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Social support for international students who faced emotional challenges midst Wuhan’s 76-day lockdown during early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study is a phenomenological investigation of the emotional challenges of international students experiencing the 76-day lockdown in Wuhan during the early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic in China. This study employed the psychological concepts of stress, fear, and uncertainty to understand international students’ risk factors and psychological symptoms during the Wuhan lockdown. Hence, this research assessed (a) the emotional challenges associated with the lockdown and (b) major sources to cope with emotional challenges. The overarching scholarly conversations are about diverse forms of emotional distress, such as stress and anxiety about their physical health and the social support from various sources at host universities and local communities, including students, teachers, administrators, and the students’ respective embassies. Overall, the current study has theoretical and practical implications and offers a guideline for administrative practice in international higher education and international student migration.

Introduction

At the end of December 2019, an unknown virus spread rapidly from its epicenter in Wuhan, which is the capital city of the Hubei Province, the People’s Republic of China (henceforth: China). By early January 2020, its transmission affected people both nationwide and with dozens of cases discovered in 34 countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) identified that this mysterious epidemic was caused by a novel coronavirus and officially designated the disease as COVID-19 in early February 2020 and ultimately proclaimed a global pandemic on March 12. Corresponding to a complete disruption of the global order, a growing body of evidence has explored the factors that have influenced people’s emotions when dealing with the epidemic and identifying the challenges and opportunities to

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normalize public policies and improve social systems (Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, 2020; Granier, Pantaleo, Ielapi, & Soverchia, 2020; Van Babel et al., 2020).

The international student migration (ISM) in higher education has been one of the growing concerns in the time of COVID-19, affecting international student affairs and services targeting international students’ mental health, social support, and general psychological wellbeing (Nam, 2021; Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2021). From East Asian perspectives, numerous scholars and media outlets have raised concerns about growing Xenophobia and Sinophobia trends in predominantly White countries, the so-called Anglophone nations (i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) (Nam, Marshall, Tian, & Jiang, 2021; Van Babel et al., 2020). These issues can be potentially traumatizing for international Asian students, which may increase their risk of anxiety, alienation, fear, and prolonged mourning (Koo, 2021; Nam & Jiang, 2021; Wang, 2021).

Despite the increased attention to the global health and psychological crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have paid scant attention to the specific needs of international students enrolled in East Asian higher education systems. Prior to the pandemic, Chinese universities were encouraged to host international students, recruit foreign faculty, and establish diverse global partnership and exchange programs. However, the pandemic significantly affected ISM, causing uncertainties and structural problems in Chinese higher education institutions. For example, according to Nam (2021), Chinese universities adopted an online education policy along with the newly growing pandemic. At the beginning of the spring semester of 2020, over 30,000 online courses were provided via e-learning platforms, consisting of Tencent Class, Online School, Wisdom Tree, and the MOOC platform of China University. While over 30 million domestic students who enrolled at approximately 3000 institutions could take courses online, international students who could not return to China due to the pandemic had to take the online classes in their own local time zones. At times, they had to deal with technological barriers and digital literacy issues.

Furthermore, according to Peters et al. (2020), international graduate students at Beijing Normal University faced challenges to gain appropriate mentoring experiences. Regarding their master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation projects, they were uncertain about their graduation research progresses due to the nationwide lockdown and campus closure. At this point, it is vital to explore more specific and various emotional challenges of international students beyond academic setting related to the pandemic. Notably, Wuhan was the most vulnerable city in the world due to the amount of danger and the length of lockdown due to the new novel coronavirus. Hence, the current study aims to investigate how COVID-19 impacted international students emotional well-being and how they gained social support from university administrations and their surrounding communities.

Pertinent to the current study, the first announcement of human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus was on January 20, 2020. The information caused fear and panic around Wuhan and led to a city-wide lockdown beginning at 10 am on January 23. Wuhan remained in a state of lockdown until April 8, or a total of 76 days in which residents were not permitted to circulate freely on the city streets. During the Wuhan lockdown, only essential workers were allowed to go to work, only one person per household was allowed to go out of the house daily for essential business (e.g., grocery, pharmacy, hospital, laundry, and gas), business hours were restricted, and a strict curfew 10 pm to 6 am was imposed. Masks were required inside all businesses or public transport (Feng et al., 2020).

A recent study by Yu et al. (2020) found that residents in Wuhan had relatively higher psychological distress than residents in other Chinese cities and provinces during the early stage of the pandemic (January-February). Residents in Wuhan and Hubei province had growing concerns and uncertainties, including fear of stigmatization and discrimination due to their proximity to the city. They were in long-term lockdown and isolation in Wuhan, which had the most significant number of cases (67,733 out of 80,955) in the nation. As Miao, Zeng, and Shi (2021) noted, Wuhan residents had to discover new ways to deal with the lockdown and cultivate prosocial behaviors in which many individuals engaged in voluntary community services (e.g., delivering food and medical supplies) for their neighbors. They also actively used social media platforms to share public health and lifeline information with their families, friends, and colleagues (Zhong, Huang, & Liu, 2021).

Despite the international spotlight on Wuhan at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, little is known about how international students experience the pandemic and gain social support from the local community and the university administration. At the time, approximately, 8000 international students were enrolled at universities in Wuhan, of which approximately 1500 of them could not be evacuated, while many foreign countries organized dozens of flights to evacuate their citizens (MEPRC, 2019). Moreover, university campuses were closed during the lockdown, and unless they had special permission from their universities, international students were not allowed to leave campuses. Hence, the international students who could not be evacuated were considered a vulnerable population. Their concerns about their families back home as COVID-19 spread internationally added to their mental health challenges. Therefore, this study explored the pandemic experiences of international students during the 76-day lockdown in Wuhan using a phenomenological approach that examined international students’ emotional challenges.

