Article

International Students' Loneliness and Social Engagement: Narratives from the United States and Japan

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing global mobility in higher education, international students in the United States and Japan face persistent challenges in well-being and inclusion. This study investigates international students' experiences of loneliness and their social engagement in a comparative perspective, focusing on friendships and involvement with volunteer organizations as the participants' most prominent types of social involvement. Utilizing qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 15 international students conducted during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, this research identifies the limited friendships with domestic students and the underutilized potential of volunteer organizations as key issues. The findings suggest better coordination with external stakeholders to enhance support systems. The study concludes that universities alone cannot address these challenges and recommends fostering collaborations with community organizations to improve international students' social integration and well-being.

Keywords: international students, Japan, loneliness, social engagement, United States

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century saw a rapid increase in international enrollments in both developed and developing countries following the accelerated pace of globalization. With the exception of a temporary drop during the COVID-19 pandemic, many destination countries are seeing a record influx in a post-pandemic rebound. Although universities in developed countries such as the United States (US) and Japan have introduced support systems to respond to the needs of the growing international student populations, challenges in the areas of students' inclusion, community engagement, and security in public and private domains persist (Marginson et al., 2010; Sato et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022).

The study defines an international student as "a person who has moved across an international border away from his or her habitual place of residence for the purpose of undertaking a program of study" (IOM, 2019, p.115). Loneliness among international students has been a significant impediment to their academic success and thriving in their college life (Janta et al., 2014; Sawir et al., 2008). As newcomers and outsiders, international students lack social capital: they typically have few local friends, especially those outside their university and/or their age group. Given the link of loneliness to mental and physical diseases, addictions, delinquency, dropout, and suicidal ideation, loneliness is seen to be among the critical aspects of international student security (Levesque, 2011; Janta et al., 2014; Marginson et al., 2010). Loneliness is not merely a personal matter; it also reflects broader concerns related to students' integration into the wider community and university support services. The importance of loneliness and social isolation has been recognized by national governments as the United Kingdom and Japan appointed ministers for loneliness in 2018 and 2021, respectively, and it is viewed by international organizations as a new human security emergency (UNDP, 2022, p.124).

This paper challenges conventional views on international students' loneliness as only a part of their sociocultural adjustment (Jabalameli, 1993; Neto, 2021) and on conceptualizing universities as the sole or main support providers. It suggests making more active use of community resources, in which case volunteer organizations could become bridges between the newcomers and broader society. Although most American and Japanese universities have international student support groups, little is known about how these groups as well as volunteer organizations off campus are used to facilitate international students' adaptation, let alone how effective they are to tackle the issue of international students' loneliness.

To fill this gap, this paper proposes two key research components: 1) loneliness and 2) social engagement, which suggest two main research questions: 1) how and why do international students experience loneliness in American and Japanese universities? and 2) what is the role of social engagement with friends and voluntary organizations in alleviating international students' loneliness in their host countries? This exploratory qualitative study seeks to understand the relationship between international students' loneliness and their experiences of social engagement in the host countries. We analyze how and why key

contributing factors, such as social, cultural, and linguistic barriers, have influenced students' feelings of loneliness.

This paper focuses on friendships and volunteer organizations as the two primary forms of social engagement for most interviewees, who identified these as the most frequent and meaningful connections at this point in their lives. Friendships and romantic relationships are significant for individuals in their 20s and 30s, as they play a central role in social development and identity formation at this life stage (Qualter et al., 2015). Additionally, engagement with volunteer groups can help the international students compensate for a lack of close personal friendships, by providing a sense of community and purpose, especially in settings where forming personal friendships is challenging. These two types of engagement not only fulfill personal and social needs but also provide crucial support networks, making them focal points for understanding interviewees' social integration. This study examines both on-campus and off-campus volunteer groups; for a detailed classification of volunteer groups involved with international students, see Ivanova & Krajewski (2024). The terms "volunteer organizations" and "volunteer groups" are used throughout the text as synonyms, while "social engagement" is used as an umbrella term encompassing various types of social connections, such as friendships, family relations, involvement with volunteer organizations, and professional experiences.

