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COVID-19 and Student Life: An Ubuntu and resilience perspective on the experiences of African International University Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

While COVID-19 affected all segments of the population, vulnerable social groups, including international students, were disproportionately affected. The primary objective of this study was to explore COVID-19-related experiences of African international graduate students (AIGS). Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 AIGS. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed. Participants reported experiencing fear of the virus and anxiety about their health and their family members (individual), feelings of isolation and depression because of reduced social engagement and lack of familial support (interactional), dealing with work-restrictive student visas, and loss of work opportunities (environmental/structural). The person-in-environment (PIE) and Ubuntu philosophy were useful lenses to understand the findings in the context of COVID-19 given its sociocultural connection to AIGS. Understanding the experiences of

AIGS can help inform better approaches, including institutional and national policy changes, to support not only AIGS but also vulnerable international students during pandemics.

Keywords: African international students, African resilience, COVID-19, mental and emotional health, coping strategies, person-in-environment resilience framework, Ubuntu, U.S.

COVID-19 caused devastating social and economic disruptions, including loss of life, livelihoods, wealth, housing, temporary closure of schools, and the emergence of a mental health crisis (Giuntella et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). Early in the pandemic, an increase in depression was recorded among college students due to school closures and social distancing protocols (Giuntella et al., 2021). Preventive measures taken by governments to decelerate the transmission of the virus caused major disruptions to everyday life. For example, stay-at-home mandates, campus closures, social distancing measures, and restricted international travel changed how people live, work, study, and interact (Ayouni et al., 2021). While the COVID-19 outbreak affected all segments of the population, social groups in the most vulnerable situations (e.g., people of low socioeconomic status), older people, persons living with disabilities, and immigrants, including international students) were disproportionately affected. International students, faced with the vulnerability of living in a foreign country where they were away from support systems (i.e., family and friends), had to endure extra burdens in order to cope (Mbous et al., 2022). International graduate students are not a homogenous group; some, particularly those from low-income countries, can disproportionately represent a smaller student population and thus are not represented in current literature (David et al., 2022). For this reason, this study fills the gap in the literature by studying AIGS. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with African international graduate students (AIGS) at a Midwestern university during the pandemic, we document their experiences and coping mechanisms during campus closures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on the experiences of international students in the U.S. during the pandemic is still emerging. Current research on college students in general (Giuntella et al., 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021) and international students in particular (Aristovnik et al., 2020) have investigated this topic. In a longitudinal study with several cohorts of college students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (N = 682), Giuntella and colleagues (2021) reported disruption to physical activity as a leading risk factor for depression during the pandemic. In other studies, COVID-19-related confinement has been reported to cause an increased risk for mental health challenges among international students, including frustration, anxiety, depression, and decreased resilience due to lack of physical activity (Sarmiento et al., 2021). The mental health stressors among

international students have been aggravated by the lack of support from their host institutions, loss of on-campus work, failure to cover educational and living expenses, and loneliness (Coffey et al., 2021; Georgia College, 2020; Neto, 2021). Despite the stress experienced by international students, there was no adequate support for this population. The lack of support for international students demonstrated a predictor of mental health (Lai et al., 2020). While these COVID-19-related stressors on international students have been explored and reported, African international graduate students' (AIGS) experiences and coping mechanisms adopted during the pandemic have not been given much attention.

Culturally, African family systems buffer the effect of life shocks - such as the trauma of losing loved ones, economic or financial adversities, pandemics, or natural disasters – by providing support for each other (Theron et al., 2012). The belief system is founded in the “*Ubuntu/Human-ness*” philosophy, or in other words, the notion that individuals’ well-being is intertwined (Eze, 2016). Given that Ubuntu is unique to the people of Africa, an examination of AIGS from an Ubuntu perspective is a unique way to explore the effects of the pandemic to see how this philosophy has been relied on (or not) and has contributed to the growing body of literature on resilience.