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4 According to an archive issued by Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (2019), the number of international students from Asia and Africa has been growing steadily. As of the 2018–2019 academic year, China hosted 492,185 international students, of which 295,043 (59.95%) were from Asia, and 81,563 (16.57%) were from Africa, while 73,618 (14.96) were from Europe, and less than 10% were from other continents, such as North America, South America, Oceania, and others.
Literature review

Pandemic and psychological traumatic symptoms

Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, in Van Bavel et al.’s (2020) research, 38 academics utilized approaches from the social and behavioral sciences to investigate a wide range of factors that cause uncertainties, anxieties, and frustrations expressed by diverse racial, ethnic- and culture-sharing, and national groups at the time of the global pandemic. From the perspective of social-behavioral and health psychology, traumatic events and associated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms are of serious concern (Orrù, Rebecca, Gemignani, & Conversano, 2020). PTSD is defined as a mental health condition that may occur in people who have either directly or indirectly experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. The various symptoms include, but are not limited to, intrusive memories, avoidance, and negative changes in mood entailing various forms of emotional and physical reactions (Mayo Clinic, 1998–2021). Symptoms typically occur in the days following the event, must last for more than a month and must cause significant distress or problems individual’s daily functioning to be diagnosed as PTSD.

In the early days of COVID-19, referring to the timeframe from late December 2019 to late March 2020, countries worldwide tried to curtail its spread by adopting safety measures such as wearing masks, social distancing and social gathering restrictions, quarantine after exposure, and business shutdowns (Van Bavel et al., 2020). These large-scale societal changes have increased the feelings of uncertainty, stress, and fear associated with the actual disease and the day-to-day changes necessary for survival. Social isolation and quarantine affect mental health with increased symptoms of psychological trauma (Galea et al., 2020).

Psychological trauma occurs when a perceived threat to self or others overwhelms internal and external resources (American Psychological Association, 2008). Traumatic experiences affect the entire consciousness, empathy, memories, and feelings of self (Bath, 2008). For example, previous studies on responses to epidemiological experiences (e.g., SARS and MERS) identified feelings of anger, lethargy, confusion, anxiety, and mourning. Specifically, those interviewed during epidemiological quarantine demonstrated high psychological traumas, such as anxiety, depression, stress, insomnia, hypervigilance, and anger (Lee, Chan, Chau, Kwok, & Kleinman, 2005; Yoon, Kim, Ko, & Lee, 2016). Furthermore, Bai et al. (2004) surveyed the stress reactions of 338 hospital staff during the SARS outbreak. They found that quarantine (9 days) was the most predictive indicator of acute stress disorder. Quarantined staff were more likely to report exhaustion, detachment, and anxiety along with irritability, insomnia, poor concentration, indecisiveness, deteriorating work performance, and reluctance to work. Further, the association of work environment with psychological trauma response and symptoms is bidirectional (Bai et al., 2004).

Additionally, Sprang and Silman (2013) compared post-traumatic stress symptoms in quarantined versus not quarantined parents and children during a pandemic response. This study found that post-traumatic stress symptoms were four times higher in children who had been quarantined compared to those who were not quarantined. Further, 28% of parents quarantined in this study reported symptoms to warrant a diagnosis of a trauma-related mental health disorder, compared to 6% of parents who were not quarantined. Namely, the result demonstrated that family support and shared trauma experiences are significant factors to consider in investigating mental health and social isolation.

Emotional challenges faced by international students during the COVID-19 pandemic

Emotional challenges faced by international students have been a growing concern among scholars within the field of international education (Bista, Allen, & Chan, 2021). In reviewing the ISM literature, Nam et al. (2021) explored the racially traumatic experiences of 16 Chinese international students enrolled at large public universities in Arizona, California, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, Oregon, and Texas. This study analyzed racially traumatic incidents and found symptoms such as insomnia, nightmares, and negative memories in the face of verbal insults in the local communities, public, and social media.

Furthermore, Wang (2021) examined the pandemic experiences of 11 Chinese international students enrolled at a large public university in New Jersey. This study analyzed safety, political, economic, social, and academic factors influencing their emotional well-being. Notably, growing geopolitical conflicts between the U.S. and China significantly affected the Chinese international students’ safety concerns. Similarly, Koo (2021) evaluated the mental health and well-being of 18 international students and found extreme they suffered from stress due to the many uncertainties such as legal status and career development opportunities.

More recently, Hari et al. (2021) explored 13 international students in Ontario, Canada, and showed that international students’ lockdown experiences often entailed severe anxiety and psychological distress. Notably, this study stated that COVID-19 produced numerous forms of uncertainties, impacting international students’ emotional well-being while Canada was also facing cross-border issues, financial crisis, and lack of social support. Overall, countless individuals all around the world have continued to experience lockdowns or community outbreaks. For ISM researchers, the psychological trauma of these individuals and their potential risk factors are essential and need to be addressed.

