

Social Value Systems and the Mental Health of International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Australian universities are understood to have the highest number of international students per capita worldwide. The sector contributes over \$40 billion to the national economy and sustains many thousands of jobs. Despite their importance to the Australian economy and society, international students are often overlooked in mainstream health promotion and support services. Of the many difficulties and hardships international students experience, mental health presents a significant problem. Evidence indicates that the mental health of international students was declining before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in Australia. The impact of the pandemic appears to have exacerbated this issue. Our findings from an online survey (n=135) and semi-structured interviews (n=20) reinforce the importance of international students maintaining close social connections for optimizing their mental health. They also bring clarity to the challenges students from highly socially engaged (collectivistic) cultures face, when studying in individualistic environments like Australia amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, mental health, international students, individualism, collectivism

University students are often at an age of early adulthood, a time when concerns around mental health are particularly pronounced. This may be

compounded by new and unfamiliar social and academic environments (Weier & Lee, 2016). For international students, mental health concerns have been found to be greater in both occurrence and severity compared to domestic students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Indeed, within the breadth of challenges faced by international students when relocating to study in a foreign country, mental health issues are among the most prevalent threats to international students' health. Recent research has shown that international students are at increased risk of experiencing poor mental health, with isolation from families and culture, language barriers, financial stress and academic pressures among the key drivers (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Norton & Brett, 2011; Orygen, 2017). Such drivers were significantly enhanced by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led international students across the globe to be forced off campuses and into an online learning environment. Such a barrier to social engagement in a foreign environment has been theorized as leading international students in exaggerated levels of isolation.

Research around the international student experience in Australia undertaken prior to the pandemic has focused primarily on foreign students' vulnerability, especially the challenges faced by large numbers of students from China and India who make up the majority of international student numbers in Australia. Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) consolidate three major issues facing international students who come to study in Australia from Asian contexts, which include the often-unfamiliar academic environment international students are exposed to, the shock of independency; and hesitations to engage in help seeking behaviors. Further research identifies significant symptoms of loneliness and/or isolation as affecting vast numbers of international students, especially during the early stages in their adopted country (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Sawir et al., 2008). Sociological research notes that loneliness can be exacerbated by cultural values and norms relating to coupling and other aspects of relationships (Hofstede et al., 2010). Cultural factors also make up a degree of expectation when it comes to social engagement and support.

People from cultures that are highly collectivistic in their social orientations for instance, tend to have strong expectations around high levels of social engagement and connectivity with others, with collectivistic societies defined by an orientation towards shared groups and goals (Humphrey et al., 2020). These societies differ from individualistic cultures, which are categorized by a preference for independence, pursuing one's own personal goals above the needs of a community, and maintaining relationships with others when the costs do not outweigh the benefits (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). The influences of culturally embedded social value systems, including individualism and collectivism, have been identified as a significant influence over international students learning practices when studying in divergent cultural environments (Owens, 2008). No such study, however, has linked these social values with the mental health of international students. It has been

noted that individualistic values adversely affect the mental health of young people in Westernized contexts (Humphrey et al., 2020).

In the current study, we seek to explore how international students from backgrounds identified as largely collectivistic in nature (Hofstede et al., 2010) navigate themselves socially while studying in an individualistic environment like Australia. We also explore how personal attachment to collectivist values may influence wellbeing. In doing so, it should be noted that we do not assume all students from Asian backgrounds possess strong collectivistic values, with Asia today influencing a diverse set of geographical and cultural social identities. Instead, we suggest that students who identify largely as 'collectivistic' in their social orientations, will feel more challenged and isolated while studying within an individualistic environment such as Australia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students in Australia: A Context

