

AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONAL WELL-BEING OF AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

International students are susceptible to threats to their well-being, as their immigrant status in host societies exposes them to unique challenges such as language difficulties, cultural differences, social isolation, and discrimination (to list a few). Relationships are an important component of individuals' well-being that can mitigate these challenges. Hence, this study aimed to explore the experiences of relational well-being of African international students at a South African university. The study adopted a qualitative design wherein semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from 16 participants (*mean age = 24; females = 5; males = 11*). Using thematic analysis, we found that African international students have reciprocal positive relationships with local and other immigrant students, and these contribute to well-being outcomes in the social, psychological, and educational domains of life. In addition, the prevailing institutional culture and the availability of spaces that provide opportunities for interaction are important determinants of relational experiences in the university campus space. It is recommended that student affairs departments create spaces in which African international students could further engage and interact with a diverse group of students to enhance their relational well-being.

Keywords: relationships, African international students, relational well-being, migration, higher education institutions

INTRODUCTION

The migration of students to other countries has increased rapidly over the years and is emerging as one of the leading reasons for individuals' migration. Globally, this figure grows between 7 per cent and 10 per cent annually (Riano and Piguet 2016, 1; University of Oxford 2015, 5). International students are those who have crossed a national border for educational purposes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2013, 58). The presence of international students increases the diversity of the populations of host societies and is perceived to be an indicator of prestige in academic institutions (Baklashova and Kazakov 2016, 1822). It also significantly contributes to national economies and provides host nations with skilled labour upon graduation (Grebennikov et al. 2016, 2431; Riano and Piguet 2016, 1). Adediran and Coetzee (2019, 1–2) highlight international students' contribution to the South African economy and argue that this calls for reciprocal quality service by South African higher education institutions. Put simply, students' experiences in the host society must reflect the social and economic benefits associated with their presence in host institutions and societies. The quality of the pedagogical space in terms of learning materials, content, interactions, and accessibility (Frimpong 2021, 171; OECD 2010, 5) is critical to the authenticity of students' education. What is taught and the quality of such education will determine the quality of the students produced, as well as the quality of employees they will be in their respective industries. Thus, students should receive the best quality educational and social experiences in exchange for their economic investment (Wearing et al. 2015, 72).

According to Ng et al. (2018, 170), international students could be exposed to multiple threats to their well-being in host societies, and this might affect their overall educational experience. Such threats include loneliness, language difficulties, and xenophobia, which have been reported in studies both old and new (Mudhovozi 2011, 294; Wawera and McCamley 2020, 1262). The challenges are a product of (or can be exacerbated by) difficulties in creating new relationships in host societies (Wawera and McCamley 2020, 1268). Given the foreign status of international students, most research focuses on the challenges they experience in host countries and host institutions. Considering the contributions of international students to their host societies, more could be done to gain an in-depth understanding of their relational experiences and to improve their well-being in host societies. Despite what is known about the challenges they encounter, there is little research that focuses on their relational well-being, especially in the African and South African contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relational well-being

Well-being ensues “when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge” (Dodge et al. 2012, 230). It is commonly divided into two subtypes, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. According to Waterman (2007, 612), hedonic well-being is characterised by seeking to achieve the goal of happiness. In this instance, happiness refers to a situation where physical and emotional-cognitive pleasures are maximised (Huta and Ryan 2010, 736; Waterman 2007, 612). Eudaimonia, however, conceptualises well-being as an ongoing and lifelong process of realising one’s full potential (Deci and Ryan 2008, 2).

The study reported on here adopted a eudaimonic view of well-being and considered the fact that academic and social challenges are inevitable in the lives of students, especially African international students. Challenges are seen as inherent in eudaimonia (Waterman 2007, 612), as it is through overcoming or growing through their challenges that individuals can realise their full potential and “flourish”. Huta and Ryan (2010, 740) suggest that eudaimonic well-being is fostered by engaging in activities that are personally significant or that may be important outside of the self, and they argue that there is personal significance in pursuing an academic degree or seeking social interactions. Ryff (2017, 162) lists the main elements that can contribute to experiencing eudaimonic well-being as autonomy; environmental mastery; positive relations with others; personal growth; purpose in life; self-acceptance. This study focused on the “positive relations with others” component of eudaimonic well-being as a way of conceptualising relational well-being.

