

“It’s not a level playing field”: Exploring International Students of Color’s Challenges and the Impact of Racialized Experiences on the Utilization of Campus Resources during COVID-19

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examined the racialized experiences on the utilization of campus resources among international students of color (ISOC) during the COVID-19 pandemic at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Often viewed as having “double-invisibility” - both racially minoritized and foreign status - international students of color face unique challenges. The objective focused on the role neo-racism played in the experiences of using campus resources and understanding their unique needs during a pandemic. Personal narratives from 20 international students of color revealed five significant themes where ISOC (1) feel university resources lack a basic understanding of their needs, (2) seek international staff and/or staff of color, (3) view faculty and/or classrooms as their primary supportive resources and, (4) deem past encounters create psychological barriers to utilizing resources, based on (5) a common perception of disadvantaged positionality due to their intersecting identities. Implications and recommendations for higher education professionals are discussed.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted and transformed U.S. higher education institutions and systems negatively impacting students' lives with uncertainty, social isolation, racial discrimination, deteriorating mental health and financial hardships (Berger, 2020; Karalis, 2020; Koo, 2021b; Koo et al., 2021b). While COVID-19 has severely transformed college campuses, international students in the United States (U.S.) have faced unique difficulties during this time. International students bring in a wealth of curricular and cocurricular skills and knowledge, increasing cultural awareness, diversity, globalization, and intellectual capital among college students that substantially aid in the achievement of U.S. institutional goals (Koo, 2018; Lee, 2007; Zhang et al., 2016). During the 2019-2020 academic year alone, international students significantly contributed over \$38 billion to the U.S. economy while supporting over 400,000 jobs (NAFSA, 2020). However, a survey by the Institute of International Education (2020) found that the number of international students studying at U.S. universities dropped by 16 percent in the fall 2020 due to the pandemic, notably impacting higher education institutions.

Scholars have explored the effects of racism and discrimination on international students in the United States (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007), drawing attention to racial identities and their impact on student experiences (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Glass, 2012; Lee and Rice, 2007). Koo and colleagues (2021b) highlighted the racial experiences of explicit discrimination, fear, isolation, and feelings of being unwelcomed among international students of color (ISOC) during the pandemic. While researchers have studied racialized experiences of ISOC during the pandemic (Koo et al., 2021b), academic motivations of international students of color in STEM (Mwangi et al., 2016), experiences of learning U.S. concepts of race, and racism among international students (Mitchell et al., 2017) and among foreign-born students of color, the impact of racialized experiences of ISOC on the utilization of campus support systems has received little attention. As we face two crises—the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism - the need to understand the intersectionality of identities of ISOC, their racialized experiences, and the effects on how they utilize campus resources is crucial as colleges and universities shape themselves around social justice, inclusion, and equality.

For this research study, an ISOC is defined as an individual, not of White or European background, studying in the United States on a non-immigrant, temporary student visa enrolled as a full-time student at an institution. They are students who are not citizens or permanent residents of the United States. Prior literature indicates international students who come from predominately non-Western, non-English speaking countries experience negative and racial interactions mainly due to nationality during their time in the U.S. (George Mwangi, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2019). Similarly, Lee (2007) provided a framework for the hardship that international students experience through the concept of neo-racism, highlighting participants from Western/English-speaking countries faced minimal to no discrimination compared to students from other regions. Campus resources are defined as those campus-wide support services, departments, and programs offered to contribute towards the academic, professional, and personal development of college student success (Patton et al., 2016). This qualitative study aimed to explore ISOC

racialized experiences impacting the utilization of campus resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study seeks to answer: (1) What role does neo-racism play when it comes to international students of color seeking support or resources on campus?; (2) How do past experiences of racism or discrimination affect the way international students of color utilize resources and how do they make sense of their identity having experienced these racist encounters through utilization/non-utilization of resources/services on campus?; and (3) What themes are present in the decision-making process of this student group utilizing on-campus resources during a global pandemic and widespread systemic racism? Current studies share little about the impacts of racial encounters on the utilization of resources by ISOC during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Racialized Experiences of ISOC During COVID-19