A Sense of Privilege

In exploring these issues, it is worth first noting that in spite of the struggles international students face while studying in an unfamiliar environment, there is a counter narrative around the many associated positives students feel about studying in developed world contexts like Australia. Indeed, Australia itself benefits greatly from the presence of international students. In 2020, there were 418,168 international students enrolled in Australian universities, a slight reduction on the 2019 pre-COVID figure and yet still a relatively high figure (Australian Department of Education, 2020). With such a vast number of international students, providing adequate infrastructure to care for their mental health is a crucial concern for Australian universities, as well as state and federal governments. Nonetheless, despite studies of international students and our knowledge of their experiences being limited primarily to those associated with vulnerability and victimhood (Sprague, 2005, p. 11), it remains important to acknowledge that international students are a 'heterogeneous population'. As noted by Forbes-Mewett and Pape (2019), in the interests of exploring the many challenges faced by international students studying in foreign environments, the sense of gratitude and appreciation many students feel at the opportunity to study away from home has been overlooked. The opportunity of an international education allows students a chance to experience a new culture while also allowing them to work towards their plans for the future.

Social Support - Home and Away

When it comes to relocating to a university in a foreign country, international students are largely stripped of their at home social support networks, including their family, local community, and lifelong friends. As Forbes-Mewett and Nyland (2010) note, not only do international students need to adapt to a foreign education system and a foreign language and culture, like migrants, they also need to adjust to being part of a social minority; that is, they encounter difficulties associated with being different. While international students may feel a sense of privilege at studying abroad in a highly developed country like Australia, this feeling may be quickly consumed by feelings of isolation and segregation from their communities. This may be related to the major and often obscure cultural shift international students are required to make (Belford, 2017; Sawir, 2005).

Factors of Isolation

Early feelings of loneliness are recorded as intense for international students, even if they remain in regular contact with people from their home country (Sawir et al., 2008). Many have reported a profound sense of loss and isolation, as well as anxiety, confusion, and disappointed expectations during their early tenure of studying abroad (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). In most cases, this intensity diminishes in time, as students' expectations and patterns of life change and as they learn to cope to extend their social circles and make new kinds of friends (Sawir et al., 2008). However, it is understood that if this transformation does not occur, the intense loneliness becomes emotionally entrenched as social alienation (Belford, 2017; Mori, 2000). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby international students have been forced off university campuses, and day-to-day movement and interactions with others have been very restricted, it seems likely this initial loneliness would have been greatly increased, and the processes of adaption severely halted.

Mental Health

The long-standing issue of mental health has come to the fore and been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gan and Forbes-Mewett (2019) claim that for Singaporean international students there is often greater acceptance of some forms of mental health after a period of time in Australia. They note the cultural pressures felt by international students relating to mental health when in their home or host country. Parents and family play a significant role in shaping international student responses to mental health issues. Other factors influencing international student mental health responses rest with the availability and suitability of the host countries' support services. In Australia these services include counselling, psychology and student mentoring services. These services are available free of charge to international students; however,

they were often believed to be inadequate and/or not culturally sensitive due to issues such as language and availability (Forbes-Mewett, 2019).

THE PRESENT STUDIES

In the present studies, we explore how international students from ‘collectivistic’ social backgrounds navigate themselves socially while studying in ‘individualistic’ environments like Australia, and how personal attachment to these values may influence their mental health. To do this, we first collected survey-based data on international students’ social values, perceived level of social support and mental health (Study 1), to explore any possible relationships between these factors. We then conducted interviews with international students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Study 2), again seeking information on their perceived social orientations and behaviours, as well as their wellbeing. We aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how these relationships work, while also hoping to gain a snapshot of how students coped during this context of uncertainty. Our findings will bring clarity to the way in which social values and differing socio-cultural norms influence the mental health of international students in the current COVID-19 context, while also providing an understanding of how these factors may relate in a normal (non-pandemic) context.

Study 1

Study 1 focused on the relationship the variables of individualism, collectivism, and perceived social support had on the wellbeing outcomes of international students specific to depression, anxiety, stress and satisfaction with life. To do this, we divided the concepts of individualism and collectivism into their horizontal and vertical planes, as has been previously proposed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). Horizontal individualism is a style of individualism whereby people value freedom, uniqueness and self-reliance, and rather than aspiring to stand out, they instead focus on becoming self-sufficient. This differs from vertical individualism, whereby people again value self-reliance, but do so in a more extreme way, essentially perceiving relationships with others as being of low importance. Here people are also more concerned about standing out, and separating themselves from others via competition, achievement and power. Similarly, collectivism was also divided into sub-traits of horizontal collectivism: whereby people value cooperativeness between an individual and their community, and see themselves as part of the collective, and vertical collectivism: which involves a complete submission and dutifulness to the authorities of one’s community.