The US and Japan offer contrasting contexts for understanding international students' experiences of loneliness due to cultural diversity and social structural differences. The US is a highly diverse society with a large international student population and a culture that values individualism, while Japan is more homogeneous, with fewer international students, less experience in cultural integration, and a collectivist cultural orientation. Comparing these two countries allows for an exploration of how cultural, societal, and policy differences impact students' experiences and coping mechanisms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Loneliness among International Students

This study uses the definition of loneliness as "a discrepancy between one's desired and one's actual relationships" (Jabalameli, 1993). This definition highlights the highly subjective nature of loneliness, not always connected to the frequency of interactions or the number of hours spent with others, which provides insights on the reasons why some individuals may feel lonely while others in the same situation remain content.

Multiple studies have shown that international students are at a higher risk for loneliness than their domestic peers (Janta, 2014; Jiang et al., 2018; Wawera & McCamley, 2020; Neto, 2021). Ennis (2013) found that international students are particularly vulnerable to loneliness during their initial weeks abroad. Given that loneliness has been connected to addictions, depression, anxiety, hypervigilance for social threat, cardiovascular disease, dropout, delinquency, and suicidal ideation (Hunley, 2010; Levesque, 2011; Janta, 2014; Jiang et al., 2018),

it is viewed among the critical aspects of international student security (Marginson et al., 2010), alongside discrimination, racism, exploitation at part-time jobs and unstable finances.

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated loneliness among international students (Misirlis et al., 2020; Orendain & Djalante, 2020; Chen et al., 2020), and among wider population which brought loneliness to the forefront of the public debate and policy agenda. Following the UK, Japan appointed a loneliness minister in 2021 (Kodama, 2021). The body of scholarship on loneliness has also increased; however, policies still tend to focus on local nationals while international students often remain an overlooked minority (Anandavalli et al., 2020).

Prior studies suggested several predictors of loneliness among international students, such as the personality type, education level, family environment and friend circle, marital or partnership status, financial status, language skills, perceived discrimination, and stereotypes (Janta, 2014; Imai, 2017; Slagter & Pyper, 2019; Neto, 2021). Loneliness is also tied to institutional and macro-level factors, such as the openness of host societies to migration and the degrees of discrimination, othering and racism that international students may experience inside and outside of the academic setting (Karakaşoğlu et al., 2022, Pineda et al., 2022).

Researchers have identified solutions for loneliness ranging from friendships and romantic relationships in the host country (Lin & Kingminghae, 2014; Geeraert, 2014; Lee & Goldstein, 2016), to the increased use of university services and a sense of campus belonging (Brunsting et al., 2018; Wawera & McCamley, 2020; Mohamad & Manning, 2024).

International students' experiences of loneliness and social engagement can be further understood considering acculturation and social capital theories. Berry (1997)'s acculturation theory suggests that the challenges of adapting to a new culture may lead to isolation, while Putnam (2000)'s social capital theory highlights how connections within social networks can provide essential emotional and practical support. These perspectives provide a backdrop for examining the interplay between loneliness and social engagement for students in foreign academic environments.

International Students' Social Engagement

Personal Friendships

As international students leave their families of origin and friends in their home countries and most do not have relatives in the destination country, making new connections becomes a critically important task. The existing literature on international students' friendships highlights two major tendencies: 1) the lack of friendships between international and domestic students and 2) meaningful connections within the international student community, both with co-nationals and international students from other countries.

First, there is a growing consensus among scholars that the mere presence of international students on campus does not automatically lead to

internationalization and acquiring intercultural competences (De Wit, 2011; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Brewer & Leask, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2022) and that simply bringing international and local students together in one classroom does not ensure friendship formation (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). Local students typically do not see the value for global learning in international students' presence on campus while overseas students struggle making meaningful connections with their domestic peers (Green & Baxter, 2022, p.340). Without appropriate interventions and intentionally designed programs by universities and other stakeholders, domestic and international students often end up creating two separate communities on the same campus and in the same town. This phenomenon is referred to as "worlds apart" (Montgomery, 2010), as "an international student parallel society" (Gomes, 2020), or an "international bubble" and a "local bubble", respectively (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). While international students may adopt and recreate cultural practices of the host country, such as backyard barbecue parties in Australia, they may still invite only fellow nationals, thereby remaining in the "parallel society" (Gomes, 2020).