Resilience and Ubuntu

Research on resilience is complex and varied, and how resilient one can be influenced by multiple factors, including personal strengths (e.g., self-efficacy, good communication skills, emotional intelligence), cultural expectations, and social and practical support (Lee et al., 2018). Compared to others facing the same adversity, an individual is considered “resilient” when they do better than others. For example, on the one hand, in the wake of large-scale crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, people who lack resilience may become overwhelmed by change and take longer to recover from setbacks. On the other hand, people with high levels of resilience may experience the same negative emotions, yet embrace change, work through emotions, and recover more quickly (Shi et al., 2019).

Current research on coping with COVID-19 has focused largely on the role of individual protective factors, with less attention given to the influence of the socio-ecological systems surrounding an individual, such as the family (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020), community, local and national institutions/policies. However, research on resilience has evolved from focusing on individualized, intrapsychic processes to embracing an ecological model of resilience processes that emphasize the interactions of individuals with others and the social environment; in other words, a person-in-environment approach (PIE) (Ungar, 2012). Several factors, including coping strategies, family support, social skills, and optimism, have been found to influence the level of resilience (Cassarino-Perez & Dell’Aglia, 2015). Weak family relationships can have negative psychological consequences, weaken resilience, and make members more susceptible to threats, pressures, and poor health outcomes (Parra et al., 2018; Stevenson et al., 2021). Strong family relationships promote family solidarity when a family experiences a “shock/crisis” collectively (Acero et al., 2017). This

is particularly true in collectivist cultures such as African cultures that believe in Ubuntu.

For African international students, locating and utilizing resources, particularly those that are culturally relevant, could be influenced by their sense of belonging to their social environment. Mkhize (2008) utilized Ubuntu in conceptions of the self and asserted that personhood could be perceived concerning the community, where people are mutually responsive to one another's needs. More recently, other scholars (i.e., Metz, 2016; Msila, 2014) have contended that the firm belief in "we-ness" is at the heart of Ubuntu. Like resilience, Ubuntu is a multifaceted and interactive process involving the individual, interaction with others, and the environment (van Breda, 2017). Combining the concepts of resilience and Ubuntu can provide important insight into the interplay between personal, interactional, and environmental factors that shaped experiences and coping mechanisms among AIGS during COVID-19. This understanding can guide recommendations for institutional and national policy changes to better serve U.S.-based AIGS and the international student population in general.

METHOD

Research Design and Setting

A phenomenological approach was used for the study. This approach is appropriate where the researcher is interested in understanding the experiences and worldviews of individuals who lived through a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017) which was the COVID-19 pandemic in the case of this study. Data were collected through Zoom interviews, which are apt tools to explore under-researched topics and allow participants to provide rich descriptions in real-world contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Applying qualitative inquiry helped us uncover how AIGS experienced mental and emotional challenges and how they viewed and responded to the various stressors during the pandemic.

Participant Recruitment

Following ethics approval by the University of Missouri [IRB 2049642], we recruited participants using a mix of purposive and snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The inclusion criteria were a) identifying as an AIGS, b) ability to communicate in English, and c) willingness to participate in the study. We recruited 24 international graduate students, of which 15 were interviewed. The other nine declined the interview mainly because of scheduling conflicts. The sample represented five female and ten male students, primarily doctoral students (see Table 1). We selected graduate students for several reasons: they were either starting their families or already have a small family, depended on scholarships or assistantships, and supported their extended family in their countries. On the one hand, these factors increase their vulnerability during a pandemic. On the other hand, African undergraduate students are generally younger, single, from

families that can afford to pay for their education and living expenses, and therefore potentially less vulnerable.

