qualitative approach.
In order to have a triangulation of in depth data, there will be 2 phases to carry out this study:
1. 4 Focus group (virtual-recorded). 25-45 mins. Approximately.
2. Follow up interviews (virtual-recorded). 25-45 mins. Approximately.
3. Short-Debrief forms after each focus group and interview. 5-10 mins to complete.

Transcriptions will be provided to each of the participants to ensure transparency of what is being selected and categorized in themes. The participants may withdraw at any given point of the study (no questions asked).
Inclusion criteria: International graduate students who are either in a master's or doctoral program. 24-50 years of age.
Exclusion criteria: International students that are NOT in a graduate program. 19-23 years of age.
Benefits: The study may yield valuable information about the experiences, stresses, coping and adjustment of being an international graduate student during the times of a global pandemic.
Stipend: The participation is voluntary and you will receive a $10 gift card at the end of the research process.
Risks: The only risk is the inadvertent release of sensitive information. However, every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of your records. Files, recordings, flash drives, transcriptions will be kept in secure cabinets to which only the investigator will have access.
Investigators: The following investigators are available about this study;
Carla Albornoz, Graduate Assistant.
Calbor1@lsu.edu
Mobile: 225-288-4512
 M-F 8:00 am-7:00 pm.
Dr. Estanislado Barrera
Education Dept. LSU
esbarreraiv@lsu.edu

Right to refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. For questions concerning participant's rights, please contact the IRB chair, Alex Cohen, 578-8692, or irb@lsu.edu
Signatures:
The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator.
By continuing this interview, you are giving consent to participate in this study:
_____Yes, I give permission to proceed to the interview/research process.
_____No, I do NOT give permission to proceed to the interview/research process.

Your information or bio specimens collected as part of the research during the interview process, even if identifiers are removed, may be used or distributed for future research.
_____Yes, I give permission.
_____No, I do not give permission.

Appendix B. Sample Focus Group Prompts/Questions.

Focus Group 1

7) Pre-COVID as an international graduate student, what made you decide to pursue studies in a foreign country ?
8) How has that experience been as an international graduate student prior to COVID-19?
9) Did you come to the U.S. by yourself ? or did get here with a family member ? friend ?
10) Did you have a support system ?
11) In your journey prior to COVID-19, did you have any experiences that made an impact in your life ? whether in school, personal, church, community, mental, spiritual, or even physical ?
12) Did any of you have certain expectations prior to COVID-19 as to how your life was supposed to be before the pandemic came ?

Focus Group 2

6) What has your experience been so far living in the U.S as an international graduate student during the pandemic?
7) What has been the hardest experience you have had to deal with because of COVID-19?
8) How have you dealt with these experiences because of COVID-19?
9) Have you had any support systems or lack there of?
10) Have you struggled with online classes or travel restrictions? Or any other factors that may be affecting your current situation throughout the pandemic?

Focus Group 3

4) Last week some of you shared your experiences about the pandemic, and others did not have much time to talk, who would like to begin and talk a little bit about their experiences ?
5) How has that been ?
6) How were the rehearsals prior to the pandemic ?
7) Have you noticed a difference between prior the pandemic and now ?