Obstacles to local-international friendships include linguistic and cultural barriers (Li & Zizzi, 2018); the tendency of local students to have well-established friendships, resulting in their lack of interest in forming new friendships with international students; assumptions that similarity is a prerequisite for successful friendships; and a lack of spaces and structures for interaction (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017, pp. 708–711). Focusing on Chinese international students, Meng et al. (2021) distinguished several inhibiting factors for their interactions with other international and domestic students: 1) individual dimension including English competence, personality, and reluctance to leave their comfort zone; 2) institutional factors, such as workload and academic pressure; 3) cultural distance, discrimination and domestic students' low motivation to interact (Meng et al., 2021, p.1523).

Second, scholars agree that international students form the most meaningful connections with other international students, both co-nationals and those from other countries (Montgomery, 2010; Gomes, 2020). Montgomery (2010) found that international students' networks resemble a community of practice developed in response to the loss of original social capital and may prepare students for work in an international context. In line, Gomes (2020) argues that international students form a "parallel society" to feel a sense of belonging in the host country, to access emotional support and practical advice for navigating daily life. However, remaining within the "international bubble" also has drawbacks, such as a "perceived distancing from local society" and a lack of social capital, crucial for those planning to seek employment in the host country after graduation (Gomes, 2020, XIII). Scholars agree that friendships with host nationals improve international students' satisfaction and well-being, decrease their loneliness and homesickness (Neri & Ville, 2008; Vaughan et al, 2014; Hendrickson et al, 2011).

In addition, since previous research highlighted that Western-centric definitions dominate friendship studies (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017, p. 703), this study invited international students to provide their own definitions of friends and friendship.

Organizational Involvement

Previous studies found that the universities alone cannot effectively solve the problem of international students' loneliness and need to work together with city halls and community-based organizations to fill the gap (Sawir et al., 2008; Kim, 2024). Previous research particularly criticized university practices that separate international and domestic students, e.g., separate educational programs for locals and internationals (Shimauchi, 2017) or separate university orientations (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017, p.711).

International students' involvement with volunteer groups on campus is associated with a number of positive outcomes. Ethnic organizations are generally focused on meeting "social and support needs of their members" (Harvey, 1991, p.226), and students involved in them find their ways to connection and inclusion during a time where they feel marginalized (Simpson & Bista, 2021, p. 8). However, research also highlights existing problems with on-campus groups: targeting international but not local students in ethnic-based groups and superficial level of most events preventing meaningful interactions between international and domestic students (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017, p.711). Although the organizations often set out to raise cultural awareness and diffuse stereotypes, they rarely act on their stated objectives (Harvey, 1991).

Similarly, off-campus charities and community-based organizations could have a positive impact on fostering international students' sociocultural adaptation and inclusion. A study involving a pilot social integration project with international students from four Australian universities found positive effects of active involvement with volunteer organizations on international students' well-being, stress levels, feeling of isolation and negative aspects of culture shock, thus increasing their chances of academic success (Owens & Loomes, 2010). Examining interactions between international students in Japan and volunteer groups on and off campus, Ivanova (2023) found beneficial outcomes for both students and local communities. However, the impact of volunteer groups on alleviating international students' loneliness was not sufficiently explored, highlighting the need for more focused studies on this topic.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of loneliness among international students, the coping strategies they adopt, and the outcomes of their interactions with volunteer organizations on their sociocultural adjustment, feelings of belonging, and overall well-being. As the global pandemic progressed, its impact on international students' experiences of loneliness was incorporated into the study's objectives. Since loneliness is a highly subjective feeling that varies across individuals, this qualitative study explores how international students define loneliness and connectedness. Narrative inquiry serves as the conceptual framework, aligning well with the study's focus on personal stories and perceptions. This approach enhances qualitative rigor by structuring the exploration of coping mechanisms, friendships, and volunteer involvement in

relation to loneliness. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for underrepresented groups whose experiences may not be easily evaluated or heard (Creswell, 2013, p. 48).