Some groundwork research has been laid focusing on issues related to international students and their experiences with racism (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Koo, 2021a; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mwangi et al., 2016). Lee & Rice (2007) revealed the difficulties from verbal insults to confrontations that international students face by peers, faculty, and the local community. Additionally, Yao (2018) described how negative experiences in a racialized campus culture led international students to feel isolated, othered and viewed as an outsider. This illustrates the added severity of racist experiences that international students who identify as students of color may face. Specifically, ISOC come to the U.S. with various country-specific racial and cultural orientations. Scholars have found that ISOC from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America experience discrimination as well as systemic racism based on their skin color, ethnicity, and nationality from on-campus faculty and students within the U.S, often experiencing more discrimination than their international White peers (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Constantine et al., 2005; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Hanassab 2006; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). A study by Yao et al. (2020) described how ISOC make sense of campus climate when faced with a racialized incident in the United States as first-year students. Their findings highlighted the unique needs of ISOC often viewed as having “double-invisibility”, having both racially minoritized and international student status within U.S. contexts, reimagining how to support this group of students.

During COVID-19, college students generally faced anxiety symptoms and suffered from depression (Koo, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Studies show ways in which race-related encounters become secondary traumatic experiences and generate psychological stress for students of color (Cheng, 2020; Koo, 2021a; Misra et al., 2020). Koo (2021b) found that racism negatively impacts the mental health and psychological well-being of international students with additional challenges during COVID-19. To support ISOC during the pandemic, it is necessary to understand their unique experiences of racism and its impact on how they seek campus resources.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Fries-Britt, Mwangi & Peralta’s (2014) Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) model, that highlights how international students of color make sense of race and racism while studying in the U.S., as a guiding framework to better understand the effects of racialized experiences. Fries-Britt & colleagues (2014) addressed emerging themes into three categories, “Unexamined U.S Racial-Ethnic

Identity, Moving Towards Racial-Ethnic Identity Examination, or Integrative Awareness in the U.S.” (Fries-Britt, et al., 2014, p. 11) regarding the experiences of foreign-born students of color including international students and how it impacted their identity through critical elements in the LRUSC framework. This study applied the LRUSC framework to ISOC specifically as a basis to discern the impact of racialized experiences and discrimination on ISOC in the way they use resources for success at a PWI. To situate any racial experiences of ISOC, the conceptual framework of neo-racism, a notion of ‘new racism’ (Lee & Rice, 2007) that discriminates based on culture and national order, was utilized. The frameworks focus on foreign students’ status and cultural experiences where Lee & Rice (2007) theorized verbal and nonverbal insults, negative stereotypes and ignorance faced by international students as neo-racism. Using neo-racism as one of the frameworks allows for exploring institutional racism in the context of immigration among race, culture, and nationality (Cantwell & Lee, 2010) during the pandemic.

Method

Data from international students of color at a large public university in the United States were collected and analyzed. A phenomenological research method chosen for this study captured the essence and uniqueness of participants through personal perspective and interpretations (Moustakas, 1994) as it focuses on understanding the unspoken personal views of individuals and their shared experiences (Patton, 1990). As the study examined students' perceptions and reflections of their academic and identity development, it became essential to understand the unspoken experiences of students of color in general who are marginalized (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012). Understanding the experiences of ISOC has the potential to influence positive changes in structural and systemic biases to improve the environment at higher education institutions.

Participants and Setting

All participants were international students enrolled at a university in the Southwestern United States. This institution enrolled approximately 22,000 students at the time of the study including roughly 600 international students enrolled from 80 different countries, representing around 2.7% of the total student body. The student body comprises 72% White and 28% students of color. ISOC were invited through an international student listserv during spring 2021 to participate in an online survey and an optional follow-up interview.