We hypothesized that students who orient towards collectivistic values, would also score higher on perceived social support, and in turn would experience positive wellbeing outcomes. While associations towards

individualistic values would have minimal to no effect on wellbeing. We base this prediction on theorizing from Humphrey et al. (2020), who suggest that maintaining ‘collectivistic’ values within an individualistic culture could help counteract some of the negative by-products of individualistic values. This approach was thought to alleviate the cultural divide students from more socially engaged cultures face when studying in individualistic contexts.

Method

For Study 1, Australian based international students (n = 135) were recruited online during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 31 respondents were deleted as they (a) took less than three minutes to complete the survey (n = 7), or (b) failed to answer at least half of the survey items (n = 24), leaving 104 (60 females, 42 males, did not specify 2) completing the survey. Participants ranged from ages 18 to 30 (Mage 22.66, SD 4.14). Participants listed their home countries as: China (n = 24); India (n = 24); Singapore (n = 9); Indonesia (n = 5); Vietnam (n = 5); Korea (n = 5); Japan (n = 5), Other, including Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Pakistan (n = 27). The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and participants were debriefed after the study.¹

Depression and Wellbeing

To assess participant’s psychological wellbeing, the 21 item Depression Anxiety Stress Scales Survey was used (DASS21 2010). Participants rated how much each statement applied to them over the past week on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much, or most of the time). The DASS 21 has three subscales measuring stress (e.g., I found it hard to wind down, M = 2.28, SD = .66, α = .83), anxiety (e.g., I felt scared without any good reason, M = 2.07, SD = .66, α = .82) and depression (e.g., I felt that I had nothing to look forward to, M = 2.16, SD = .74, α = .87). Mean scores were then calculated, with higher scores indicating higher depressive symptomology. Wellbeing was also measured through the Satisfaction with Life scale (SWL; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and responses across 5 items were made on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “the conditions of my life are excellent”, 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; M = 3.98, SD = 1.30, α = .86). Mean scores were then calculated, with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction with life.

¹ All studies were approved by a University ethics committee and were conducted in accordance with APA ethical conduct of research with human subjects. As such, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Social Values and Support Networks

To measure individualism and collectivism, participants completed the 16-item scale introduced by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). Participants responded using a 7-point scale with endpoints labelled “1 = Strongly disagree” and “7 = Strongly agree.” The scale has 16 items. Participants answered four questions related to: 1. Horizontal individualism (e.g., I’d rather depend on myself than others, $M = 7.46$, $SD = 1.78$, $\alpha = .87$); 2. Vertical individualism (e.g., It is important that I do my job better than others, $M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = .71$); 3. Horizontal collectivism (e.g., If a co-worker gets a prize, I would feel proud, $M = 7.07$, $SD = 1.50$, $\alpha = .74$); and 4. Vertical collectivism (e.g., Parents and children must stay together as much as possible, $M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.92$, $\alpha = .86$). Additionally, to analyze participants level of social connectedness with others, we used The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988). Responses across 12 items were made on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “I can count on my friends when things go wrong”, 1 = Very strongly disagree, 7 = Very strongly agree; $M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .86$). Mean scores were then calculated, with higher scores indicating higher perceived social support.

Results

Zero-order correlations revealed that individualistic and collectivistic social orientations had minimal association with wellbeing, other than vertical individualism relating positively to increased stress, and horizontal collectivism relating positively to satisfaction with life. Both collectivism

Table 1. Zero-order and partial correlations between measures.