This study considers emotional challenges of international students during the Wuhan lockdown that can be intertwined with stress, uncertainties, and potential traumatic symptoms, especially in the early stage of the public health emergency. In this context, the current study views that coping with their mental health through social support and community support is more a significant analytical angle. Namely, coping is a transactional process in response to acculturative stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Further, various coping strategies have been shown to reduce or attenuate the negative impacts of acculturative stress on adaptation outcomes (Aldwin, 2007). Additionally, social support is another instrumental strategy to help reduce traumatic stress. In some cases, social support from host country members has provided an effective buffer against uncertainty (English et al., 2021). While considering this phenomenon in the time of COVID-19, social support may need to include community members or local university staff members...
because, in a time of dire need, international students may not have adequate social and emotional support (Nam & Jiang, 2021; Nam et al., 2021; Koo, 2021; Wang, 2021). For these reasons, this study assumes explicit cross-cultural adaptation is already stressful and continues onward to contemplate how emotional factors interact with psychological trauma during the pandemic. Exploring international students’ emotional challenges during a lockdown is significant for determining whether international students can cope with the barriers when they have gained sufficient social support or cultivated prosocial behaviors. Therefore, the primary research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How did international students experience the 76-day lockdown in Wuhan?
RQ2: What sources of social support did international students gain to cope with emotional challenges associated with the 76-day lockdown in Wuhan?

Methodology

A phenomenological approach

A phenomenological approach is a methodology in qualitative research, often used in the social and behavioral sciences as well as social psychology (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The approach employs a social constructivist viewpoint with which to develop subjective meanings and worldviews. With these methodological, ontological, and epistemological foundations, phenomenologists examine the common life experiences of individuals within a particular social phenomenon and propose that emotional challenges are universally experienced (Creswell, 2013). In social psychology particularly, the phenomenological approach is utilized with people who may encounter diverse life and emotional unrest, such as trauma, depression, anxiety, frustration, alienation, and discrimination (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This study has sought to understand the new global social phenomenon that international students’ ordinary lifestyles, emotions, and holistic well-being have been impacted by the pandemic, especially in Wuhan, China. Therefore, based on the methodological considerations, this study examined the pandemic experiences of international students who faced various forms of emotional unrest during Wuhan’s lockdown and evaluated, through a phenomenological lens, the operational challenges they faced to cope with mental health issues.

Researchers’ subjectivities

Since the phenomenological approach entails diverse socio-psychological factors that influence individual life and emotional challenges, it is essential to recognize the researchers’ subjectivities and acknowledge their positionalities, such as their academic qualifications and personal experiences. In so doing, potential biases can be minimized, and trustworthiness can be maximized (Creswell, 2013).

In qualitative research, scholars examine intercultural issues as specific social phenomena often face dilemmas when interviewing their participants due to different positionalities (Mullings, 1999). For example, Mullings (1999) argued that participants in social categories such as “gender, race, class or sexuality” involve political issues which entail power differentials created by elite groups on both the local and national scales (p. 340). Thus, to clarify researchers’ positionalities, namely their “self-representation” such as political traits, power, honor, and privileges, illustrating their “insider/outsider boundary” (Mullings, 1999, p. 340).

The research group in this study included three American authors and one Chinese author with backgrounds in international higher education, educational psychology and counseling, cross-cultural psychology, and communication. All authors were insiders to this research due to their positionalities and reflexivity. Notably, as university faculty members and researchers in the Chinese higher education system, two American authors and one Chinese author directly experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in China as stakeholders. The two American authors also directly experienced short-term and medium-term lockdowns as foreigners in China. Furthermore, the Chinese author was involved with international student communities for four years at one of the universities in Wuhan. Notably, the author oversaw international student dormitory and community support programs as a liaison. While the pandemic was severe, one author (Chinese) observed international students’ emotional challenges and special needs during the lockdown.

One American author is also currently facing uncontrolled community spread of COVID-19 in the United State while teaching and mentoring numerous international students as a university faculty member. Therefore, all the authors admit certain biases in analyzing other individuals’ life stories, especially in the cross-national and cross-cultural contexts characterized by divergent national, social, and cultural identities. Given these standards, the authors acknowledge that their preconceived beliefs should not control their analyses, allowing them to find conclusive results based on mutual discussions (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

To execute a phenomenological study, Creswell (2013) recommended that investigators “interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (p. 81). Hence, purposeful non-random and convenient sampling methods were used to recruit eight international students who resided in Wuhan during the 76-day lockdown (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants were recruited from April 2 to May 12, 2020. The interviews were scheduled and conducted between early June to late August. The participants were from Global South (e.g., Arabian Sea and West African nations), consisting of three nations: Pakistan, Cameroon, and Malawi. They were five men and three women. Their ages ranged from 21 to 35, and the length of their stay in China ranged from two years and seven months to five years. Their academic degree programs included bachelor’s, master’s, and Ph.D. levels in diverse
academic fields. While they were in lockdown, they remained in university dormitories and the local community (see Table 1).

As aforementioned, one of the authors (Chinese) had been involved with the international student community at one of the universities in Wuhan. Typically, there are more than 1500 international students in Wuhan; however, many countries evacuated their students at the start of the epidemic. The participants in the current study could not be evacuated and remained in the city the entire time. While they were in lockdown, one of the authors closely interacted and communicated with the participants. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in English (see Table 2). The interviews were first audio-recorded, and then transcribed and sent back to the participants for member-checking. Upon their agreement, these transcripts were interpreted through cross-check analysis. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ identities. Their legal names and affiliations were removed from the transcripts.