Positive relations or relational well-being exists where individuals experience or exhibit feelings of affection, empathy, and love in relationships (Ryff 2017, 162). In addition, being able to identify with other people and supporting others are important markers of positive relations (Ryff 2017, 162). Having positive relationships in school was found to increase the likelihood of immigrant students thriving in their academic pursuits and post-school occupational endeavours (DeAngelo 2014, 60; Picton, Kahu, and Nelson 2017; Wayt 2012, 10). In exploring African international students’ relational experiences, this conceptualisation of relationships was used as a guide towards making sense of the students’ experiences.

An African perspective

Given that this study specifically sought to understand the relational experiences of *African* international students, African theoretical perspectives of relational well-being should be

considered in making sense of their experiences. African worldviews are generally distinguished by the importance they place on interconnectedness, relationships, and spirituality (Owusu-Ansah and Mji 2013, 2; Wissing, Schutte, and Wilson-Fadiji 2019, 3; Wissing et al. 2020, 1). Nwoye (2017, 42) discusses in detail how relationships are conceptualised in the African worldview, with a particular focus on the *ubuntu* philosophy that is derived from the Nguni proverb “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which is translated as “a person is a person through other persons”. Although the noun “*ubuntu*” is often associated with the South African Zulu language, the philosophy is embraced in most African countries in the sub-Saharan region using different nouns. However, the most commonly used nouns in most countries are “*ubuntu*” and “*maaya*” (Mugumbate and Chereni 2019, 28).

In his paper, Nwoye (2017, 48) illustrated how *ubuntu* and its associated emphasis on relational interconnectedness function as the foundation upon which the African child is reared and through which most African individuals make sense of the world and their own well-being. He further argued that *ubuntu* is “a powerful motivational force” and individuals consider it “beneficial to submit to the life of reciprocity and mutuality ... investing, by so doing, in the reciprocal support of others in times of need” (Nwoye 2017, 53). The significance placed on relationships and interconnectedness means that much of the African individual’s well-being stems from their relationships and being in harmony with other people (Owusu-Ansah and Mji 2013, 2; Wissing et al. 2020, 1). Evidence of this is seen in studies conducted in South Africa and Ghana where participants described their well-being as being embedded in their relationships with others (Owusu-Ansah and Mji 2013, 2; Wilson, Wissing, and Schutte 2018, 1380; Wissing et al. 2020, 1).

Experiences of international students in South Africa

South Africa has seen substantial increases in international students as part of the growing trend of international educational migration (Pineteh and Mulu 2016, 383). International students constitute approximately 17 per cent of the student population at South African private and public higher education institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2018). Unlike any other country, South Africa has a very high proportion of *African* international students in a context where its citizens are very xenophobic towards immigrants from other African countries (Lee and Schoole 2019, 5). For example, a recent study that investigated South Africans’ attitudes towards immigrants between 2008 and 2016 determined that xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants are homogenous across the different racial categories – Black, Coloured, and White (Dube 2019, 197). As such, international students’ experiences in the country are likely to be shaped by natives’ attitudes towards them.

International students' psychological well-being and relational experiences in South Africa mirror those observed internationally. Homesickness (Chinyamurindi 2018, 219), loneliness and stress (Pineteh and Mulu 2016, 397) are common psychological states experienced by international students. The main triggers of these states are similar to those observed in other countries; that is, language difficulties, cultural differences and social isolation (Pineteh and Mulu 2016, 397; Ratshilaya 2017, 73). In South Africa, language issues were also found to cause low self-esteem among international students, as they act as a hindrance in relating with others socially and academically (Pineteh and Mulu 2016, 392; Ratshilaya 2017, 63). In fact, language limitations may affect how relational patterns and experiences manifest between local and international students.

Much like students in other countries, international students in South Africa relate primarily with other international students (Herman and Kombe 2019, 514). Although language and cultural differences play a role in these relational patterns, xenophobia is a significant contributor (Chinyamurindi 2018, 216; Herman and Kombe 2019, 517). Xenophobia and other types of discrimination are common in the broader international student experience (Wu, Garza, and Guzman 2015, 3). Unfortunately, these issues are particularly salient within the South African context, as the country is known for its negative attitude towards immigrants. This was evident from the 2008 and 2015 attacks (Chinomona and Maziriri 2015, 20; Kayitesi and Mwaba 2014, 1128), and more recently, the heinous crimes committed against African migrants in 2019.

As such, international students are often aware of the xenophobic climate before coming to South Africa (Herman and Kombe 2019, 518). This, together with experiencing and/or witnessing xenophobically motivated events of discrimination, causes them to develop negative attitudes towards locals (Chinyamurindi 2018, 216). Consequently, international students may avoid locals in favour of developing meaningful relationships with other international students (Chinyamurindi 2018, 216; Herman and Kombe 2019, 514). This may have negative consequences for international students' social integration, and by extension, their general well-being (Pineteh and Mulu 2016, 398). They may not reap the benefits of building close relations with natives, such as easier adaptation to local languages and cultures, which are known challenges to international students in South Africa.