Twenty ISOC served as participants and were invited to complete an interview to discuss their experiences of racism and utilization of resources at the university in more depth. Participant profiles comprised a range of diverse academic fields and cultural backgrounds. From the sample of participants, eight (40%) identified as female and twelve (60%) identified as male. Students’ countries of origin were Belize, China, El Salvador, Ghana, Honduras, India, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Of these, fifteen (75%) identified as Asian, three (15%) as Latina/o, one (5%) as Arab/Middle Eastern, one (5%) as Black. Fifteen of the twenty students were from the Asian countries of China, India, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym keeping identifiable information confidential.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Level of Study	Years in the U.S.
Angel	Female	Honduras	Doctorate	6
Anon	Male	Sri Lanka	Masters	4.5
Damian	Male	El Salvador	Doctorate	7
Fred	Male	Saudi Arabia	Bachelors	5
Gary	Male	India	Bachelors	2
Harvey	Male	India	Doctorate	6
Helen	Female	China	Bachelors	2
Hope	Female	India	Masters	2.5
Jack	Male	India	Doctorate	5
Kingsley	Male	Ghana	Masters	1.5
Maria	Female	Belize	Masters	6
Mat	Male	Sri Lanka	Bachelors	3.5
Rachel	Female	India	Bachelors	3.5
Regina	Female	Vietnam	Masters	8
Sarah	Female	Sri Lanka	Masters	2.5
Sean	Male	Sri Lanka	Bachelors	4
Seth	Male	India	Doctorate	4
SJ	Female	Sri Lanka	Bachelors	4
Theo	Male	China	Bachelors	1.5
Tyler	Male	India	Masters	1.5

Data Collection & Analysis

To gain insight into their past racial experiences and its effect on utilizing campus resources, participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Patton (1990) describes purposeful sampling that allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the study as “information-rich cases” (p. 169). After receiving university Institutional Research Board approval, participants were recruited through an email invitation sent by the university’s International Students’ office with permission and support from the director. Recruitment through snowball sampling (Merriam, 2014) was engaged wherein participants informed other ISOC to send an email to the primary researcher if they wanted to participate. Participants were informed of the nature and time commitment of the study. All terms of the study were disclosed and accepted by the participants, and compensation was not offered.

Data were collected from recorded, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Individual interviews ran 30 - 40 minutes in length. Participants initially completed a quantitative survey that collected self-reported demographic information. Participants were then invited to an in-depth, semi-structured Zoom

interview with the primary researcher. The semi-structured interview protocols included questions focused on past racist and discrimination experiences during their time in the United States as an ISOC. Additional questions explored the ways participants learned about race and racism in the United States. Furthermore, to get a sense of the environmental context, the researcher asked students to describe their challenges during the pandemic related to those racialized experiences found at campus resources.

All individual interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into a computer-assisted qualitative analysis software, Delve, that allowed the development of codes to identify themes from the data. The transcripts were reviewed to analyze the data through open and axial coding. The coding process of this study included highlighting detailed and prominent quotes related to racism and the thought process of utilizing on-campus resources, and then grouping those codes into themes (Merriam, 2014). To ensure accuracy, transcripts were matched with the audio recordings. Researchers conducted member checks, data triangulation and peer debriefing to enhance trustworthiness.

Researcher Positionality

As researchers, we must demonstrate awareness of the impact of personal experiences, social identities, beliefs and biases on research studies. Both researchers work in university settings. The primary researcher, an Asian international doctoral student of color, facilitated all individual interviews. This intentional research design offered a comfortable environment in which participants could share racial experiences and challenges at the university with an international person of color. Sharing similar cultural backgrounds and experiences as an ISOC allowed them to build rapport and trust with interviewees quickly. The second researcher who identifies as a White, American national has worked in higher education for 30 years. She routinely works with international students as a student affairs practitioner and faculty member. She brought in a unique perspective with expertise in student of color experiences during data collection, data analysis and writing process.

Findings

The findings revealed the following five themes in participant's decision-making: (1) a disadvantaged positionality as a guiding framework for (2) a lack of understanding of needs and challenges, (3) faculty and/or classroom perceived as a resource, (4) the need for international staff and staff of color, and (5) psychological barriers. Additionally, findings expose the role of neo-racism, the impact of past experiences, and the ways participants make sense of their identity, answering the research questions. The first, second, fourth and fifth themes reflect the role of neo-racism for students seeking support on campus and students' decision-making process to use campus resources during the pandemic. The first and third themes reflect how students make sense of their identity having experienced racist encounters through the utilization of campus resources. Thus, perceptions of being disadvantaged serve as a basis for understanding all three research questions, exposing the role of neo-racism, how participants make sense of their identity, and their decision-making process in utilizing resources during the pandemic. All participants have been studying in the U.S. for at least 18 months. Participants encountered some form of racism, discrimination, or microaggressions in one or more instances, on and off-campus, based on color or ethnicity and race as an international student in the U.S.