Data Collection

Following the consent process, four of the seven authors used semi-structured Zoom interviews to collect data. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes (range 40 to 70 minutes) and continued until saturation was reached (i.e., the point at which no new useful information was generated) (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Research Team

The research team approached the study with both scholarly and personal interests in the meaning of being an AIGS in the U.S. during the pandemic. Members of the research team identified as Black or African American but were diverse in their country of origin (5 countries), gender identifications (3F, 4M), and professional classification (5 graduate students, 2 professors). Four doctoral students interviewed participants, analyzed transcripts, and drafted manuscripts. One master's student coordinated the recruitment of participants, analyzed data, and assisted with manuscript preparation. Of the two professors, one participated in the project design, and initial coding of data. The other served as an independent auditor who a) guaranteed that multiple data perspectives were honored and discussed, as well as that b) the researchers' assumptions, expectations, and biases did not unduly influence the findings (Hill et al., 1997). Additionally, the auditor reviewed the manuscript for correctness and completeness.

The research team discussed the various assumptions and expectations team members held about the findings. To minimize the possibility of "groupthink" because of personal biases related to the research topic, the graduate student authors met several times to discuss the data (Hill et al., 1997). Assumptions and expectations that emerged through this process included a) the expectation that the experience of being an international student during COVID-19 would be a pervasive and salient one for research participants and b) that there would likely be gender differences in the experience during the pandemic. The explication of these assumptions and expectations was seen to be forthcoming, thus the transparency assisted in minimizing any undue influence on findings (Patton, 2002).

Analysis

We used the resilience and Ubuntu philosophy (Shi et al., 2019) as conceptual lenses to categorize and interpret the interview data and guide the analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns within each category (Frost, 2011). Five graduate student authors and one professor read each transcript independently and identified themes from their readings. Each reader bracketed the data by focusing on the phenomenon of interest (e.g., coping during the pandemic, loss of work opportunities). The six authors then met to discuss the identified themes. Each theme was discussed, areas of disagreement were resolved, and exemplars for each theme were highlighted to ensure that participants' experiences were accurately captured and were not solely guided by

authors' personal biases and assumptions. We then developed a table reflecting each transcript's themes and exemplars. Next, agreed-upon themes were discussed and compared across transcripts. This portion of the process was similar to the cross-analysis described by Hill and colleagues (1997) but differed in that tracking the frequency of themes and sub-themes was not a goal and, therefore, not documented. Instead, consistent themes across transcripts reflected emerging meaning units of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002).

The final agreed-upon themes and raw data were compiled and given to the auditor (senior author) for review and feedback. The research team met and discussed the study results and the auditor's feedback.

Table 1: Participant demographic information

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age Range	Country of Origin	Length in the U.S. (Range in years)	Visa	Advanced Degree	Marital Status	Number of children
Anna	F	33-37	Nigeria	4-5 years	F1	MA/MSC	Married	2
Robert	M	33-37	Nigeria	2-3 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Adam	M	>37	Zimbabwe	More than 5 years	J1	PhD	Married	2
Dawud	M	23-27	Nigeria	2-3 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Angela	F	33-37	Ghana	4-5 years	J1	PhD	Married	1
Esther	F	33-37	Nigeria	2-3 years	F1	MA/MSc	Married	1
Ahmad	M	28-32	Nigeria	4-5 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Rose	F	28-32	Cameroon	4-5 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Lloyd	M	23-27	Nigeria	2-3 years	F1	MA/MSc	Single	0
Daniel	M	23-27	Ivory Coast	4-5 years	J1	PhD	Single	0
Victor	M	33-37	Nigeria	4-5 years	F1	MA/MSc	Married	0
Halima	F	33-37	Nigeria	4-5 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Solomon	M	33-37	Nigeria	2-3 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Joshua	M	23-27	Nigeria	2-3 years	F1	PhD	Single	0
Jose	M	23-27	Ghana	2-3 years	F1	PhD	Single	0

FINDINGS

Overall, the in-depth interviews revealed that African international students experienced mental health stressors at different forms and levels during the pandemic. Participants reported that they endured the anxiety of getting the virus and stress about their health. Because of the COVID-19-related measures (lockdowns, social distancing rules, travel restrictions), participants' interactions and activities were limited, resulting in feelings of social isolation and depression. Participants also shared their mechanisms for overcoming their mental and emotional challenges. Following resilience theory and the Ubuntu philosophy, the themes were sub-grouped into the PIE domains: individual, interactional, and environmental experiences. A fourth domain, Ubuntu as a tool for resilience, emerged from the data. Only exemplar quotes are used; additional evidence is provided in Figure 1 presented at the end of this section.

