An Exploration of Relational Well-Being of African International Students at a South African University

By

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

Herewith I declare that this mini-dissertation that is submitted in partial fulfilment for degree purposes for the degree MA Research Psychology at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not been submitted previously by me for another degree at another university.

09 December 2021

Signature

Date

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this dissertation, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval.

The author declares that he/she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of Ethics for researchers and the policy guidelines for responsible research.

Abstract

Students are often faced with high academic pressures that create high levels of distress and anxiety, leading to low levels of psychological well-being. International students, in particular, are more susceptible to threats to their psychological 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, and the contribution of relationships to international students' well-being has been largely neglected in the literature. As such, the overall aim of this study was to explore the experiences of relational well-being of African international students at a South African university. African international students were specifically selected given the propensity for discrimination against African migrants in South Africa which might expose African international students to greater threats to their well-being relative to other international student populations. This study was part of a larger study on relationships, meaning, and well-being. Both studies adopted a qualitative design wherein semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data, and the transcripts of 16 out of 28 participants (*ave. age = 24; females = 5; males = 11*) were selected from the larger study's data set for the purposes of the analysis in this study. To make sense of the findings, thematic analysis was used and from the findings arrived upon through the analysis, it was concluded that African international students have reciprocal positive relationships with local and other immigrant students that contribute to well-being outcomes in the social, psychological, and educational domains. In addition, it was discovered that institutional culture and the availability of spaces that provide opportunities for interaction are important determinants of relational experiences in the university campus space. It was thus recommended that efforts should be made to create more spaces in which African international students could engage and interact with a diverse group of students to encourage relationship formation.

Keywords: Relationships, African International Students, Relational Well-Being, Migration, Higher Education Institutions, South Africa

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction and Background

The migration of students to other countries has been increasing rapidly over the years and is emerging as one of the leading reasons that individuals migrate, with the global rate of growth ranging between 7% and 10% annually (Riano & Piguet, 2016; University of Oxford, 2015). International students are those who have crossed a national border for educational purposes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). 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 & Kazakov, 2016). They also significantly contribute to national economies and provide host nations with skilled labour upon graduation (Grebennikov et al., 2016; Riano & Piguet, 2016).

A study conducted by Menzies and Baron (2014) indicates that in Australia, international students contribute billions to the economy. Similarly, Adediran and Coetzee (2019) bring attention to how international students contribute to the South African economy and argue that this necessitates reciprocal quality service by South African higher education institutions. Put simply, students' experiences in the host society must reflect the social and economic benefits that accompany their presence in host institutions and societies. In doing so, students receive the best quality educational and social experiences in exchange for their economic investment (Wearring et al., 2015).

It is known that international students could be exposed to multiple threats to their well-being in host societies which might affect their overall educational experience (Ng et al., 2018). In particular, loneliness is one of the numerous challenges that is reported in studies old and new (Mudhovozi, 2011; Wawera & McCamley, 2020), which is often exacerbated by difficulties in creating new relationships in host societies (Wawera & McCamley, 2020). Considering the contributions of international students to host societies, more could be done to gain an in-depth understanding of the relational experiences of international students to improve their well-being in host societies. There is, however, little research that focuses on their relational well-being, especially in the African and South African contexts.

1.1.1. Well-Being

Well-being refers to "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, p. 230). It is commonly divided into two subtypes, hedonic and eudaimonic

well-being. According to Waterman (2007), hedonia is characterized by seeking to achieve the goal of happiness. In this instance, happiness refers to a situation where physical and emotional-cognitive pleasures are maximized (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Waterman, 2007). Eudaimonia, however, conceptualizes well-being as an ongoing and lifelong process of realizing one's full potential (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Unlike hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being can manifest even in the presence of challenges as they can assist in developing individuals' potentials (Waterman, 2007). Nevertheless, the two types of well-being are not mutually exclusive. They converge and covary, such that one can experience hedonia through eudaimonic well-being, but one can also experience hedonic well-being outside of eudaimonia (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In essence "well-being refers to being fully functioning" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 3).

Seminal works such as that of Ryff (1989), consider positive relations with others as one of the factors that contribute to individuals' eudaimonic well-being. Having positive relationships in school increases the likelihood for immigrant students to thrive in their academic pursuits and post-school occupational endeavours (DeAngelo, 2014; Picton et al., 2017). However, immigrant students' well-being may be compromised as most struggle to forge relationships with native students and are far from established social circles in their home countries (Boafor-Arthur, 2014). They have to navigate unfamiliar spaces in the absence of close friends and families. In conceptualizing relational well-being, a eudaimonic perspective is most fitting as it allows for an understanding of well-being that can exist despite experiencing challenges that may come with being an international student, and how relationships could mitigate the challenges experienced in a students' journey. In this study, relational well-being is further conceived of as positive outcomes to well-being as fostered by interacting and relating with other students.

1.1.2. Experiences of International Students

Being a university student is stressful, but its difficulties are heightened for international students due to increased financial demands, limited social support, language difficulties, and cultural changes (McKenna et al., 2017). In addition, moving to a different country generally poses a threat to an individual's well-being (Ng et al., 2018), with psychological/emotional states such as homesickness and loneliness being common among students away from their home countries (McKenna et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2018). The above-mentioned factors, as well as other challenges that accompany them such as acculturative stress, have consistently been found to be sources of depression, stress, and anxiety among international students in different

parts of the world (Altinyelken et al., 2019; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Li et al., 2013; Li et al., 2014; Redfern, 2016). Language difficulties and differences in cultural behaviour and values may also affect the relational experiences of international students (Aydun, 2020; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Rienties & Nolan, 2014).

Language may act as a barrier to communication between local and international students. It can function as an exclusionary medium of discrimination by locals in social and academic activities, thus limiting opportunities to develop or maintain social relations with international students (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; McKenna et al., 2017). As such, international students tend to gravitate towards developing friendships with those they share similar languages and cultures, as there is an increased sense of comfort and connectedness among them (Ng et al., 2018).

Although these foreign friendship networks are important, they may hinder the development of meaningful relationships with local students (Aydun, 2020; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). This may be to the disadvantage of international students' psychological health as numerous studies indicate that international students report higher life satisfaction and are less homesick when they have more host national than co-national friends (Hendrickson et al., 2010; Lee & Sehoole, 2019; Lim & Pham, 2016, Menzies & Baron, 2014; Wearring et al., 2015). This is because having host national friends plays a vital role in transitioning and adapting to the host country successfully, as they assist with learning the native language and culture (Menzies & Baron, 2014). For example, Li et al. (2013) and Rahman (2018) found that positive psychological well-being was higher among international students who prioritised relationships and made effort to assimilate to the local culture.

From this, it is apparent that local and international friendship networks play an important role in the well-being of international students. Through understanding relational well-being and its benefits, efforts can be made to promote friendship networks among international and native students. Therefore, it is important to gain a more relevant understanding of how relational well-being might manifest in the South African context.

1.1.3. The Case of South Africa

International students' psychological well-being and relational experiences in South Africa mirror those observed internationally. Homesickness (Chinyamurindi, 2018), loneliness and stress (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016) are common psychological threats experienced by international students. The main triggers of these psychological states are also similar to those

observed in other countries; that is, language difficulties, cultural differences and social isolation to list a few (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016; Ratshilaya, 2017). In South Africa, language issues have also been found to cause low self-esteem among international students, as they act as a hindrance in relating with others socially and academically (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016; Ratshilaya, 2017). As such, 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 & Kombe, 2019). Although language and cultural differences play a role in these relational patterns, another salient contributor is xenophobia (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Herman & Kombe, 2019). Xenophobia and other types of discrimination are common in the broader international student experience (Wu et al., 2015). However, these issues are particularly salient within the South African context as the country is known for its negative attitude towards immigrants. This was demonstrated in the 2008 attacks (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015; Kayitesi & Mwaba, 2014), and the more recent attacks and heinous crimes committed in 2019 against African migrants.

As such, international students are often aware of the xenophobic climate before coming to South Africa (Herman & Kombe, 2019). This, together with experiencing and/or witnessing xenophobically motivated events of discrimination, causes international students to develop negative attitudes towards locals (Chinyamurindi, 2018). Consequently, international students may avoid locals in favour of developing meaningful relationships with other international students (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Herman & Kombe, 2019). This may have negative consequences for international students' academic performance, social lives, and general well-being (Keeling, 2014), as they cannot reap some of the benefits of having close relations with natives such as easier adaptation to local languages and cultures, which are known challenges to international students in South Africa. Therefore, this study presents a valuable learning opportunity for understanding international students' relationships and how they might contribute to their well-being as this area of study has been largely neglected.

1.1.4. Problem Statement

Given the propensity for discrimination against migrants in South Africa, research among international students focuses heavily 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 do not explore their well-being

experiences in-depth, as it is not the foci of the studies. Much less is known about students' relational well-being and precisely the relationships that positively contribute to their overall well-being. The present study aims to take a step in the direction of remedying this lack of attention given to the relational well-being of international students. It adopts a more positive approach and is less challenge-focused, to understand how international students' relationships might help foster or maintain their well-being in the face of social and academic challenges

1.1.5. Research Questions

How do African international students experience relationships at the university campus space?

What are the relational experiences of African international students that contribute to well-being?

1.1.6. Objectives

To explore the relational experiences of African international students at a South African university.

To examine relationships that contribute to the well-being of African international students.

1.2. Justification

Psychological well-being is important to students' successful adaptation to university life (Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2020). However, students are often faced with high academic pressures that create high levels of distress and anxiety, leading to low levels of psychological well-being (Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2020). When students have high psychological well-being, they are more likely to use positive coping strategies to manage academic stress (Freire et al., 2016; Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012). One of the factors that has been found to significantly contribute to and enhance psychological well-being amongst students is positive social relationships (Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2020).

According to Young (2008), relationships are essential to the healthy functioning of individuals, as humans are inherently social beings. They play an important role in maintaining individuals' well-being by offering nurturance and mutual support (Mahali et al., 2018). Thus, a portion of individuals' overall well-being is dependent on their relationships with others. The concept of relational well-being is especially salient in African societies where the individuals' well-being is intrinsically tied to their relationships with others as is common in interdependent

contexts (White, 2010; Wissing et al., 2020). A focus on relationships and well-being is necessary since research on international students often neglects these aspects of their experiences, opting to focus mainly on their adjustment and adaptation difficulties.

While there is a scarcity of literature investigating the well-being and relational experiences of international students globally, there is a greater dearth of research on these students within the South African context. There are a few studies (Hamilton & Ferreira, 2013; Herman & Kombe, 2019; Naik et al., 2017) that broadly focus on international students' social experiences in South Africa; however, they do not specifically focus on relational well-being. For instance, some studies investigate international students' involvement in non-academic activities (Hamilton & Ferreira, 2013; Naik et al., 2017) and their social networks (Herman & Kombe, 2019). Other studies focus on adjustment problems and other challenges that international students encounter in the country (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015; Iwara et al., 2017; Lee & Sehoole, 2019; Sehoole, 2015; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2012).

These studies report that discrimination in the educational environment causes negative relational experiences between immigrant students and native students. They also indicate that international students have few meaningful relationships with host students, and often report feelings of homesickness, are socially isolated, and may struggle with anxiety (Hendrickson et al., 2010). Consequently, the relational well-being of international students warrants research attention given what is known about their psychological well-being and how it relates to their relational experiences or patterns.

It is for this reason that this study seeks to investigate the dynamics of African international students' (henceforth referred to as 'AI' students) relational experiences. Emphasis is placed on the relationships that contribute to their well-being as AI students. The findings obtained from this study can be useful for university international student divisions and student affairs departments, or any other institutional bodies whose purpose is to enhance the successful transition of international students in universities. Such measures have the potential to positively contribute to students' well-being and academic success. The findings may also be useful for broader government policy making.

Another reason for focusing on AI students in particular, is the intention of gaining a perspective about the experiences of a population that seldom receives research attention. Their experiences in South African universities must be understood as most African students select South Africa as their destination for international studies and thus constitute a majority of the

international student population in the country (University of Oxford, 2015). Moreover, AI students are more likely to have adjustment problems than European students internationally because they are perceived negatively by native students compared to their European counterparts (Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Lee & Sehoole, 2019). In South Africa, this is revealed through the xenophobic attacks against African migrants perpetrated by South Africans. Therefore, these experiences warrant a specific focus on AI students considering their marginalization in the South African society and the difficulties they encounter in building relationships with locals, as this may have the potential to affect their well-being (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016).

1.3. Structure of the Study

In this Chapter, an introduction to this study's topic and research objectives were outlined. This will be followed by Chapter 2, which engages in an in-depth literature discussion of various sub-topics related to this study. First, there will be a brief delineation of the history of migration, followed by a presentation of the trends in international student migration including a discussion of the various factors that shape the trends. Then, the challenges that international students experience abroad and locally will be examined, and the link between relationships and well-being will be explored. The chapter will conclude with a description of this study's guiding theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 focuses on the study's research methodology and will begin by describing the research context of the study and explaining the study's paradigmatic assumptions. Second, the research design and ethical considerations which guided the execution of this study will be outlined, concluding with a detailed description of sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

In Chapter 4, the findings of this study will be presented in five main themes: conducive spaces for relationship formation, African international students' interactional styles in forming relationships, language barriers in delaying relationship formation, relational patterns, and relationships and well-being.