This exploratory qualitative study draws on 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with international students, including nine in the US and six in Japan. Among the 15 interviewees, five were studying in Hawaii, four in the American Northeast, and six in Japan (Kyoto, Shiga, and Fukuoka prefectures). All participants had been in their host countries for several years, indicating they were beyond the acute stage of culture shock as described by Oberg (1960). Further details on the participants' demographics are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics (*N* = 15)

Pseudonym	Gender	Marital status	Age range	Country of origin	Degree	Major	Campus location
				United States			
Mike	M	Single	21-30	China	Undergrad	Finance	Hawaii*
Liam	M	Single	21-30	China	Master's	Business	Hawaii
Christine	F	Single	20	China	Undergrad	Tourism	Hawaii
Sunny	F	Single	31-40	China	Ph.D.	Education	Hawaii
Koharu	F	Married	30	Japan	Ph.D.	Education	Hawaii
Martina	F	Single	31-40	Colombia	Ph.D.	Humanities	Northeast
Ali	M	Married	31-40	Afghanistan	Ph.D.	Humanities	Northeast
Lynn	F	Married	31-40	China	Ph.D.	Humanities	Northeast
Chris	M	Single	31-40	South Africa	Ph.D.	Engineering	Northeast
				Japan			
Leila	F	Single	31-40	Malaysia	Ph.D.	Linguistics	Fukuoka
Luc	M	Single	21-30	France	Master's	IR**	Kyoto
Victoria	F	Single	21-30	US	Ph.D.	IR	Kyoto
Sam	M	Single	31-40	Egypt	Ph.D.	IR	Kyoto
Amir	M	Single	31-40	Afghanistan	Ph.D.	Engineering	Shiga
Emma	F	Married	31-40	Chile	Research student	Education	Kyoto

*Note. *Transfer student from the Marshall Islands, ** International Relations (IR)*

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Morgan State University on September 18, 2020, IRB #20/09-0116, and the interviews were carried out from November 2020 to June 2021. The study adopted a purposeful sampling strategy for participant recruitment (Creswell, 2013). Participants' length of stay in the host country ranged from two to fifteen years. To empower participants to share their stories, the research team designed semi-structured interview questions that aimed to balance the power asymmetry between researchers and participants and allowed participants to steer the conversation and define the key concepts in their own words. The questions focused on international students' experiences of loneliness and social

engagement, including friendships, involvement with volunteer groups, motives for participation or withdrawal, observed outcomes for their well-being, and challenges faced. After transcribing and coding the data, thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify and analyze those key themes brought up by participants. The data analysis process involved both inductive and deductive elements, as patterns and themes emerged from the data while being informed by existing theoretical frameworks (Merriam, 2009). Regarding the authors' positionality, all authors have been international students themselves. At the time of data collection, two authors were international PhD students in the US and Japan, providing an emic or insider perspective that enriched the study's analysis.

FINDINGS

Reimagining Loneliness and Coping Strategies

This section summarizes interview findings on common loneliness triggers and coping mechanisms. The triggers included: 1) traditional festivals highlighting the contrast between family reunions and solitary meals abroad (e.g., Spring Festival for Chinese students), 2) lack of peers in one's age group, particularly for older students, 3) self-isolation in a new city or country, especially for newcomers, 4) being the only international student in a program, and 5) working from home and questioning one's purpose abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, common coping strategies included reaching out to family and friends, napping, watching TV or movies, playing video games, shopping, eating snacks, and exercising (e.g., walking, hiking, tennis). Since the pandemic, some participants shifted to focusing on studies, engaging in religious practices, using social media more, and having frequent online chats with family and friends. Others joined virtual interest-based groups, got a pet, or chatted online with strangers.

The interviewees were often aware of certain coping strategies being less healthy or less safe than others: "Yeah, social media, I just talk with random people […] but I feel that's kind of unsafe because once we talk more, they just want to see me offline, I just kind of feel unsafe and uncomfortable" (Christine, US).

The interviewees also identified different facets of loneliness: 1) lack of family support; 2) language barriers; 3) difficulties making friends except with co-nationals, 4) difficulties asking for help with medical support, academics, or daily life.

Some participants distinguished loneliness from boredom, suggesting that when people feel lonely, they are often just bored (Liam, US). This interviewee proposed "finding something to do" as a solution to loneliness. Another interviewee connected emotions of loneliness and embarrassment:

> I did not know how to start my washing machine. So, I was just stuck there for like ten minutes until a girl beside me was willing to help me. I just feel like maybe it's cultural differences that make me feel lonely and embarrassed (Christine, US).

Loneliness During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, with social distancing, lockdowns, and travel restrictions, escalated loneliness for many international students. Pre-pandemic coping strategies, such as visiting family, exercising, and joining student clubs, became difficult or impossible. This study found significant variation in how the pandemic affected students, with self-perceptions playing a key role. Introverted or independent students reported enjoying the solitude, with some stating they didn't feel lonely at all ("I'm a home type. I feel like I need more time with myself" – Sam, Japan). In contrast, new students who arrived just before the pandemic faced extreme isolation, unable to meet anyone or access campus resources ("The first months were tough" – Luc, Japan).