One of the authors considers herself to be a member of the local community. Therefore, this may potentially affect the power dynamics embedded in the research process, which could impact their responses. In the given social phenomenon of the new and growing pandemic, every participant shared their sudden lifestyle changes, felt uncertain about their study abroad progress, and was anxious about their physical and emotional well-being. The author distinctly informed participants that if they felt emotional distress during the interview, they could skip questions or quit the whole interview at any time. Along with the student interviews, the author used a collaborative approach to communicate with more than 30 individuals, such as university administrators and local community members who had directly interacted with the international students. These collaborators also helped build rapport and intimacy between the author and participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data analysis

Given the nature of the phenomenological investigation, this study employed a qualitative thematic and taxonomic analysis method to establish the primary domains and categorize emergent themes by stages (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). In the initial stage, the authors openly coded and developed domains. In this regard, they considered the primary research questions and the chosen conceptual maps. Thus, the primary domains were divided into two main contents along with the participants’ emotional challenges and responses to the pandemic and potential factors influencing the coping mechanism: (1) Domain I: The Emotional Challenges Associated with the Lockdown and (2) Domain II: Major Sources to Cope with Emotional Challenges. In the next stage, the authors carefully reviewed the transcripts that focused specifically on how diverse factors influenced trauma, the risk factors for trauma, the support from others, and the active challenges to coping with their traumatic experiences. In the final stage, the authors mutually discussed the most common themes and stories to derive conclusive results.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Nationality | Length of stay in China | Major                                      | Degree | Living location during pandemic (Jan. 15- Apr. 15) | Self-reported Chinese Language |
|-----------|--------|-----|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Abu       | M      | 35  | Pakistan    | 4 years                 | Agricultural Economics and Management       | PhD    | University Dorm                                 | Spoken: Basic Reading: Lowest level |
| Becky     | F      | 21  | Malawi      | 4 years                 | Sociology                                   | BA     | University Dorm                                 | Spoken: Almost advanced        |
| Calvin    | M      | 26  | Pakistan    | 3 years                 | Genomics                                    | MA     | University Dorm                                 | Reading: Average Spoken: Above average |
| David     | M      | 29  | Pakistan    | 4 years                 | Theoretical Physics                         | Postdoc| Local Community                                 | Reading: Above average Spoken: Basic |
| Ella      | F      | 27  | Pakistan    | 3 years                 | Plant Science                               | MA     | University Dorm                                 | Reading: Very Basic            |
| Farhan    | M      | 34  | Pakistan    | 2 years                 | Material Science and Engineering            | PhD    | Local Community                                 | Reading: Lowest level          |
| Gary      | M      | 31  | Pakistan    | 5 years                 | Management Science                          | PhD    | Local Community                                 | Spoken: Basic Reading: Very Basic |
| Helen     | F      | 35  | Cameroon    | 2 years 7 months        | Agricultural Protection                     | Postdoc| Local Community (near campus)                   | Spoken: Basic Reading: Very Basic |

In China, post-doc researchers are considered students as they receive a diploma upon completion of their research; Students’ living location was an important factor because international students were confined to their living quarters for 76 days. Chinese language was vital as students received information and communicated with locals entirely in China. Not understanding Mandarin language made communication difficult.
Findings and analysis

Domain I: the emotional challenges associated with the lockdown

Stress and Anxiety about Physical Health Condition. Facing a largely unknown public health emergency, international students in the current study were concerned about their safety and physical wellbeing. Fever, cough, and chest tightness are typical symptoms of the coronavirus. Yet, when people are stressed and unsettled, such symptoms may also occur. Some students overreacted to those symptoms due to the lack of knowledge about the coronavirus and their fears of infection. For example, Helen experienced chest tightness and headache for more than a week, but her body temperature remained normal. She was worried about getting infected. Helen recalled:

I was really feeling this disturbing headache like my head would just ache. I never experienced this headache before, so I was just thinking I am infected with coronavirus, like every time I just feel I am going to faint. I feel like I cannot breathe, I feel this, I feel that I thought I was dying here.

Becky and Ella were outside engaging in social activities on January 22 (the day before the lockdown) and did not wear masks. Ella accompanied her friends to Hankou Railway station and the airport and went shopping in GuangGu (a crowded shopping block), while Becky was in a bar with friends that night. Ella recalled:

I did not realize anything. Until the lockdown happened, I realized that I did not wear the mask and was in the train station. There were so many people, and then I thought I must be infected; oh my God, I must have the virus. Then, I stayed in my dorm for a week, I felt headache and ill, I think I might die, I spent seven days like that and thank God, I passed the first week.

The tension caused by unprotected exposure led to Ella’s mental burden and overreaction to minor symptoms. Notably, David who was diagnosed with COVID-19, and his hospital experience deepened his fear, he shared his experience:

At the hospital and even after I was released, I kept thinking...Maybe just because we feel lonely and helpless. In my mind, I was thinking like the whole world is blocked and we are just trapped, we are trapped here. I thought I was dying here. I wasn’t sure if I can go to my country. I didn’t know if I’ll meet my people [families and friends] or not.

Overall, the COVID-19 outbreak happened in winter, and the weather in Wuhan during the lockdown was cold. Symptoms such as fever and cough and slight headache could also be attributed to cold weather. However, under such circumstances, those students were more sensitive to the symptoms and reacted with fear. The more one was alert to the body, the more one would feel the symptoms, and vice versa. Notably, one participant, David, actually received a clinical diagnosis of COVID-19 and had to recover in the hospital for several weeks.