Given the propensity for discrimination against migrants in South Africa, research among international students focuses strongly on adjustment and adaptation problems (Mokgwasi 2017; Mudhovozi 2011). The little that is known about their psychological well-being is derived from the challenge-focused studies, which did not explore their well-being experiences in depth. Since it was not the focus of these studies, even less is known about students' relational

well-being and precisely the relationships that contribute positively to their well-being. The present study attempted to remedy the lack of attention given to the relational well-being of international students. It focused less on the challenges and adopted a more positive approach towards understanding how international students' relationships might help foster or maintain their well-being in the face of social and academic challenges. Therefore, the objectives of the research in hand were to:

- explore the relational experiences of African international students at a South African university; and
- examine relationships that contribute to the well-being of African international students.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research study (reference: HUM037/1120) was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria before any data collection took place. Additionally, the Division for International Cooperation at the university gave permission for research to be conducted with international students. Participants received an information sheet that provided in-depth information about the study and what participation would involve. They subsequently gave written consent by completing the form that they were furnished with upon recruitment into the study.

To ensure confidentiality, only the researchers involved in the study had access to participants' private information. This information was stored on password-protected laptops, and any shared databases (such as Google Drive shared folders) restricted access to the researchers involved in this study. Additionally, pseudonyms were employed in reporting research results so as to maintain participants' anonymity.

SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

Maximum variation purposive sampling and snowballing were used to recruit potential participants through social media and in-person engagements. The researcher approached various international student organisations affiliated with the university that had a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The administrators of the social media accounts would then advertise the study on the respective platforms upon the researcher's request or would refer interested participants to the researcher.

In addition to recruitment through social media, potential participants were randomly approached – in person – at student hotspots around the university, such as at student residences, in restaurants, and in the local mall. Participant recruitment rarely took place on the university

campus due to the COVID-19 restrictions that limited access to the university. The snowballing technique was used by asking students who had already agreed to participate to refer any of their friends or acquaintances who might also be interested in participating.

Ultimately, the sample consisted of 16 students from a variety of African countries, disciplines, and levels of study. Excluding one participant who did not supply their age, the mean age for this study's sample was 24 years. Of the 16 participants, five were female and 11 were male, while the majority (nine) were undergraduate students and only seven were postgraduate students. Furthermore, most (five) of the African international students pursuing postgraduate degrees were enrolled at Master's level. Thirteen of the students were from SADC countries (i.e., Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Eswatini) and only three were from countries outside of the SADC region – specifically, Nigeria and Kenya.

PROCEDURE

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Depending on the participant's preference, interviews were conducted face to face, through a Zoom meeting, or over the phone using the "CallApp: Caller ID, Call Blocker & Call Recorder" app. Interviews lasted for 45 minutes on average, and the face-to-face interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. Zoom interviews and phone-call interviews were recorded using the relevant functionalities within the Zoom app and the Call Recording app respectively. Consent to record the interview was always obtained before recording the face-to-face or Zoom interviews, and participants were informed that the phone call was being recorded before an interview over the phone was commenced. Virtual platforms were predominantly used to conduct interviews as stringent social restrictions still applied at the time of data collection and overall anxiety and apprehension reigned in the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, participants often preferred to conduct interviews on a virtual platform.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-step thematic analysis process, which involves familiarising oneself with and immersing oneself in the data by reading interview transcripts multiple times prior to any coding or analysis. As the researchers transcribed almost half of the interview transcripts, their repeated listening to interview audios during the transcription process ensured their familiarity with the data. Next, they generated codes from the data, most of which were used to formulate themes and subthemes. The data analysis software Atlas.ti was used for coding and organising the codes into themes. The themes and subthemes originating from the codes were given names and they

were constantly reviewed before eventual finalisation. In the data excerpts, “UG” denotes undergraduate student, “PG” denotes postgraduate student, and the number in parentheses next to a participant’s quote (e.g., “21”) indicates the participant’s age.

The trustworthiness of a study can be determined through transferability, dependability and confirmability (Willig 2013, 493). To ensure transferability and dependability, a thick description of the research process and methodology was used. The researchers in the study co-coded the data; that is, they coded the same interview transcripts separately to ensure that observations and conclusions reached by one researcher were noted or confirmed by other researchers, thereby ensuring confirmability. Moreover, the study’s findings were compared with those of studies previously conducted on similar topics so as to ensure confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To provide a detailed account of the African international students’ experiences, the findings were classified under three main themes. The themes, accompanied by subthemes as outlined in Table 1, are discussed next.