Chapter 5 will conclude this mini-dissertation, discussing the limitations of this study and providing recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Migration

Migration is a central characteristic of human development and interaction (Wagner et al., 2016). Because of its complex nature, it is hard to develop a definition that can accurately represent its complexity (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). However, in simple terms, it is defined as "the crossing of a spatial boundary by one or more persons involved in a change of residence" (Kok, 1999, p. 20). Migration can take place on a small scale (i.e., internal migration) and large scale (i.e., international migration), but most migration generally takes place between neighbouring countries (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). This can be observed in patterns of migration in Europe, where the majority of migration occurs within the continent; the same pattern is also observed amongst African countries (Dube, 2019).

Data for migration trends and patterns throughout history are well documented in Europe, ranging from the pre-colonial era, the Cold War's influences on labour and migration, to modern-day asylum seekers and highly skilled migrant labourers (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). On the contrary, accurate and consistent data of African migration patterns over time is limited (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). It is however evident that migration by Africans to countries outside of Africa has steadily increased over time, while there has been a significant decrease in inward migration from the rest of the world after the end of colonialism (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). Furthermore, some of the data that is available for African migration shows that the narrative of Africans fleeing the continent towards Europe or North America to escape violence and poverty is false (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). Reasons for migrating are not limited to attempts to escape poverty and violence but include migrating for school, work, and family purposes (Kim & Sondhi, 2015). Though people migrate due to a variety of reasons, student migration has been one of the leading motives for migration in recent years.

2.2. Trends in International Student Migration

Students are faced with an array of choices when selecting their countries of destination. However, European countries are a popular choice of destination among international students. The European Union (EU) hosts 40% of the international student population, with the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany accounting for 11% and 6% respectively (OECD, 2019). Other leading countries include the United States of America (USA) (24%), Australia (8%), Russia (6%), Canada (5%) and China (3%).

Educational migration by European students is mostly intracontinental, as they make up a significant portion of international students in other EU countries such as Germany (40%) and Italy (45%). France, however, is dominated by Africans (17%); while Asian students dominate Australia, Korea, and Japan with a collective population of 80% in these countries (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2019). Although Nigeria makes up the biggest portion of the African students' population in the UK, most international students from Africa pursue their studies in South Africa (University of Oxford, 2015).

South Africa has seen substantial increases in international students as part of the growing trend of international educational migration (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016). International students constitute approximately 17% of the student population in South African private and public higher education institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2018). The DHET (2018) report shows that most international students are from Zimbabwe followed by Namibia, Nigeria, and Swaziland. The high proportion of Zimbabwean students is a consequence of the higher number of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, who constitute 40% of the total migrant population, the highest in the country (Dube, 2019). In general, the trends outlined in the migration of student sojourners do not occur randomly; they are shaped by an array of factors.

2.3. Factors that Contribute to International Student Migration

Moving to a new country for educational purposes is not a decision made lightly. There are several push and pull factors that motivate individuals to leave their home countries and select their destinations. Some push factors are war, political instability, a scarcity of or lower quality higher education institutions, and a lack of economic opportunities (Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Kim & Sondhi, 2015; Lee & Sehoole, 2019; Stebleton, 2010). Conversely, common pull factors identified in the literature include the availability of diverse school programmes, the value of a foreign qualification in the labour market, a welcoming attitude towards migrants by host countries, and the possibility of permanent migration (Kim & Sondhi, 2015; Riano & Piguet, 2016; Stebleton, 2010). International students consider a number of these and other push and pull factors when making decisions about their countries of destination.

One of the most important reasons that influence international students' decisions is the availability of courses offered in the English medium (Kahanec & Kralikova, 2011; Tati, 2010). This contributes to the appeal of the two most popular destinations for students, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (US), as they have some of the best higher

education institutions in the world and English as the official language of the countries (Grebennikov et al., 2016; University of Oxford, 2015, King & Raghuram, 2013). Although these countries are preferred by students, they are not without their shortcomings.

Students with aspirations of studying in the US or the UK have to contend with contradictory policies on migration implemented by these countries (Wearring et al., 2015). Presumably due to their histories with terrorism, they are pro-migration but simultaneously hostile towards immigrants, taking measures to regulate the presence of foreign students in their countries (Wearring et al., 2015). As a result, these countries have been experiencing a gradual decline in their migrant student population over the years (University of Oxford, 2015). Canada and Australia have been receiving increasing popularity as a result, due to their friendly post-graduate policies (University of Oxford, 2015). These trends give credence to Kim and Sondhi's (2015) assertion that the flows of international students are influenced by the policies of destination countries.

The factors that attract students to South Africa are similar to those observed internationally. These include the availability of diverse school programmes, English medium institutions, and the availability of high standard and internationally recognised universities with advanced technological facilities (Mokgwasi, 2017).

These and other pull factors shape trends of international student migration in different countries. Although students migrate to other countries for educational purposes, their experiences in host countries extend beyond their educational instruction and include their interaction with locals and the environment around them (Wearring et al., 2015). As such, they may experience challenges as they adapt to living in host countries (Altinyelken et al., 2019).

2.4. Challenges Faced by International Students Globally

Challenges can be expected whenever an individual relocates to a new city or country. One will inevitably take time to adjust to a new place. Cultural differences between international students' home countries and their destination countries can predict how well international students adjust to the host country, as well as how host nationals will treat immigrants (Herman & Kombe, 2019; Ratshilaya, 2017). When there are many discrepancies between international students' cultures and those of the host countries, international students will experience more difficulties adjusting to the host country and its dominant culture(s) (Dube, 2019; Mokgwasi, 2017; Wearring et al., 2015). Additionally, international students can also experience difficulties adjusting to different school systems (Mokgwasi, 2017).

Other challenges that international students are subjected to include but are not limited to prejudice, discrimination, adapting to different teaching styles, as well as loneliness caused by separation from friends and family (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016; Ratshilaya, 2017). However, at the root of most students' negative experiences is often language difficulties (Boafor-Arthur, 2013; Wearring et al., 2015). There are a plethora of studies documenting the difficulty that language poses to international students (Lee & Sehoole, 2019; Lim & Pham, 2016; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Mokgwasi, 2017; Stebleton, 2010; Wearring et al., 2015). Ratshilaya (2017) found that English proficiency was one of the most significant problems reported by international students; it affected their social lives and academic performance. Academically, students encounter challenges such as experiencing difficulties in contributing to class discussions, writing in the language of instruction, and failure to meet lecturers' expectations (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015). These problems may lead to lower grades as they adjust to different academic expectations and are excluded from collaborative work due to their language limitations (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Pineteh & Mulu, 2016).

In the social domain, Wearring et al. (2015), found that Asian students in Australia were willing to interact with local students but Australian students often avoided Asian students because of their strong accents. This limited opportunities for social networking as well as opportunities to improve Asian students' English abilities, resulting in the students isolating themselves or only associating with other Asian students which by extension, negatively affected the students' confidence. Relatedly, Pineteh and Mulu (2016) found that international students who were proficient in English were less likely to have the stress associated with social isolation and low self-esteem. Both studies illuminate how language proficiency can lead to vastly different experiences in host countries for international students. The salience of the role of language in successful adaptation is further illustrated in Hendrickson et al.'s (2010) study. It is one of the few studies identified where international students had more host national friends than co-national friends. Incidentally, this group of international students were also fluent in English and reported higher life satisfaction, as well as more favourable perceptions of the educational institutions and the country's natives.

Finally, students also experience financial difficulties. Some students, especially those from collectivist societies, may be financially responsible for families in their home countries, creating a financial burden (Boafo-Arthur, 2013). In South Africa, there are limited bursary opportunities for immigrant students (Tati, 2010), which further increases financial stress and insecurity especially since international students may be required to pay for all fees upfront as

well as other additional international student fees (Lee & Sehoole, 2019). In addition to financial strain, this can foster feelings of alienation and exclusion as native students are not subject to these requirements (Mokgwasi, 2017; Ratshilaya, 2017).

2.4.1. Challenges Faced by International Students in South Africa

The challenges that international students encounter in South Africa are similar in many ways to those witnessed internationally and unique in other ways. In line with international findings, language is often the cause of many of their struggles. AI students must not only contend with English language difficulties that affect academic activities such as writing and presentations (Ratshilaya, 2017), but students and lecturers may communicate in native South African languages such as isiXhosa, Sepedi, and isiZulu to list a few, which makes it difficult for immigrant students to participate in classroom activities (Mokgwasi, 2017; Pineteh & Mulu, 2016; Ratshilaya, 2017). Furthermore, in the studies just previously cited, local students were often unfriendly in the classroom and their unfriendliness extended outside the classroom thus straining social interactions.

Consequently, AI students gravitate towards other international students and have more international student friends than South African friends because of shared cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences in the host society (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016). Attempts to pursue friendships with non-Black students are often prevented by racial grouping that has its origins in apartheid; Black students associate mainly with other Black students, while White, Coloured, and Indian students also prefer to associate with students of their race (Mokgwasi, 2017; Pineteh & Mulu, 2016; Ratshilaya, 2017).

Other international student challenges that are unique to the South African context occur in part due to the demographic of the international student population in South Africa, and South Africans' attitudes towards immigrants. 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 & Sehoole, 2019). For example, in a recent study investigating South Africans' attitudes towards immigrants between 2008 and 2016, it was determined that xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants are homogenous across race, class, gender, and socioeconomic lines (Dube, 2019). As such, international students' experiences in the country are likely to be shaped by natives' attitudes towards them.

2.4.1.1. *Xenophobia or Afrophobia?*

Prejudice and discrimination are issues that many international students experience across the world and international students in South Africa are not an exception; they are also subject to discrimination, particularly, xenophobia (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016). AI students tend to experience more discrimination than international students from other countries outside of Africa. To illustrate, it was discovered that Black South African students are more accepting of White international students than they are accepting of Black AI students (Ratshilaya, 2017).

Similar patterns observed in the literature have led authors such as Mundenga (2015) to argue that the issue with xenophobia in South Africa should be recognised as Afrophobia. In labelling it Afrophobia, it highlights how it is specifically hatred by (South) Africans of other fellow Africans and not a general dislike of foreigners. However, Dube (2019) notes that the phenomenon of Afrophobia is more nuanced than the term implies. He found that it is not a general hatred of all African immigrants but a specific dislike of Nigerians as they are associated with crimes such as drugs and human trafficking, and Zimbabweans because there are many of them and they are accused of draining resources meant for South Africans.

This aligns with Wagner et al.'s (2016) argument who state that if a group is perceived as a threat, prejudice will form because they are a source of competition and anxiety. In a sense, immigrants can be used as scapegoats for existing social ills. There is generally more hostility towards migrants in times of strife and instability relative to when individuals are satisfied with their life conditions (Stebleton, 2010). Kayitesi and Mwaba (2014) found evidence for this in South Africa where students with higher life satisfaction were less prejudiced towards foreigners relative to those with lower life satisfaction. That is, students that were socially and economically vulnerable were more hostile towards immigrants (Dube, 2019).

As South Africa has a very high number of immigrants and most of the native population living under conditions of economic insecurity, perceptions of competing for resources with migrants are more prevalent (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015; Kayitesi & Mwaba, 2014; Ratshilaya, 2017). Some of these negative feelings may be expressed by lecturers and local students towards international students in academic environments. For instance, international students at the University of Venda and the University of Zululand report that local students constantly accused them of coming to South Africa to take away work opportunities, which affected cultural integration between the groups of students (Iwara et al.,

2017). Over time, these negative relational experiences may affect students' academic performance and well-being during their stay in the country.

2.5. Types of Relationships and Well-Being

One of the strongest determinants of well-being is an individual's social relationships (Kansky, 2018). Individuals exist in relation to other people (Mahali et al., 2018), and the nature of relationships differs depending on levels of intimacy and context. That is, relationships characterised primarily by personal closeness, social, and emotional support (Mental Health Foundation [MHF], 2016), with non-kin ties, are typically considered friendships, while similar relationships that involve greater levels of physical intimacy are considered to be romantic in nature (Kansky, 2018). There are variations within these types of relationships, such as 'friends with benefits' who are friends that may engage in sexual activities together (Owen et al., 2013), or romantic partners whose relationships may not involve sexual intimacy (Sloan, 2015).

Moreover, individuals also experience relationships in other contexts such as the workplace (collegial), school (teacher-student), and at home (parent-child; siblings). However, the specificities and nuances of these types of relationships are beyond the scope of this research report. Ultimately, the essence of most relationships is mainly determined by perceived quality, as well as levels of satisfaction, support, and/or intimacy (Kansky, 2018; MHF, 2016); the benefits of which are consistent throughout studies regardless of the form that the relationship takes (see, Aspelin, 2012; Holder & Coleman, 2015; Suldo & Fefer, 2013; Thomas et al., 2017; Wissing et al., 2019).