Domain 1: Individual-level Experiences

Fear of The Virus and Anxiety About Their Health

For most participants, feelings of anxiety were twofold. Most of the AIGS were anxious about contracting the virus and how that would affect their health and well-being. Several students worried about the health of their families – those living in the U.S. and those residing in their home countries. The stress level increased among AIGS who tested positive for COVID-19. In discussing the extent of stress, she experienced, Esther explained:

Getting the virus was the worst experience. There was much tension in the house...and then there's another fear when you get it. The feeling, what's the next thing. Would I be better, would he (her husband) get worse...I hope I won't have any real mental breakdown. I was really worried about our health. I hope my liver, my kidney all is well after the virus...It was very stressful; it was like one part of your brain is not working. (Esther).

Participants expressed that they were also stressed if their spouses were considered essential workers (e.g., healthcare workers) and if they had children living with them during the pandemic. In addition, the participants were concerned about the health of their family members who still reside in Africa. They received multiple communications regarding family members being diagnosed or dying from COVID-19.

Domain 2: Interactional Experiences

At the interactional level, study participants expressed feeling anxious, socially isolated, and depressed due to a lack of human interaction and deteriorating social networks during the pandemic.

Social Isolation and Depression

Participants reported feeling isolated and disconnected during the pandemic as in-person events, and socializing opportunities were canceled. Qualitatively,

not interacting with others in the same physical space, and being uncertain about how long the pandemic would last, caused a feeling of loneliness and depression among some students. “From time to time, I started losing sight and feeling kind of lost in my thought and didn’t really know what is going on.” (Daniel). When there was not enough space, the students felt imprisoned in their homes, converting their small living spaces into home offices, entertainment centers, and playgrounds, all at the same time:

Turning your home into an office can affect your mental health. It's like because you are just more focused on work, it no longer feels like a home again it now feels like staying in the office. Usually, when I'm in the office till late, I come home to just relax. Like I wouldn't open my computer, but now, when I'm at home (*all the time*), it feels depressing (Victor).

Isolation feeds boredom, and boredom feeds depression. Feeling bored and unmotivated was the other challenge for the participants. Lloyd said, “a lot of times, working was a little bit difficult because I was just bored all the time.” Participants reported that lack of human interaction and having limited entertainment resources/gadgets in the house exacerbated the boredom.

I wasn’t able to interact with people so that kind of piles up the stress. Also, the fact that I had to stay online zooming for about two and half hours and more every day was a huge stress for me. So, sometimes, apart from the online class, you still have to read articles online, looking at the computer and all, and that brought with it a lot of mental stress for me (Robert).

Lack of Familial Support

Going through a pandemic while studying in a foreign country away from family has been challenging for most participants. Given the travel ban, familial support could only be provided virtually for those whose families stayed in their home countries. For many African countries, access to the internet is a significant challenge meaning families could go several weeks without communicating as Halima said:

I mean, you’ve been by yourself, and having been hit by this hurts a lot. I have family back home; everybody wants to know how you're feeling over here, but you're just by yourself. You know, going through all these pains. It would be different (*if I were*) back home.

The pandemic has aggravated homesickness among AIGS. As Ahmad said, “If I wasn’t an international student, I would have had the support of my family and friends. But since it wasn’t the case, I was just alone suffering.” Participants were used to strong communal and cultural bonds they could not find in the U.S. This became an additional stressor during the pandemic.