Mental Crisis and Psychological Well-Being. As quarantine played an important role in controlling virus transmission, it tragically impacted individuals’ psychological wellbeing. Psychological response refers to the students’ emotional response and reaction to the pandemic. It is imperative to understand the students’ feelings and emotions towards the pandemic. In times of crisis, psychological reactions, such as acute stress, anxiety, and post-traumatic symptoms, are wide-ranging and substantial.

Fear was found to be the most frequently mentioned emotion. Fear is not simply an evaluation of a threat that people face; rather, fear involves a feeling of hopelessness when facing a threat. When the lockdown was imposed, and confirmed cases were increasing

Table 2
Interview protocol for participants.

1) Demographic Information
   a) What is your nationality?
   a) How old are you?
   a) What is your major and your degree level?
   a) How long have you been staying in China?
   a) What are your Chinese literacy and proficiency levels?
   a) Where did you stay during the lockdown?

2) General Pandemic Experience
   a) Please share the overall pandemic experience in Wuhan.

3) Communication and Support
   a) Please describe how you communicated with your family during the lockdown.

4) Cultural Conflict
   a) Did you have any cultural conflicts with Chinese staff, or locals? If so, how did you deal with them?
   a) Did any cultural conflicts with other international students? If so, how did you deal with them?

5) Reflection on Traumatic Experience
   a) Please describe your emotion during the lockdown broadly.
   a) Did you feel any emotional unrest or discomfort?

6) Advice and Suggestion
   a) Describe your fundamental needs while you are currently staying in China.
   a) Provide any useful information that the investigator should know about your current life.
day after day, the participants felt fearful about the situation. Becky recalled that “I was scared, I was very scared of going outside and doing normal stuff” and that being fearful was one of her three dominant emotions in her entire pandemic experience. Calvin said, “That time was frightening; we were afraid.”

Moreover, the worry was another prevalent feeling among students. For instance, students expressed their worries about their life and the overall situation. Calvin shared, “We were worried about our food items and things, like how we will buy things, how we will manage our daily routine.” Farhan, a student who had his wife and one-year-old daughter with him in Wuhan, shared, “When I was in Wuhan, I was staying in my apartment like I wasn’t allowed to go outside. So, I felt like I was worried about the situation, what will happen... you have to worry about your situation and all these things.” Helen had a stronger response, “.you feel like you are being restricted psychologically, also disturbed, you feel like you’re in prison.”

Students also mentioned uncertainty about what will happen and how things will develop. Feeling uncertain about the future or that the future is completely unpredictable. Becky disclosed that “uncertainty” was her predominant response to the pandemic. Gary remembered that “During the lockdown, in the beginning, I didn’t expect that this thing is going to be that serious and then with everyday things getting worse and worse, so it was some uncertainty.” Furthermore, students’ emotional distress also included anxiety, nervousness, and loneliness. For instance, Abu recalled, “I was stressed out in the start, it is because it was like a war, lots of misinformation, there were lots of rumors and a lot of news and uncertainty. There was so much misinformation.” Calvin, a master’s student who was applying for his Ph.D., recalled, “We were nervous about our education because we came here for education and in the final year, in the final semester, this Covid-19 came, and we feel that we were stuck at that time.” David described his feelings when he was in the hospital, “At that time, I wanted to go back home but I needed to be treated first. Well, that time, I was feeling lonely and depressed.”

The emotional problems were amplified by financial hardships, such as affordability and job loss. For example, Helen just completed her post-graduate education and research project in late January 2020 and started her new job in the United States in February. Due to the lockdown, she could not begin her work as scheduled and, in the meantime, her study ended, and the scholarship stopped. As a result, she did not have any income. Helen shared, “by February my studies had finished, no salary, no money. So, like, it was very stressful.” Moreover, when students were asked to recall their pandemic experiences in Wuhan 3 months later (August 2020), the intensity of their emotions appeared to have long-lasting psychological effects of the pandemic, indicating that some students might have developed symptoms of PTSD. For example, Helen shared, “for now, I just I have a kind of a PTSD. I hope this winter this corona thing will not be coming back again.” Social distancing and quarantine for more than two months challenged not only students’ daily lives but, more importantly, their psychological wellbeing.

Homesickness and Burnout but Continuous Pursuit of Education. International students in the current study felt homesick and abandoned as many of their friends and classmates were able to return to their home countries during the outbreak. They were burnt out due to the diverse emotional challenges they faced. However, they were determined to stay and continue their education in China. Lockdown was imposed over the winter vacation when students had travel plans. Some students followed through with their plans to finish their theses and complete experiments in the laboratory; some students had no other options as their flights were canceled. In addition to why they stayed, a more important question was whether they regretted staying. Regrets about staying can be linked to students’ ruminations over reality. From this perspective, interviewees provided different responses. Most participants did not regret staying. In the past several months, China and Chinese communities showed great determination and took strong actions to control the situation to create a safe environment and to accommodate the international students who stayed. In the end, international students survived this stressful event. As Abu shared, “I don’t regret staying here because I think staying here was also kind of fun, and it was safe. I don’t regret it.” Calvin shared, “I don’t regret staying; I will say that I feel safer here.”