Most participants' experiences fell between these two extremes. Many felt frustrated by restrictions on mobility, which hindered participation in university clubs, activities, and the ability to maintain or make new connections. For most, friendships and interactions decreased, while social media use increased. "The coronavirus has made things difficult from the friendship standpoint" (Emma, Japan). Some struggled with studying from home and questioned their reasons for being abroad: "I started to sense some homesickness... for two weeks, I almost couldn't do anything, because I was very homesick" (Chris, US). Those unable to enter their study destination due to travel bans felt stuck at home, separated from their campus and classmates for months or even years.

Despite the challenges, several participants still found their loneliness during the pandemic less frustrating compared to previous significant experiences of their private life, e.g., friends' departure, a conflict with a significant other or a temporary separation with their spouse. One participant characterized the second semester of his program as the loneliest time during his study as his friends graduated and returned to their home countries. The contrast for him was sharp:

> During these six months, I had a great time with them; a lot of fun, laughter, going to Osaka, Kyoto, exploring new places, nice places. And after they went back, I was kind of alone. At the beginning, this was difficult for me. When I saw some people, they usually come with a group so when I would get to that garden, to that place, to that museum, I was alone. Yeah, that gave me some kind of stress (Amir, Japan).

Eventually, he adapted to his new situation, but he admitted feeling quite depressed before it occurred. Another interviewee, Emma said that the loneliest time for her was the first two months in Japan when she was waiting for her husband to arrive:

> I think the hardest was when I first came. I had to come alone because I had to do by myself all the paperwork for him [*Emma's husband*] to come. I remember the first time I came and when I was handed the keys to my room in the university dorm, as soon as I entered, I started crying because I felt very alone. Even though I even made friends on the way

during the transfer from the airport to the university dorm, but the first time I faced loneliness, it was at that time (Emma, Japan).

In addition, changes in immigration policies during the pandemic requiring international students with F1 visa to leave the US if they did not take courses in person increased anxiety and stress for some.

There was a possibility that [University name] was going to be fully online in the fall last year. So, I realized: 'oh, that means I really might have been kicked out of the US if the [University name] decided to go online (Koharu, US).

Unexpected changes in fiscal policies contributed to the feeling of anxiety and financial burden:

And also speaking of Trump's policy, they changed the tax law […] Instead of receiving money, I had to pay a really big amount for an international student. That was more than one month of rent. Yeah, that was really shocking (Koharu, US).

Out of the 15 interviewees only two, both Chinese studying in the US, had relatives in the host country. One of them, Liam moved out of his aunt's place during the pandemic because of strict rules that she was imposing on him: "she was putting a lot of pressure on me; she wouldn't even allow me to go downstairs and take out the garbage. So, I said to myself, I'm done with it" (Liam, US). After moving out, the student settled on his own for the first time in his life, built his own support system and thus saw the pandemic as a catalyst for him to change his life.

Loneliness and Friendships

Most interviewees reported having mainly international student friends, and only three out of 15 participants stated also being close friends with domestic students. This confirms previous literature on insufficient interactions between international and local students and the fact that internationalization does not happen automatically from the presence of foreign student body on campus (De Wit, 2011; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Brewer & Leask, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2022).

The meanings of friendship largely varied among participants. Some emphasized the importance of support: "a friend is a person who can help me out when I was in difficult situations, and who can be supportive and offer advice" (Sunny, US). Others highlighted disinterestedness, absence of selfish motives as an essential characteristic of true friends: "they are like parents, they do not ask for any rewards" (Christine, US). For some, authenticity was the main quality they sought in friends: "they are people you feel you can be authentic with; you don't have to pretend" (Martina, US). Yet others believed that shared cultural and linguistic background was indispensable: "friendship of course, it needs shared background, shared language" (Sam, Japan). In particular, a shared language

appeared to be an important factor for building friendships that drew together Spanish speakers from Latin American countries, or French speakers from France and Tunisia.

Some interviewees also differentiated levels and purposes of friendships: "long-term" vs. "short-term" friends; friends from university, local ethnic community, church, or part-time jobs. An awareness of such variation could be helpful for students in managing their expectations regarding their new friendships.