Disadvantaged Positionality for International Students of Color: “It’s not a level-playing field”

Most participants expressed feelings of disadvantage as a person of color at a PWI with the additional layer of international student status. Seth (India), a doctoral student in Applied Physics noted “I am cognizant of that...it is not really a level-playing field...” (2021), that the university environment was unequal, constantly feeling the need and expectation to work harder than domestic counterparts. Almost all participants felt it was important for ISOC to use the resources available as they believed their international student status hindered their ability and knowledge of the higher education system compared to domestic peers. Jack (India), a Mechanical Engineering doctoral student shared the experience of being an ISOC as an added hindrance to understanding and utilizing resources on campus.

...as an international student I am already at a disadvantage. I am in a new country, culturally shocked...so I am already behind in understanding the available resources or getting the full picture of the available resources to me....and then this is just a further setback in that process because now I know these resources are available but I am just afraid to use them. (Jack, 2021)

To utilize campus resources, students noted having to blend in and adapt their cultural identity, often stopping to scan the room before going into those spaces. This was prevalent even among participants who lived in the U.S. for over five years who could be considered as reaching ‘integrative awareness’ (Fries-Britt et al., 2014), the highest stage within the LRUSC model. These students reflected on the experience of regressing a phase in the LRUSC model when they thought about using resources in these spaces. Maria (Belize) shared such an experience from graduate school when she struggled with a feeling of being unwanted at these resources as an international student of color while also working as a graduate assistant in these student affairs spaces.

You fall short of what you could have, you know, um,...and if I don’t feel welcome in these spaces, then it’s kind of like that privilege you know. The other students having the privilege of being welcome in those spaces and having those things and I don’t have that privilege and it discourages me so then I don’t use it. (Maria, 2021)

Participants in the study felt the need and expectation to outperform their domestic counterparts and described they learn the hard way that international students often have much to lose and play a different game where the stakes are high with “no safety net” as Seth described.

University Resource Personnel Lack Understanding of ISOC Needs: “It’s important for us to feel that there are people who are looking out for us”

A salient theme reflected amongst several participants revealed that university resources failed to understand the unique needs and unexpected challenges experienced by ISOC during the pandemic. Jack (India) expressed the importance of support from university resources during the pandemic when he stated,

I think it is extremely important to feel supported at [university] because we definitely contribute a lot to the university to the system. Even as graduate students and undergraduate students contribute in a

different way and the least you can expect is to be supported by the system and obviously when you see different protests you can kind of relate to them, oh hey I experienced something like that, and I totally understand what people around me are protesting because this was definitely it was not something I was expecting to happen to me or was totally unfair. (Jack, 2021)

While participants reflected upon and drew connections between their past racial experiences and seeking campus resources, students like Tyler (India), a master's student, expressed the lack of support towards ISOC during the pandemic and how it would make a difference to him,

I think it is highly important to feel supported because these kinds of incidents create a sense of fear that...sometime and somewhere we might also have to face such kind of situations...so if I feel if there is any separate body at [university] to give support and give awareness about such kind of situation...people would feel relaxed, confident and work relaxed at their field of study or work whatever they are doing at [university]. (Tyler, 2021)

A significant number of students described their perceptions of the lack of awareness and consideration of challenges and needs of on-campus services, particularly during unprecedented pandemic times. Nearly all the participants described facing financial challenges during the pandemic and expressed the need for emotional support during *and* after the pandemic. Mat (Sri Lanka), a Mechanical Engineering undergraduate student described frustrations with a lack of financial support from university resources during the pandemic.