In an extensive review of the literature, Kansky (2018) determined that individuals with strong and positive social relations have a longer life expectancy, better mental and physical health, higher work performance and job satisfaction, as well as higher academic performance. Greater levels of well-being and lower levels of stress are reported for married people in particular (Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2018; Kansky & Diener, 2017; MHF, 2016), due to higher levels of closeness, emotional, social, and financial support within these relationships relative to others (Kansky, 2018). In addition, Kenny et al. (2013), also found that lower levels of stress were evident in student friendships that individual students perceived as high in levels of satisfaction and support. This is because friendships also fulfil emotional, social, and communication needs that have positive impacts on well-being (MHF, 2016). Of particular note, Kansky (2018) reports that reciprocating relational support also contributes to well-being because it adds to a sense of "purpose in one's life" (p. 6).

The Mental Health Foundation (2016) also observed that young people consider helping or being supportive of their peers as important to their well-being. This highlights how people's well-being is rooted in their social relationships, whether they are giving or receiving support from their companions. Overall, these findings indicate that the benefits of relationships are numerous, affecting a variety of domains in life.

Inasmuch as relationships have a plethora of benefits, unhealthy relationships can have more negative mental and physical impacts than being lonely or single (MHF, 2016). Negative relationships are characterized by high levels of conflict and hostility and are associated with poor physical and psychological health, manifesting in the form of poor immune function, substance abuse, anxiety, and depression (Kansky, 2018; Kenny et al., 2013). It is this knowledge that has led some (Hutten et al., 2021; Kansky et al., 2018), to argue that it is not one's relationship status or breadth of social network that determines the impact that their relationships can have on well-being, but rather the quality of their relationships.

2.5.1. Positive Relational Experiences of International Students

Research conducted on international students in higher education emphasises the importance of the relationships that international students have with host national students (Wearring et al., 2015). One study with a title that includes the quote "how can you make friends when you don't know who you are?", discusses how identity changes and identity confusion affect the process of making friends for international students (Ng. et al., 2018). In this study, students find it difficult not only to create new friendships but to also maintain those left behind at home, exacerbating feelings of loneliness. They however still recognise the importance of creating new relationships in the host society.

Similar findings were observed by Wawera and McCamley (2020), where international students would make effort to attend social events to create networks with the main purpose of alleviating loneliness through social interaction and relationship building. Furthermore, students in Huang et al.'s (2020) study also speak at length about the value of positive social interaction for creating a sense of security, providing support to other students who appear to be struggling, for relieving stress and anxiety, and for creating memorable experiences through leisure activities.

Likewise, international students in South Africa recognise and emphasise the importance of relationships to their well-being. Amid the challenges that cause feelings of homesickness, fear and loneliness, they identify social relationships as central to coping with the stresses of adjusting to host institutions and the South African society (Mudhovozi, 2011).

Students state that relationships act as a buffer against many of the problems they encounter due to the support that other students offer (Mudhovozi, 2011). Additionally, students feel that frequent interaction with locals assists with the acquisition of local languages, increasing their sense of belonging and presumably, their well-being (Mudhovozi, 2011; Ratshilaya, 2017).

These positive relational experiences among international students have empirically been found to exert positive effects in other domains, such as students' academic performance (Keeling, 2014; Wayt, 2012). According to DeAngelo (2014), Picton et al. (2017), and Schreiber and Yu (2016), student friendships are associated with increased class attendance, cognitive understanding, and higher academic performance (DeAngelo, 2014; Picton et al., 2017; Schreiber & Yu, 2016). Although there is limited research that highlights the experiences and benefits of positive relationships on the well-being of international students, especially in South Africa, it is nevertheless apparent from the evidence presented here that positive relationships play an important and meaningful role in the overall well-being and success of international students, locally and internationally.

2.6. Theoretical Framework: A Eudaimonic Model of Well-Being

This study adopts a eudaimonic position to understanding well-being. This is in consideration of the fact that academic and social challenges are inevitable in the lives of students, especially AI students. Challenges are seen as inherent in eudaimonia (Waterman, 2007), as it is through overcoming or growing through one's challenges that an individual can realise their full potential and 'flourish'. Thus, it is necessary to conceptualize well-being as a state of being that is capable of manifesting in the presence of challenges that AI students will encounter in their academic journeys.

Eudaimonic well-being is not characterized by consistent positive affect because a subjective sense of positive affect is not necessarily indicative of psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Rather, the positive emotions that arise from eudaimonia can be the result of achieving a goal one has been working towards for a time or from gradually improving in some manner such as acquiring a skill or a psychological resource over time (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Huta and Ryan (2010) also believe that eudaimonic well-being is fostered by engaging in activities that are personally significant or that may be important outside of the self (Huta & Ryan, 2010), and it can be argued that there is personal significance in pursuing an academic degree or seeking social interactions. Ryff (2017) outlines the main elements that can contribute to experiencing eudaimonic well-being. These are: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

The current study focuses on the 'positive relations with others' component of eudaimonic well-being.

Positive relations are relationships where individuals experience or exhibit feelings of affection, empathy, and love (Ryff, 2017). Friendships are also included in this demarcation of relationships. In addition, being able to identify with other people and supporting others are also important markers of having positive relations (Ryff, 2017). While exploring AI students' relational experiences, this conceptualisation of relationships will be used as a guide to making sense of the students' experiences. Furthermore, it will be used to determine precisely how their relationships affect their well-being amid life's challenges based on their accounts.

2.6.1. An African Perspective

Given that this study specifically seeks to understand the relational experiences of *African* international students, African theoretical perspectives of relational well-being should also be considered in making sense of AI students' experiences. African worldviews are generally distinguished by the importance they place on interconnectedness, relationships, and spirituality (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013; Wissing et al., 2019; Wissing et al., 2020). Nwoye (2017) provides a detailed discussion of how relationships are conceptualized 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" (p. 42). 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, but the most common nouns used to express it in most countries are '*ubuntu'* and '*maaya'* (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019).

In his paper, Nwoye (2017) illustrates how *ubuntu* and its associated emphasis on relational interconnectedness functions as the foundation upon which the African child is reared (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019), and through which most African individuals make sense of the world and their well-being. The author further argues 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, p. 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 & Mji, 2013; Wissing et al., 2020). Evidence of this is seen in some studies conducted in South Africa and Ghana where participants describe

their well-being as being embedded in their relationships with others (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013; Wilson et al., 2018; Wissing et al., 2020).

Some researchers have used this knowledge to develop models that can be useful for interpreting the relational experiences of populations in Africa (see, Wissing et al., 2019). For example, the meaning and relatedness well-being (M&R) model by Wissing et al. (2019) emphasises the salience of relatedness and interconnectedness in creating meaning, and its implications in enhancing well-being (Wissing et al., 2019). That is, people derive meaning from their relationships and their well-being is also embedded in their relationships with others. This model also considers the role of cultural context in shaping how individuals relate to one another, and what may and may not be considered meaningful in different cultural contexts. Above all, it recognises the need for a conceptualisation of well-being that acknowledges the role of spirituality, relationships, and interconnectedness in the African context. As such, the M&R model is useful in making sense of AI students' relational well-being experiences as it acknowledges the role of relationships in well-being.

To conclude, it is important to outline precisely what this study considers to be experiences of well-being. Participants' explicit reports of well-being experiences will be relied upon to identify experiences of well-being. Furthermore, the literature discussed in this chapter contains valuable evidence of less conventional 'experiences' of well-being. One of them which is relevant to this study is academic success, wherein it was demonstrated and argued that positive friendship networks are associated with higher academic performance and behaviours that generally promote academic success such as increased class attendance. It can be argued that AI students' well-being could be enhanced by succeeding in their academic work. The study also adopts the view that the participants' abilities to meet their basic needs of sustenance such as water, food, and shelter contribute to their well-being, as individuals need to meet these needs to function optimally (Kansky, 2018). As such, student relations that contribute to meeting these needs will also be considered as having positive well-being implications for AI students. These, together with the theories discussed in this section, will be used to make sense of AI students' relational well-being experiences.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The present study is a sub-study of a larger study titled 'psychosocial pathways to educational success: a qualitative exploration of relational adjustment and meaning-making of African international students in a South African university'. The larger study aimed to explore AI students' relational experiences, what their experiences of meaning-making as a pathway to educational success are, and how they experience a sense of place. The present sub-study focuses only on exploring the relational well-being experiences of African international students. This chapter will be reporting the procedures of data collection in relation to the larger study.

Prior to engaging in any in-depth discussion of the methods used in the research, the researcher will briefly describe the research context of the study. This will be followed by an explication of the paradigmatic assumption that is the foundation of the study, interpretivism, leading to a discussion on the study's research design. Following this will be a discussion of the ethical considerations taken into account before and while the study was underway. The last few sections of the chapter will provide an in-depth outline of the study's sampling and data collection procedures, as well as discuss the data analysis process used to make sense of the study's findings.

3.2. Research Context

The context of the study is a South African higher education institution situated in the Gauteng province. It is one of Africa's top universities and the largest contact university in South Africa. The institution has a total enrolment of around 620 000 students with seven campuses throughout the province. On average, the institution has over 4500 international students annually, the majority of whom (67%) are from Southern African Development Community [SADC] countries (Times Higher Education, 2021).

The university's main campus is located in a suburb close to the city centre; it is a vibrant space with blooming businesses including several restaurants and clubs. The area is mainly populated by students, many of whom live in the low-rise apartment buildings and university residences surrounding the main campus. The city is mainly populated by Black African people (78.3 %) (Tshwane, 2015), and the predominant languages in the city are Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, Xitsonga, and Afrikaans (Kapala, 2020). The general population in the area is considered to be youthful, with most people (approx. 69%) being under the age of

35 (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs [DCGTA], 2020). Additionally, the city is known for having high levels of inequality (DCGTA, 2020) and it also has some of the highest occurrences of xenophobic attacks.

3.3. Paradigmatic Assumptions: Interpretivism

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 1048) write, qualitative researchers are "committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience". Essentially interpretivism, the guiding principle of the present study, lies at the core of qualitative research. Interpretivism has its roots in Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics and Edmund Hursserl's phenomenology, which is somewhat reflected in interpretivism's ontological and epistemological positions (Eichelberger, 1989). The ontological standpoint of the paradigm is that reality is multiple and subjective or socially constructed (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). In its epistemological stance, interpretivism aims to uncover meaningful patterns that emerge from research data as opposed to providing factual claims. It also emphasises gaining a deep understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals in their natural environments (Pham, 2018).

The focus on the depth of understanding of individual experiences is well-aligned with the present study's aim of exploring the experiences of relational well-being of AI students. Additionally, in line with the ontological and epistemological stances of interpretivism, the study assumes that the participants' realities and experiences are subjective and context-based because they might have different histories and personalities, which could result in varied relational experiences. Hence, subjectivity and context were important constructs to be considered when conceiving this study. These viewpoints on reality and knowledge informed the design of the research from the research questions and aims to data collection and data analyses.

3.4. Research Design

According to Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p. 2) "it is the choice of paradigm that sets down the intent, motivation and expectations for the research". The research paradigm is the basis upon which the study's research design adheres (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Similarly, how the present study was designed aligns with the methods appropriate for use in interpretivism research.

Firstly, this was a qualitative research study. A qualitative methodology allows for the rich description of phenomena such that the findings produced provide a deep and personalised

understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Astalin, 2013; Queirós et al., 2017). The main objective of qualitative studies is to understand the meaning of phenomena, not to quantify it as is characteristic of quantitative research (Rahman, 2016), although the limitation of not being able to quantify and generalize is seen as a drawback of qualitative studies (Roald et al., 2021). This study sought to investigate the participants' relational experiences and how these relationships contribute to their well-being. AI students were sought out in particular not only due to their position as foreigners in the country but also due to their unique status as *African* foreign nationals and how this duality might shape relational experiences in the host institution. To explore these experiences, a qualitative research design was appropriate for the study.

The subsequent research questions, which endeavoured to gain an understanding of the experiences of relational well-being of AI students, were also aligned with the interpretivist paradigm. That is, AI students were sought out specifically as they were best positioned to provide an accurate account of experiences of relational well-being. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were used and the transcribed interview recordings were analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed the researcher to identify emerging patterns in the data as well as draw interpretations from the findings.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This research study was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, University of Pretoria (reference: HUM037/1120), before any data collection took place. The detailed approval letter can be seen in Appendix A. Additionally, the International Cooperation Division at the university also gave permission for research to be conducted on international students in the larger study as seen in Appendix B. Finally, the researcher and the other two fieldworkers underwent training on the general ethics of research, such as, *inter alia*, instruction on how to approach participants, how to conduct oneself professionally as a researcher, and strategies for conducting a successful interview. The experienced lead researchers of the larger study oversaw the training process.

3.5.1. Informed Consent

Informed consent involves briefing participants about the nature of a study and the benefits and risks associated with participating (Nnebue, 2010). The information should be presented in a language that is accessible to ensure that their participation is in fact voluntary (Nnebue, 2010).