	Anxiety	Stress	SWL	HI	VI	HC	VC	PSS
Depression	.72***	.76***	-.39***	.08	.11	-.11	-.12	-.30**
Anxiety		.75***	-.29**	-.12	.02	.11	.10	-.27**
Stress			-.36***	.08	.26**	-.11	-.12	-.33**
SWL				.17	.08	.32**	.18	.49***
HI					.32**	.55***	.16	.07
VI						.17	.23*	-.02
HC							.35***	.23*
VC								.26**

Note: SWL = Satisfaction with Life, HI = Horizontal Individualism, VI = Vertical Individualism, HC = Horizontal Collectivism, VC = Vertical Collectivism, PSS = Perceived Social Support. Correlations accompanied by *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

measures related positively to perceived social support, as opposed to individualism which did not, suggesting that those students who maintain a sense of collectivistic values may be more likely to experience higher levels of perceived social support. Perceived social support in turn related positively to all wellbeing outcomes (see Table 1).

A series of multiple regression analyses were run in order to explore further how these social variables would relate to wellbeing. We examined relationships between wellbeing and individualism-collectivism using a series of multiple regression analyses in which each measure of wellbeing was regressed on the four measures of individualism and collectivism, as well as perceived social support. In these analyses, all four measures were entered simultaneously. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 2.

The analysis revealed that perceived social support positively predicted satisfaction with life as well as all wellbeing measures including stress, anxiety and depression. The relationship between both planes of individualism and collectivism were largely non-significant in predicting wellbeing outcomes, other than vertical individualism positively predicting stress, horizontal individualism positively predicting stress, and horizontal collectivism predicting higher satisfaction with life.

Table 2. Regression analyses of relationships between social measures and wellbeing.

Variable	N	F	R2	HI	VI	HC	VC	PSS
SWL	96	7.65	.26			.25*		.45***
DASS-Stress	96	4.46	.15		.28**			-.28**
DASS-Anxiety	96	1.91	.05					-.27*
DASS-Depression	96	3.23	.10	.27*				-.28**

Note: Non-significant ($p > .10$) coefficients not displayed. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Brief Discussion to Study 1

Study 1 aimed to explore how attachment to differing social values related to international students' wellbeing. Our analyses revealed that individualistic and collectivistic social orientations had some association with wellbeing, with vertical individualism relating to increased stress, horizontal individualism relating to increased depression, and horizontal collectivism relating positively to satisfaction with life. These associations were quite limited. However, these findings do provide some evidence that there are indeed traits embedded with these social values that can influence the wellbeing of international students studying in an individualistic social context, as has been shown in past research on general young adult populations (Humphrey et al., 2020). It is of course possible that the COVID-19 pandemic was significant in mediating these results, with further research required in a normal context to fully ascertain how important these social values are in influencing the wellbeing of

international students. Collectivistic social values were also significantly associated with perceived social support, which positively predicted all wellbeing outcomes reinforcing previous research showing the importance of social support for international students' mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Pape, 2019; Sawir et al., 2008). Such findings provide further support for the significance of international students maintaining adequate social connections during their tenure of studying in a foreign context. We theorize maintaining such connections would have been particularly poignant in safeguarding international students' mental health during the recent time of high societal, as well as personal, uncertainty and stress brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study 2

Building on these initial findings, Study 2 sought a deeper narrative on international students' social values, social experiences and mental health, aiming to provide further insights to the experiences of international students throughout the coronavirus pandemic. The responses have implications for our understanding of not just the challenges international students faced during the coronavirus pandemic while studying in Australia away from home. They also more broadly contribute to our knowledge on how international students from collectivistic backgrounds navigate themselves socially in an individualistic country like Australia, and any repercussions such cultural differences may have for their mental health.