...and through [University] Care [Act] they made an issue to offer...they offered \$400 and \$800 some money to [domestic] people but clearly mentioned that we are not offering for any international students...and that is something I was really worried about because I am representing here...I am here right now...I could go...when Trump administration says okay "I am going to kick out all international students"...I would go to my country but I can't go because I have to participate in my senior capstone...I have free healthcare I do not have to worry at all...but here I am sick because I am not citizen...if I get something, I am at the end of the queue...end of the line... (Mat, 2021)

Most participants hoped to get pandemic support from the university in the areas of COVID vaccine availability, faculty support of racism faced by students, counseling accessibility, offering support groups, and involving international students in university decision-making policies. Multiple participants noted the need to include ISOC in campus conversations such as residential housing during the pandemic, to talk about injustices and spread awareness and accessibility of resources among this underrepresented group. Participants placed emphasis on the presence of ISOC involvement in campus-wide university resources to show ISOC are also "normal people". It is important to note that participants did not mention that the number of resources was insufficient or unavailable, but rather confirmed that the excellent resources that existed were not supportive or understanding of their needs. Maria (Belize) defined "support" as,

...knowing that they too have people that want them to be successful or know that they have people who care. Because I think the university has these resources that scream so loudly at domestic students, that you know – we have all these things but then what do we international students have? (Maria, 2021)

Similar to Maria's experience, S.J. (Sri Lanka), an undergraduate student expressed uncertainty whether or not the personnel involved in the resources being offered understood her needs. She began second-guessing her use of on-campus resources after personally facing racism in those spaces.

I think it is very important to tell international students of color that there are people who are looking out for them but personally I haven't felt that from [university] so I am not sure what kind of feeling I should expect. I guess it is more like a reassurance...like we are here for you... (S.J., 2021)

Faculty and/or Classroom Identified as a Resource: “Support from my professors made a world of difference”

Participants were asked about who or what they identified as resources and how these resources contributed to their development. Fifty percent of participants saw faculty and the academic classroom as primary supportive academic resources, along with the International Office, Counseling Services, and the library. Study findings indicated that faculty support and awareness of ISOC experiences were crucial, especially during the pandemic. Participants shared they did not seek campus-wide support services as much as they relied on faculty and graduate program department personnel for support. This was particularly true for graduate students. Participants stated that faculty were helpful in providing the support they needed, addressed COVID-19 issues, and navigated systemic racism during that time. Helen (China) expressed a sense of belongingness with her faculty who stood as strong support for her when racism against Asians was at its peak during COVID-19.

I also think it is because my professor said they also really care about their student's mental health especially for international students. My professors are very nice persons. When the pandemic just started at the very beginning there were many hatred (issues) towards Asians and Chinese students and my professors ask all the Chinese students to stay after the class ended and she just talked to us if you experienced any racial issues or discrimination and you can talk to me and I can report it to our colleague and find a solution, which was helpful. (Helen, 2021)

Kingsley (Ghana), a master's student, elaborated on the unique challenges he faced while distant from home and family and not being able to return due to the pandemic. He expressed the need to feel supported by the university through faculty support in addition to seeking funding opportunities, safety, and awareness of needs.

I think it is really important because the pandemic and anti-racism...that is like for some students we are still choosing to stay on campus even during the pandemic that is we are living far away from our families and sometimes we feel lonely especially when our friends also go back to our home country and

live alone here...that is why I think it is quite important to feel the support from the campus, such as from our professors (Kingsley, 2021)

Angel (Honduras), a doctoral student, conveyed similar opinions of faculty being key in contributing to ISOC feeling supported when faced with microaggressions. Angel drew attention to international faculty who were able to relate to her unique experiences and serve as a guide in her field of study. She explained,

I think in my undergrad my professors did a great job of supporting me, however they didn't understand what it meant for me to be an international student. At [university] I actually have a professor who is on a work visa at [university], and it's just been, it's just made like a world of difference to be able to sit with him and talk with him about some of the challenges that I face that some of my classmates don't understand and that other professors aren't really aware of... (Angel, 2021)

Urgency to Hire International Staff and Staff of Color: “I need someone who looks like me”