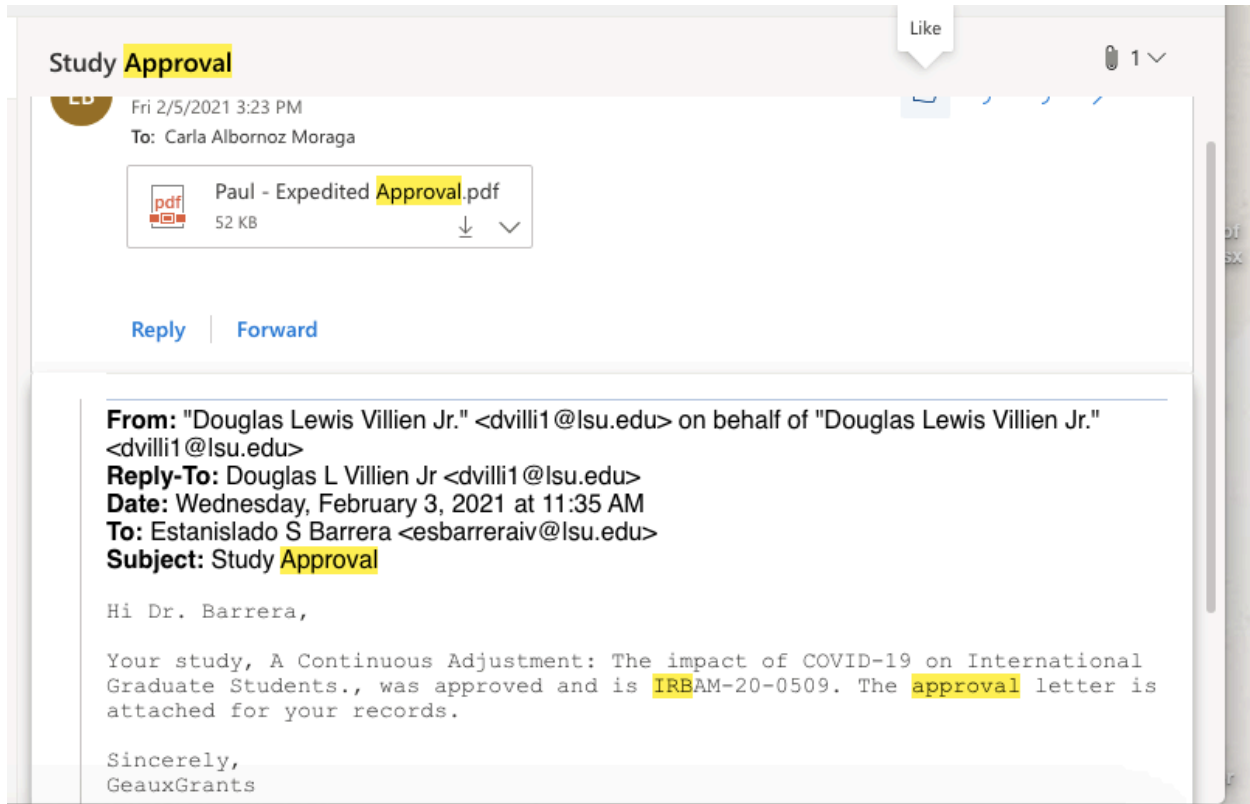Someone mentioned this fear of going out now, can anyone else relate to that ?

Focus Group 4

7) Do you think the pandemic is going to be a one-time event in history or will this continue?
8) What are your thoughts on going back to "normal"?
9) What advice would you give to someone in future about dealing with the pandemic?
10) What is a positive consequence of the pandemic?
11) What is a negative consequence of the pandemic?
12) What could have been done differently to handle the Pandemic?
    Governments/Schools/Society/

Note: The questions served as a prompt to initiate the conversations and not all of them were asked nor responded.

Appendix C. Sample Individual Interview Questions

Where are you from? How old are you? Are you a Masters or doctoral student? How far in are you in your program?
What made you decide to be an international student?
When you are in a stressful situation, how do you cope with it?
How has your experience been so far living in the U.S as an international graduate student during the pandemic?
Since the virus outbreak started and the many changes that came with it, such as online learning, travel restrictions among others, do you think that you have had enough support from family? Friends? The community? The university? Why? Why not?
Have your study plans changed due to the virus outbreak?
Were your travel options restricted?
Have you had any concerns or restrictions of your visa or immigration status due to COVID-19?
Were you worried about your finances during the pandemic? Were you concerned about being able to pay for rent? Tuition? Living expenses?
Has your graduation date been affected due to the pandemic?
Have you had difficulties with the teaching and online learning? Why? Why not?
Has your motivation stayed the same? Has it shifted?
What has been the hardest experience you have had to deal with because of COVID-19?
Have you felt isolated at any given point during the pandemic? And what did you do to get through it?
Have you been the target of bias or hate-related incidents during COVID-19? What have you done to cope with it? Did you reach out to anyone?
From your point of view, do you think that the university has done enough to support their international students? What is something positive and negative that you encountered in terms of the support or lack thereof, with ACME? Your college? Your professors? What changes would you recommend?
From your personal experience, would you recommend future students to come to this college to study, amid a global pandemic? Why? Why not?
Do you have any overall long-term concerns about your future in the U.S upon graduation during the pandemic?
Will you give an attempt to apply to the U.S job market once you graduate? Do you plan on going back to your home country? Or will you go somewhere else?
Overall, what is the main takeaway amid the global pandemic? As an international graduate student? It could be personal, life, academics etc.
Note: NOT all the questions were asked to the participants nor answered.

Appendix D. IRB Approval

Appendix E. Sample Referral.

The global pandemic has brought challenges to us all, this would be a great opportunity to hear your story!

10 Volunteers Needed for Non-Clinical Research Study.

You May Qualify if You

- Are an international graduate student.
- Have experienced stresses, coping and adjustments during the global pandemic.
- Are in a Master's or Doctoral program.

Participation Involves

- 4 Zoom focus group sessions.
- Written Statements through Debrief forms.
- Individual Interviews.

Location: Virtual Zoom meetings.

Participants will be compensated with a $10 gift card for their time.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact

Carla Albornoz at 225-288-4512 calbor1@lsu.edu

Monday-Friday 8:00 am-7:00 pm.