Method

Twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to encourage a balance between the participant relating their experiences and steering the conversation towards the research question. The interview questions were semi-structured and followed an interview guide. Questions were broadly framed, seeking information on participant's personal experiences of being an international student studying in Australia, their social preferences, attitudes and behaviors. A semi-structured approach allows optimum reflection for the participant while at the same time providing guidance to stay close to the topic. An example of some of the questions that were asked in the interview include: How would you describe your experiences of studying in Australia? Do you feel at home in Australia? And, Would you feel comfortable in seeking help from people in Australia? Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of the interviews and the study was approved by a University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Eight participants were male (40%) and 12 female (60%), with the ages of participants ranging from 18 to 29 ($M = 22.65$; $SD = 2.21$). Eleven participants were from India, four from China, two from Singapore, Cambodia,

Philippines, Indonesia, Iran and Korea, with 11 undergraduate students, and nine postgraduates. Participants were recruited via an advertisement posted on an online message board, as well as by implementing the 'snowballing' method of participant recruitment. The criteria for inclusion in this study was to be an international student currently studying in Australia at a major university. Potential participants were provided with a contact number for the researchers to arrange a telephone interview if they were interested. Participants were assured that pseudonyms would be used if parts of their interviews were published and all socio-demographic identifiers would be removed. The interviews were conducted over the phone. All interviews were audiotaped and took around 20 minutes to complete.

Analysis Process

All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author, with the transcriptions then read several times to gain a comprehensive understanding. The first stage of the analysis process involved manually coding transcripts by identifying common topics among the responses from the 20 participants. Following, a thematic data analysis was undertaken as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). It was then analyzed for common major themes in the data in order to understand the experience of international students studying in Australia through the perspectives of the participants. This approach provided an understanding from the lived experience of international students in Australia throughout the coronavirus pandemic. The analysis provides insights into how international students have fared socially within the pandemic, as well as prior to this in their home country, their social support structures, and their self-perceived mental health during this time.

Findings

The results of the analysis are structured into four domains which we believe offer a diverse insight into the experiences of international students studying in Australia. Section one focuses on how the participants viewed their experiences of studying and living in Australia. Section two then focuses on the level of social support students felt they had both back at home (before and after relocating to study abroad) as well as in Australia. Section three looks at notions of isolation in participants studying in a foreign environment and section four looks at participants self-perceived psychological health as well as their major causes of stress and worry. In all sections, the overall thematic outline is presented first, followed by detailed descriptions of each theme and its sub-themes, which are supported by representative quotes and interpretations.

A Sense of Privilege. A significant portion of participants indicated a sense of privilege at being afforded the opportunity to study in Australia. As discussed in the introduction, this is an under-explored component of the

international student experience when studying abroad. In response to a question asking how participants would describe their experiences of studying in Australia so far, many expressed gratitude and an appreciation for their new home:

I think I'm very lucky to be able to study at a Melbourne University to be honest, I know the quality of education in Australia is quite high, there are a lot of universities in Australia that are among the best in the world. So, I think I'm very lucky. I think I would do much better if I was able to attend courses on campus, but still I think the experience has been very pleasant. (Participant 20)

First of all, the lifestyle changes, living in Australia for us is a very good option, because I'm living in Melbourne, one of the most wonderful cities across the world. (Participant 10)

Indeed, a number of participants extended this gratitude by elaborating on the hardship they endured in their home countries before coming to Australia. This hardship was due to a multitude of reasons, including contexts of political instability, poor facilities and substantially higher study loads.

Well, the place I come from it is very busy, unlike Australia, it doesn't have great facilities, like electricity is always going out, the roads are very bad. But here in Australia we do have these facilities, so this is a very good place to live. (Participant 15)

To study in Australia, we get to think more critically here, it's amazing. We also have the opportunity to work for 20 hours as well so we can pay the bills and stuff, so it's a great opportunity here. (Participant 10)

With a high proportion of Australia's international students coming from developing countries throughout Asia, this insight gives an interesting perspective on the appreciation students can have for living in a cosmopolitan context such as Melbourne or Sydney.