In line with the tendency towards homophily (forming friendships with similar ones by ethnicity, age, and role), brought up by the previous literature (Neri & Ville, 2008, Vaughan et al., 2014), most interviewees had friends from their country or region: e.g., Asian students often found it easier to make friends with other Asians based on shared cultural values. Most also had friends of their own age; however, there were two exceptions. One participant stated having friends among ladies 20 years older than herself from the local ethnic community who supported her as "mother figures" at the initial stages of her stay in the country: "I was really depending on these 'mother figure' friends when I first came here but gradually, I got stronger and more independent" (Koharu, US). Another participant represented a case of almost extreme loneliness as he was the only international student in his institution: "I feel awkward to see there are no overseas students" (Mike, US). During his studies, Mike was living with his aging relatives helping in their family restaurant but had no friends of his age. He formed a weak connection with only one local classmate who invited him to socialize twice outside the class. Mike saw the language and cultural barriers as the main obstacles to forming ties with local students. He compensated for his lack of social life in the host country by socializing online on WeChat and Weibo for about three hours a day.

Involvement with Volunteer Organizations

Most interviewees (nine out of 15) had experiences with volunteer groups during their study period. The interviewees stated the following motives to join volunteer groups:

- academic: "I am interested in those activities that are related to my academic work but not social gatherings" – Lynn, US
- professional: "it would look good for my CV" – Martina, US
- pragmatic: "I wanted to stay in the dorm because it's convenient" – Leila, Japan (the interviewee was asked to organize weekly social events in her dormitory and although she was not enjoying this role, she saw her volunteer work as an implicit condition for staying in the dormitory)
- peer pressure: "the person who invited me is a friend, so …I cannot decline the invitation" – Sunny, US
- social networking: "I joined the club just for meeting people because in real life, I wouldn't have met them" – Chris, US
- service to others; making an impact: "I want to create a multicultural environment there" – Ali, US.

Reasons for not joining volunteer groups included the lack of time, financial considerations, and skepticism about their events. Some students refused joining social events on Zoom believing that "the online wall is too thick" (Luc, Japan), while others found one-time events organized by most on-campus groups ineffective for creating lasting connections: "If you only meet these people once and then you guys never meet again, that won't help reducing loneliness" (Sunny, US).

The differences in sociocultural and institutional contexts in the US and Japan may also impact international students' experiences, particularly regarding language and cultural attitudes. Comparing student groups in the US and Japan, American on-campus groups emphasized informal social gatherings, e.g., a coffee hour or a movie night, while their Japanese counterparts tended to focus on more formal and structured cultural activities, e.g., tea ceremonies or calligraphy workshops. In addition, several interviewees in Japan mentioned the language barrier as an obstacle for joining university clubs or off-campus groups, or one of the reasons for dropping out from a volunteer group. Another reason for quitting was feeling excluded by domestic members, e.g., not being invited to their informal gatherings (Amir, Japan).

DISCUSSION

This study examined: 1) international students' experiences of loneliness in the US and Japan, 2) social engagement in the form of personal friendships and participation in volunteer organizations, and 3) impact of the pandemic on both loneliness and social engagement. First, the study found that students' self-concept played an important role in shaping their loneliness experiences: those who saw themselves as "homebodies" or "introverts" did not experience much loneliness.

While most participants reported feeling lonelier than usual during the pandemic, several found that their pandemic experiences were less intense than earlier, personal episodes of loneliness—such as the departure of close friends or temporary separation from a spouse. This unexpected finding highlights how personal loneliness can often feel more impactful than collective experiences like the pandemic. One might wonder why earlier personal events seem to have left a stronger mark than the ongoing pandemic, which was still affecting participants at the time of the interviews.

A few explanations may account for this. First, previous experiences of loneliness may have helped participants develop coping skills that they could apply during the pandemic. Second, earlier experiences—such as waiting for a spouse, classmates moving away, or ending university friendships—were uniquely personal. Participants may have felt isolated, as they saw themselves as the only ones affected. In contrast, the pandemic created a shared experience, offering a sense of collective resilience through the "we're in this together" ethos. Finally, as an unprecedented crisis, the pandemic was beyond individual control and thus free from self-blame. By contrast, participants might have felt partly responsible for their loneliness, attributing it to personal choices, such as studying

abroad or relationship breakdown, leading to self-blame or self-criticism that intensified their loneliness.

