The Social and Emotional Challenges for International Students and the Coping Mechanisms Used

Raed I. Seraj

University of South Florida

IDH 4200

Barbara Cruz

December 8, 2020

The Social and Emotional Challenges for International Students and the Coping

Mechanisms Used

International students make up a large part of the community at many colleges across the US. The journey for them is not quite the same as other students and they face quite a lot of challenges during their transition away from home into a new culture and society. Being so far away from home, students face issues like culture shock, language barrier, financial barrier, academic difficulty and many more. These can then cause emotional responses like isolation, homesickness, depression, stress etc. In my research, I analyze two models of coping mechanisms international students use, called problem-based coping and emotion-based coping. I analyze the survey results conducted by some researchers in 2020 and make my own survey to produce results from international students in my social circle. This provides insight into how frequently students use these mechanism and which ones they are more likely to use. Lastly, I discuss how I will be connecting my research work to my major, Computer Engineering.

Rationale

This is a personal topic as I am an international student myself. I became sick due to stress when I first arrived in the US and did not understand how to process the various emotions I was going through. I felt happy because I finally got freedom and live my dreams of studying abroad, I was sad because I left home and my parents, I was excited for what the future held but nervous of the uncertainty at the same time. I did not know if others were feeling the same and could not find many ways to relate/communicate this to others. This built a lot of stress in me and eventually I became really sick. I thought this was a great topic to study because I wanted to know the experience of other international students. By understanding how other international students cope with stress and by sharing my work, I can help others relate and hopefully help them handle the

stress better. I feel international students form a very important part of a university's community but are unfortunately underrepresented. As such, it can sometimes be very difficult for a struggling student to prioritize their mental health and find good support. Hence, this topic is very much worth studying.

Challenges for international students

When international students first arrive in a host country, they face numerous challenges. Most of the students are young adults or growing teens who may have limited experience with living alone, providing for themselves, handling pressure situations, dealing with numerous responsibilities, navigating emergencies etc. Pair that with the unfamiliarity of a new culture, language, social construct and many other factors and things can quickly become very overwhelming. Due to these reasons, international students face numerous challenges in their initial years of living abroad. A study on international students by Murat Tas in 2013 discusses these challenges in details (Tas, 2013). The challenges in this study can be summarized into the following:

- Culture Shock- International students experience social and cultural barriers like unfamiliarity with the host culture, difficulties in adapting to cultural practices, difficulty understanding interpersonal relationships etc. (Krsmanovic, 2020).

- Language barrier- Some students are unable to communicate/express thoughts very well with peers. This poses a barrier in them being able to form meaningful connections with likeminded individuals.

- Financial barrier- Some students are very inexperienced and lack proper knowledge on dealing with financials. There are many barriers which prevent them from taking out loans/budget properly.

- Academic difficulty- Students are unable to adjust to new academic expectations, work in a new environment and navigate their way around a different work culture.

Effects on international students

The challenges mentioned can lead to some negative consequences on the students. The barriers can cause students to struggle to form social connections and feel validated. In fact, the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication reports that 40% of international students had no close friends amongst their American classmates (Quartz, 2012). Hence Some of the possible effects on students include:

- Isolation/ Loneliness

- Homesickness

- Depression- A study in 2011 actually showed that depression is negatively correlated with both social support and English proficiency (Sumer et al., 2011). This means that the greater a student's English-speaking skills, the more the person is able to communicate with others and socialize and the less likely he/she is to be depressed. Hence, one of the challenges discussed above is directly linked to this effect.

- Stress

- Poor grades

Coping Mechanisms

Various psychological studies tell us that human beings process emotions differently. No two person ever processes the same situation in the same way. As such, the emotional journey for every international student is different. While almost everyone goes through the above listed negative emotions at some point or the other, some people recover faster than others. However, the use of coping mechanism to deal with negative emotions remains the same across students. A

study on students in Australia by Dr. Yue and Dr. Le showed two possible models of coping mechanism that international students are likely to use: problem-based coping mechanism and emotion-based coping mechanism (Yue, Le, 2013).

Problem-based coping mechanisms

This type of coping is aimed at solving or doing something to alter the source of the stress. Hence, students are more likely to engage in such coping strategies if they actively try to sort out their stressors. Some of the mechanisms involved in this type of coping include:

- Planning- thinking/planning to deal with a stressor.

- Active coping- actively taking action to remove a stressor.

- Suppression- avoiding other things to remove a stressor.