Table 1: Theme outline

Themes	Subthemes
1. Conducive Spaces for Relationship Formation	A. Classrooms as a positive relational space B. Organised activities and other spaces conducive to relationship formation C. The university as a welcoming environment
2. African International Students’ Interactional Styles in Forming Relationships	
3. Relationships and Well-Being	A. Academic relationships B. The value of friends in times of need C. “No one is an island”

Theme 1: Conducive spaces for relationship formation

This theme addresses how African international students develop relationships during their time at university. It comprises three subthemes. The first (1A) discusses the formation of relationships in classrooms specifically, while the second (1B) looks into how other spaces such as university residences and organised group activities facilitate relationship development. The third subtheme (1C), “the university as a welcoming environment”, explores how the social climate at the university may have an influence on how other spaces in the university are experienced. Theme 1 provides an overall understanding of how space shapes African international students’ relational experiences on campus.

Subtheme 1A: Classrooms as a positive relational space

Most of the African international students’ relationships began in the classroom. These

classroom relations also typically made up the students' main social circle as is evident from the (verbatim) quotes below:

Tafadzwa: "Most of the friends I've made were in classes, you just get into class then you just sit in the right place then there's other people just up here you're like 'Wow this looks like cool company' then that's how I became friends with most of the friends that I have at UP." (Zimbabwe, 21, Male, UG).

Evans: "It'll be mostly my classmates because ... the thing which takes up most of my time is school so when basically in that school environment you have to talk to people who are within that same environment so, ja basically ... I spend most of the time talking to my, to my classmates." (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG).

Evans further states that making friends in class is "straightforward" because "you already have like a common base with ... other people so it's easy to relate". The African international students in this study reflected on how the frequency of contact facilitated relationship development. They saw the classroom as a positive relational space engendered by shared interest and a mutual need for communication, due to the amount of time that they shared this space. Bennet, Volet, and Fozdar (2013, 548) confirmed these observations, as they found that the majority of students' friendship networks in their study revolved around people they met in class due to shared academic interests, shared curriculum content, and working together in class projects. Rienties and Nolan (2014, 178) also note that students are more successful at developing relationships in class, due to repeated contact.

In South Africa, Ratshilaya (2017, 59) found that international students find it easier to make friends when they try to communicate and make friends in class, and then take those friendships outside of class. As immigrants in a new country, classrooms are the spaces where most academic activities occur from the start of their studies. They provide numerous opportunities to interact with others, while shared courses and modules may serve as easy "material" for conversation stimulation.

Subtheme 1B: Organised activities and other spaces conducive to relationship formation

Apart from intellectually engaging spaces where students might feel pressured to interact because of a mutual need for communication, other forms of interaction tend to occur in alternative, less coercive spaces such as residential spaces, day houses, and student societies. The participants explained as follows:

Anesu: "I think the thing that allowed me to probably start knowing a lot more people was staying

at an off-campus residence. And obviously like when you're cooking in public kitchens then you start to know people you know, greet people and then turns out that there's other people who've known people that you know that are probably doing the same degree as you and then that's how you start to form friendships." (Zimbabwe, 19, Female, UG).

Angela: "More foreigners were in the societies, in the day houses because we were all trying to find people they can relate to, trying to find friends in those societies." (Zambia, 21, Female, UG).

African international students' relationships may also develop outside of class in other "organisational" spaces. That is, spaces where students come together and share a common interest, such as engaging in sports with a fellow group of students, being funded by the same bursary, or living in the same residence/affiliated with the same day house. These spaces provide opportunities for African international students to meet other students, some of whom they might become close with over time. This finding is consistent with other literature which found that international students who lived on campus reported higher involvement levels in academic, religious, and internationally oriented organisations (Naik, Wawrzynski, and Brown 2017, 997; Wawera and McCamley 2020, 1269). Mudhovozi (2011, 295) found that international students in South Africa are intentional in their efforts to develop relationships, as they understand that relationships are important sources of psychological and social support. When their psychological and social well-being needs have been catered to, they are better able to cope with academic pressures (Mudhovozi 2011, 295), thus increasing their chances of success in this domain.