In this study, participants were provided with an informed consent form (Appendix C) together with an information sheet (Appendix D), which provided in-depth information about the study and what participation would involve. The forms were distributed via email or WhatsApp depending on the participant's preferences. Much of the information was also repeated verbally during recruitment and before conducting the interview, particularly emphasising the voluntary nature of participation, the freedom to leave the research without any untoward consequences, as well as the freedom to decline to answer questions they felt were uncomfortable. Participants provided written consent by completing the form that they were furnished with upon recruitment into the study. They were encouraged to send back the form at their earliest convenience considering their busy academic schedules, and would typically return the form within five days from the initial recruitment either through email or WhatsApp.

3.5.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

One of the core ethical values that governs research is that of ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of participants by concealing their private information (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], n.d.). In this study, only the researchers involved were privy to participants' private information to ensure that it remained confidential. Participants' private 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. Maintaining participants' anonymity is also important to keep any identifying details confidential. As the researchers interacted with the participants personally during the recruitment and/or the interview stage of the research, absolute anonymity in participating cannot be guaranteed. However, pseudonyms were employed in reporting research results to maintain participants' anonymity.

3.5.3. Emotional Risk

The principle of non-maleficence stresses that researchers should ensure that no harm should come to participants during the research process (HPCSA, n.d.). In this study, emotional distress was the most likely source of harm that could have affected participants. The interviews required them to reflect on personal experiences that have the potential to be emotionally arousing. The topic of the study however was not especially sensitive, so the risk of emotional distress was minimal and there was no incident of a participant being noticeably distressed during the research process.

Nonetheless, the participants were always made aware that there are psychological services that are available to them in the event that they needed them as outlined in Appendix D.

3.5.4. Ensuring Trustworthiness of the Study

Several criteria are used to assess the quality of a qualitative study. Among them are transferability, dependability, confirmability, credibility, and reflexivity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Willig, 2013). To ensure transferability and dependability, a thick description of the research process and methodology is used. In addition, the researchers in the study co-coded the data; that is, they coded the same interview transcripts separately to ensure that observations and conclusions made by one researcher were noted or confirmed by other researchers, thereby ensuring confirmability. Moreover, comparing the study's findings with those of studies previously conducted on similar topics will also be used to ensure confirmability.

3.5.4.1. *Credibility*

Credibility is concerned with how true the research findings are (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure credibility, peer examination and reflexivity were used in the study. The researcher's supervisors, who are knowledgeable in the topic of study could be relied upon to critically evaluate the researcher's work and ensured that every component of the study was conducted in line with the appropriate research and ethical standards. Additionally, Willig (2013) indicates that verifying one's accounts with those of other researchers/previous literature is also a good measure of ensuring credibility. Thus, the researcher will also utilize comparisons of this study's findings and related literature to ensure credibility.

3.5.5. Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to a self-awareness wherein a researcher can acknowledge their subjectivity in the research process (Willig, 2013). It enables the researcher to better recognize how they shape the research process or are shaped by it. Through reflexivity, a researcher challenges their assumptions and perspectives, as well as those of the broader social world (Palaganas et al., 2017). It further ensures that the researcher's biases and assumptions are made transparent such that the reader can know how they may have influenced interpretations. Willig (2013) highlights different approaches to reflexivity found in qualitative studies, in particular, epistemological reflexivity and personal reflexivity.

3.5.5.1. *Epistemological Reflexivity*

The importance of epistemological reflexivity stems from the knowledge that what a researcher assumes about reality shapes key aspects of the research process; for example, the research question, research design and method of analysis (Palaganas et al., 2017). One of the assumptions that I hold about reality is that we live in a society where people are generally prejudiced against those who are different from them or those who do not belong in their 'in-group', particularly as it relates to race and nationality. I also believe issues of race are complex, influenced by a plethora of variables not limited to, but most significantly, centuries of oppression and colonialism. This is reflected in my choice to study not just immigrant students in general, but AI students in particular.

However, in making sense of the findings, I took care to ensure that I interpreted the participants' experiences in a way that best objectively explained the results or that was more of a reflection of how they experience/explain relationships and well-being rather than imposing my assumptions about racism and xenophobia on the findings. Furthermore, my supervisors critically reviewed initial drafts of this study's findings to ensure that my observations and conclusions truly reflected what the participants were saying, and not what I may be biased to see based on my assumptions about reality. As such, they played an instrumental role in minimizing the extent to which knowledge biases shaped the final presentation of findings.

3.5.5.2. *Personal Reflexivity*

Personal reflexivity focuses on how a researcher's opinions and beliefs influence the research process and how the research itself affects the researcher (Willig, 2013). As I share a few attributes with the participants, it is imperative that I reflect on my shared experiences with them as well as my differences from them, and how these influenced my thoughts and actions throughout the research process.

I am a young Black South African, and I am a student like the participants. I attend the same university as the participants and have my thoughts and experiences concerning the overall atmosphere of the university and developing relationships on campus.

Generally, I find the university campus space to be tolerant towards different peoples as it has a very diverse student body. Through my past observations, it appears as though national origin is not something that significantly determines and/or dictates student relations

around campus. I truly believe that the university campus space is tolerant, and I was aware that this could lead me to gloss over the participants' experiences going into the research.

However, as a South African, I am also aware that I am blind to many of the experiences of international students on campus. As such, in an attempt to keep this potential bias from influencing the study's findings, I ensured that follow-up questions regarding students' experiences were not suggestive to prevent responses that would support my beliefs, but that instead reflected participants' true feelings on the subject. I also approached the data analysis process with an open attitude, aware that I would come across patterns or themes that might contradict my opinions and beliefs.

Concerning relational experiences, I find that it is generally easy to interact and develop friendships with students in residences, classrooms, cafeterias, and other densely populated areas around campus. However, it has not been common in my experience that these campus relations develop into meaningful and long-lasting friendships. Nevertheless, I am aware that the process of developing and maintaining human relationships is a very subjective experience, and did not assume that my experience will be echoed by those of my participants. As such, I did not find it necessarily difficult to separate my relational experiences from those of the participants in order to engage in interviews from an objective position.

A phenomenon that encouraged me to not conflate my experiences with those of the participants was the common occurrence of social media gate keepers and participants asking whether I was an international student 'as well'. This would typically take place during recruitment or before the interviews. Although the question could pass for simple curiosity, it might also suggest that international students are vigilant or more aware of the nationality of the person they are interacting with; especially if the individual is singling them out as participants for a research study. It is possible that this factor influenced the recruitment process and perhaps even how much information participants were willing to divulge during interviews, depending on how comfortable they were with the whole process.

After all, research has shown that South Africans are notoriously xenophobic (Dube, 2019) and that international students come to South Africa having an acute awareness of this xenophobia (Herman & Kombe, 2019). Given this knowledge, it is within reason to posit that the issue of nationality might have affected recruitment and data collection. Overall, the phenomenon cemented the knowledge that how I occupy and experience the university campus space, as well as surrounding areas, may be very different from international students' experiences. I regularly reflected on these experiences in my diary, as it enabled me to candidly

express my feelings about the process. It also made me aware of how my assumptions were affecting how I perceived and made sense of the process.

3.6. Research Process: Sampling

Maximum variation purposive sampling and snowballing were used to recruit potential participants. Purposive sampling entails seeking out a specific population for study (Etikan et al., 2015). Potential participants were initially sought out using social media. The researcher approached various international student organisations affiliated with the university that had a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The researcher informed the administrators of the social media accounts about the call for research participants, what the study was about, as well as who the target population was. The administrators then distributed the information to their respective groups or social media audience, who were provided with the researcher's contact details and they reached out if they were interested in participating.

In addition to recruiting through social media, potential participants were also approached in person. In-person recruitment was carried out by three different researchers involved in the larger study. The researchers involved in the study were located in a student-dense area close to the university and, as such, were conveniently positioned to approach students around campus premises and various other student hotspots. Students who had agreed to participate were then asked to refer any of their friends or acquaintances who might be interested in participating. This is how snowballing was utilized in the study.

However, not every international student that indicated an interest in participating was allowed to participate. African international students who were not born in the country but moved to South Africa at any point in their lives and had since acquired permanent residence were not allowed to participate. These students were excluded as they are more likely to have naturalised as well as have their relational support structure (family, friends etc.) present in the country.

On a related note, there were inclusion criteria that guided the researchers in selecting potential participants:

- Students must have been from another African country other than South Africa as AI students were the target.
- Potential participants must have been at the university for at least one year for them to have had experience on campus and thus, something to reflect back on.
- Students of all levels of study, undergraduate and postgraduate (honours, master's, and PhD), were eligible for participation.

Ultimately, the sample consisted of students from a variety of African countries, disciplines, and levels of study. Data collection for the larger study is ongoing, but from the 28 transcripts that are present in the dataset, only excerpts from 16 of the transcripts are included in the final presentation of findings for this study. The whole data set was read consecutively for analysis purposes with the intent to use no more than 20 transcripts considering the scope of the study, and at around 16 transcripts data saturation was reached. Although the remaining transcripts were read, they contained no new information that was relevant to this study's objectives.

A description of the participants whose transcripts were used in this study is provided in the table below.

Table 3.6.1.

Participant Statistics

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Level of Study	Country of Origin
Anesu	19	Female	Undergraduate	Zimbabwe
Angela	21	Female	Undergraduate	Zambia
Ayo	28	Male	Postgraduate (Master's)	Nigeria
Christopher	22	Male	Undergraduate	Tanzania
David	38	Male	Postgraduate (Master's)	Nigeria
Ethan	27	Male	Undergraduate	Zambia
Evans	23	Male	Undergraduate	Zimbabwe
Fatima	n/a	Female	Undergraduate	Kenya
Joy	30	Male	Postgraduate (Master's)	Zambia
Khanya	29	Female	Postgraduate (Master's)	Eswatini
Leroy	21	Male	Undergraduate	Zimbabwe
Tadiwa	23	Male	Undergraduate	Zimbabwe
Tafadzwa	21	Male	Undergraduate	Zimbabwe
Thomas	27	Male	Postgraduate (Master's)	Zambia

Steven	26	Male	Postgraduate (Master's)	Zambia
Victoria	22	Female	Postgraduate (Honour's)	Namibia

In summary, excluding one participant that did not supply their age, the mean age for this study's sample is 24 years. Of the 16 participants, five were female and 11 of them were male, while the majority (nine) of the participants were undergraduate students and only seven were postgraduate students. Furthermore, most (five) of the AI students pursuing postgraduate degrees were enrolled at Master's level and most of the AI students were from SADC countries (i.e., Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Eswatini). Only three of the participants were from countries outside of the SADC region; specifically, Nigeria and Kenya.

3.7. Research Process: Data Collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Interviews are considered an appropriate method of data collection in interpretivist research (Pham, 2018). Semi-structured interviews can guide and facilitate the conversation between the researcher and the participant through prepared questions, while simultaneously providing the freedom to probe participants' answers specific to their narrative. The ability to question and probe the participants allows the researcher to uncover and gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and feelings (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). In this study, a semi-structured interview was most suitable because students often addressed different topics and had varied experiences. Consequently, the interviewers had to be flexible to have the right follow-up questions and subsequently carry out a successful interview. The semi-structured orientation permitted such flexibility. The interview guide can be perused in Appendix E.

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. Face to face interviews were not usually selected likely due to the corona virus pandemic, however, the appropriate distance was maintained during contact interviews for safety.

Interviews lasted for 45 minutes on average and they were recorded using a digital audio recorder for face-to-face interviews, while Zoom interviews and phone-call interviews

were recorded using the relevant functionalities within the Zoom app and the call recording app respectfully. Consent to record the interview was always obtained before recording the face-to-face and Zoom meeting interviews, and participants were made aware that the phone call was being recorded before commencing with an interview over the phone.

3.8. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible method of analysis that allows the researcher to report on patterns that they identify in the data, which they subsequently draw interpretations from (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This is done through a methodical analysis of data allowing the researcher to identify, interpret, describe and report on various aspects of the research. Using Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-step thematic analysis process, the following procedure was adhered to:

(1) Familiarising oneself with the data, through immersing oneself in the data by reading interview transcripts multiple times prior to any coding or analysis. As the researcher transcribed almost half of the interview transcripts, this enhanced familiarity with the data through repeatedly listening to interview audios during the transcription process. (2) This was followed by generating codes from the data; (3) most of which were used to formulate themes and subthemes. The data analysis software Atlas.ti was used for coding and organizing the codes into themes. During the coding process, there were outliers, some of which are included in the final presentation of the findings. The researcher was of the opinion that they should be included because they are important to understanding the AI students' relational experiences holistically and to answering the research questions, although they do not fit in with the majority of other AI students' experiences. (4) The themes and subthemes originating from the codes were given names and constantly reviewed until finalised. (5) The finalised themes were then given definitions; (6) after which this research report was written.