- Restraint- waiting for an appropriate time to remove stressor.

- Seeking social support- asking help from other to remove stressor (Yue, Le, 2013).

Emotion-based coping mechanisms

This type of coping is aimed to reduce or manage the emotional distress related to the situation. So, if someone is actively trying to control their emotions and overcome a stressful situation, they would be using emotion-based coping mechanisms. Some of the mechanisms involved here include:

- Seeking social support- getting emotional support from others

- Venting of emotions- expressing distressed feelings

- Behavioral disengagement- reducing effort to deal with stressor

- Mental disengagement- when the situation prevents behavioral disengagement

- Denial- denying reality to relieve stress temporarily (Yue, Le, 2013).

Although there are many other different types of mechanism, these are the most common ones. It is important to notice that not all the mechanisms are positive, and some are very negative ways of dealing with situations. When a person is going through a difficult time, it is very difficult to realize exactly what type of mechanism one is using because we do not usually think about this when we are depressed/stressed. As such, it is important to know of these mechanisms so we can recognize and correct them or act on them in time.

Research

In the research by Dr. Yue and Dr. Le, a study was conducted on 314 international students to see what kind of coping mechanisms they were likely to use. This was done by creating a survey which included questions corresponding to each of the coping mechanism discussed above. For example, one of the questions in the survey asked if students "try to vent their feeling" and the options ranged from "never" to "very often". If a student was to choose "very often" it meant they were using an emotion-based coping mechanism. A range of similar questions were asked in the survey and the results were analyzed to see what type of coping mechanism students used.

As discussed before, one of the goals of this research was to know how other students processed emotions when they first arrived at their host country. I have many international students among my friend circle, and I thought I could ask them about their experiences and gather data. So, I designed a survey containing a total of six questions similar to the ones in the referenced research and received a total of 35 responses in return.

Survey Responses

For the first question, I asked the participants " What was one emotion you felt overwhelmingly when you first arrived in the host country?". The responses can be seen below in Figure 1.

What was one emotion you felt overwhelmingly when you first arrived in the host country?
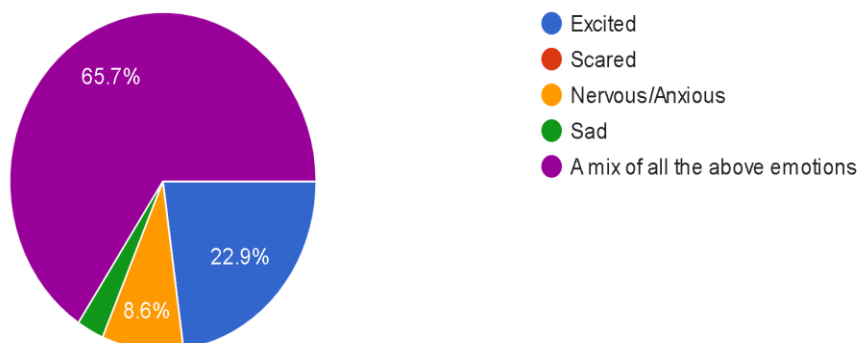35 responses

Figure 1: Response for question 1.

In the responses, we can see most of them (65.7%) responded that they felt a mix of emotions. This means most students were excited, scared, nervous, anxious and sad all at the same time. This was very true for me as well. In fact, the article "The Five Stages of Studying abroad" explains this very well and would characterize such feelings as going through the first phase, "excitement and optimization", and the second phase ,"disorientation" (Top Universities, 2016). Hence, this process is very natural, and most students are likely to feel similar emotions when initially starting their journey as an international student.

In my second question, I aimed to understand some of the negative effects on international students from facing the mentioned challenges. So, I asked the participants if they had faced some of these during their time. The responses can be seen in figure 2 below.

Are these some of the things you experienced while living abroad? Check all that apply.
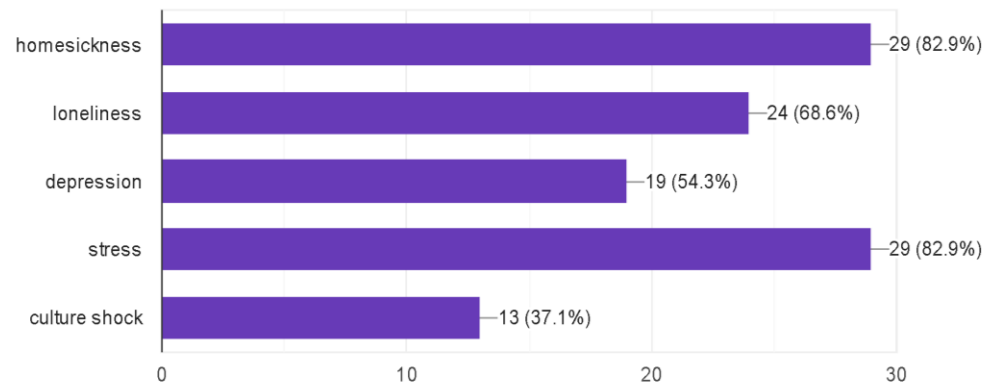35 responses