Domain 3: Environmental Experiences

Beyond the personal and interactional-level factors, African international students experienced environmental (structural and policy-related) factors that shaped their mental and emotional well-being during the pandemic. These include restrictive student visas that limited their work alternatives following campus closures and the job market decline that eroded their future in the U.S.

Restrictive Visas - Loss of Work Opportunities and Status Maintenance

Being an international student (F-1 or J-1) means one cannot work outside campus, and their spouses (F-2) cannot legally work anywhere in the U.S. This created a financial challenge for students, increasing participants' stress, especially when the campus was closed. Participants were also stressed by legal requirements pertinent to maintaining their status as international students in the U.S. Despite the disruption caused by the pandemic to the teaching-learning process, those requirements were not revised or adjusted to the new reality causing further stress among international students.

As an international student, I have to maintain my student status by taking a certain number of credits. With all the disruption going around, I had to still meet those requirements. I have to qualify and pass despite COVID-19. We have too many status-related requirements, including the quality of your GPA. (Rose).

Environment Induced Job Anxiety, Fear, and Uncertainty About the Future

For students nearing completion of their degree, COVID-19 significantly impacted their job prospects as economic and employment opportunities dwindled during the pandemic. The pandemic caused the most anxiety to international students nearing the completion of their programs. They hoped to secure a job before their visas expired. Dawud stated,

Unlike U.S. citizens, international students go through extra stress to get jobs while struggling to maintain their immigration status. This journey became more frightening as the pandemic has taken many employment opportunities away. (Dawud)

Policy restrictions on international students further aggravated job anxiety among participants. Due to the introduction of restrictive immigration policies, prospective employers preferred candidates with a green card or citizenship over students with F-1 or J-1 visas. This added an emotional burden to AIGS. Besides jobs, students also worried about what the future would look like because of the unpredictable nature of the pandemic.

Domain 4: Ubuntu as a Tool for Resilience

Despite the multifaceted stressors AIGS dealt with, they demonstrated resilience by using various coping strategies to maintain their mental and emotional well-being during the pandemic. The application of Ubuntu and African resilience played a central part in participants' coping mechanisms.

Keeping Themselves Engaged/Busy

One of the coping mechanisms was keeping themselves busy to avoid boredom, fear of the virus, and the overall stressful atmosphere. Esther said, "I just go to the market and start buying stuff even though I don't need them because it just helps me get out and also change my thought." With the closure of campus facilities, participants resorted to other strategies to stay active during the pandemic: some started to do more physical activities such as walking and exercising, and others stayed focused on their research to avoid COVID-19-related stress and anxiety. Such students reported that they over-engaged in virtual conferences and professional networking during the pandemic to keep themselves away from the psychological impacts of the pandemic.

Ubuntu and African Resilience

Participants utilized their strong African communal tradition to navigate through the difficult days, from phone calls and text messages to just coming by and knocking on doors to check if someone is doing okay. They applied Ubuntu, which illustrates the essence of communalism and interdependence during times of hardship. As Africans, the international students relied on the tradition of checking on each other during disasters that impact families and communities. In the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of an individual's responsibility to link with others and provide support. A supportive community played a vital role in helping the students cope during depressing days:

I do have a community. So, when I feel sad, I try to go out of my way to do things I would typically like. Just have fun, go, and relax with people and everything, especially if they are not, like, very scared of having anybody over. So, yes, I do have that community. I think that has been helpful for me (Daniel).

Students received support from classmates during their difficult days. The community support included engaging with their classmates and having African friends. Adam, who suffered from migraine and stayed in bed during the pandemic said, "I had my friends who come over to cook for me. I just got to understand how much classmate interaction is important."

The Ubuntu – interdependence – is the foundation for 'African resilience,' a term used by participants to denote the strength they inherited from their African sociocultural background. Halima said, "You know we are Africans, and we are resilient when it comes to emotional and psychological challenges. We came through a long journey that gave us the experience to stay calm and handle difficulties." By African resilience, participants referred to their ability to survive or navigate an environment dominated by risk, COVID-19 in this case, and utilize their experience rooted in their African tradition.