Appendix F. Codes-Categories-Themes-Focus Group 1.

Grouped codes	Categories	Emerging Themes
Diversity/Culture Education in the Home Country Different Perspectives Education in the US Meeting People Job Opportunities Scholarship Funding Improve English Pre-Covid Life Comparing States within the US Life in Baton Rouge Living Expenses Support System Lack of Interaction with Locals University International Support Improving Information Services & Programs Church Organizations Chemistry Department University Life Interactions with other International Students Experiences in Graduate School Differences in Grading System Classes in the US Dealing with Stress Understanding Others Struggles Weather Life in the Home Country Poor Access to Transportation Facilities on Campus Advice to Future International Students Accountability on Academic Performance	Social Interactions While Studying Abroad Education & Life in the Home Country Education & Life in the U.S Support Systems Struggles & Challenges Would Still do Study Abroad	Studying Abroad is Both Academic and Social. Surviving Struggles and Challenges Requires Support Systems

Appendix G. Codes, Categories, and Themes for Focus Group Session 2-4, Interviews and Debrief forms.

Codes, Categories, and Themes for Focus Group Session 2 through 4, interviews & debrief forms			
Codes (Instances)	**Total Grouped Instances**	**Categories**	**Themes**
Family dynamics (10) Living apart from family (16) Life during the pandemic (37) Living with COVID-19 (22) Society and the virus (14) Post-pandemic (11) Pre-COVID life (6) Discrimination/racism (13) Vaccine (10) Masks (15) COVID-19/virus (15) Personal Responsibility (13) Poor vs. rich (4)	186	Life during the pandemic	*Contextualizing life during COVID-19*
News (19) Handling of pandemic (14) Government (5)	38	Information/disinformation overload	
Online/hybrid learning or teaching (15) In-person classes (4) Failed expectations (6) University life (12)	42	Educational experience	*COVID-19's impact on academic life*
Visa Issues (14) Immigration (5) Traveling (8)	27	Visa and Immigration Issues	

Mental health issues and services (37) Anxiety/Stress (4) Coping and adjusting (20)	61	Mental health and coping	*COVID-19's impact on quality of life.*
Health insurance (14) Healthcare (3) Healthcare system (5)	22	Limited access to healthcare	
Finances (9) Support system (16) Issues related to IS (4) Living in the U. S. (10) Living situation (5)	44	Living in the U. S.	
Isolation (37) Lack of social engagement (20)	57	Lack of social engagement	
Total Coded Instances	477		

Appendix H. Debrief Forms Codes.

FGD1 Q1	FGD1 Q2	FGD1 Q3	FGD1 Q4
CONNECTING WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	CRITIQUE OF INITIAL QUESTION	TOPICS DISCUSSED	CLARIFICATION OF QUESTIONS
SHARING ABOUT GRADUATE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES	CHOOSING THE U.S AS FIRST PRIORITY	TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD	SAFE SPACE FOR DISCUSSIONS
OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES	DENIED ENTRANCE/ACCEPTANCE TO STUDY IN THE U.S	OPENNESS & FLOW OF THE FGD	HELPFUL FACILITATION
OVERALL ISSUES AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT	STUDYING ELSEWHERE		DISCUSSION TOPICS
DELIVERY OF QUESTIONS	BEING COMFORTABLE WITH THE OTHER PARTICIPANTS		OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION
SUPPORT GROUPS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	SETTING AND FORMALITY OF THE GROUP SESSION		TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD
DIFFERENCES WITH OTHER PARTS OF THE U.S			
COMPARING PAST EXPERIENCES HAVING LIVED IN THE U.S			
Note: Abbreviations: FGDQ: Focus Group Discussion 1 Question 1-2-3-4.			

FGD2 Q1	FGD2 Q2	FGD2 Q3	FGD2 Q4
ISSUES RELATED TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD	EXPECTING TRANSPARENCY FROM RECRUITERS	VARIETY OF TOPICS
HEARING FROM OTHERS	SYNTHESIS OF THE PARTICIPANTS	HEALTH INSURANCE & THE PANDEMIC	GUIDANCE OF QUESTIONS
DEEP THINKING		REFLECTING ON CHANGES	OPPORTUNITIES TO SPEAK
HELPFUL FACILITATION		BETTER OPPORTUNITIES TO INTERACT WITH LOCALS & OTHER U.S. STUDENTS	EFFECTIVENESS OF CONVERSATIONS
COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THE PARTICIPANTS		MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	WILLINGNESS TO OPEN UP
TOPICS DISCUSSED		LACK OF MOTIVATION	OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT
DISCRIMINATION & RACISM		ANXIETY	RELATING TO THE OTHER PARTICIPANTS
		UNKNOWN FUTURE	RESEARCHERS ROLE
		HOME COUNTRY CONCERNS	
		RECEIVING THE VACCINE	
		TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD	
		CRITIQUE OF QUESTIONS SET UP	
		COMPARING THE FGD WITH THE FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW	
		FORGETTING THE QUESTIONS FOR THE DISCUSSION	
		OVERALL COMMENTS OF THE FGD	
		FUTURE RECCOMENDATIONS OF TOPICS	

Note: Abbreviations: FGDQ2: Focus Group Discussion 2 Questions 1-2-3-4.