The research report includes verbatim data extracts to support the choice of themes and any claims made from the findings which can be read in detail in Chapter 4 of this paper. It is important to note that the process did not occur in one linear sequence. Rather, it was iterative, involving a constant back-and-forth between the different steps as was necessary for the endeavour to achieve quality final outputs.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This chapter is a presentation of findings from data collected during the semi-structured interviews. The presentation of the findings is guided by the following research questions. (i) How do African international students experience relationships at the university campus space; and, (ii) How do the relational experiences of African international students contribute to their well-being. To provide a detailed account of the AI students' experiences, the findings are divided into themes and subthemes which are listed in the table below. In presenting the excerpts in the chapter, 'UG' denotes undergraduate student, while 'PG' denotes postgraduate student. In addition, the numbers in the parentheses next to participants' quotes (e.g., '21') indicate the participants' ages.

Table 4.1.

Theme Outline

Themes	Subthemes
1. Conducive Spaces for Relationship Formation	- Classrooms as a positive relational space - Organised activities and other spaces conducive to relationship formation - The university as a welcoming environment
2. African International Students' Interactional Styles in Forming Relationships	
3. Language Barriers in Delaying Relationship Formation	
4. Relational Patterns	- Classroom relations as surface-level relationships - Finding comfort in foreign national friends
5. Relationships and Well-Being	- Academic relationships - The value of friends in times of need - 'No one is an island'

4.2. Theme 1: Conducive Spaces for Relationship Formation

This theme addresses how AI students develop relationships in their time at university. It consists of three subthemes: the first discusses the formation of relationships in classrooms specifically, while the second subtheme looks into how other spaces such as university residences and organised group activities facilitate relationship development. The last theme, 'the university as a welcoming environment', explores how the university environment may have an influence on how other spaces in the university are experienced. The theme provides an overall understanding of how space shapes AI students' relational experiences on campus.

4.2.1. Subtheme 1: Classrooms as a Positive Relational Space

Most of the AI students' relations begin in the classroom. These classroom relations also typically make up the students' main social circle as described below:

> ***Tadiwa****: Oh and friends on campus… yeah I'm not that much of a bubbly character but then yeah I have a few, mostly who are doing my degree or who I have mutual modules with. Ja that's mostly the people who are in my circle.* (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG)

> ***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 AI students in this study reflect on how the frequency of contact facilitates relationship development. The classroom as a positive relational space is engendered by shared interest, a mutual need for communication, and the amount of time in which such a space is shared. Bennet et al. (2013) confirm 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) also note that students are more successful at developing relationships in class due to repeated contact.

In South Africa, Ratshilaya (2017) found that international students find it easier to make friends when they make efforts to communicate and make friends in class, and then take those friendships outside of class. As immigrants in a new country, classrooms are spaces where most academic activities occur from the beginning of their studies. They provide numerous opportunities to interact with others, while shared courses and modules may serve as easy 'material' for conversation stimulation. As such, there are a multitude of aspects that make the classroom a positive relational space. The findings in this study are congruent with those from previous studies, both in the general student and international student populations (Bennet et al., 2013; Rienties & Nolan, 2014).

4.2.2. Subtheme 2: 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).
>
> ***Tafadzwa**: And also sports, I used to be in [student] res[idence] in 2019 so ja, I did meet a few people there.* (Zimbabwe, 21, Male, UG)
>
> ***Thomas**: So there's, social events held by…my scholarship for instance, and my residence also.* (Zambia, 27, Male, PG)
>
> ***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)

Each of the above quotes demonstrates that relationships may also develop outside of class in other 'organizational' spaces. That is, spaces where students come together and share a common characteristic amongst themselves such as engaging in sports with a fellow group of students, students funded by the same bursary, and those living in the same residence/affiliated with the same day house. These spaces provide opportunities for AI 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 organizations (Naik et al., 2017; Wawera & McCamley, 2020). Naik et al. (2017) posit that international students make extended efforts to be involved in organizations because they place a high value on their education in the country. Similarly, Mudhovozi (2011) 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 are catered to, they are better able to cope with academic pressures (Mudhovozi, 2011), 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. They further indicate that the 'student experience' is "a co-construct between human actors and the space within which they act and relate" (Tumubweinee & Luescher, 2019, p. 2). In addition, the findings also 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.

4.2.3. Subtheme 3: 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. AI students describe the university environment as comfortable and relaxed, with plenty of social events and support structures in place to assist with the transition into the university space. When asked to reflect on their overall experience at the university, the AI 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)

***Tafadzwa**: Ja my experience on campus has been really chill.* (Zimbabwe, 21, Male, UG)

The participants generally speak positively about their experiences on campus and how they experience the campus atmosphere as positive. This includes their interactions with classmates, staff, as well as structures that are in place to aid students in navigating the academic and social environment. Such a positive space appears to increase the AI students' sense of belonging as indicated in the first and second 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).

The importance of space in relationships and well-being is explicated by the conceptual framework of student engagement as developed by Kahu et al. (2017). In their theory, structural influences (the university) and psychosocial influences (relationships) converge to influence the general student experience. The interaction of these elements merges to shape and affect students' self-efficacy, emotions, sense of belonging, and well-being (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Thus, as the AI students in this study experience both the institution and the relationships within the institution as positive, they are more inclined to take initiative in developing relationships inside and outside the classroom and are also more likely to experience higher levels of well-being.

The findings in this study deviate from previous findings of the literature on AI students in other South African universities, where narratives of discrimination perpetrated by local students and lecturers dominate (Iwara et al., 2017; Ralarala et al., 2016). In these studies, students report that they experience the university space as hostile, they contend with higher

incidences of xenophobia, and often have negative perceptions of locals. It is possible that AI students' relational experiences may depend on the respective universities' student racial/ethnic demographic. To illustrate, the South African Black student population in the two universities studied by Iwara et al. (2017) is approximately 95% and 99% respectively (DHET, 2011; University of Zululand, 2021), while the South African Black student population in the study conducted by Ralarala et al. (2016) is 66% (Ralarala et al., 2021).

In the present study, the university has a comparatively smaller margin of difference between Black students (54%) and White students (37%) (University of Pretoria, 2020), relative to the studies cited previously. Therefore, it may be the case that in universities that have a more racially or ethnically diverse student demographic, individuals tend to be more tolerant to those different from them resulting 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). After all, incidences of discrimination and xenophobia in South Africa occur most frequently in environments where there is a predominantly Black population (Lee & Sehoole, 2019).

4.3. Theme 2: African International Students' Interactional Styles in Forming Relationships

This theme explores how AI students' interactional styles play a role in their relational experiences. Interactional styles are relationship-seeking behaviours that are rooted in individuals' preferences, dispositions, and *willingness* to seek relationships. To illustrate how this shapes AI students' interactional experiences, some excerpts are presented below:

> ***Joy****: So in as much as it is challenging, it has not been that difficult for me to interact and meet with the new personnel because I tried to understand how people behave.* Zambia, 30, Male *(PG)*

Being open to reaching out and interacting with people enabled some of the AI students to form relationships without difficulties. Steven and Angela also stated:

> ***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 reflect that there are AI students who are willing to make the effort to interact with people and are also inclined to join more campus-based organizations to make friends. Their behaviour appears to be largely determined by the type of person they are, i.e., "interactive person", "social person", suggesting a generally outgoing personality. Doroszuk et al. (2019) describe these types of individuals who strongly desire the company of others and who often make efforts to associate with strangers as extraverts. They further state that these individuals tend to make friends easily as their interactive styles and even body language create positive impressions on their interaction partners, resulting in people wanting to spend more time with them, thus forming relationships. Due to their vibrant personalities, individuals tend to describe initial contact with extraverts as 'friends at first sight', whereas relations with their diametrical opposites, introverts, are often experienced as a "gradual transition into friendship" (Nelson & Thorne, 2012, p. 1). Consequently, extraverts tend to have wider friendship networks.

It was noted in the findings that not all AI have the same interactional style of being sociable and willing to reach out to people to form relationships; some find it very difficult due to their more reserved personalities. The following AI students expressed these 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)

In the last quote, the AI student had a difficult time making friends in their first year and they attributed the initial difficulty to be mainly due to their introversion. Generally, these participants account for their smaller friendship circles or any difficulties they initially had in

making friends by disclosing their introverted dispositions or what their preferences in friendship networks are. Aydun's (2020) findings corroborate the international students' assertions, as introversion also emerged as a barrier to relationship formation for international students in Turkey. Conclusions drawn by Doroszuk et al. (2019) and Harris and Vazire (2016) suggest that introverts have difficulty in forming relationships or have smaller friendship networks because they tend to be pessimistic in their social interactions, relative to extraverts who are usually more comfortable in interactions with others and often assume their interaction partner finds them likeable. Although the AI students in this study may not provide in-depth reasons for their tendencies to not "*just strike up a conversation*", it is possible that the aforementioned observations might be at play in the AI students' interactions. Besides being an introvert, unwillingness to engage and interact with other people was also found to hinder relationship formation. An AI student explains:

> ***Evans**: I think it's a lack of willingness on my side just to put in more effort but then I wouldn't say that it's difficult…like I could say I don't have too many friends outside of my class but then if I think of my flat mate, he has lots of friends because he's willing to you know, to talk to everyone and like be out there. So I don't think it's difficult to make friends but then, it's just the amount of effort you're willing to, to put in.* (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG)

In this excerpt, the lack of willingness to interact and engage with others emerged as an element that determines relationship development and the size of one's social network. Harris and Vazire (2016) argue that it is not uncommon for introverts especially to be unwilling to engage with strangers and that this behavioural trait negatively affects their friendship networks. Intentional unwillingness to form relations with local students was also noted in Aydun (2020) for a variety of reasons including language barriers and socioeconomic differences. In the present study, unwillingness may be intentional due to preferences of keeping one's friendship circles small (Tafadzwa) or just due to a tendency to not exert effort in creating friendships (Evans). As with other studies, unwillingness in this study may also be caused by language barriers as will be demonstrated shortly.

In this study, the interactional styles exhibited by the AI students determined their willingness to seek or avoid relationships. Depending on their dispositions or preferences, their resultant behaviour in interactions might be such that it promotes or hinders relationship formation. The findings in this theme re-affirm the knowledge that the friendship making

process is also governed by internal factors (Harris & Vazire, 2016), not only external influences or circumstances such as the university environment or the attitudes of other students. Besides the described interactional styles, language barriers were a significant challenge that discouraged AI students from engaging with local students to enable them to form relationships.

4.4. Theme 3: Language Barriers in Delaying Relationship Formation

This theme describes how AI students have had negative relational experiences due to having a lack of proficiency in South African languages. A few students explain their experiences with language dynamics on campus as follows:

> ***Angela:*** *If I'm being very honest because of the like, the language barrier and not being able to relate to the majority of South Africans…So that's been quite difficult, like the whole language barrier.* (Zambia, 21, Female, UG)

> ***Ethan****: That's why I decided look, I will just be with Zambians, and even if I am given a project, the first people I choose is Zambians, because I know communication will be much easier. Everybody expects you to speak a certain language and when you kind of speak this language they respond to you in another language which you can't understand. So it kind of takes you down like that confidence of talking to them or try and talk to them or making an effort…So it's everybody, starting from the students, to the workers, to the people in the cafeteria, so it becomes that thing where you even feel like you don't have the confidence to talk to them because of that. So the language barrier is not just that, even if they know that you don't understand, they are still going to continue speaking that language.* (Zambia, 27, Male, UG)

International students often experience language difficulties in host institutions, especially with English (Stebleton, 2012). Likewise, international students in South Africa struggle with English, but indigenous languages such as, isiZulu, Sepedi, and Setswana which may be spoken by students and staff alike, also present a challenge (Mokgwasi, 2017). Therefore, while some of the AI students might have a good command of English, they might still struggle with local languages. As the second participant indicates, the difficulties that they are subjected to because of language barriers may affect their self-esteem and/or confidence (Ramos et al., 2014; Ratshilaya, 2017), which makes integration difficult (Lim & Pham, 2016). As a consequence, AI students might go to extreme lengths to avoid local students, preferring instead to work and interact mainly with co-nationals as in the above excerpt. However,

interaction with locals cannot be permanently avoided. Because of this, some AI students eventually make efforts to interact with and become comfortable with locals:

> ***Ethan**: I think it's just up to a point where I became comfortable, where I just see people for people and not really for ja…having a lot of those people, South Africans around me, there are a lot of South Africans around me.* (Zambia, 27, Male, UG)

Ethan eventually became comfortable with local students and had several close South African friends. This demonstrates how an unwillingness to relate with others due to language barriers can delay relationship formation. Another student expresses:

> ***Angela**: But I really tried to make efforts to learn the language to be able to relate to people and to the people in South Africa…So my friends like let's say in first year, most of my friends were Tswana…I still had that struggle, the language barrier, but they were always compromising, like they always knew that you know Angie doesn't speak…she is not fluent in Tswana or Zulu, so they accommodated me in that way.* (Zambia, 21, Female, UG)

Taken together, the AI students' sentiments indicate that despite the challenges posed by the inability to speak local languages, some of the students may sometimes develop the courage to make efforts to improve their relational experiences in the host society. This happens naturally through repeated exposure to local students or through intentional efforts to learn local languages. Mudhovozi (2011) also states that international students who make efforts to learn local languages to ease their transition into host societies tend to have more positive social experiences because of their frequent exposure to locals. As illustrated in the findings, when the AI student makes efforts to integrate, the local students also exhibit positive behaviours by accommodating the AI students' language limitations, essentially 'meeting them halfway'. Consequently, students may end up experiencing more positive social relationships, which may enhance well-being as opposed to negative relational experiences, which are associated with poor psychological and social well-being (Redfern, 2016).