Social Support - Home and Away. When asked about their social networks back in their home country, participants commented on strong social connections with their communities as well as friends and family before they came to Australia. Such responses were consistent with how the research on collectivistic cultures suggests people orient socially (Ahuvia, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2020). When asked how involved they had been in their communities back home, responses such as the following were common:

I was very involved in the community, we used to have get togethers and functions in the community a lot, and small parties a lot, you are never alone you always have someone to hang out with. (Participant 19)

Other participants shared some of the factors that influenced this involvement in community life, including social contexts that overtly required cooperation and engagement in the community:

Yes, I was involved in everything in my community back home, it is very structured where I'm from. Everyone has a role. You're expected to help each other out no matter what, which was really different when I came here, like everyone seems so independent, even people who are like 15, 16 years old. (Participant 9)

It wasn't like you really had a choice not to engage in the community back home. It wasn't like here where you get to go home and do whatever you want. (Participant 11)

Yeah, actually since my hometown is in turmoil we have to look after each other on a personal level, like the schools were shut, and since I had completed my schooling so what we did was organize classes for children of ages 8 to 10. So, we have to look after other people where I'm from. (Participant 15)

These communities comprised of those with whom our sample of international students maintained ongoing and regular contact. The vast majority of participants stated that they were still in contact with their friends and family back home on a daily basis, and for some even multiple times daily. Despite regular contact, the physical distance from family members and close community networks seemed to present challenges for students, who noted a 'social disorientation' when they came to Australia. Losing this semblance of community, as well as difficulties establishing new friendships (particularly during the initial adjustment period), were specific factors described by participants.

I was very involved (in my community back home), but here I feel we are very isolated. Like here we would only communicate with other Chinese people. At home I had family, friends, it was very good. (Participant 8)

That's one of my struggles in coming to Australia because I don't know where to put myself – socially – in this country. (Participant 16)

I was very social, until I came here, I'm anti-social now that I'm here! (Participant 12)

After sharing close relations with their communities, families and friends in their home country it was understandable that international students would subsequently miss social connections when they moved away from them.

However, coming from such socially engaged contexts suggests a keenness to continue this pattern and engage socially in Australia. Yet when participants were asked if they were involved in any social or community groups in Australia, the prevailing response was no. Those students who had gone against this trend and become members of community groups during their time in Australia, such as faith-based groups and university societies, largely spoke of factors around a desire to connect with others, and specifically people from their home country, as their motivation for doing so. Some students for instance spoke of joining groups that represented people from their home country (for example their University's Indian Student Society). Fewer still spoke of wanting to learn more about Australian culture as their key motivation for this.

Social and mental support I guess, like for me when I came from overseas I knew nobody, I was by myself, Australian university wasn't what I expected, like back home we were forced to know people, as we were locked in a class, whereas when I came here we just go to lectures and sit down. And sometimes I just realized if you don't engage in a conversation with someone you won't meet anyone, like you might be lucky and get put in a group project and they might introduce you to people but then what I found was when the group project lapsed they then never talk to you again. That's why I was like look, like sometimes after Semester 1 in my first year, I had met five or six people but none of them spoke to me afterwards, because we met in class, so that's why I went to clubs to hopefully meet people and get new connections. (Participant 11)

The main motivation is that I think student support is what keeps us going because international students that arrive to a new country and the culture is new, and they don't have any family or friends here. I think it's really important to build a new society so I think student communities are really important to find a peer group, so I really believe it's so important to be a part of groups with people of my own age with the same interests. (Participant 20)

I wanted to know more about Australian culture and make some friends as well and get to know about the rules and regulations of Australia you have to follow. So, I learnt all of that which was a good experience. (Participant 19)

Factors of Isolation. Despite being in regular contact with people from their home country, a lack of engagement with community groups meant a large portion of participants felt lonely and isolated in Australia. This is not a new finding, with a breadth of past research international students experience both personal and social loneliness. The literature however notes that the 'intensity' of feelings of loneliness can diminish over time, as students' expectations and

patterns of life change and as they learn to extend their social circles and make new kinds of friends (Gomes, 2015; Sawir et al., 2008). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic however, such processes of adjustment were extremely hindered, as the participants below identified:

I was expecting a lot when I came to Australia, but because of the COVID-19 crisis I haven't had the university experience I thought I would have, like I don't have any friends in the University, it has definitely been a challenging first few months for me. (Participant 14)