FGD3 Q1	FGD3 Q 2	FGD3 Q3	FGD3 Q4
AN INVITATION TO REFLECT ABOUT THE PANDEMIC	OVERALL COMMENTS OF THE FGD	HEALTH INSURANCE	VARIETY OF DISCUSSIONS AND RELATION TO OTHERS
MOVING ON TO THE FUTURE		STRUGGLES OF THE PANDEMIC	OVERCOMING THE PANDEMIC
MORE TO DO TO HELP INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS		TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD	TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD
PERSONAL CHANGES DUE TO COVID		BEING GIVEN MORE TIME TO REFLECT PRIOR ENTERING THE SESSION	OVERALL DISCUSSIONS
ENGAGING IN THE CONVERSATIONS		REASON TO SEND THE QUESTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS PRIOR ENTERING THE SESSION	A POSITIVE OUTLOOK
RESEARCHER'S ROLE		FINANCIAL BURDEN	BEING WORRIED OF FAMILY MEMBERS WHO ARE FAR AWAY
SEEKING CONNECTION WITH OTHERS		BETTER RESOURCES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	FEELING LESS LONELY BY SHARING WITH OTHERS
			RESEARCHERS ROLE
Note: Abbreviations: FGDQ3: Focus Group Discussion 3 Questions 1-2-3-4.			

FGD4 Q1	FGD4 Q2	FGD4 Q3	FGD5 Q4
INSIGHTFUL FGD	EXPECTATIONS OF THE FGD	RECCOMENDATION OF OTHER TOPICS	THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE FGD
PARTICIPANT SENT EXTRA INFORMATION	OVERALL COMMENTS OF THE FGD	CHOOSING THE TOPICS OF DISCUSSION	OVERALL SCOPE OF THE QUESTIONS
OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH OTHERS	RECCOMENDATION OF OTHER TOPICS	TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD	PARTICIPANTS WILLINGNESS TO SHARE
			TECHNICALITIES OF THE FGD
			FLOW OF CONVERSATIONS
			SHARING WITH OTHERS
Note: Abbreviations: FGDQ4: Focus Group Discussion 4 Questions 1-2-3-4.			

FI-DFQ1	FI-DFQ2	FI-DFQ3	FI-DFQ4
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	OVERALL INSIGHTS OF THE FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW	RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE ZOOM MEETINGS	FLOW OF CONVERSATION
REFLECTION OF THE PANDEMIC	A SPACE TO TALK FREELY	FUTURE DISCUSSIONS/TOPICS IN GENERAL TERMS	TOPICS DISCUSSED
LACK OF SUPPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY	RESEARCHERS ROLE	FUTURE DISCUSSIONS/TOPICS IN RELATION TO THE PANDEMIC	RELYING ON MEMORY
SETTING OF THE FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW		RECCOMENDATIONS TO GATHER MORE INFORMATION FROM PARTICIPANTS	ORGANIZATION OF THE INTERVIEW
SAFE SPACE		RESTRICTIONS OF RESEARCH DUE TO COVID	GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW
HOME COUNTRY AND THE PANDEMIC		OVERALL TOPICS & DISCUSSIONS	TECHNICALITIES OF THE FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW
BEING WORRIED OF FAMILY MEMBERS WHILE ABROAD			
CAMPUS PARTIALLY OPEN			
RESTRICTIONS OF TRAVELS			
Note: Abbreviations: FI-DFQ: Follow up interview-Debrief form question 1-2-3-4.			

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VITA

Carla Albornoz was born in Chile, Concepcion. Throughout her life, she has had the opportunity to live both in the U.S. and her home country for an extended period of time. She was an ESL student, then went on to become an ESL teacher, and pushed it even further, to pursue graduate school and become an international student. She has had to be mentally, physically, emotionally and even spiritually strong to endure every obstacle that came with navigating life between those two worlds.

She seeks to inspire others, to continue to grow and learn, and who knows, perhaps experience life in a third country, learn a third language and tackle new obstacles. She has realized that moving, packing, saying goodbye or not knowing when she will be back has turned into a way of life. She has infinite stories to tell and she wears her heart in her sleeve. As cliché as this may sound, she says "home is literally where the heart is" and goes on to add "and that could be anywhere.