4.5. Theme 4: Relational Patterns

Within AI students' relationships, there were some emerging patterns. The first notable pattern was that classroom relations often remain academic in nature (i.e., surface-level relationships). The other relational pattern that was identified was that AI students generally

have more international student friends than South African friends. This theme provides more detail and nuance to some of the relational experiences reported in the previous themes.

4.5.1. Subtheme 1: Classroom Relations as Surface-Level Relationships

Most of the AI students' relationships developed in the classroom were described as 'professional' or academic in nature:

> ***Angela:*** *I think it was because our relationship was purely based on academics, even though yes here and there we used to talk about, we used to relate on a personal level, etc., etc., but I think it was more on the academic side, and talk about academics all the time, instead of personal/emotional relationships with each other.* (Zambia, 21, Female, UG)

> ***Steven:*** *...But is in some ways more like a professional relationship...We boost each other professionally. But when it comes to like the other guys…like my friends from the soccer group, I think our relationship is more of a social relationship.* (Zambia, 26, Male, PG)

> ***Evans:*** *As for the other friends like, like which I have with classmates of mine, our relationship is more of a, maybe professional relationship.* (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG)

> ***Fatima****: So it's still good, it's still a good experience, but it's mostly academic.* (Kenya, Female, UG)

In the excerpts presented above, it is apparent that classroom friendships mostly serve academic needs – they are surface-level relationships. The tendency for these friendships to feel superficial is reported in other studies (Mokgwasi, 2017; Wawera & McCamley, 2020), but they do not necessarily preclude participating in leisure activities by virtue of being primarily academic in nature. To make sense of this pattern, Wayt (2012) put forth that this may occur because these relationships develop in spaces where the university exercises a lot of control. To clarify, Wayt (2012) observed that the 'strongest' relationships are those that develop in more relaxed social situations, where "the university has the least amount of control" (p. 4). Thus, the classroom is a space in which the university exercises a lot of control relative to, for example, residential spaces and other student-based (and often student-led) organizations where there are usually no immediate authority figures (lecturers), and where standards of conduct are more relaxed and informal.

Some regulations that can apply in classrooms are class length, student-lecturer conduct, prohibited activities such as smoking and eating, which can create a strict atmosphere of efficiency and professionalism. This can subsequently influence how relationships are approached and experienced within the space, leading to friendships developed in classroom spaces being primarily academic in nature. However, it is also important to note that there were a few cases where the classroom relations evolved into more intimate and personal relationships. To illustrate, some of the AI students shared the following sentiments:

> ***Evans**: I think I'm very close to, to one guy [from class], ja the relationship is great we speak almost every day and then…he's there when I'm facing difficult times and I'm also there for him so, ja it's, it's a relationship which benefits both.* (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG)

> ***Ethan**: In the same [class] project I was given it was this, I think it was three, four Indian guys, and there was one white guy… they helped me and everything…they didn't even treat me like you know it's a classmate or anything, they would invite me to their place, they made me feel as comfortable as possible, also helped me with the project as much as possible…because they were being like okay let's eat at this place then, you know it's a far place, they all have cars…but they will just tell you no man like if you need transport you can tell us we can come to pick you up, you don't need to give us anything…it was very cool…it ended up like it was one of the best groups I've ever had and I'm still very good friends with those same guys.* (Zambia, 27, Male, UG)

The above quotes illustrate that some classroom relations can overcome the professional 'barrier'. For the classroom relations to evolve into meaningful long-lasting friendships, it appears that they have to be characterized by mutual academic, emotional, and social support. The relationships have to transcend activities or conversations that mainly revolve around academic work and should, as implied by the participant's statements, be relationships in which the AI students feel a sense of security and comfort. Friendships that are perceived as high in emotional and social support are associated with well-being, including low levels of stress (Kenny et al., 2013; MHF, 2016). Nonetheless, it appears that not many AI students can experience these benefits to their well-being from their *classroom* friends as most classroom relations remain professional.

4.5.2. Subtheme 2: Finding Comfort in Foreign National Friends

Another relational pattern that was observed in this study is that the majority of AI students find comfort and relate more with their foreign friends compared to their South African friends. The following are some of the sentiments from the participants:

> ***Angela**: I guess I would say, about 70% of my friends or 60% of my friends are foreign, are from Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe and ja Botswana, and the rest are South African…I feel like me and my foreign friends relate more to each other, not just me and my Zambian friends, but me and my foreign friends relate more, compared to me trying to form relationships with South Africans, it's completely different. Honestly, I can relate more to my Congolese friends because our food is very similar, our general culture is very similar, to my Nigerian friends, to my friends from Cameroon, you know I just relate to them more.* (Zambia, 21, Female, UG)

> ***Tafadzwa**: But obviously it's very comforting to know that well, someone else is a foreigner so maybe you can share some of the things that happen regarding foreigners in the country.* (Zimbabwe, 21, Male, UG)

The participants' statements reveal that AI students gravitate towards or develop closer personal connections with other international students because they share many things in common as immigrants, which increases the sense of relatability and comfort within these relationships. This relationship pattern, as well as the accompanying reasons for why the pattern is observed, is aligned with the majority of the literature on international students globally and in South Africa (Lim & Pham, 2016; Mokgwasi, 2017; Ratshilaya, 2017; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). It is highly possible that the comfort that occurs as a result of these more 'familiar' relationships can have well-being enhancing effects. However, Chigeza and Roos's (2012) findings indicate that when immigrants hold on to home country values and culture, it might lead to a lack of integration due to prioritising relationships with fellow immigrants, which can evoke hostile reactions from locals, thereby limiting the prospects of relationship formation. Similarly, Rienties and Nolan (2014) and Lim and Pham's (2016) findings illustrate that seeking to build relationships primarily with other foreign students interferes with the development and maintenance of relations with locals. Consequently, in prioritizing foreign relations, AI students might unknowingly sacrifice some of the well-being outcomes associated with relating with local students as will be discussed later in the chapter. Another student provides a different reason for having more foreign national friends:

> ***Thomas**: I have more international friends because there are few South African students…I think in my class out of 30, maybe South African students you can say that there would be, maybe, maybe 7.* (Zambia, 27, Male, PG)

The participant attributes circumstantial factors as determining the ratio of their friendship group. Their environment determines the types of individuals that are available for them to relate to. In agreement with this assertion, Bennet et al. (2013) encourage researchers to consider the size of respective ethnicities/nationalities within classrooms when examining international students' friendship networks, as these also shape relational patterns. Opportunities for relational engagement are strongly associated with the breadth and *type* of friendship networks that students have (Danby et al., 2012; Stauder, 2014). This further highlights the importance of opportunities or spaces being made available to international students so they can interact and relate with other/local students.

The findings from this subtheme have illustrated that the relational patterns that manifest among the AI student groups can be shaped by different dynamics. It may be intentional on their part to pursue relations with other AI students because it is easier to relate with them, or circumstantial as discussed above. It was also discussed that due to the tendency for classroom relations to remain academic in nature, some well-being benefits are sacrificed by AI students unknowingly.

4.6. Theme 5: Relationships and Well-Being

This theme explores the various relationships that contribute to the well-being of AI students. There are academic relationships, where students' mutual support plays a central role in their academic success. In addition, there are also social relationships (beyond academic support/activities) that contribute to the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of AI students. The latter types of relationships focus mainly on the *presence* of other students and 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.

4.6.1. Subtheme 1: Academic Relationships

Students support each other academically within their relationships. AI students spoke at length about the value of their classroom relations and how integral they have been to their educational success:

> ***Fatima**: So we formed a group and we actually have a study group so whenever there's a difficulty in an assignment or whatever, we have, what do you call them, video calls and we help each other out.* (Kenya, Female, UG)

> ***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 AI students received from others was described in many ways. Students share notes, update one another on missed work, and assist one another when help is needed understanding course material. Drawing from the above quotes, AI students also compare their performance with those of their peers to gauge how well they are doing, and they may even emulate their friends' positive study habits. In agreement with previous studies (Keeling, 2014; Wayt, 2012), the academic support that students provide to one another is portrayed as integral to their success.

Although these findings are not unique to AI students, they demonstrate that the AI students in this study can successfully integrate with their peers, South African and otherwise, to maximise their academic experiences and success. This is noteworthy because AI 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 & Mulu, 2016). Other AI students further reflect on their experiences of academic support:

> ***Evans**: He wasn't able to register as early as he would have wanted to…during the time that he was not here he still needed you know, to keep up with what was going on in class…I was able you know, to sort of like check in…just telling him that okay this happened in this module, or this assignment is due on this date, this is the new stuff that we've done in class so, in that time when he was not registered, still he was able you know, to keep up with what was going on.* (Zimbabwe, 23, Male, UG)

> ***Ethan**: The day the recess started I was hit by a car, that was in my second semester. Ja so, after hospital it took some time to recover, I came back to TUKS, I was willing to go on, I was told to rest for about 3 months because I couldn't walk…the Zambian guys so they would generally maybe bring me the class notes or come and explain some things to me and all that.* (Zambia, 27, Male, UG)

The above excerpts demonstrate the important role that friends play in AI students' academic journeys, especially in times of adversity. They exhibit how there are pivotal moments in one's academic journey where the assistance or support one is given by their friend can alter one's academic journey or academic success. These and the previous statements from the participants illustrate that AI students cope better with academic challenges when they receive academic support from their peers, with potential well-being enhancing outcomes. Although numerous studies note the 'everyday' positive academic influences due to friendships such as increased cognitive understanding, academic performance and class attendance (DeAngelo, 2014; Picton et al., 2017; Schreiber & Yu, 2016), it is rarely illustrated or exemplified as to how friends can be especially helpful in times of need. The above findings assist in filling in this gap.

4.6.2 Subtheme 2: The Value of Friends in Times of Need

Outside of academic support, the relationships that AI students have with their friends also satisfy several social needs; in the AI 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 AI students' reflections indicate 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 is aligned with Kansky's (2018) observation that individuals can cater to their needs for survival when in groups better than they would in

solitude. When their basic survival needs are met, they are likely to experience higher levels of physical and mental well-being (Narvaez, 2018).

While some AI students mentioned being supported in terms of their basic needs being fulfilled, relating with local students, in particular, appeared to contribute in assisting the AI students to acclimatise to the South African environment. The AI students reflect 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, the participant speaks about a time when a taxi driver was speaking to them in a South African language during a period of heightened xenophobia in the city. One of their South African friends was able to come to their aid and answer the taxi driver's question before their foreign status could be exposed, thereby preventing exposure to the potential danger of physical harm or discrimination. This not only demonstrates the value of friends in general but also shows one of the benefits of having a local friend as an immigrant student; they can mitigate potentially dangerous or awkward situations. Altogether, the excerpts demonstrate the importance of relational interactions between local students and AI students. These relationships can assist AI students to understand the South African environment, its people, and to learn local languages which may ultimately lead to AI students being better equipped to navigate different spaces in the local environment due to having 'insider' knowledge.

Research has shown that the presence of support networks is important for many aspects of everyday life, including integration (Lessard-Philips et al., 2019). When international students interact with local students academically or socially, it creates an avenue for cultural exchange (Ratshilaya, 2017); which consequently eases their integration into the South African society. Rahman (2018) also found a significant relationship between international students' adjustment to local culture and 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 AI students (Li et al., 2013).

4.6.3. Subtheme 3: 'No One is an Island'

***Fatima**: Like no one is, is an island you need people.* (Kenya, Female, UG)

The mere presence of people in one's life or knowing that one is not alone in the challenges they face can improve AI students' well-being, for example:

> ***Thomas**: Yeah as humans we are social beings and no man is an island or no woman is an island so…yeah you cannot feel to be alone and also…there's a social side of it so you want people to be around you.* (Zambia, 27, Male, PG)

> ***Fatima**: 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 AI 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 affirm the notion that AI students' psychological well-being can be enhanced by knowing that their difficult experiences are shared by others. In this way, their relationships serve a protective function by ameliorating stressful experiences (Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2018). Murray et al. (2002) concur with this argument when they state that people are happier when they feel that a person they share a

relationship with shares their experience and understands them. In addition to shared experiences, conversation also emerged as an essential quality in AI students' relationships:

> ***Khanya**: Well for emotional support mostly…like having someone to talk to…has been like a sort of my emotional support.* (Eswatini, 29, Female, PG)

> ***Leroy**: Mostly because they're there for you…when you need them…like most of my friends are from school and I spend most of my day with them…like we can discuss more or less anything, I can learn from them.* (Zimbabwe, 21, Male, UG)

The AI students' experiences highlight how one's social interactions (relationships) are intertwined with their emotional well-being. Having friends to talk to appears to enhance their well-being. This may happen because being listened to and perceiving empathy from other people creates positive emotions and reduces anxiety levels (Mowat, 2010). It also generally helps individuals feel good about themselves, that is, it improves well-being (Mowat, 2010).