Positivity and Staying Informed

Remaining positive and hopeful was the other strategy used by participants to counter emotional challenges during the pandemic. Optimism is connected with African resilience and ingrained in African international students' communalism and interdependence. Most participants cited their background and faith when speaking of remaining hopeful under the shadow of the pandemic. Victor said, "I had to remind myself every single day that nothing lasts forever, like it's going to be over very soon, and you want to move on." Dawud added, "I usually call, like friends. I call my parents. I also go to church and pray to stay strong." Remaining connected with other African students through church and prayers helped them build resilience and not to lose hope. The students expressed their optimism about the new administration's health policies (e.g., President Biden) which gave them hope about living in the U.S. For example, Halima expressed relief regarding relaxing restrictive policies that prevented international students from enrolling in online courses: "The good thing is that, recently, I heard that all of those policies have been reversed by the new administration."

Participants used their connection and interdependence to get information on the new developments related to the pandemic and regulations. The interviews

revealed that one's interconnectedness with other African students helped them adapt to the new conditions of life and develop resilience to handle the unknown future during the pandemic. Participants also reported that staying informed helped them mentally and emotionally prepare during the pandemic. Ahmad said, "The way you see and lose lives, it's not going to end up soon, and I was prepared. I would say I was more prepared for what was coming ahead." Participants also used self-encouragement and self-belief as ways out of their stressful situations. Apart from employing various coping strategies, all participants said they did not pursue mental health assistance or professional service. Most participants mentioned personal strength and African resilience as reasons for not seeking mental health services. These findings are depicted in the PIE framework in Figure 1 below.

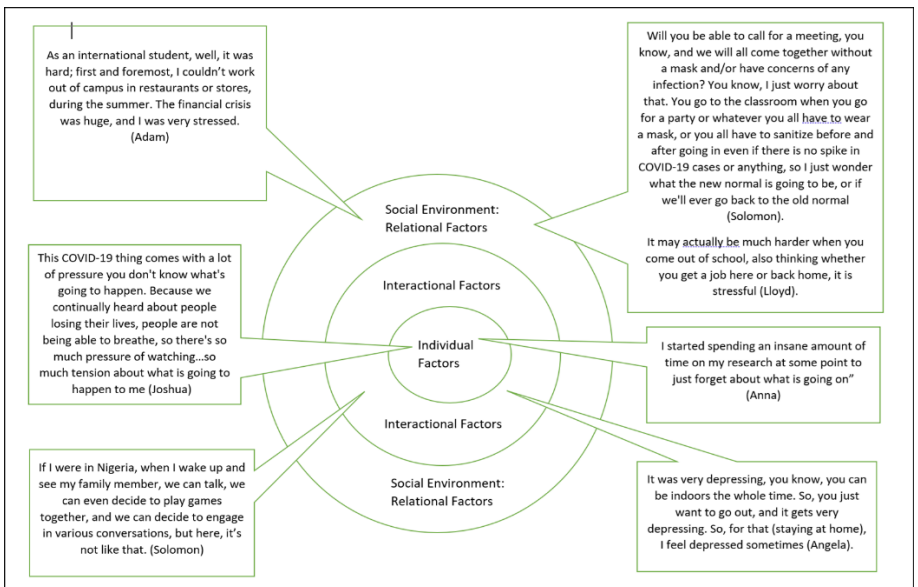


Figure 1: Integrating Findings into PIE Framework

DISCUSSION

Guided by the resilience theory and Ubuntu philosophy, this qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of AIGS during COVID-19 and the coping strategies they utilized to cope with the pandemic-caused hardships. Our findings suggest that AIGS experienced various mental health and emotional challenges at individual, interactional and environmental levels. At each level, AIGS utilized various coping mechanisms that helped them stay resilient. Ubuntu

– a philosophy that fosters resilience was central in all three socio-ecological levels of the PIE.