I do feel isolated, especially during the start of the pandemic, I wanted to go home, because it felt like I was out of place, even though I said earlier I preferred Australia than my home country, I wanted to go home to my family and my pets. So that was when the feeling of being alone really hit me. (Participant 16)

Currently I don't have any real social support because I don't really know anyone outside a few people I am doing my course with, so I wouldn't say I have any social support here. (Participant 14)

Despite the obvious limitations to socializing during the pandemic, there were additional barriers participants mentioned in their responses that spoke to the challenges they faced with integrating socially into Australian society. These included the efforts required to build social networks in Australia, as well as a reluctance to reach out to members of the Australian community.

I would say it's pretty challenging for students coming from China, because like, back home teachers tell us what we need to do, but in Australia we have to manage our own time and we do not get told if we have to do things within a certain time, so that is quite challenging for us. (Participant 8)

There have been periods where I am very lonely, and especially when I come back to Australia after going home for a holiday back in Indonesia. (Participant 7)

A small number of students also spoke of racism as a barrier to their efforts to integrate into Australian society.

Can I say it? I don't know if I can say this, Australia is very racist, I think. Especially during this time, I barely go downstairs [out of the accommodation block], because every time I go downstairs there's something going on. I mean we just kind of get used to it, but it's really terrible here. (Participant 8)

I don't know, because I still feel like I have that boundary where not many Australians welcome people like us, especially because of the recent events [COVID-19] and that stuff, like coronavirus, people kept saying stuff to me, like... I don't want to say it. But it was very racist. So, I still feel like my social connection isn't very great. Like I know how to talk when I need to, but it's still not like back home. (Participant 11)

When asked in the interview, "Can you elaborate on what you mean by people like us?", the following response was provided:

I mean international students. Like usually when I talk to them [local students], I have the feeling they don't want to talk to me. Like [from] what I have seen I have this fear that Australians don't like Chinese people because of coronavirus, and they don't like us more generally. (Participant 11)

Mental Health. The final domain of questions focused on participant's self-perceived state of mental health, as well as potential contributors to this. Participants pointed to a few factors they deemed to be contributing to their levels of stress.

A lot, every day. There's sometimes where I kind of panic, and in the current situation with the coronavirus, it's made it worse. I'm stressed right now actually because I've got assignments to do. (Participant 12)

There was a time after I arrived here for the first few months I was under a lot of stress and anxiety, I also felt a lot of home sickness, and that I wasn't matching up to the expectations of my family, but I felt like the university really promoted the help services so I went to the counselling centre which really helped. (Participant 9)

The major causes of this psychological angst participants experienced seemed to centre around factors such as a lack of social support, being away from family and friends as well as a reluctance to seek help from people in Australia as key contributors:

Yeah of course, back home we have a massive network of people, like literally if you need help, or if you want to do something there's always someone there, whereas here all I have is my roommate, and it's literally just a roommate, like we hardly talk. Sometimes I have a video chat with Mum and Dad – like every 3 or 4 days but that's it. So, the only people I see is on Zoom and there's no interaction at all, so yeah I feel very lonely. (Participant 11)

Because I don't have anybody here for support, and now I'm also worrying about the virus. (Participant 3)

Just the family thing that they are so far away, sometimes when there are big functions back home through the year I get very stressed about that. (Participant 19)

I'm paying hefty fees of about \$40,000 a semester, so I think staying at home and studying online doesn't make sense, because that interaction a person has with a professor becomes very low. So that's a major drawback, even a week ago I was quite depressed, because I spent all of this money to come here and I'm staying at home – and for what use. (Participant 15)

Brief Discussion to Study 2

Our interviews shed light on some of the social barriers faced by international students while studying in Australia. They also bring clarity to the way in which social values and differing socio-cultural norms have influenced the mental health of international students in the current COVID-19 context (as well as prior to it). Participants first noted a sense of privilege at the opportunity to study in a culturally diverse and highly developed context such as Australia. As has been noted in past research, this point serves as a good reminder of the significant opportunity studying in a foreign context often is to students (Forbes-Mewett & Pape, 2019). Studying so far from home has also been noted as having many challenges (Sawir et al., 2008).