Thus far, the findings indicate that AI students' friendships positively contribute to their academic and social experiences. Positive relational experiences, whether in the social or academic realm, may have positive influences on the emotional and psychological well-being of AI students. However, besides them receiving support, AI students also talk about how their well-being is 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 AI students' excerpts shift the perception of well-being as a unidirectional phenomenon where the things that others do for an individual or things that happen to an individual are what determine their well-being. In these cases, well-being is bidirectional; it is also realized in the things that an AI student does for other people. Essentially, helping others is as necessary and important to their well-being as receiving help (Kansky, 2018). White (2020) argues that collective societies have a tendency towards a collective view of wellness, where one's well-being is intrinsically tied to one's relationship with others (White, 2020;

Wilson et al., 2018). As most African societies have a propensity for collectivist views, it follows that the AI students in this study espouse values that include being supportive of others as important to their well-being.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed the findings from this study in five main themes. The first theme established how different spaces are important for creating opportunities for engagement and by extension, opportunities to make friends. The theme also discussed the importance of a positive university environment in making students feel comfortable to interact in other spaces. In somewhat of a contrast, the second theme illustrated how personality characteristics and preferences also play a salient role in shaping relational experiences, indicating how there are 'forces' beyond the space that AI students occupy that feature in the relationship formation process. Language barriers also held sway over relational experiences, as students discussed how they make interaction with local students difficult, thus delaying relationship formation. Some notable patterns within AI students' relationships were discussed in the fourth theme, particularly, the tendency for AI students to have more foreign friends than local friends and for classroom relations to be more professional than intimate and personal in nature.

To conclude, the fifth and last theme of the chapter outlined the well-being outcomes that are a product of AI students' relational experiences and interactions. More specifically, AI students' relational experiences were established as contributing positively to their academic work, to their physical well-being by providing shelter, food, and financial support when necessary, and to their social and psychological well-being. In this theme, it was also indicated that AI students also derive well-being from assisting others, not only by receiving assistance.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In Chapter 1 of this research report, the study's research questions were outlined. The first question, 'how do African international students experience relationships at the university campus space?' was answered in the first four main themes. To provide a summary, AI students find it easy to form relationships in the classroom and other organised spaces because these spaces encourage interaction, and students also have common grounds to relate to each other within them. The AI students in this study supplied numerous examples of spaces that provide opportunities for interaction, ranging from classroom spaces to residential spaces, day houses, and even activities like sports and academic events. Considering that AI students are least likely to have pre-established social networks when starting university compared to local students (Boafor-Arthur, 2014), the salience of space in relationship formation is foregrounded in this study.

It was also argued that the positive atmosphere of the university enables AI students to feel comfortable within various spaces in the university and thus, are more comfortable seeking relationships with others. Only language barriers were presented as an aspect that can create an uncomfortable environment, subsequently delaying relationship formation as students may take time to adjust. Altogether, it was determined that relationships formed in slightly more informal spaces may be more meaningful and last longer than those that originate in classroom settings, since classrooms tend to be stricter and more formal, giving rise to relationships that imitate this formal/academic feel.

It was further established that AI students' personalities and relational preferences determine how willing they are to seek or initiate relationships, leading to varied relational experiences. Those whose predispositions were skewed towards relationship-seeking behaviour had larger friendship networks, while those who were more reserved or preferred smaller networks typically had fewer friends and sometimes experienced difficulties developing relations with others.

The answers to the second research question, 'how do the relational experiences of African international students contribute to their well-being?', are found mainly in the fifth theme. In this theme, academic relationships in class were confirmed as being very important to AI students' academic success as, *inter alia*, they assist with coping with academic challenges and enhancing understanding of course content. This academic support structure was noted as potentially having benefits to AI students' well-being

Relational benefits were also observed beyond academic needs, such as when AI students shared their experiences of social support from their friends in times of need. It was

further discussed that it is even more beneficial to have local friends because they assist with integration which may reduce the experience of the stress and anxiety associated with struggling to adapt to the local environment. Most importantly, AI students spoke about the psychological impacts of knowing that they are not alone in the challenges they face, as well as knowing that their friends are always there to talk to and for emotional support. Lastly, it was discovered that students also experience well-being from being able to reciprocate the support they receive from their friends.

Previous studies have noted that international students experience loneliness and have trouble adjusting to host societies (Iwara et al., 2017; Lee & Sehoole, 2019; Sehoole, 2015; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2012). This study has illustrated that although some of the AI students experienced social, psychological, and academic challenges, having support (academic, social, emotional, psychological) from their relational interactions with local and foreign students may have assisted them to cope with the challenges that they experienced in the host institution/country. From the findings, it can be argued that AI students' relationships provide critical well-being experiences in several domains.

5.1. Limitations

The findings of this study are important to broadening the understanding of the experiences of AI students in the South African society. These findings, however, should be generalized with caution considering that the way in which qualitative studies are designed does not usually permit for unambiguous generalisations to other contexts and populations, although this view has been challenged in recent years (Roald et al., 2021).

Another limitation identified is the use of only one method of data collection. The semi-structured interview format allowed for a detailed account of the participants' experiences. However, other methods of data collection might likely have allowed the researcher to unearth more in-depth findings. For example, collecting data using a focus group might have provided opportunities for AI students to engage with each other by agreeing, disagreeing, or adding more detail to others' points and views, creating a richer, more varied, and nuanced account of AI students' relational experiences. The focus group interview allows for these dynamics to take place, as it is mainly characterized by group interaction where the interviewer mostly occupies the role of a moderator (Willig, 2013).

On a similar note, interviewing participants through phone calls could have affected the findings of this study. The cell phone interview has some advantages such as limiting travelling efforts or expenses, but it does not permit the interviewer access to participants' non-verbal

cues so they can respond to them accordingly (Jablonski, 2014). Furthermore, the interviewer may be limited in their ability to demonstrate some of their interpersonal skills (Jablonski, 2014), which may disadvantage the interviewer's ability to build rapport with the participant that can enable participants to feel more comfortable with the interview setting. It was also the case that frequent breaks in connection and other technical difficulties would occur during phone interview calls, further affecting the natural flow of conversation and the quality of the interviews. These technical failures were much less frequent with the Zoom interviews.

The overall experience of conducting Zoom and in-person interviews was more preferable to that of conducting cell phone interviews. In-person interviews felt more relaxed, and it was much easier for the researcher to read participants and see how they felt about the interview process and the questions being asked. Because of this, the researcher was better able to demonstrate flexibility in their approach in in-person interviews depending on participants' tone, body language, and facial expressions. The participants were also more comfortable in in-person and Zoom interviews to make recommendations of their own on how to improve the AI student experience at the university and to ask more about what inspired the researcher to pursue this study's research topic. This suggests that interview formats that more closely resembled natural interaction where the parties involved could see one another's faces, smile, and use humour in some parts, were better suited to building rapport and making participants feel comfortable during the interview.

In contrast, a sense of personal distance was always present during cell phone interviews, especially in situations where participants had been recruited online as opposed to in-person. These interviews were typically 'straightforward'; it was rarely the case that participants would be interested in discussing aspects of the research besides answering the interview questions and, in some cases, participants were less co-operative (Jablonski, 2014). For example, one participant was uncomfortable sharing their age and it was explained that their age was only required for statistical purposes and that all their identifying information would not be linked to them in research publications, even if their age was included. The participant did not yield to this explanation, compared to another participant in an in-person interview who was also uncomfortable sharing their age but felt more at ease to share it after the researcher explained why their age was required.

This may also suggest that the rapport that was developed in in-person interviews indeed made the participants feel more comfortable. However, the lack of face-to-face interaction in cell phone interviews impeded this rapport-building process, resulting in participants feeling uncomfortable sharing some information. Hence, it is argued that the cell

phone interviews might have negatively affected the findings of this study as some participants might have been less forthcoming with information (beyond demographics) relative to if the interviews had been conducted in-person or on Zoom. Generally, using different or inconsistent interview formats might have also affected the study's results.

5.2. Theoretical Conclusions: Eudaimonic Well-Being and African Worldviews on Relationships

The theoretical viewpoints and propositions discussed in Chapter 2 of this research report were mostly confirmed by this study's findings. In the discussion, it was argued that a part of what constitutes the experience of eudaimonic well-being is when individuals manage to overcome a challenge over time, sometimes through gaining an important skill in the process (Huta & Ryan, 2010). In this study, this was demonstrated in the participants' abilities to overcome language barriers that were initially experienced as unpleasant and as limiting relational interactions. Through concerted efforts to learn local languages or interact more with local students, AI students were able to acquire the necessary social and linguistic skills to improve relational experiences and were thus able to make friends. The negative feelings associated with the language challenges were reduced in the process or alleviated by local students' support in assisting AI students during their learning process.

It was also argued that pursuing relationships can be considered as an act of personal significance, considering that acts of personal significance contribute to the experience of eudaimonic well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Through discussing the role of AI students' interactional styles in shaping relational experiences, it was determined that for outgoing students especially, relationships with others are a necessary component of their lives and well-being. As one student (Angela) stated, '*I can't stay alone for a long time*'. The efforts they made to establish relational connections with others reflected the importance of having friends to them because they were active in initiating conversations in class or other spaces and also participated in student organisations with the primary aim of expanding their relational networks.

One of the elements that forms a part of having positive relations with other people is being able to identify with them (Ryff, 2017). Identifying with others proved to be especially important in this study, as participants spoke about the psychological benefits of knowing that their social, emotional, and academic challenges were shared by other students.

Supporting others or performing actions that have significance outside of the self as defining components of positive relationships and eudaimonic well-being also emerged in this study (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryff, 2017). That is, participants were shown to derive well-being from reciprocating the support they receive from other students and not only by experiencing support *from* them. The importance of reciprocity in relationships and well-being was also noted as one of the defining characteristics of the *ubuntu* philosophy that guides Africans' conceptions of relational interactions (Nwoye, 2017), which was confirmed in this study as discussed above. Furthermore, the embeddedness of *ubuntu* in the African individuals' psyche was demonstrated in the AI students' reference to the adage '*no one is an island*', which is somewhat akin to the full translation of *ubuntu*, a person is a person through other persons. Overall, the study's findings support the theory put forth by the M&R model that individuals' well-being is rooted in their relationships with others (Wissing et al., 2019).

The theoretical contributions of this study to the theories discussed above are that types of positive relationships may have varying levels of intimacy (i.e., academic and social relationships), but that each type of relationship contributes to individuals' functioning and well-being in unique, important ways regardless of the level of intimacy. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that how individuals experience the spaces they navigate and occupy may also influence how they experience relationships that originate in those spaces. This is an extension upon Wissing et al.'s (2019) argument that cultural contexts shape how people relate to one another.

5.3. Key Contributions and Practical Implications

This study has provided depth and detail to the relational experiences of AI students. Although AI students undoubtedly have negative relational experiences, this study presents a different and more positive perspective of relational experiences from what is commonly reported in the literature. Thus, it could be argued that the study balances the representation of AI students' experiences in the literature by illustrating their positive relational experiences and the associated well-being outcomes vis-à-vis literature that details the difficult experiences of (African) international students in university spaces and in their relational interactions.

The findings are especially important for the South African context considering the paucity of research conducted on AI students in the country. The study has demonstrated that although South Africa may generally be considered a hostile environment for African migrants, this does not guarantee that AI students will have predominantly negative relational experiences in host institutions in the country. On the contrary, the findings indicate that AI

students' relational experiences could be largely positive, but that this may be dependent on institutional culture or atmosphere.

In consideration of this knowledge, it becomes apparent that the institutional space that AI students inhabit plays a significant role in shaping not only their relational experiences but also their perceptions of their respective universities. Experiencing the host institution as an overall positive environment potentially makes students comfortable to interact within other spaces in the host institution. This is salient as it was established that spaces that provide opportunities for relational interaction/engagement are necessary for AI students to create or expand their friendship networks.

Tumubweinee and Luescher (2019) argue that university spaces are not merely spatial contexts where academic events take place but are also products of the relationships that occur within them and the policies that govern them. As such, universities should interrogate how their policies and support structures influence the AI student experience. That is, whether the configuration of the universities' policies and structures is one that alienates AI students by exacerbating their existing challenges as immigrants or one that prioritizes AI students' seamless transition into the universities' academic environment. This is relevant not only for academic adjustment but also for relational adjustment, as the findings in this study demonstrated that AI students consider both their academic and relational experiences in their appraisals of the university experience. Prioritising both elements might contribute to creating a positive institutional atmosphere.

For example, university Student Affairs units can aid AI students' relational adjustment. Specifically, Student Affairs divisions that are responsible for overseeing student societies and other organised student activities should make themselves visible and take measures to encourage AI students to join and participate, especially during the orientation period in the first year of university. In light of this study's findings, university Student Affairs units should also create more spaces and activities that are geared towards increasing engagement between AI students and South African students.