Overall, the subthemes presented thus far highlight the role of "space" as an avenue through which opportunities can be created for interaction, a component rarely touched on in the relational experiences of international students in previous studies. These findings further indicate that the "student experience" is "a co-construct between human actors and the space within which they act and relate" (Tumubweinee and Luescher 2019, 2). In addition, the findings demonstrate the diversity of spaces that can be conducive to relationship formation, both in formal and informal settings. Thus, "space" emerges as an important element in relationship formation.

Subtheme 1C: The university as a welcoming environment

The overarching "reason" that might dictate the trends and behaviours noted in the previous subthemes is the institutional atmosphere or culture. African international students described the university environment as comfortable and relaxed, with plenty of social events and support structures in place to assist with their transition into the university space. When asked to reflect on their overall experience at the university, the African international students said the

following:

Evans: “Life as an international African student is similar if not identical to life as a local student. There are plenty of support structures in place to make international students accustomed to their new surroundings ... I’ve met new people, made new friends, the lecturers have been friendly, I mean it has been a good learning experience like, I don’t look back on the past three years and you know, reflect badly on everything, it’s been fine, it’s been okay.” (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG).

Thomas: “So studying here ... it’s, it’s been good. Yeah it’s been interesting I think there’s a lot of social events where students are able to participate and know each other you know? Yes so it’s, it’s been basically, been good. My experience has been fine.” (Zambia, 27, Male, PG).

Fatima: “I was lucky enough to have really amazing classmates. So whenever I was at school and stuff like that I was comfortable.” (Kenya, Female, UG).

The participants generally spoke positively about their experiences on campus and how they experienced the campus atmosphere as positive. Such a positive space appears to increase the African international students’ sense of belonging as indicated in the first and last excerpts, thereby increasing relationship-seeking behaviours. Certainly, the overall social climate of institutions can influence how individuals feel and behave within those spaces (Ryff 2017, 171). The findings in this study deviate from previous findings in the literature on African international students at other South African universities, where narratives of discrimination perpetrated by local students and lecturers dominated (Iwara, Kativhu, and Obadire 2017, 10639; Ralarala, Pineteh, and Mchiza 2016, 249). In the latter studies, students reported that they experienced the university space as hostile, they contended with higher incidences of xenophobia, and often had negative perceptions of locals. It is therefore possible that African international students’ relational experiences may depend on the respective universities’ student racial/ethnic demographics. To illustrate, the South African Black student population in the two universities studied by Iwara et al. (2017) was approximately 95 per cent and 99 per cent respectively (DHET 2011, 4; University of Zululand 2021, 111), while the South African Black student population in the study conducted by Ralarala, Pineteh, and Mchiza (2016) was 66 per cent (Ralarala, Hassan, and Naidoo 2021, 137).

In the present study, the university had a comparatively smaller margin of difference between Black (54%) and White students (37%) (University of Pretoria 2020), relative to the studies cited previously. Therefore, it may be that in universities with racially or ethnically more diverse student demographics, individuals tend to be more tolerant of those different from them. This may result in a more positive institutional atmosphere, as opposed to academic spaces where the student population might be dominated by a specific racial or ethnic group (Brown 2004, 27–28). After all, incidences of discrimination and xenophobia in South Africa

seem to occur most frequently in environments where there is a predominantly Black population (Dube 2019, 192).

Theme 2: African international students' interactional styles in forming relationships

This theme explores how African international students' interactional styles played a role in their relational experiences. In the present study, interactional styles were defined as relationship-seeking behaviours rooted in individuals' preferences, dispositions, and *willingness* to seek relationships. To illustrate how this shaped African international students' interactional experiences, some excerpts are presented below:

Steven: "I'm kind of an interactive person, so for me, as long as I have like people to interact with ... now I've created like a lot of relationships with people, like lots of connections so, is easy for me to kind of manoeuvre around and get things." (Zambia, 26, Male, PG).

Angela: "I'm a social person, I can't stay alone for a long time. I was also part of ... a day house. That really really helped with friendships. So I made friends from the day res, I made friends from being part of the society, I was part of ... The Business Women's Association of South Africa I think it is. I was part of that and I made friends from there. And other than that you just had to be brave and you know, say something to someone during class." (Zambia, 21, Female, UG).