At an individual level, evidence from the data suggests that preventative measures were taken against the spread of the virus (e.g., university closures, stay-at-home orders) resulted in social isolation and disconnectedness among AIGS. In turn, social isolation bred depression, homesickness, and boredom among students. These findings confirm reports from emerging literature on the mental health impact of COVID-19 on international students (Coffey et al., 2021; Guintella et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2022). Although AIGS shared the same negative consequences of the pandemic as their other non-African international graduate students (Wang et al., 2020), our findings suggest that AIGS are at higher risk of experiencing mental health issues. Coming from a strong communal culture, adjusting to a solitary life caused by the pandemic increased AIGS' risk for depression. The increased racial tension and violence in the U.S. during the pandemic and the inability to travel home due to border closures exacerbated these vulnerabilities. Along the same vein as Neto (2021), we noted that the lack of a supportive environment exacerbated perceived discrimination and loneliness among AIGS.

Experiencing hardship can foster resilience. To counter the above individual-level hardships, African international students took personal measures such as keeping themselves busy and focused on their studies to avoid mental and emotional destruction. This is supported by previous research that reported students' demonstration of being goal-oriented and self-disciplined in times of hardship (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Participants took part in various activities, including shopping, social media, walking, exercising, watching movies, listening to music, and cooking to divert their anxiety and ease their stress from the pandemic. Besides, AIGS used self-encouragement and self-belief to remain positive and hopeful during the pandemic. These individual-level resilience strategies are ingrained in the participants called African resilience – the ability to take challenges positively and overcome hardships using past experiences and interdependence with others (van Breda, 2018).

Feelings of anxiety and depression, as expressed at the interactional level, can be risk factors for unhealthy behaviors such as excessive screen time (e.g., TV, phone, gaming), which can, in turn, worsen mental health and cause depression (Chen et al., 2020). Living far from their family and immediate support system caused fear and anxiety among participants. African international students from a highly communal culture found adjusting to the new isolated life under the pandemic challenging, thereby increasing the additional adjustment burden (Boafo-Arthur, 2020). As reported by the participants, the suspension of group activities such as get-togethers to cook and share traditional meals, prayer and worship programs, and friendship events organized by the African Graduate and Professional Association (AGPSA) contributed to their feelings of isolation. Insights from the interactional level suggest that AIGS felt their African “Ubuntu” philosophy and spiritual engagements were essential resources of their resilience. Most importantly, AIGS benefited from their communal tradition of checking on and supporting each other during the pandemic's gloomy days.

The application of Ubuntu and African resilience was helpful at the individual, interactional and environmental levels. Being an international student involves several academic and legal procedures that create additional mental and emotional burdens for participants (David et al., 2022). Many international students in the United States (e.g., F-1 and J-1) visas limit them to campus employment. With campus closures, students were left unemployed and could not seek employment outside the campus. The loss of additional income increased anxiety over supporting themselves and their families. Our findings suggest that international students living with spouses and children and those responsible for caring for their parents or family members in their home countries were hard hit. Finally, their inability to maintain legal status after graduation worsened the uncertainty over their financial status, given the proclamations (e.g., Presidential Proclamation 10052)¹ that blocked H1B, H2B, and J visas coupled with the economic downturn associated with the pandemic (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020). Closely associated with these measures were the exclusionary moves that limited the number of online classes for international students, which resulted in many students being out of legal status. Similar to our findings, other researchers (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020) observed the lack of employment opportunities as dehumanizing and depressing. Given the sample of this study that constituted students who lived more than two years in the U.S., the COVID-19 discussed above could have been worse for new students who are still navigating and adapting to life in a foreign country, as suggested by Kim and Kim (2021).