Figure 2: Response for question 2.

In the results, it can be seen that 82.9% experienced homesickness, 68.6% responded loneliness, 54.3% faced depression, 82.9% suffered from stress and 37.1% experienced culture shock. Numerous studies have showed that depression is much more common among international students compared to native students. One such study released by Yale University in 2013 showed 45 percent of the Chinese international students on its campus reported symptoms of depression (Han et al., 2013). In comparison, about 14.2 percent of general college students in America report symptoms of depression according to National College Health Association (CGTN America, 2018) .

For my third question, I asked the participants to rate how challenging it was for them to adapt socially/culturally to the host country's environment. The responses are shown in Figure 3 below.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how challenging was it to adapt socially/culturally to the host country's environment?
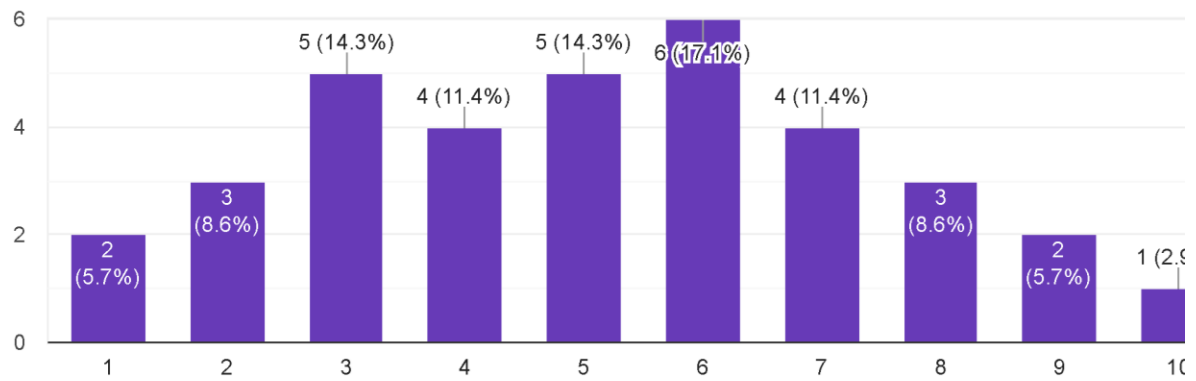
35 responses

Figure 3: Response for question 3.

For the fourth question, I asked the participants how often they would make plans to solve their problems. In other words, I wanted to find how likely they were to use problem-based coping mechanisms. The responses are shown in figure 4 below.

How often would you make plans to solve your problem?
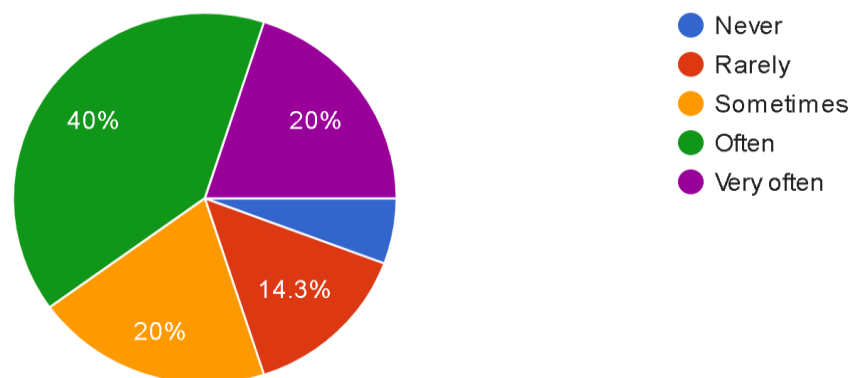
35 responses

Figure 4: Response for question 4.