The above quotes show that there were African international students who were willing to make the effort to interact with people and to join more campus-based organisations to make friends. Their behaviour appeared to have been largely determined by their type of personality, i.e., "interactive person", "social person", suggesting a generally outgoing personality. Doroszuk, Kupis, and Czarna (2019, 2) categorise these types of individuals that strongly desire the company of others and who often make an effort to associate with strangers as extraverts. They further stated that these individuals tend to make friends easily as their interactive styles and even body language make positive impressions on their interaction partners, resulting in people desiring to spend more time with them, and forming relationships. However, it was noted in the findings that not all participants had the same interactional style of being sociable and willing to reach out to people to form relationships; some found it difficult due to their more reserved personalities. The African international students expressed the following sentiments regarding their willingness to interact with others:

Tafadzwa: "It's something that I've always, I've been the type of person where I select one, two, three people, that I trust and can always talk, and after that there's no one else and I've always been okay with it ... I live an introvert life ... I do prefer to just have a small circle." (Zimbabwe, 21, Male, UG).

Fatima: “I would just say it’s because I’m introverted. So I am not the person to just strike up a conversation in front of people and make friends.” (Kenya, Female, UG).

The last quote shows that Fatima had a difficult time making friends in her first year and she attributed the initial difficulty to be mainly due to her introversion. Generally, these participants accounted for their smaller friendship circles or any difficulties they initially had in making friends by disclosing their introverted dispositions or what their preferences with regard to friendship networks are. Conclusions drawn by Doroszuk et al. (2019, 2), and Harris and Vazire (2016, 652) suggest that, relative to extraverts who are usually more comfortable in interactions with others and often assume their interaction partner finds them likeable, introverts have difficulty forming relationships or they have smaller friendship networks because they tend to be pessimistic in their social interactions. Although the African international students in this study did not provide in-depth reasons for their tendencies to not “just strike up a conversation”, it is possible that these observations were at play in their interactions.

The findings under Theme 2 re-affirmed the notion that the friendship-making process is governed by internal factors (Harris and Vazire 2016, 651), not only by external influences or circumstances such as the university environment or the attitudes of other students.

Theme 3: Relationships and well-being

This theme explores the various relationships that contributed to the well-being of African international students. One example is academic relationships, where students’ mutual support plays a central role in their academic success. In addition, social relationships (beyond academic support/activities) contribute to the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of African international students. Both types of relationships focus mainly on the *presence* of other students, the interactions that occur within these relationships and how they generate or improve well-being. Although the subthemes are separated, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Subtheme 3A: Academic relationships

Relationships served as a source of academic support for students in this study. African international students spoke at length about the value of their classroom relations and how integral these were to their educational success:

Tadiwa: “We study together basically so even though some of them they’re doing different programs, you can always copy one or two things from them. Maybe work ethic or whatever, how they navigate through these things.” (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG).

Evans: “I don’t think I’d be able to survive without, without those people because ... sometimes it

might be difficult to, you know to keep up in class like let's say on a particular day and then maybe to approach a lecturer afterwards it's, might also be difficult. So at least having someone who, like who's in the same space, who was there during the lecture, it kind of helps ... even understanding the work, trying to you know, gauge your performance against the performance of others, just trying to figure out where you stand in terms of understanding your work." (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG).

The academic support African international students received from others was described in many ways. Students shared notes, updated one another on missed work, and assisted one another when help was needed to understand course material. Drawing from the above quotes, African international students also compared their performance with those of their peers to gauge how well/bad they were doing, and they sometimes even emulated their friends' positive study habits. In agreement with previous studies (DeAngelo 2014, 60; Wayt 2012, 50), the academic support that students provided to one another was portrayed as integral to their success.

Although these findings are not unique to African international students, they demonstrate that the African international students in this study were able to successfully integrate with their peers, South African and otherwise, to maximise their academic experiences and success. This is noteworthy because African international students at another South African university pointedly explained that they struggled to receive support or collaborate on schoolwork with their classmates due to discrimination (Pineteh and Mulu 2016, 395). This may be due to differences in institutional factors, such as whether international students experienced the university spaces as largely negative or positive, or whether the local students were largely unbiased/accepting or xenophobic (as discussed previously). More research is necessary to understand the different institutional factors that will foster a positive climate and experience for African international students specifically.

Subtheme 3B: The value of friends in times of need

Outside of academic support, the relationships that African international students had with their friends also satisfied several social needs. In the African international students' own words:

Ethan: "I think it [the friendship circle] was just like a family, whenever you have a problem you go to them. Ja when you have a problem you go to them ... when you have a certain decision that you want to make you go and hear from them ... If you need any financial help is between us so ja." (Zambia, 27, Male, UG).

Angela: "Just being supportive in general, in every arena, you know whether it's a place to stay, with food groceries when I need you know. If I'm struggling, just generally being there as a friend, and yeah I will say overall they've been those support systems for me." (Zambia, 21, Female, UG).