In summary, insights from the study suggest that participants were aware that new developments at the university and national level could affect each of them and leveraged the ‘we-ness’ philosophy to exchange information, opportunities, and concerns that affect them. African students managed the stress-fostering factors (e.g., campus closures, stay-at-home mandates, social distancing, exclusionary visa-related proclamations, and financial hardships) through supporting each other and standing together as an interdependent community under Ubuntu.

Implications

Our study highlights the need for all parties involved – AIGS, universities, and government, to learn from the recent experience and re-examine educational and immigration policies to create a more AIGS-friendly learning and living

¹ The Presidential Proclamation (P.P.) 10052 was a U.S. presidential declaration that suspended the entry of certain nonimmigrants including on applicants for student visas (e.g., J-1, F-1) and work visas such as H-1B, H-2B, and L-1 visas and their spouses, who were determined to present a risk to the U.S. labor market during the economic recovery following the COVID-19 outbreak. The proclamation expired on March 31, 2021.

environment. While the worst of COVID-19 seems to be behind us, it will undoubtedly not be the last of its nature.

- Universities must address AIGS' needs by implementing institutional policies and provisions that minimize the students' mental, emotional, and financial vulnerabilities during pandemics. These include providing culturally appropriate mental health and counseling services, ensuring that emergency health services are available and at no-to-low cost, and working closely with international student organizations (e.g., African Graduate and Professional Students Association). Additionally, higher education institutions could advocate for immigration reform on behalf of international students.
- Universities must ensure that AIGS are supported financially during pandemic-related campus closures by offering virtual employment opportunities and advocating for off-campus work permits. Additionally, universities should invest in more learning resources (e.g., computers) during a pandemic.
- Working in collaboration with colleges and universities, the U.S. government and policymakers could revise the restrictive visa conditions and adopt a progressive approach that allows vulnerable international students to work outside the campus. AIGS, most of whom paid income taxes as Graduate Research or Teaching Assistants, did not receive the government-funded COVID-19 financial relief. This practice was wrong from individual human rights and social justice points of view, and policies that lessen these vulnerabilities are needed.
- Acknowledging the common good and the value of interconnectedness is vitally important to overcoming mental and emotional challenges among international students. Active participation in both academic and non-academic clubs and associations will help build strong social networks and provide sustained support to each other. Establishing student support groups that intentionally involve students of diverse backgrounds can promote cultural exchange and learning about the Ubuntu philosophy and its practice in higher institutions. African international students should continue to practice and spread the wisdom of Ubuntu and African resilience to international and domestic students.

Limitations

This study is limited in that it constituted students who had more than two years' stay in the U.S., yet those with fewer years of stay in the U.S. could have been more vulnerable as they were more likely to have a weaker support system. Despite this limitation, we strongly believe this study contributes to the emerging knowledge of AIGSs' emotional and mental challenges during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Future studies should include a more diverse sample (undergraduates and graduates) and test the relationships between the demographics of international students and fear, anxiety, stress, and resilience.

Conclusion

AIGS experienced mental and emotional challenges that spanned individual, interactional, and environmental levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges included fear of the virus and anxiety about their health; social isolation and disconnectedness, depression, lack of familial support, anxiety induced by restrictive visas, and uncertainty about the future. The AIGS came from communal cultural backgrounds and adjusting to the new isolated life under the pandemic disproportionately affected their lives. AIGS mainly relied on their African “Ubuntu” philosophy and resilience to cope with the mental and emotional challenges. The ‘we-ness’ philosophy and spirituality that is rooted in their African culture helped them support each other, exchange information, and thrive in the difficult times of the pandemic. The findings implied that universities should revisit institutional policies and services to provide culturally appropriate mental health services that integrate the “Ubuntu” philosophy, provide financial support, and work closely with student organizations to ensure the mental and emotional well-being of AIGS. In addition, universities should work with policymakers and advocate to revise the restrictive visa regulations that increase the emotional and financial vulnerabilities of AIGS.

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