Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Educational Innovation and Philosophical Inquiries
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

Research on the Mental Health of International Students in College

Jiaying Lin[1,a,*]

[1]*New York University, New York, NY, 10012, USA*
a. jl13358@nyu.edu
**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the context of increasing rates of mental illness among college students worldwide, this study examines the mental health of international students. Previous research indicated that international students had more stressors and worse mental health conditions than domestic students in college. This study compared international and domestic undergraduate students at New York University in their COVID-19 burnout levels and hopelessness levels through a correlational study. However, the results showed that international students had significantly lower COVID-19 burnout levels and similar hopelessness levels as domestic students. The factors for the inconsistency between previous research and the correlational study and suggestions for international students' mental health were discussed in the study.

Keywords: international students, mental health, COVID-19, well-being, higher education

1. Introduction

The mental well-being of college students is an increasingly serious issue. Rising research and findings have reported deteriorated mental health and increased rates of mental disorders among students. According to the National Institute of Mental Health in 2020, the highest prevalence of any mental illness (AMI) in the United States occurred in young adults aged 18-25 years old (30.6%), which accounted for the highest proportion of college students, compared with adults aged 26-49 years (25.3%) and aged 50 and older (14.5%) [1]. The SERU COVID-19 survey conducted at nine U.S. universities presented that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 35 % of undergraduate and 32% of graduate students suffered from major depressive disorder (MDD), while 39% of undergraduate and graduate students experienced generalized anxiety disorder (ASD). Their prevalence of MDD and ASD was 2 times and 1.5 times higher, respectively, in 2020 than in 2019 [2]. As an important segment of the college student population, international students are also showing a negative trend in their mental well-being and are more prone to mental disorders since the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. Therefore, it is important to understand international students' mental well-being and provide them with the help that fits their situations and needs.

Up from two million in 2000, there were over six million international students worldwide in 2019 [4]. During the 2020-2021 academic year, over nine hundred thousand international students from roughly 200 different countries were enrolled in the United States, the most popular host country, and represented 4.6% of the total U.S. student enrollment [5]. However, contrary to their exponentially rising population, international students received significantly less public and academic attention

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

concerning their mental well-being. It is not easy to find accurate data on the mental well-being of international students, compared with a large number of statistics regarding the mental health of the general college student population.

This study examines the mental health of international college students through a literature review and a correlational study. The study is going to discuss physical and mental factors for international students' well-being and to analyze the correlational study that compared COVID-19 burnout and optimism levels between international and domestic students. Moreover, it is going to suggest possible solutions to the mental well-being issues that international college students are encountering.

2. Literature Review

International students experience a range of stressors that contribute to their mental struggles. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic, academic pressure, interpersonal issues, job searching, and so on always challenge all college students. However, international students have to confront more difficulties that only affect them, such as language and cultural barriers, social exclusion, racial discrimination, and homesickness [6]. These difficulties and challenges interact with each other to make international students' situations worsen. The three relatively significant stressors are going to be discussed as follows.

2.1. COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of the college population, particularly international students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 80% of international students in the United States had impediments back home and had to remain, while their domestic classmates easily reunited with their families and friends [7]. On account of restricted international travel and closed campuses, international students had no choice but to live in self-isolation. They were far away from their significant others and lacked social support [8]. Therefore, international students were likely to feel insecurity, anxiety, and helplessness when they heard a surge of negative COVID-related news or tested positive for COVID-19 alone.

Higher education in many countries was reorganized massively for the pandemic, which made international students more difficult to adapt to foreign education. Transition to online delivery modes, form changes of exams and assessments, cancellation of labs, etc. created a great sense of uncertainty and aggravated academic pressure for international students [9]. Besides, the economic recession caused by the pandemic brought international students more stress to support their high costs of living and tuition in foreign countries [9]. Additionally, international students of Asian origin experienced microaggression and even discrimination since they were perceived as the root of the spread of coronavirus disease and since they were misunderstood for their different reactions toward COVID-19 (e.g., wearing protective suits) [3]. With more reasons not mentioned above, the pandemic has put international students with decreased mental health in a more risky position.