The reflections of the African international students indicated that their friends can be relied upon for general social support when needed, but more especially for providing material assistance in the form of shelter, food, or money when necessary. This agrees with Kansky's (2018, 6) observation that individuals can better cater to their needs for survival when in groups than what they would manage to do in solitude. When their basic survival needs are met, they are likely to experience higher levels of physical and mental well-being (Narvaez 2018). The findings from the study by Cobo-Rendon et al. (2020, 1) further support the above assertions that social support, which encompasses friends' assistance in times of need or adversity, contributes positively to the eudaimonic well-being of university students.

Some African international students mentioned that being supported in terms of the fulfilment of their basic need to relate with local students greatly assisted them in acclimatising to the South African environment. The African international students reflected on the social benefits of having local friends:

Steven: "I think I've gotten to like learn a lot of things, that I never knew about South Africa and also the stories. So basically it has just helped me to like understand the cultures of South Africa and just how, just to have a few like understanding of the environment itself. I need something maybe in town, I don't know the place, then I just try to check my relationships, I check who do I talk to, who do I know, who can assist me in this place ... which is nice because if I never made those relationships I would find my way hard to like get certain things." (Zambia, 26, Male, PG).

Fatima: "So having a South African friend is definitely helpful in that especially, there's this activity we had ... we needed to take a taxi, and go to town that was when the xenophobia thing was happening so it was very scary for me ... we were going to find a taxi, and the conductor the, the driver guy was speaking to me in his language and I looked so confused and it was so obvious. And then I was, I was about to say I don't understand. Then my friend like immediately came in and then, yeah yeah yeah, we quickly got in the taxi. So I don't know just, it was very helpful." (Kenya, Female, UG).

In the last excerpt, Fatima speaks about a time when a taxi driver was speaking to her in a South African language during a period of heightened xenophobia in the city. One of her South African friends was able to come to her aid and answer the taxi driver's question before her foreign status could be exposed, thereby protecting her from the potential danger of physical harm or discrimination. This not only demonstrates the value of friends in general, but also shows the benefit of an immigrant student having a local friend who can mitigate potentially dangerous or awkward situations. Altogether, the excerpts demonstrate the importance of relational interactions between local students and African international students. These relationships can assist African international students to understand the South African environment, its people, and to learn local languages. This may ultimately lead to African

international students being better equipped to navigate different spaces in the local environment due to having “insider” knowledge.

Research has shown that support networks are important for many aspects of life, including integration (Lessard-Philips et al. 2019, 17). When international students interact with local students academically or socially, it creates an avenue for cultural exchange (Ratshilaya 2017, 84); which consequently eases their integration into South African society. Rahman (2018, 1) found a significant relationship between international students’ adjustment to local culture and their increased psychological well-being. Thus, it is within reason to propose that the ease of cultural adjustment mediated by local students contributes to the well-being of African international students (Li et al. 2013, 155).

Subtheme 3C: “No one is an island”

The mere presence of people in one’s life or knowing that one is not alone in the challenges they face seemed to contribute to African international students’ well-being, for example:

Fatima: “Like no one is, is an island you need people ... the girl came ... Ja that’s when I was still a bit, mentally not okay honestly. ‘Cause I didn’t have any friends, I was still confused on all the things I’d been doing, culture shock and things like that and then, so I meet her ... and then she tells me how she’s also been struggling as well, ‘cause she’s also introverted ... And then I don’t know I just felt a bit better knowing that I wasn’t alone and ... that was the beginning of an upper trajectory in my mental health.” (Kenya, Female, UG).

Tadiwa: “‘Cause you do have a lot of bad days in this [course] program so it does help knowing you know, it’s not, you’re not that unique in that perspective you get? So, yeah it actually does help psychologically.” (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG).

The African international students used the phrase “no one is an island” to signify that as humans we fare better when we have people in our lives. Moreover, their statements affirmed the notion that African international students’ psychological well-being could be enhanced by knowing that their difficult experiences were shared by others. In this way, their relationships served a protective function by ameliorating stressful experiences (Joshnloo and Jovanovic 2018, 6; King et al. 2021, 4). Murray et al. (2002, 564) concurred with this argument when they stated that people are happier when they feel that a person they share a relationship with shares their experience and understands them. However, it should be noted that the relationship between shared experiences and well-being is largely unexplored in higher education, and it warrants more research attention, considering the findings in respect of this theme.