For the fifth question, I asked participants how often they would try to vent their feelings to overcome stress. This was to gauge how often participants would rely on emotion-based coping mechanisms to relieve themselves of stress. However, in this case, it is important to note that venting can have both long-term and short-term pros and cons. For example, venting can provide instant relief in a stressful situation but in the long run this may cause more damage as your anger and stress can slowly build up (Entrepreneur, 2019). The responses for the question are shown below in figure 5.
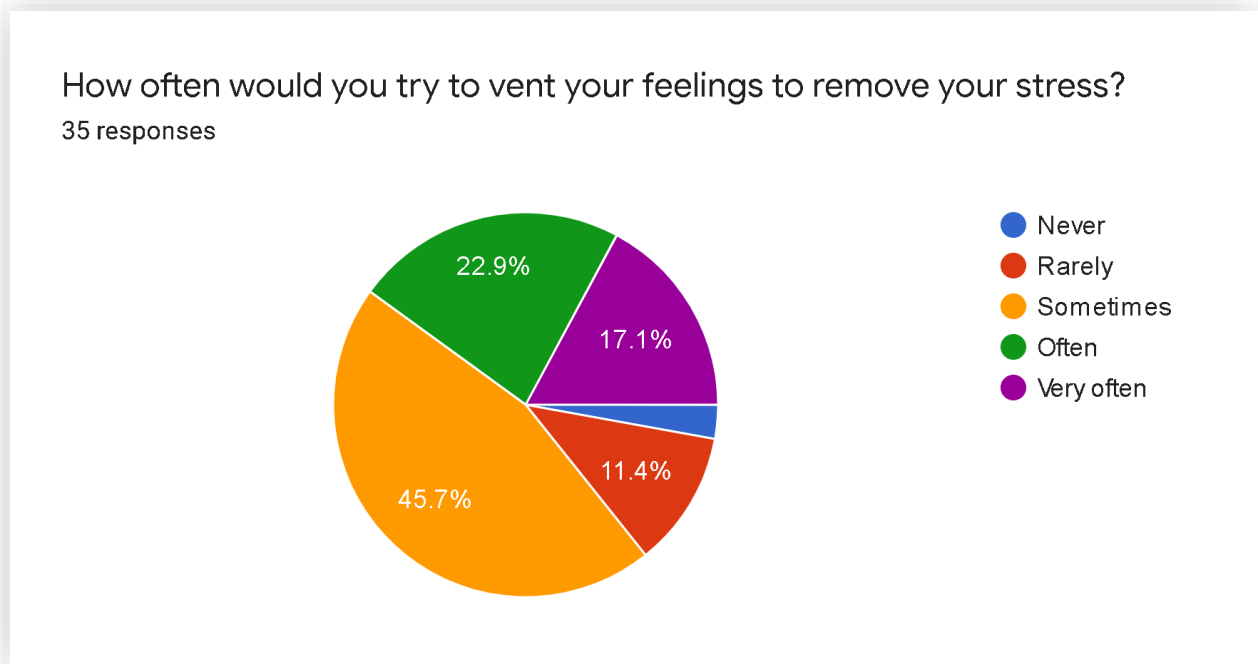

Figure 5: response for question 5.

For the last question, I asked how participants were more likely to overcome stress, either by using a problem-based mechanism or emotion-based mechanism. The responses for the question are shown below in figure 6.

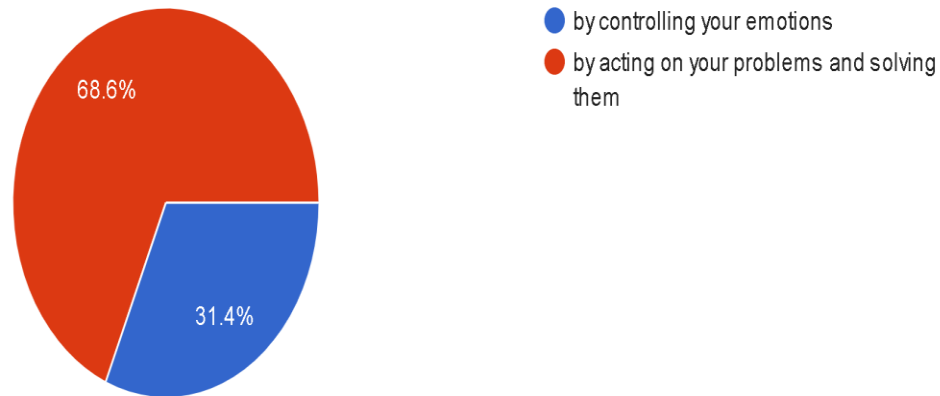How are you more likely to overcome stress?