2.2. Language Barriers

It is not novel to mention the importance of language proficiency in foreign college life. According to researchers Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, language may be "the single greatest barrier" in terms of the academic and social life for international students [6]. International students lacking language proficiency will find it hard to fully understand lectures and textbooks, flinch from communications with their professors and classmates, and have disadvantages if class participation is emphasized for grading. International students can go abroad usually because they were better at family incomes, academics, or talents than peers in their home countries. When they find frustrations in foreign colleges, it will blow their confidence and lead to their self-doubt, guilt, and anxiety [10].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

Isolation and loneliness are prevalent among international students in new linguistic environments. They leave old friends from their home countries and make few friends with the natives in host countries. Without knowledge of idioms and slang, they have difficulties having deep conversations with their domestic classmates [6]. Therefore, social connectedness and support are prevented for international students. In a study of 198 international students at Pennsylvania State University, "loneliness" was the number four psychological concern that 28% of the participants reported experiencing (besides the concerns of "academics'', "career", and "stress") [11]. Additionally, language barriers impede international students from access to mental health support services. In some circumstances, international students struggle to communicate their complicated, intertwined thoughts and feelings clearly with their school counselors using non-native languages, thus lowering the bonding between their counselors and them as well as the efficacy of counseling on their mental issues.

2.3. Cultural Differences

Like language barriers, cultural differences lead to psychological issues related to loneliness for international students. Cultural differences not only bring international students estrangement in unfamiliar cultural environments but also hinder friendships between international students and the natives. The most popular destinations for studying abroad are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and France, all of which are western individualistic countries [3]. However, the leading places of origin for international students in the United States are China, India, and South Korea, all of which are Asian collectivist countries (although without accurate statistics, the major international student population in other popular destinations also comes from collectivistic countries) [12]. Individualism manifested in the western college environment will weaken the sense of belonging for international students coming from the collectivistic culture [13]. There will be misunderstandings and prejudices easily between international students and domestic students because of their differences in verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, interpersonal boundaries, and how these differences are interpreted. [13].

Cultural differences furthermore can disassociate international students from their home cultures and their past identities. In new cultural environments, students receive an opportunity to observe, rethink, and examine the cultural beliefs that they hold for the long term from foreign perspectives. The opportunity will help students discover who they are and develop new identities from independent and critical thinking; however, it is challenging and takes lots of time. International students may swing between their host and home cultures and lose belonging and security. They may have generational conflicts with their parents who hold traditional beliefs and they may doubt themselves and their future. Before their new identities develop fully, they are going to feel a great sense of loss, unsettlement, and pessimism, leading to mental well-being crises [10].

Based on the review, it is reasonable to assume that international students facing more stressors have worse mental conditions as well as a higher risk of getting mental disorders than their domestic counterparts. While students' mental states towards COVID-19 were used as one of the references for their mental health conditions, the hypotheses proposed are as follows:

- International students have a higher COVID-19 burnout level than domestic students;
- International students have a higher hopelessness level than domestic students.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants in the study were 38 undergraduate students who took the same psychology course in Spring 2022 at New York University. The study included two questionnaires: 37 participants completed COVID-19 burnout scale and 33 participants completed Beck's hopelessness scale. Among the 38 participants, there were 17 international students (44.7%) and 21 domestic students (55.3%). They included 25 females and 10 males while 3 participants preferred not to say. In terms of race, 63% of the participants were Asian, 18% were White, 11% were White, and 8% were Latino. All participants were recruited voluntarily as part of their assignments in the course.

3.2. Materials and Procedures

It was a correlational study with a predictor of student status (international/domestic) and outcomes of COVID-19 burnout level and hopelessness level. COVID-19 burnout level was evaluated by the COVID-19 burnout scale while hopelessness level was measured by Beck's hopelessness scale (BHS).

The COVID-19 burnout scale attempted to measure students' burnout levels towards the pandemic through self-report. The scale includes 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 5 = "always". Sample items are "I feel tired of hearing about new variants", "I feel despair when thinking about how COVID affected my life", and "I feel emotionally drained when listening to any COVID-related news". The Cronbach's Alpha for the scale was 0.831, above 0.80, showing very good reliability.

The Beck's hopelessness scale was designed by Dr. Aaron T. Beck to assess three aspects of hopelessness: feelings about the future, loss of motivation, and expectation [14]. The scale includes 20 dichotomous items (True/False) ranging from 0 to 20, while higher total scores indicate greater hopelessness. Sample items are "my future seems dark to me", "things just won't work out the way I want them to", and "I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm". The scale has been shown to predict depressive symptoms and suicidal tendencies [15]. The Cronbach's Alpha for BHS was 0.867, above 0.80, also showing significantly high reliability.

The questionnaires of the COVID-19 burnout scale and Beck's hopelessness scales were administered as a part of participants' voluntary assignments in their psychology course and were collected online for two weeks.

3.3. Analysis

The data were analyzed using independent t-tests through SPSS Statistics 27. The alpha level was 0.05.