Meanwhile, the participants perceived that their home countries’ medical facilities and government measures might not have been as effective as those in China. Namely, they felt they have better living conditions in China than in their home countries. For example, Gary said, “I would rather stay in China. Because I experienced how they handle the situation, I am more confident about China than Pakistan. Pakistan doesn’t have that ability and doesn’t have that capacity.” Moreover, staying in school provided a better environment for students working on their theses, as mentioned by Becky and Ella. Becky recalled, “I was working on my thesis, so it was better for me to be in the school environment, to focus,” while Ella shared, “If I have a chance, I don’t want to go. I want to stay because I must write my thesis.”

Another significant factor was that once students returned to their home countries, it became uncertain when they would be able to return to China. Hence, staying in Wuhan was a strategic choice. Based on the discussions with the students who stayed in Wuhan, many students who returned to their home countries (evacuated or left before the lockdown) are still outside of China and regretted leaving Wuhan. The purpose of studying in China was to obtain academic degrees, and students’ classes, thesis writing, and lab experiments had to be conducted at school, which was largely disrupted by the pandemic. Farhan was a typical example. He stayed in Wuhan till May 2020 and then took a chartered flight back to Pakistan with his family. In August 2020, he reflected that he regretted leaving Wuhan because he needed to complete his Ph.D. project, and now he did not know when he could return to campus in Wuhan. He felt that he should have stayed in Wuhan the whole time. Overall, students had to negotiate with their schooling while they were feeling diverse emotional challenges.
Domain II: major sources to cope with emotional challenges

Social Bonds over Cultural Conflicts. Cultural conflicts refer to students’ perceived or encountered problems and conflicts with different cultural groups. The participants shared that they experienced more social and emotional support as opposed to cultural conflicts. The school’s social isolation policy at the time was very strict, and it was the first time that students encountered such a situation, but they all expressed their understanding. Abu said, “I don’t think there was any cultural difference or conflict there. They know our needs. We also understand theirs. At that time, we all had very great empathy. We understood each other.” Ella was volunteering during the pandemic, and she had no cultural conflict working together with teachers and local people. She mentioned, “I was working with Chinese volunteers, and they were all teachers. We didn’t feel any conflict with them, and they also didn’t feel any conflict with working with us or talking with us, never.”

Farhan, living in the local community, mentioned that “I don’t have any cultural conflict with Chinese people. So, we were in a community group, and I was the only foreigner in that group. They were very humble. They were very loving, and they were very kind.” Students could not meet people outside of their buildings during the pandemic, which reduced much of the contact and, therefore, conflict. Gary shared:

During this lockdown, personal interaction was much less. So, there was less chance of any cultural conflict. Most of the time, we had a community group, and we could go shopping together. If you had a question, they would answer in the group, so never face any problem.

The lack of cultural conflict with international students and different groups contributed to students’ successful intercultural adaptation during their stay in Wuhan.

University Administration and International Student Community. The University’s International Students Office (ISO) is directly responsible for international students. Based on interviews, during the pandemic, the university faculty worked closely with students to guarantee that they (1) had sufficient daily necessities, such as food and water; (2) were in good health without physical discomfort; (3) communicated with universities so that they did not feel abandoned, and (4) were emotionally stable. To achieve these goals, the university went to great lengths to (1) create a WeChat (social media messaging app) group to collect students’ living needs, which were compiled into a list by student volunteers who contacted the local supermarket suppliers for fixed-point delivery; students did not need to worry about the payment (the university took care of the bill); (2) required students to check their own temperature (administration also occasionally checked their temperatures) and report it twice a day; (3) encouraged students to communicate more with fellows, supervisors, and families, and to ask teachers questions at any time; and (4) organized online cultural activities, such as student sharing pandemic experiences and recording pandemic videos for Wuhan community and healthcare workers to keep morale high. All the interviewees spoke highly of their universities and recognized their universities’ hard work. For example, Abu and Calvin shared:

Abu: The university has helped us in many ways, and they tried their best so that we did not go out unnecessarily. Number two, they made sure that we took all the precautions when we went out. Number three, they made sure that we had all the necessities, like food and stuff. And they tried to provide for us, even though it was difficult at that time, everything was so scarce that sometimes there was no water in the city, like clean drinking water, bottled water, but they went to great lengths to acquire water for us.

Calvin: They supported us in a very good way. We communicated with the international college whenever we needed something; we could not go out of our dormitory at that time, so if we needed anything, we asked the international college, they noted everything we need, and they delivered it to us downstairs in the outer dormitory gate.

As part of a community of international students, the students themselves had the best understanding of their collective situation. As such, they always gave each other strong backing and emotional support. Despite different cultural backgrounds or ethnicities, international students unified and confronted the crisis together. Calvin recalled, “If other students needed anything, we just helped each other.” Ella also recalled:

We helped each other, you know, sometimes, not everyone can cook, and so if I cooked, I shared some food or some dinner with my friends. And if I don’t cook, they give me some, and sometimes even in the evenings, we shared a cup of tea and had a positive discussion.

Moreover, Ella was active in her dormitory building, and the international students in the dormitory supported each other by sharing food and having small and quick meetings together. Further, Farhan felt the care from his friends through information exchange in groups and their encouragement. Farhan shared:

If I needed any other group for food or anything, other groups would give me information on all these things. So, I shared information about anything with my countrymen and what information they got when they shared that information with me. So, these types of help, we shared information and help, support, moral support each other (while staying in the local neighborhood).