Participants in the study reported they were more likely to seek resources from staff who look like them. Students described the importance of hiring faculty and staff from underserved and underrepresented communities such as international communities and communities of color to connect with those from similar backgrounds. Several students recounted their experiences of walking into a room on campus and “scanning the room” to guess how they would be treated. Participants recommended that hiring international faculty and staff in these spaces was essential because those with a diverse, international background were more likely to recognize and serve their needs. These students primarily faced racism based on their international student status more so than being a person of color. This shows how participants were concerned about staff having neo-racist attitudes, discouraging them from approaching resources for assistance. For example, Helen (China) reflected on her fear of facing discrimination across campus. She intentionally seeks out international faculty/staff in these spaces to avoid facing embarrassing situations.

I will take Writing Commons as an example, I go through the list and try to find someone who has an international background because they can kind of, help me or understand me to better help me... I think maybe for most international students, we are trying to find someone who share similarities like Writing Common issues like for Chinese students they are more willing to find Chinese writing assistants to help them. (Helen, 2021)

Prior racist encounters create a psychological barrier to use campus resources: “I became more cautious and guarded”

When asked how past experiences of racism and discrimination affect their use of campus resources, participants described the fear and stress of reliving the racialized experiences and avoided using campus resources unless absolutely necessary. Jack (India) described his feelings of distrust which led to nervousness to use resources to avoid “embarrassing situations”. He stated,

...it leaves me mentally second-guessing every resource I want to use so, this would not be my first prompt action to use these resources, I would check online and do as much research I can and find out myself just to avoid that in-person contact and trying to find it hard to face an embarrassing situation..., little bit of distrust, even there could be situations of misunderstanding, I am trying to convey a different message and person helping me takes it in a different sense. (Jack, 2021)

Theo (China), an undergraduate student, harbored worries about the ways past racist experiences affected conversations with peers at campus resources. He experienced a loss of self-confidence and increased feelings of stress and anxiety during the pandemic. He mentioned,

...you lose the courage or confidence to talk with other U.S. people, especially in those branches [campus resources]...it will become a barrier...for us so again as I included situations this branches [campus resources] should just move actively to try to just break the barriers...

But for this year, most of my friends returned to our home country but I am still in [U.S. city] but this year I am concerned if I can wear my traditional clothes and go outside because I see many negative news about Asians being attacked by the Whites or by someone who very frustrated with the pandemic... one thing I need to hide my identity but not to direct my culture and avoid developing the cultural things; just to avoid raising any troubles. (Theo, 2021)

Seth (India) described himself as more “cautious and guarded” when seeking campus resources after experiencing instances of racism. Kingsley (Ghana) expressed constant fear and uncertainty of what the university might do if he stood up for himself, having faced racism at these campus resources. He explained,

...so I think experiencing such situations in places like this...on campus even at the [university] library...may let them create a kind of cage...a wall around them...where they will not be able to open up...there was an issue with a friend and that led to her being taken out of campus...and as a result of that we became very conscious...and asking for help from authorities was very difficult...I personally became very closed to myself...everything I am going through I just keep it to myself...even though they say “If you need anything, come to us!” “if you need anything, come to us” but I feel like those were just protocol. (Kingsley, 2021)

Discussion

The findings highlight the unique and distinct experiences of ISOC seeking on-campus resources due to prior racial encounters experienced on campus. While ISOC benefit from utilizing campus resources academically and socially once they use them (Kuh et al., 2011; Webber et al., 2013), these resources often go unused due to their significant barriers.

The study revealed the role that neo-racism plays for ISOC in resources on college campuses specifically on the intersecting identities of ISOC and impacts on their racial and social identity when accessing campus resources. Interviews revealed that discrimination at these campus resources based on international student status was more prevalent than discrimination based on skin color which support

previous studies (Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007) Students shared fears about staff and other individuals within those resources having neo-racist attitudes towards them and indicating they were more likely to feel welcomed and explore campus resources when they see staff of color or international background. This aligns with the findings by Zhang et al. (2020), of increasing underrepresented and underserved identities among university populations of faculty and staff where students feel safer connecting with those from similar backgrounds and experiences. Increasing representation from minoritized populations allows for deconstructing oppressive hierarchies in the United States and higher education institutions (Zhang et al., 2020). ISOC perceive faculty and staff of color with an international background to understand their unique challenges and seek support for their needs, thus considering faculty as their top resource. Consistent with the implications of the LRUSC framework, faculty and staff can act as a crucial guide for students during that painful time of encountering racism while students make meaning of those events (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017). Additionally, the findings indicated ISOC viewed faculty as a crucial support, particularly during the COVID-19 challenges. This highlights the need to recruit, train, and educate international faculty and staff of color to build trust and rapport with ISOC, particularly during the pandemic.