4. Results

COVID-19 burnout levels between domestic and international students were compared by an independent t-test. The 21 domestic students ($M = 2.9524$, $SD = 0.68965$) compared to the 16 international students ($M = 2.4563$, $SD = 0.75363$) demonstrated a significantly higher level of COVID-19 burnout, $t(35) = 2.083$, $p = 0.045$ (Figure 1). The result was opposite to the hypothesis that international students have a higher burnout level, and therefore, the hypothesis was rejected.

Another independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare hopelessness levels among students. The 18 domestic students ($M = 0.6500$, $SD = 0.25205$) compared to 15 international students ($M = 0.6833$, $SD = 0.22093$) presented no significant difference between the two student groups, $t(31) = -$

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

0.400, p = 0.692 (Figure 2). Because the p-value is larger than 0.05, the hypothesis that international students had a higher hopelessness level was also rejected.

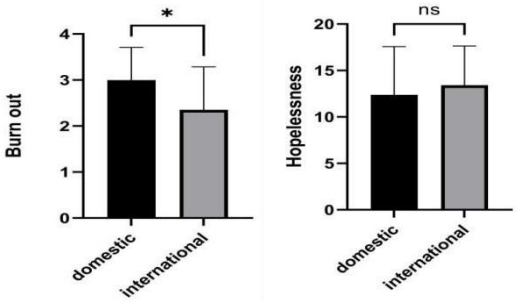


Figure 1(left): Domestic students had a significantly higher level of COVID-19 burnout than international students.

Figure 2 (right): Domestic students and international students had no significant difference in their hopelessness levels.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between participants' COVID-19 burnout levels and their hopelessness levels. According to figure 3 below, there was no significant correlation between the two levels, r = 0.3175, p = 0.0521.

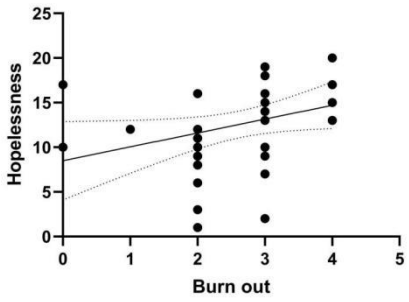


Figure 3: There was no significant correlation between COVID-19 burnout levels and hopelessness levels among students.

5. Discussion

The results rejected the hypothesis that international students facing more stressors have worse mental well-being. Instead, international students were as optimistic about their life and their future as domestic students and even thought more positively about COVID-19. The results might be caused by the limited sample size and the particular sample selection. Moreover, people's attitudes towards COVID-19 might have changed when it has been two years since the pandemic. Additionally, because the p-value for the relationship between COVID-19 burnout levels and hopelessness levels was very close to the alpha level, it could also be said that the two levels had a nearly significant positive correlation. Their correlation might be significant if the sample size increased or the sample selection changed; it is reasonable to assume that people who feel more stressed and tired of COVID-19 feel more hopeless.

But still, the results were not surprising. According to the SERU COVID-19 survey, 31% of international undergraduate students, compared to 35% of overall undergraduate students, screened positive for depression; 31% of international undergraduate students, compared to 39% of overall undergraduate students, screened positive for anxiety [2]. As regards the stressors of language barriers

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

and cultural differences, a study at the University of Toledo showed that 64.9% and 17.6% of international student participants reported having “no problems” and “few problems” adjusting to the new cultural norms respectively. Likewise, 75.4% of the participants indicated that they had made friends in college and over half agreed or somewhat agreed with their inclusion in the local community [6].

The rejection of hypotheses might imply that international students have higher resilience to manage adverse situations in their foreign life. Studying abroad for them is not only a challenge but also an opportunity to gain independence, maturity, and self-confidence. Away from their families during the pandemic, international students learned to take precautions more scrupulously to protect themselves and thus had lower COVID-19 infection rates and burnout rates subsequently. New linguistic and cultural environments increase their initiative to meet new people and improve social skills as well as their resilience to accept loneliness and embrace challenges. Independent life experience has enabled international students to feel confident about both themselves and their future. An alternative explanation could be that international students have adventurous and daring personalities that lead them to leave familiar and safe home countries for new outlooks. They choose to study abroad because they are less afraid of setbacks and more willing to step out of their comfort zone than others. Their strong characteristics, nurtured from foreign experiences or born, allowed international students to take a more positive view of challenges including the pandemic.