University student counselling services could also play a role by collaborating with international student departments to encourage AI students to seek help. Although AI students' relationships were shown to assist them in coping with social, psychological, and academic challenges, it is important to emphasize that they *acknowledged* that they experience challenges in these areas. As such, it is essential that AI students should receive professional assistance adjacent to the relational support that their friends provide as they adjust to host institutions and contend with academic pressures.

Lastly, the implementation of South African introductory language courses for AI students in their first year might alleviate language barrier challenges (Iwara et al., 2017). The researcher suggests selecting the languages to be taught based on languages that are predominant where the university is located.

5.4. Future Recommendations

Based on this study's findings, it is recommended that more research should be conducted on similar topics to work towards increasing knowledge and closing the gap in research related to the relational well-being experiences of AI students, particularly in South Africa. For example, researchers could explore how the relationships that AI students maintain with their friends and/or families in their home countries influence their relational and/or well-being experiences in host societies. By increasing understanding in this area of study, higher education institutions will be better informed on how to enhance AI students' relational experiences, which can subsequently contribute to their well-being. Researchers are also encouraged to take advantage of different methodologies, that is, quantitative methods, mixed-methods, and other types of qualitative research designs in exploring related topics to ensure consistency in research outcomes across varying methods of investigation.

It is also suggested that universities take measures to intervene in creating spaces outside of the classroom where AI students can engage with other local and international students. This might allow them opportunities to develop diverse friendship networks, as it was evident in this study that both international and local friendship networks possess their unique advantages. Some of the advantages discussed include local students' ability to assist AI students with integration into the South African society and AI students finding comfort in international student friends due to shared culture and languages amongst other things. Doing so might allow AI students to experience the relational well-being benefits of both students groups during their time in South Africa. When students have positive relational experiences, they are better equipped to endure and overcome academic, social, emotional, and psychological challenges.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval Letter

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

Humanities 100. Since 1919

18 March 2021

Dear Ms TS Letsoalo

Project Title:	An Exploration of Relational Well-being of African International Students at a South African University
Researcher:	Ms TS Letsoalo
Supervisor(s):	Dr S Chigeza
Department:	Psychology
Reference number:	15097422 (HUM037/1120)
Degree:	Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 18 March 2021. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

Prof Innocent Pikirayi
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Research Ethics
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: PGHumanities@up.ac.za

Appendix B: International Cooperation Division Permission Letter

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Department Research and Innovation

1 June 2020

University of Pretoria
International Cooperation Division
Department of Research and Innovation
Room 1-40, Graduate Centre
C/- Lynnwood Road and Roper Street
Hillcrest campus, Pretoria 0002

Letter to Support Educational Research for Dr Shingairai Chigeza: Lecturer and Research Psychologist

It is with great pleasure to write this letter of support from the International cooperation Division (ICD) for Dr Shingairai Chigeza regarding her study Titled: Psychosocial pathways to educational success: A qualitative exploration of relational adjustment and meaning-making of African international students in a South Africa University.

ICD will act as a go-between by informing the students about the project and we will refer interested students to the researcher. The proposed work is highly relevant and well in line with the research interests of the ICD, and will provide valuable information that we need to assist African international students.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. Danny Bokaba
Manager: International Cooperation Division

Appendix C: Participant Informed Consent Form

Psychosocial Pathways to Educational Success: A Qualitative Exploration of Relational Adjustment and Meaning-Making of African International Students at a South African University.

HUM049/0320

Participant Information

Age:_____

Gender: _____

Country of Origin: _____

Level of Study (undergraduate, honour's, master's etc.):_____

WRITTEN CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ , confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

Please indicate consent by ticking ✓ for every statement provided below.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any consequences or penalties.			
I understand that information collected during the study will not be linked to my identity and I			

give permission to the researchers of this study to access the information.			
I understand that this study has been reviewed by, and received ethical clearance from Research Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria.			
I understand who will have access to personal information and how the information will be stored with a clear understanding that I will not be linked to the information in any way.			
I understand how this study will be written up and published.			
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.			
I consent to being audio recorded.			
I consent to my audio recordings being used in research outputs such as publication of articles, thesis and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			
I consent to my photos being used in research outputs such as publication of articles, thesis and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			

I give permission to be quoted directly in research publications whilst remaining anonymous.			
I have sufficient opportunity to ask questions and I agree to take part in the above study.			

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE OF THE STUDY

Psychosocial Pathways to Educational Success: A Qualitative Exploration of Relational Adjustment and Meaning-Making of African International Students at a South African University.

Dr Shingairai Chigeza and Dr Angelina Wilson Fadiji, lecturers at the Department of Psychology and Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Pretoria, are inviting you take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, which will explain the details of this research project. Please feel free to ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

Educational success among migrant students in Africa has received meagre research attention and there is a growing a gap in research on the psychosocial pathways to success among African international students residing in South Africa. This pathway which includes relational adjustment and meaning-making of the new life and educational environment has the potential of limiting or enabling educational achievement. There is a lack of evidence on how these dynamics affect social interaction in higher education institutions including its contribution to relational adjustment, adaptation and meaning-making pathways to educational success. The aim of the present study is to explore the processes of relational adjustment, meaning-making and adaptation among African international students.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

- You have been invited to participate because you are a student from another African country studying at the University of Pretoria
- You have also complied with the following inclusion criteria:
- You are a registered student for at least a year, residing in an African country other than South Africa
- You are an undergraduate or a post-graduate student (Honour's, Master's and PhD)

Please note that you will not be allowed to participate if you have received permanent residency in South Africa.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

- You will be expected to participate in an in-depth individual interview and a photo-voice session. The in-depth individual interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour, and the photo-voice session will take approximately one hour which you will complete in your own time, at your discretion.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason and without negative consequences or being penalized.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured by assigning code names/numbers to each participant, and they will be used in all research notes and documents. Findings from this data will be disseminated through conferences and publications. Participants' information will not be linked to any reporting of the findings. Participants' names will remain anonymous.

Please note participant information will be kept confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obliged to report incidents such as abuse and suicide risk.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There may be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study. However, I hope that information obtained from this study may:

- Be a tool of transformation to be used by student affairs unit and international student offices in institutions of higher learning to help African international students adjust to their new environment, facilitating educational success and well-being in different domains of life.
- The findings of the study may provide insight into how international students navigate their new social and learning space to benefit from quality education and succeed.

- The study will also demonstrate the experiences and sources of meaning-making that will contribute to how you as a migrant student can adapt and thrive at an institution of higher learning.
- The study may also be useful to the South African government and contribute to policy development on African international students at higher institutions of learning.

WHAT ARE THE ANTICIPATED RISKS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The benefits of this study outweigh the risks**.** There are minimal risks anticipated in taking part in this study. It is anticipated that participants may have fatigue due to the long hours of data collection e.g. in the interview and photo-voice sessions. The participants may also experience emotional discomfort due to sharing personal experiences.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT THAT SOME FORM OF DISCOMFORT OCCUR AS A RESULT OF TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

Should there be any of the anticipated risks described above, the researchers will arrange a counselling psychologist for the participants. In the event of fatigue, the researchers will provide few minutes breaks in between the sessions to avoid exhaustion.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

- Participant information in hard copies of raw data will be locked in a cabinet in the Department of Psychology and electronic data will be kept in a file that is password protected. Only researchers involved in this study will have access to the data.
- Electronic information will be stored for a period of 15 years. After 15 years the hardcopy data will be destroyed and the file with the electronic data will be deleted.
-

WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- NO you will not be paid to take part in this study.
- Travel expenses will be paid for participants who have to travel to the site. Participants will also be provided with data or airtime in situations where virtual interviews are conducted. This means there will be no costs involved to you if you take part in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. The ethical approval number is HUM049/0320. A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

- The findings of the research study will be shared on request by Dr Shingairai Chigeza immediately after analysing the data. The researcher will write a report that will be shared with the participants and the International Office of the University of Pretoria after completion of data analysis.

WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH DATA BE USED FOR?

The data that will be gathered from the research participants in this study will be used for research purposes that include;

- Dissertation, article publication, national and international conference presentations
- For administration purposes (International cooperation division office of UP)
- Policy briefs
- Data will be reused for secondary data analysis.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE CONCERN, COMPLAINT OR ANYTHING I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE STUDY?

If you have questions about this study or you have experienced adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researchers whose contact information is provided below.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and in advance for participating in this study.

Principal investigators

Name: Dr Shingairai Chigeza

Contact number: 073 828 0665/012 420 4015

Email address: shingairai.chigeza@up.ac.za.

Name: Dr Angelina Wilson Fadiji

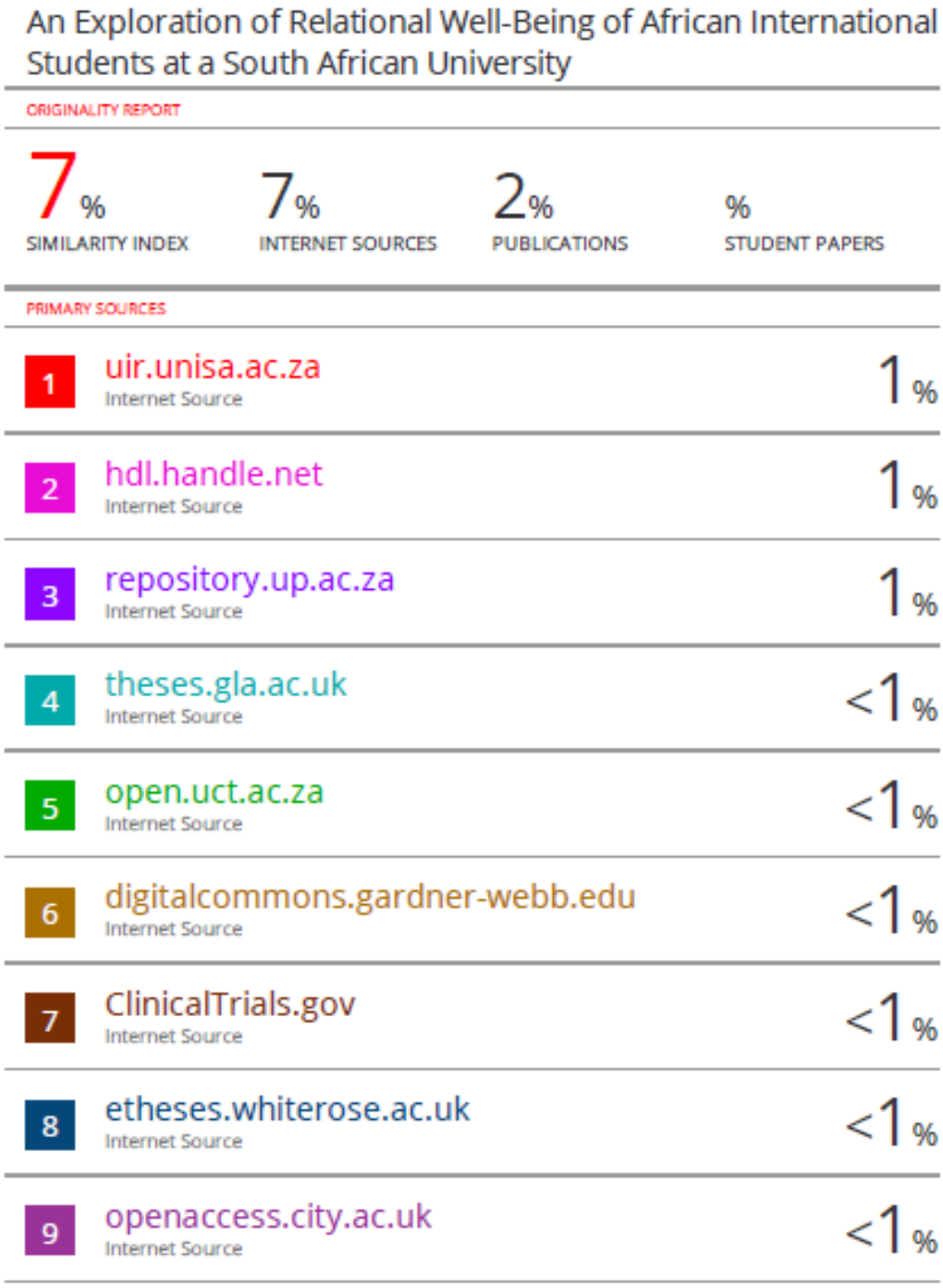
Contact number: 060 408 4832

Email address: angelina.wilsonfadiji@up.ac.za

Appendix E: Semi-structured Interview Guide

1. Can you please tell me what your overall experience has been at the university, making friends and so on?
2. Who do you relate with on a day-to-day basis or who are the people most closest to you?
3. Why do you consider these relationships to be important to you?
4. How would you describe the quality of your relationships with these people?
5. Would you say you have more South African friends or international student friends? Why do you think that is?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't touch on in the interview but you would have liked to address?

Appendix F: Turnitin Report



An Exploration of Relational Well-Being of African International Students at a South African University

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