The interviews also showed that the feeling of loneliness may intersect and be confused by some students with other emotions, such as boredom or embarrassment. This suggests that developing greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence skills may be beneficial for distinguishing between these emotions and addressing them more skillfully. This finding is in line with those previous studies regarding loneliness and emotional skills (Wols et al., 2015).

Consistent with Ennis (2013) who noted international students' vulnerability to loneliness in the first few weeks, this study found loneliness among newly arrived students more acute and severe compared to their peers who had more time to build their community and support system abroad. To counteract this initial loneliness, Ennis (2013) recommended longer and more comprehensive orientation programs. While this study supports this recommendation, it is likely that deeper layers of loneliness may appear later as students start settling down and expecting deeper, more meaningful relationships beyond superficial friendliness.

In addition, loneliness may be reflective of the attitudes of the host societies to migration and the degrees to which international students feel welcome or unwelcome (Karakaşoğlu et al., 2022, Pineda et al., 2022). The migration regimes, including legal policies, institutional mechanisms and administrative frameworks can help international students feel welcomed and a part of the host society, or become a means of othering and alienating them. Students' response to President Trump's administration policies illustrates how the macro-level changes in immigration rules and tax policies may affect students on an individual-emotional level and contribute to their loneliness through alienating and othering from the wider society.

The findings also modified the initial hypothesis. In addition to sociocultural and linguistic barriers to international students' social engagement, the study also found the influence of other factors, such as: 1) macro-level factors, e.g., immigration law, tax policies, and administrative frameworks, constituting migration regimes in the host society, and 2) individual factors, e.g., personality types (sociability, introversion, individualism) and resulting self-perceptions.

The study also examined how different approaches to socialization in the US and Japan can either alleviate or exacerbate loneliness among international students. For instance, the emphasis on informal social gatherings among the US volunteer groups may pose challenges for introverted students, while Japan's more formalized social structures may create barriers for those struggling with language and cultural norms or who value spontaneity and authenticity in interactions. Additionally, the individualistic nature of American society may leave international students feeling unsupported if they do not actively seek out social connections. In contrast, Japanese collectivism might generate unspoken expectations for international students to conform to group dynamics, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion.

The study's limitations include its small sample size, potential language barriers, and researcher bias. The relatively small sample size may limit the depth

of insights that could have been gained with a larger sample. Additionally, most students were not interviewed in their first language, which may have affected the depth or accuracy of their responses. Finally, the research team shares a background as international students, which could introduce researcher bias and shape the interpretation of the findings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this exploratory study highlighted the relationship between personal friendships, volunteer organization involvement, and loneliness among international students, using the US and Japan as contrasting case studies, and offered new insights into the factors influencing students' social well-being in these diverse contexts. The findings have shown that international students' experience of loneliness is highly diverse and subjective, and the universities need to accommodate for variation in students' needs and expectations depending on the time of their arrival in the host country, their age, personality type, marital/relationship status, their support network. Since the universities cannot solve this problem alone, effective coordination with other stakeholders, including volunteer organizations, local communities, and governments, seems key to improving international students' social engagement on campus and beyond.

In line with the previous studies, few international students had friends among domestic students. Commonly, only international students are encouraged to adapt and take initiative in engaging with their domestic peers, while no changes on behalf of local students or communities are usually expected. Instead, we suggest a two-way model, in which universities and communities should create conditions for increased interaction between international students and other residents, including domestic students, and help the latter to see value in interacting with their international peers. The universities and local governments could cooperate in providing basic intercultural training to staff and volunteers of community-based organizations to minimize and effectively mitigate cross-cultural misunderstandings. Such training could be part of broader campaigns to educate the public about the advantages of migration for local communities and positive aspects of cultural diversity.

The findings confirm that volunteer groups have potential for improving international students' social engagement; however, this potential remains under-exploited in both US and Japan. It can also be inferred from the interviews that offering event series or long-term programs would be more beneficial than one-time events to allow participants to meet again and strengthen their ties. To address some concerns about participation, volunteer groups should strive to offer flexible schedule, reduce membership fees for international student members, and prevent all forms of discrimination against international students. The findings of this study remain highly relevant in today's post-COVID higher education landscape, where social isolation, re-entry anxieties, and increased reliance on hybrid learning environments have reshaped international students' experiences.

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