However, international students’ mental well-being is still as decreasing as the overall student population’s mental health. The prevalence of international students with mental disorders in 2021 was over one-third, which should not be neglected [2]. Another study from Yale University showed that 45% of its Chinese international students reported symptoms of depression and 29% reported symptoms of anxiety [16]. Therefore, a few recommendations for international students’ mental health are as follows.

- Universities should guide international students to adapt to individualistic cultures in a more collectivistic way. They should build up more positive and welcoming relationships with the students and help them gain social support and establish new student identities in new campus environments [13].
- The profile of international students on the campus should be raised. Ignorance and prejudices from domestic students also prevented the inclusion of international students in universities [6]. Holding cultural fairs, introducing international students’ hometown food, or playing foreign movies on movie nights can decrease the cultural differences among students.
- More opportunities should be created for international students to improve their language skills [6]. For example, universities can hold language-learning partner programs where international and domestic students can make friends and teach each other their native languages.
- Most importantly, universities should notice and strengthen the inner mental resources of international students. It should be emphasized again that stressors are also opportunities for students to grow up. It will be long-term effective if universities help the students to develop resilience to the stressors in the meantime by limiting the stressors.

6. Conclusion

The study examined the mental well-being of international college students through a literature review and a correlational study. The review suggested that international students have more stressors

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/11/20230740

and worse mental health, but the study found that international students were more optimistic than domestic students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, no valid answers were provided in this study for the inconsistent findings between the review and the correlational study. Future research could explore the cause. Furthermore, it should be mindful of the limitations of the method. The nature of correlational study limited the ability to conclude the causation between variables and the ability to eliminate all alternative explanations for the results. For example, international students had lower COVID-19 burnout scores perhaps because they learned to "save face" from collectivistic cultures and had a higher tendency to answer the questionnaires based on society's expectations, which is called social-desirability bias. Additionally, the study's generalization was limited by the sample which was only a class of psychology undergraduate students at New York University. Further research is needed to determine whether the correlational finding is applicable to international students in other universities in other countries.

References

[1] *National Institute of Mental Health (2020). Mental Illness [Data Set]. Retrieved from https://www.nimh.nih.gov/*

[2] *Chirikov, I., Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., & Jones-White, D. (2020). Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic. UC Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/*

[3] *Chen, J. H., Li, Y., Wu, A. M. S., & Tong, K. K. (2020). The overlooked minority: Mental health of International students worldwide under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102333*

[4] *UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022). Education: Inbound internationally mobile students by continent of origin [Data Set]. Retrieved from http://data.uis.unesco.org/*

[5] *Institute of International Education (2021). International Student Enrollment Trends, 1948/49-2020/21[Data Set]. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. Retrieved from https://www.opendoorsdata.org/*

[6] *Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2020). International students: a vulnerable student population. High Educ, Higher Education, 60, 33-46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z*

[7] *Fischer, K. (2021). Global Concerns. In A. C. Kafka (Eds.), Reopening Campus (pp.42-53). The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/*

[8] *Sahu, P. (2020) Closure of Universities due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff. Cureus, 12(4), e7541. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7541*

[9] *Velde, S. V., Buffel, V., Bracke, P., Hal, G. V., Somogyi, N. M., Willems, B., & Wouters, E. (2021). The COVID-19 International Student Well-being Study. Scandinavian Journal of Public Health, 49(1), 114-122. https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494820981186*

[10] *Qin, X. (2019). Common Factors of Mental Health Challenges Among International Students. In P. Burak (Eds.) Addressing Mental Health Issues Affecting International Students (pp. 8-13). NAFSA. Retrieved from https://www.nafsa.org/*

[11] *Poyrazli, S. (2015). Psychological Symptoms and Concerns Experienced by International Students: Outreach Implications for Counseling Centers. Journal of International Students, 5(3), 306-312. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i3.424*

[12] *Institute of International Education (2021). Top 25 Places of Origin of International Students 2000/01-2020/21 [Data Set]. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. Retrieved from https://www.opendoorsdata.org/*

[13] *Prieto-Welch S. L. (2016). International Student Mental Health. New Directions for Student Services, 2016 (156), 53-63. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20191*

[14] *Beck, A. T., & Steer, R. A. (1988). Manual for the Beck Hopelessness Scale. San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corporation.*

[15] *Alansari, B. (2014). Depression, hopelessness and anxiety: Significant relations. European Psychiatry, 29 (1), 1. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0924-9338(14)78038-1*

[16] *Han, X., Han, X., Luo, Q., Jacobs, S., Jean-Baptiste, M. (2013). Report of a mental health survey among Chinese international students at Yale University. J Am Coll Health, 61(1), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1080/00050060902733727*