Embassy, Supervisors, and Chinese Locals. At the official level, embassies provided aid. For example, the Pakistani ambassador visited universities in Wuhan in February and brought supplies. Every Pakistani student who stayed in Wuhan received a one-time subsidy of 500 dollars. The Malawi embassy provided their students in Wuhan with a monthly subsidy of 200 dollars for three consecutive months. Moreover, as David was a confirmed case, his supervisor went to great lengths to get a hospital bed for him despite the scarcity of resources at the peak of the pandemic. Ella recalled, “My teacher. usually called me after two days. And sometimes he called and

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5 In general, scholars within socio-cultural and cross-cultural studies define conflict as power relations between people who have divergent ideologies. In critical theory and cross-cultural ethnography, cultural conflicts illustrate power struggles between different ethnic or national groups and express hostility toward each other upon different ideologies, beliefs, norms, and ways of life (Gobo & Molle, 2017).
talked on WeChat… almost 30 or 40 min to talk about the situation, asking me what I’m doing, what about my thesis.” Gary shared, “When we had some problems, we talked to our supervisor, and then supervisor managed things for us.”

Additionally, Chinese locals, including the workers in the dormitory and people from the local neighborhood community, extended their assistance. During the pandemic, the dorm manager (shifu) stayed with students and helped deliver goods and disinfect the building. Abu remembered that “the shifu was there, there was one shifu present at all times, we have a very good understanding with him. He knows us. Everybody knows. He knows our needs.” Moreover, students who lived off-campus in the local neighborhood were taken care of by their neighborhood. The Neighborhood community selected workers who could speak English to communicate with the international students. Farhan shared his experience living in a local neighborhood:

The neighborhood helped a lot because we were in strict lockdown, and in our building, there were two to four cases of COVID-19. So, we were strictly not allowed to go outside of our door. When we needed anything, they were in touch with us in the WeChat groups. So, when we needed anything, we asked them to buy it. So, they were buying for us. And for me, for my baby, we listed food items, all the things. So, they were helping us a lot (while staying in the local neighborhood).

Overall, participants in the current study expressed diverse emotional challenges and shared major sources that helped them cope with the emotional challenges while they were in a long-term lockdown in Wuhan.

Discussion

Participants expressed concerns about mental and physical health, safety, and ambiguous non-death losses due to isolation, uncertainty, and disruptions of normalcy. Student responses to COVID-19 were like those of other populations that experienced changes in their education, virtual learning, and altered schedules and plans (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused various forms of emotional challenges for the international students that can develop potential PTSD symptoms such as anxiety, stress, and fear, especially during the lockdown periods (Nam et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2020). The potential traumatic incidents and risk factors are not only for international students but also impact international faculty, migrants, sojourners, and their families. They are often angry amid COVID-19 discrimination which are rising concerns among the local community in China (Li, English, & Kulich, 2021). Thus, cultural conflict can be a serious issue in ISM literature (e.g., Hari et al., 2021; Wang, 2021). However, the findings showed that sources of social support were prominent examples how international students could cope with their emotional challenges.

In the early days of COVID-19, referring to the timeframe from late December 2019 to late March 2020, countries worldwide tried to curtail its spread by adopting safety measures such as wearing masks, social distancing and social gathering restrictions, quarantine after exposure, and business shutdowns (Van Bavel et al., 2020). These large-scale societal changes have increased the feelings of uncertainty, stress, and fear associated with the actual disease and the day-to-day changes necessary for survival. Social isolation and quarantine affect mental health with increased symptoms of psychological trauma (Galea et al., 2020).

As China has moved through the COVID-19 changes, exploring the individual’s mental toughness and physical manifestations of dealing with uncertainties, stress, and various traumatic symptoms and potential risk factors among these international students who faced unforeseen events or accidents are important (Li et al., 2021). Isolation and psychological distress accompanied fear during the pandemic. Participants were isolated in their dorms and were unable to engage in everyday activities. Their daily routines were upended entirely due to fear of contamination and the impositions of COVID-19 restrictions.

While international students felt uncertainty along with the rapid academic, social, and cultural life changes during the lockdown, the potential risk grew for a physical and mental decline, substance use, and emotional despair (Nam et al., 2021; Hari et al., 2021; Koo, 2021; Wang, 2021). Participants did keep in contact with family, and some called their families every day. Due to safety concerns, most participants secured themselves by staying in their dormitories or places provided by the local community. Upon reflection, they believed they had made the right choice. Some also stayed because they were unable to get flights home; however, many appreciated the structure of the school environment. Though the educational landscape had changed, participants found that they could combat the growing pandemic and feelings of uncertainty by staying.

In ISM research, primary coping demonstrates how sojourners (e.g., temporary migrants, including international students and expats) can make efforts to overcome cultural conflicts. Secondary coping indicates that sojourners can adjust themselves to or negotiate within these cultural conflicts (Szabo et al., 2017; English & Zhang, 2020). The secondary coping consists of positive reframing and acceptance of problems (i.e., cultural conflicts or adaptation challenges such as language barriers) is, therefore, a way of combating stress (Morling & Evered, 2006). With respect to coping more specifically, recent studies by Bender, van Osch, Sleeegers, and Ye (2019) and English et al. (2021) theorized the significance of social support as a prominent coping strategy. In China, host country members provided sufficient social support to international students and sojourners. They felt less psychological problems such as anxiety and stress when they adapted to new locations and environment. International students typically have different status from the locals without families. They may have limited knowledge or little information about the local urgent policies and cultural un

A lack of cultural conflicts aided the students’ recovery. Participants used primary and secondary coping strategies to find their pathways to empowerment, combatting isolation, and cultivating prosocial behaviors that built a sense of community. Participants reported few conflicts because the focus was entirely on maintaining a sense of well-being during the pandemic. Rather than feeling
aware of cultural differences, these international students thought they had built a strong sense of community that helped them feel safer and connected. They noted that empathy helped establish working relationships with the locals and other international students; thereby, they could recover a level of emotional well-being. Community response to the needs of the students was significantly positive for both physical and mental health.