Thus far, the findings indicate that African international students’ friendships may make a positive contribution to their academic and social experiences. Positive relational experiences,

whether in the social or academic realm, seemed to contribute positively to the emotional and psychological well-being of African international students. However, besides them receiving support, African international students also talked about how their own well-being was enhanced through *helping* others:

Christopher: "... My friends and ja, even other people. I like helping people, is like your charities and all that, ja." (Tanzania, 22, Male, UG).

Ayo: "When they find themselves in a situation and really want someone to talk to, I'm always that person who is ready to listen ... so, me keeping them happy is me doing myself a favour also, I find it really really important. So I don't necessarily expect anything from them, I'm just giving and that's what I'm here to do basically." (Nigeria, 28, Male, PG).

The excerpts from the African international students' responses change our perception of well-being as a unidirectional phenomenon where the things that others do for an individual, or the things that happen to an individual, are what determine their well-being. In these cases, well-being is bidirectional; it also manifests in the things that an African international student does for other people. Essentially, helping others is as necessary and important to their well-being as receiving help (Kansky 2018, 6). According to White (2010, 161) and Wilson et al. (2018, 1380), collective societies tend to take a collective view of wellness, where one's own well-being is intrinsically tied to one's relationship with others. As most African societies have a propensity for collectivist views, it follows that the African international students in this study embraced values that included being supportive of others as important to their well-being.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The study demonstrated that although South Africa may generally be considered a hostile environment for African migrants, this does not imply that African international students will have predominantly negative relational experiences in host institutions in the country. On the contrary, the findings indicated that African international students' relational experiences could be largely positive, but that this probably depends on institutional culture or atmosphere.

Tumubweinee and Luescher (2019, 2) argue that university spaces are not merely spatial contexts where academic events take place; they are also products of the relationships that occur within them and the policies that govern them. As such, universities should consider how their policies and support structures influence the experiences of African international students. That is, they should determine whether the configuration of the universities' policies and structures alienates African international students by exacerbating their existing challenges as immigrants, or prioritises African international students' seamless transition into the universities' academic

environment. For example, Letsoalo (2022) noted in their study that the main complaint that African international students had about their class experiences was the tendency for South African students to speak in indigenous South African languages while performing group tasks. This alienated the international students, leading them to prefer to collaborate on schoolwork with other international students, while actively avoiding working with South African students. As such, to improve the pedagogical space so that immigrant students do not feel excluded, it is suggested that lecturers (institutions) should encourage local students to be more conscious, inclusive, and sensitive to students of other nationalities while in class. This can take the form of *encouraging* the use of English as a medium of communication, particularly when performing group tasks. This is relevant not only for academic adjustment, but also for relational adjustment, as the findings in this study demonstrated that African international students consider both their academic and relational experiences in their appraisal of the university experience. Prioritising both elements might contribute to creating a positive institutional atmosphere.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study are important for broadening our understanding of the experiences of African international students in South African society. They should, however, be generalised with caution, considering that the way in which qualitative studies are designed does not usually permit unambiguous generalisations to other contexts and populations. Certainly, the results of this study only indicate the experiences of African international students from one university. However, important lessons can still be drawn from its findings such as the importance of space in relationship formation, how the relationships can be salient in students' academic journeys and their well-being experiences, and how the university environment (positive or hostile) can affect the immigrant students' overall academic experiences. These lessons can be applied and/or adapted to other university contexts.

Another limitation that was identified concerned the interviewing of participants through phone calls, which could have affected the study findings. The cell phone interview does not permit the interviewer access to participants' non-verbal cues so they can respond to them accordingly (Jablonski 2014, 6). Frequent breaks in connection and other technical difficulties also occurred during some phone interview calls, which further affected the natural flow of conversation and the quality of the interviews. Using different or inconsistent interview formats might have generally affected the study's results.

Regarding recommendations, it is suggested that universities take intervening measures to create spaces outside of the classroom where African international students can engage with

other local and international students. Furthermore, universities should attempt to tailor their interventions to accommodate students' different interactional styles where possible, as the latter were identified as being salient in relationship-seeking behaviour and breadth of social network. University student counselling services should also play a role by collaborating with international student departments to encourage African international students to seek help. Although African international students' relationships were shown to assist them in coping with social, psychological, and academic challenges, it is essential that these students receive professional assistance – in addition to the relational support that their friends provide – while they adjust to host institutions and contend with academic pressures.

CONCLUSION

In this article, space was found to be a prominent aspect in the relational experiences of African international students. Institutions and institutional culture also played a central role in how African international students experienced university spaces. While personality factors were noted as being important in the relationship formation process, African international students appeared to have positive relational experiences overall with other local and international students. This contributed positively to the academic, social, and psychological domains of their lives.

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