Our participants generally indicated their closeness to their families, friends and communities back in their home country, by way of their continued daily interaction with these networks. Such behaviors point to participants deeply ingrained social tendencies, behaviors and realities before coming to study abroad. These tendencies were however challenged by the level of face-to-face social interaction students could expect to experience while studying in Australia, away from these support structures. This was of course particularly the case due to the unique social environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby students were forced off campus, and onto online learning delivery modes. Yet these social expectations were also challenged throughout participants narratives due to the vastly different social landscape students found themselves in while studying in Australia. Non-specific to the environment created by the pandemic, participants raised factors such as highly independent learning environments, a shortage of formal opportunities outside the classroom for social interaction with others, lacking a sense of belonging and racism as key challenges they have faced whilst studying in Australia. These factors were then also cited as a major cause of participants stressors and worries, a finding consistent with the associations shown in Study 1 as well as previous research (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Sawir et al., 2008).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous research has shown that the mental health of international students was declining before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in developed countries including Australia. The research pointed to the social challenges faced by international students, with symptoms of loneliness and isolation noted as affecting vast numbers (Sawir et al., 2008). Our findings provide evidence of further social difficulties students from highly socially engaged (collectivistic) cultures face when studying in an individualistic environment like Australia, as well as the challenges students have faced more generally while studying away from home amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results also reinforce the importance of international students maintaining close social connections, both locally and back home, as a crucial factor for optimizing their mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

These findings are of course likely heightened due to the novel context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, we believe the narrative offered in Study 2 sheds light on a number of persistent barriers to social integration for international students while studying in Australia. These barriers included intercultural challenges specific to students' social backgrounds, language barriers and most concerning, threats of racism that were referred to by the participants. With the possibility of continuing political tensions between nations looming throughout the continuation of the pandemic, as well as post its cessation, we believe this last point to be a particularly poignant one for universities to address.

Limitations and Future Directions

We suggest several possible interventions that may help administrators to address the social needs of international students while studying in Australia. We believe a better understanding at an institutional level of international students' social contexts and embedded traits could help create more appropriate communities and support structures for international students while studying within individualistic environments. Universities do of course commonly offer a range of social outlets and opportunities for international students, including student mentoring, as well as various university clubs and societies (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). However, better understanding of the differences in social expectancies of students from collectivistic backgrounds may assist such outlets in their efficacy to best help students settle and thrive in a foreign location. Such expectancies are noted in previous research as being highly influential on the experiences of loneliness faced by international students (Sawir et al., 2008), with students from collectivist cultures requiring the presence of strong group settings to thrive, particularly in a loosely knit social environment like Australia. Drawing on this idea, a further point of intervention could be to better integrate international students with the domestic cohort as proposed in past research, in order to build a more accepting and inclusive environment (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Gomes, 2017).

Further research is required to explore the effectiveness of these strategies. Future research should also focus more deeply on the socio-cultural factors that may present particular challenges for international students' processes of social integration while studying in a foreign cultural context. In particular, the divergence of student's collectivistic social orientations as well as the social expectations these carry, along with how these then outwork in an individualistic cultural setting, should be further explored across large-scale participant samples. Given the exploratory nature of our study, this was not possible for the current research, with our relatively restricted sample size limiting the implications of our findings.

A further limitation of our study specific to the influence social values have on wellbeing is that our data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we do not have pre-lockdown baseline assessments when on campus learning arrangements were in place. Thus, it could be argued that our findings only apply to the time-period when most students were required to study online. However, examining this association during a time of crisis has allowed us to test the robustness of these associations in a real-life situation, with these findings offering an important snapshot of how international students are faring during a time of heightened stress. As the pandemic ceases into the future, measures ensuring international students have the necessary social support and cultural tools they need to thrive seem more important than ever before.

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