Regarding the decision-making process of ISOC in utilizing campus support systems, almost all participants felt that it was essential for ISOC to use the resources available to them. However, they believed their international student status hindered their ability and knowledge of the higher education system compared to their domestic peers (Lee & Rice, 2007) depriving them of resources to succeed in U.S. higher education. Although ISOC seem to need to leverage their academic preparedness to establish themselves as competent in their academic fields (Mwangi et al, 2016), these students reported disadvantage facing inequalities in the academic system and accessibility of resources. Students also described navigating discrimination in academic settings (such as their graduate assistantship workplace, on-campus workplace, class) and how challenging it was for them to discuss their awareness of racism (Mitchell et al., 2017; Mwangi et al., 2016). The study illustrated that some graduate students who found themselves at a disadvantage claimed their performance was affected due to fear of discrimination by their faculty advisors and supervisors. Future studies could explore these experiences in-depth examining relationships with faculty advisors and supervisors and various contributing factors of stress over time.

It is important to note that ISOC cannot be stereotyped under one group when it comes to intersecting racial and cultural identities. The participants spent a significant amount of time connecting their racialized experiences to their culture and status to how they sought campus resources during COVID-19. For most of the students, ethnicity was a key aspect of their identity development as a person of color, and they were actively engaged and connected with their ethnic groups on campus (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012). Asian ISOC expressed their need to hide their own cultural identity when using campus resources and services, and adapt to the dominant culture, especially after hate crimes rose in the nation during the pandemic (Koo et al., 2021b; Tessler et al., 2020). This aligns with research that shows international students who faced discriminatory experiences were negatively impacted regarding their sense of belongingness at a PWI (Mwangi, 2016). ISOC expressed fears of reliving racial experiences along with feelings of embarrassment which lowered their self-esteem and self-confidence in seeking resources. While self-esteem contributes to psychological well-being, healthy behaviors, and sociocultural adjustment (Wei et al., 2008), international students generally suffer from low self-esteem, negatively impacting physical

and mental health (Koo et al., 2021a). This further negatively affects their academic development (inability to ask for help), mental development (creates unwanted stress), and social development (building peer relationships) which pose as barriers to success. Considering ISOC were more cautious about using campus resources, the connection between the lack of utilization due to fear and feeling disadvantaged compared to their peers is concerning and indicates a need to provide support systems that positively contribute to their psychosocial well-being.

Findings support previous research indicating the gaps in support from campus resources where international students found university resources not very relevant or helpful (Koo & Nyunt, 2020) and where participants questioned the support, they would receive. Participants hoped to receive university support during the pandemic along faculty support, culturally centered mental health resources (Koo et al., 2021), various support groups and systems, and spaces on campus to openly discuss inequalities and be included in university decision-making around COVID-19 policies.