Additionally, universities and their administrators helped build a sense of community, as well. They created communication systems by using social media to abide by social distancing restrictions, making connections, and preventing isolation. The community did regular home checks and encouraged students to communicate so that they could normalize their feelings. Community members also worked to keep up morale by sharing videos and stories. Scholars may have overlooked the earliest pandemic experiences, as the world had not experienced the illness as a pandemic; therefore, the experiences of vulnerable international students in Wuhan have been absent in scholarly literature (Wang, 2021). Notably, Hari et al. (2021) raised a crucial point regarding the limited “transnational social and cultural resources” to support international students’ mental health and psychological well-being. They called upon critical scholars to consider ways to cope with their “severe anxiety, loneliness, and gaps in social networks during the pandemic” (Hari et al., 2021, p. 15).

**Practical implications, limitations, and future research**

This study found that international students in Wuhan had to endure diverse emotional challenges while in a long-term lockdown, but they could cope by learning how to survive through sharing traumatic experiences, gaining social support systems, and overcoming cultural differences. In the present line of inquiry, international students in China often felt excluded because of cross-cultural adaptation issues such as language barriers and a wide range of uncertainties regarding academic, social, and cultural lives in a foreign country (English & Zhang, 2020; English, Zeng, & Ma, 2015).

Nonetheless, during the pandemic, the Chinese society has promoted social cohesion and compassion about others regardless of domestic and international status in the nation. For example, numerous medical practitioners and social workers volunteered to rescue people in Wuhan. Further, Chinese citizens donated to purchase facial masks, food, and other fundamental necessities (Yu et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2021). In the meantime, Wuhan residents cultivated prosocial and collective behaviors to promote healthy prevention strategies; thereby they could mitigate rapidly growing transmissions (Miao et al. 2021). Hence, universities and their counselors can reflect diverse cases of positive prosocial behaviors across the globe and apply them to their approaches in mental health counseling for their clients. To mitigate trauma response symptoms, social supports reduce fear and uncertainty. Specifically, concerning the use of peer support (e.g., groups or mentors), counselors, advisors, and faculty can advocate university wide support groups and aid in gaining resources, such as groceries, school supplies, and transportation. As the findings showed, social support from the larger community was essential to participants’ symptom mitigation and developing a community support through the university can help international students to feel less fear and uncertainty and more connected with the larger community.

This research had a few notable limitations. Initially, the sample size was relatively small, and the participants were from specific geographical areas representing a few Arabian Sea and West African nations, such as Pakistan, Cameroon, and Malawi, because only a limited number of students could be evacuated when the COVID-19 was growing into a severe public health crisis. Thus, future studies should consider including a larger sample and conducting a quantitative investigation if similar lockdown issues occur. While using the phenomenological approach, varying degrees of emic and etic views may complicate a researcher’s positionality. Future studies should rely more on participants’ lived experiences (Mullings, 1999). In consideration of Mullings (1999), representing insider or outsider status of investigators can provide a deeper and comprehensive understanding of intercultural relations. From that standpoint, the authors in this study commonly experienced the pandemic as insiders and considered the significance of social support, especially community resilience, including developing an integrative and interdisciplinary approach to view the current pandemic at hand. Therefore, the authors perceive that it is instrumental to enhance an understanding of community resilience from a life span perspective and promote scalable and cost-effective interventions for the community resilience; thereby future scholars can contemplate how to improve pandemic preparedness in ISM research. Finally, the current study was a phenomenological investigation that examined international students’ lockdown experiences, but it did not include the more diverse international student populations in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, future studies should recruit such populations to enhance our understanding of the pandemic emergency issues.

**Concluding remarks**

This phenomenological study examined how international students experienced Wuhan’s 76-day lockdown. The findings highlighted emotional challenges of international students. Notably, this study suggested the need to investigate the individual experiences of each international student to clarify the effects of lockdown on their mental health and the ways they overcome diverse emotional challenges in the time of public health crisis through collective endeavors.

Recently, China has actively promoted the internationalization of higher education and hosted international students and establishing global partnerships and scholarly exchange programs. Thus, it is vital to pay close attention to foreigners’ psychological wellbeing who are living away from home during a public health emergency. As COVID-19 continues to grow and influence global student mobility, this study emphasizes the importance of coping mechanisms, emphasizing the need for efficient guidance and counseling practices within the contexts of international higher education and global student mobility.

By reflecting on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions in China must suggest plausible strategies for finding the best way forward to strengthen the coping mechanisms of their students. From the initial outbreak to the current fall
semester of 2021, it has been critical to normalize the nation’s higher education system. All the stakeholders, including those in academic leadership positions, administrators, faculty members, and students, have been making a collective effort to overcome a wide range of difficulties. The coping mechanisms for ISMs are still challenging yet continuing to suggest plausible strategies to find some level of normality during the educational crisis has been crucial. Therefore, this study calls upon future scholars to pay more attention to international students in more diverse situations and geographical contexts and encourage them to cultivate prosocial behaviors and engage in community support programs as vital intercultural practices.

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