35 responses

Figure 6: Response for question 6.

Analysis of results

Figure 6 shows students are more likely to use problem-based strategies (68.6%)compared to emotion-based ones (31.4%). Figure 4 shows that the dominant response was that students used problem-based coping mechanisms like planning from often to very often levels 60% of the times. For emotion-based mechanisms, around 57.1% responded they used venting to relieve stress rarely to sometimes (Figure 5). In the referenced research by Dr. Yue and Dr. Le, the results had shown that a large percentage of students chose to use problem focused strategies from often to very often (~48%). In their study, for emotion-based strategies, most students chose to use these from rarely to sometimes (~57%) (Yue,Le, 2013). Hence, my survey results have shown results that have high correlation to the study in 2013 but is limited by the smaller sample space.

Connecting research work to major

As a computer engineering major and international student who is very passionate about the topic presented, I thought of many ways to integrate the topic into my major. Depression and

mental health issues are very prevalent among engineering students and my work could potentially help them understand their feeling . As such, I thought of many ways to distribute my work and ended up deciding to build a website to showcase it. This is because people are more likely to read a webpage compared to a simple document. Webpages tend to be more interactive and provide greater viewing experience in general. Also, if I am building a website compared to writing in a document, I am more likely to keep it updated even after this course ends which means I can even consider this as a project in the future. The link to the developed webpage is: https://raed56.github.io/honors-project/

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, one of the limitations in my research was the small sample space of 35 participants which could have produced results that are less reliable. This is around ten times smaller than the referenced research by Dr. Yu and Dr. Le which had 314 participants (Yu, Le,2013). However, even with the smaller sample space, my results showed considerable correlation to the referenced research.

The next limitation is about the web page. Initially, I wanted the page to be interactive in that students would be able to comment about their experiences as an international student and possibly share their feelings so that there would be a community that can support each other in the website itself. However, creating such a website would require the incorporation of database knowledge and other key concepts which I, as a sophomore, have not yet mastered. As such, I am still considering expanding this as a personal project for the future once I develop the required skill set.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe the topic of mental health among international students is not discussed enough and my work should provide a basic understanding of how students are likely to react and process emotions at least in their early stages of transitioning into studying abroad. I did achieve both goals of my research which were to understand how other students behave during their first phase of studying abroad and the coping mechanism they may use. My results also showed good correlation with a peer-reviewed, more reliable research (Yue,Le, 213). Lastly, I connected my work to my major by building a website which should be more accessible to other students and will preserve my work until I gain the appropriate skill sets to develop this further.

References

1. Bustamante, J. (2020, November 14). *International Student Population & Enrollment Statistics [2020]*. https://educationdata.org/international-student-enrollment-statistics.

2. Tas, M. (2013). International Students: Challenges of Adjustment to University Life in the U.S. International Journal of Education, 5(3), 1. https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v5i3.3481

3. Krsmanovic, M. (2020). The Acculturation Strategies Adopted by International First-Year Undergraduate Students in the United States. Journal of International Students, 10(4). https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i4.1160 ojed.org/jis

4. Niekerk, A. van. 40% of foreign students in the US have no close friends on campus: The culture shock of loneliness. Quartz. https://qz.com/31376/40-of-foreign-students-in-the-us-have-no-close-friends-on-campus-the-culture-shock-of-loneliness/.

5. Sümer, S., Poyrazli, S., & Grahame, K. (2011, December 23). Predictors of Depression and Anxiety Among International Students. Wiley Online Library. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00531.x.

6. Yue, Y., & Lê, Q. (2013). Coping Strategies Adopted by International Students in an Australian Tertiary Context. The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies, 7(2), 25–39. https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-011x/cgp/v07i02/53235

7. Rigano, G. (2016, April 11). The Five Stages of Studying Abroad. Top Universities. https://www.topuniversities.com/blog/five-stages-studying-abroad.

8. Han, X., Han, X., Luo, Q., & Jacobs, S. (2013). Report of a Mental Health Survey Among Chinese International Students at Yale University. Journal of American College Health. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2012.738267

9. Fu, Z. (2018, June 15). International students face unique mental health stresses. CGTN America. https://america.cgtn.com/2018/06/14/international-students-face-unique-mental-health-stresses.

10. Greiner, N. (2019, August 6). Should You or Should You Not Vent About Your Stress? Entrepreneur. https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/335696.