Finally, this study parallels previous research on international students of color (Fries-Britt et al., 2014) where participants appear to best reflect the LRUSC framework in which emerging themes were addressed as to how racial experiences impact their racial-ethnic identity (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). When participants discussed their racial experiences in utilizing campus resources during the pandemic, they aligned with one of the three LRUSC frameworks. Twenty percent of participants experienced racial encounters and microaggressions in the past but reflected race did not affect them or were race-blind “Unexamined U.S. Racial-Ethnic Identity” phase (Fries-Britt et al., 2014, p. 4; Mitchell et al., 2017). Eighty percent shared ways in which race caught up to them, moving them further toward examining their racial-ethnic identity “Moving Towards Racial-Ethnic Identity Examination” phase (Fries-Britt et al., 2014, p. 7). Twenty percent of participants demonstrated commitment to action “Integrative Awareness” phase, similar to Fries-Britt and colleagues’ study (2014, p. 8). The findings for this study reveal four ISOC in the integrative awareness stage of their racial-ethnic identity examination exhibiting confidence and commitment to their racial identity (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). However, these four ISOC moved back to the previous phase when faced with neoracist experiences during the pandemic (Koo et al., 2021b) when utilizing campus resources, contrary to the LRUSC framework. Findings illustrate perceptions of being disadvantaged, having outsider status, and lacking inclusivity and support in campus resources decision-making, forcing these ISOC, unlike other foreign-born students of color, to move back to contemplating the complexity of their racial identity in the U.S. Additionally, this study shows that having a strong connection to their racial/cultural identity and community on campus, acknowledging racial experiences in ways that motivated them to succeed and serving as support to other peers, cost ISOC their mental health with added stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Koo et al., 2021b), particularly when deciding to seek campus resources, although they may seem to be progressing in their racial-ethnic identity stages.

Implications and Recommendations

Results from the study offer practical insights that strengthen the case that higher education institutions must focus on building connections with ISOC. On-campus offices, including student affairs departments, must consider increasing the number of employees of color and diverse international backgrounds. Universities must also consider hiring more international faculty allowing students to connect with someone who looks like them. Hiring ISOC themselves in these spaces creates feelings of comfort and

inclusivity. This invites students who are now part of these resources to use them and encourages other students to as well.

Additionally, there must be a more concerted effort to leverage campus resources that serve as a gateway to other resources for ISOC to feel supported. To aid identity development and the holistic success of ISOC, university staff must actively break down barriers of support that increase accessibility. Participants portrayed their nationality to be a significant aspect of their identity, a theme commonly found in Black immigrant literature (Mwangi, 2016). This resulted in conflicting feelings when students faced racism based on color, race, or international student status. Efforts to eliminate accessibility barriers centered around cultural beliefs and values would help build an advocacy network for this minoritized group of students. Including ISOC in the decision-making process, hiring more international faculty and staff of color, or having photos of ISOC on the walls of these spaces invites inclusion. Understanding and taking action to diminish barriers, inclusivity in institutional decision making and governance, and engaging advocacy efforts cultivate a sense of belonging and trust among ISOC.

Finally, institutions must encourage collaboration to create support groups and spaces across campus addressing the double-burden ISOC face during the COVID-19 pandemic (Koo et al., 2021b; Yao et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2020). Moreover, we recommend university resources not just focus on culturally responsive (Koo & Nyunt, 2020) but culturally centered practices grounding their efforts around the individual student voices, their cultural roots, and their communities with humility to decolonize university systems. Resources staff must collaborate to invite academic units with higher numbers of international students and graduate assistants of color into culturally centered dialogue spaces. Empirical studies describe how international students learn about race and racism as innocent bystanders in the United States culture (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mitchell et al. 2017). Creating spaces for intergroup dialogues and academic curricula (Mitchell et al., 2017) can empower ISOC.

Limitations and future areas of study

While this study provides meaningful insights regarding racial experiences among ISOC during the pandemic, several limitations must be addressed. The generalizability of data is limited since the surveying and interviewing of students occurred at one point in time rather than longitudinally, during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants in the study were from one single institution and did not capture ISOC experiences across multiple PWIs in the U.S. Future research should replicate the study among ISOC at different institutions in the U.S during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study had a small sample size that may limit the significance of data analysis but within the prescribed limits for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998), however, future studies could be conducted on larger sample sizes over a more extended period to achieve an in-depth understanding of the grounded experiences of this group. The study solely looked at ISOC in the U.S. but included a more significant number of participants from Asian countries in the sample. The study did not capture differences in culture, background, language, and cultures from students from multiple countries to avoid disaggregating students by country or ethnicity (Koo, 2016). Studies considering the length of time spent studying in the U.S and its impact on the utilization of campus resources which in turn affect psychosocial factors of ISOC could be crucial to understanding among the long-term effects of COVID-19.

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