

Finding Strength Through Adversity: An Exploratory Study of the Role of Homesickness among International Students

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ABSTRACT

Homesickness is a well-studied phenomenon among international students, traditionally viewed as a negative experience. However, emerging research suggests that it can also have positive implications for other individuals. This exploratory study aims to address this gap by investigating the potential benefits of homesickness on international students from diverse cultural backgrounds and exploring the coping mechanisms they employ to manage it. Utilizing a purposive sampling approach, the study recruited ten participants: five from Africa, three from America, and two from Asia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their experiences with homesickness, its impact on their lives, and the coping strategies they utilized. The findings indicate that homesickness can act as a catalyst for positive change, fostering identity-based cohesion, a willingness to learn, and cultural appreciation resilience. Participants reported re-evaluating and redefining their existing relationships, underscoring the significance of social connections. The study also identified various coping mechanisms employed by students, including cultural engagement, social networks, and the utilization of emotional coping strategies. Overall, our study suggests that while homesickness presents challenges, it can also serve as a trigger for personal growth and positive development among international students.

Keywords: Homesickness, Resilience, Strength-based approach, International students.

1. Introduction

Life is full of obstacles, adversity, and setbacks. These experiences, which are universal to the human condition, can be stressful and have a negative impact. However, research has shown that there is inherent resilience within each individual that can help to overcome adversity (Wright, Masten & Narayan, 2013). This resilience is the result of the complex interplay between internal factors (genetics, brain function, and cognition), and external factors (social support from family and friends). Together, these protective factors act as a buffer against the effects of adversity to promote resilience (Masten, 2015). According to Hunter (2012), These protective factors vary depending on the individual's age or developmental stage, as well as the type of adversity being faced.

One of the adversities faced by a vast number of people is homesickness (Fisher 1989), depending on varying reasons, Archer et al (2023), explained homesickness as a state of intense longing caused by the separation of a person from their home environment and their loved ones.

Homesickness, is characterized by a number of different signs and symptoms including, disturbing negative thoughts, a strong desire to return home, unstable emotional states, anxiety, depression (Archer et al. 1998). Grieving the loss of familiar surroundings can lead to feelings that can cause inability to function normally which is very likely to affect health and ongoing educational (Mozafarinia & Tavafian, 2014) The time taken, and degree of difficulty experienced in adapting to a new environment, differs for each person as it occurs in different stages (Zeller & Mosier 1993).

Thurber and Walton (2007) argued that leaving familiar surroundings and entering a new environment can cause homesickness in nearly everyone, regardless of the reason for the move. This includes refugees: migrant entrepreneurs (Plobete et al., 2023), children in boarding schools (Fisher et al., 1984), and soldiers during military deployment (Niziurski & Dorthe, 2018). In the same essence, students who seek higher education in foreign countries experience homesickness as they are separated from their families and friends. However, these groups experience homesickness differently as international students typically make a conscious choice to study abroad, whereas migrants, refugees, and children in boarding schools may not have a choice. Additionally, moving away from home to study abroad is often motivated by positive factors, such as a desire to gain a new perspective on life, whilst in other groups is not the case.

Recent research suggests that homesickness among international students is not solely triggered by separation from their familiar environment. Other factors, such as culture shock and language barriers, also play a role. According to a study by Ye (2005), the greater the cultural difference between a student's home and host country, the more likely they are to experience homesickness and acculturative stress. Geary (2016) and Pardede (2015) also stressed that the pressure of independent living, and language fluency problems make their stay challenging.

However, it is often said that every coin has two sides, and the same can be said for the role of homesickness among international students. While it can be difficult and distressing as noted above, research suggests that homesickness can have positive effect on individuals. For example, a research conducted by Poblete et.al (2023), revealed that homesickness among migrant entrepreneurs can facilitate entrepreneurial ideation process. Similarly, Thorb (2004) highlighted that longing for familiar environment provided artists and musicians with an inspiration for myth and poetry. For this reasons, this study intends to explore the often overlooked positive side of homesickness, focusing specifically on international students in higher education. Through an inductive approach which relied on in-depth interviews with international students of the East Campus of Yangtze University in China. This research aims to examine how homesickness can positively impact the well-being of international students from diverse cultural background and to identify the coping strategies they use to manage homesickness. Despite the challenges homesickness can present if it can also play a positive role on international students, we suggest that social workers could utilize a strength-based perspective. This approach would empower international students to identify their own strengths and help them perceive available personal and environmental resources , including the positive aspects of homesickness as being sufficient to deal with homesickness. Rather than solely focusing on the negative emotions it evokes. By fostering this approach, social workers could potentially guide students towards personal growth and sense of mastery.

While existing literature on homesickness among international students often paints it solely as a negative experience, neglecting its multifaceted nature, little research has explored its potential upside. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the positive aspects of homesickness and its impact on international students' lives.

2. Theoretical Framework

This exploration of homesickness among international students in higher education draws on stress appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman 1984), a framework commonly used in psychology, to provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing this phenomenon. Stress appraisal theory focuses on how individuals evaluate events, rather than the events themselves. It proposes a two-stage cognitive process by which people assess potentially stressful situations and determine how to cope with them (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Understanding these stages sheds light on how homesickness can be a multifaceted experience for individuals, encompassing both negative and positive aspects.

The initial stage of stress appraisal, called primary appraisal, involves evaluating the significance and potential impact of the event. For individuals experiencing homesickness, this might involve appraising it as a threat, signifying a potential loss of familiar surroundings, social connections, and a sense of belonging. This negative appraisal could lead to feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation (Thurber 1999).

However, stress appraisal theory is not limited to negative interpretations. Homesickness could also be appraised as a challenge, an opportunity for personal growth and development. As stated in the theory, challenge consists of events that provide a person an opportunity to gain a sense of mastery and competence by confronting and overcoming a dilemma (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The second stage, secondary appraisal, focuses on identifying coping resources and strategies. Individuals will choose different approaches based on their primary appraisal. Individuals who see homesickness as a challenge might utilize coping mechanisms such as phone calls, Entertainment, Institutional support and religion as observed by Mekonen and Adarkwah (2023) in their study.

This highlights the importance of understanding how international students appraise homesickness. Social workers and other practitioners can play a crucial role by helping students reframe homesickness as a potential challenge for growth. By understanding the potential interpretations and coping mechanisms, support services can be tailored to meet the individual needs of students and help them navigate this experience in a way that fosters both positive growth and adaptation to their new environment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context

China is a popular destination for international students, thanks to its top-quality education, affordable fees, and unique cultural and technological opportunities. The country's history and diverse population of students provide an ideal setting for exploring the complex nature of homesickness, allowing for a deeper understanding of its potential positive role among international students.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting border closures in China have left many international students in an unprecedented situation, isolated from their friends and family in a foreign country. This experience of isolation has the potential to exacerbate feelings of homesickness, especially for those who have been in China for three years without visiting home (Mekonen & Adarkwah 2023). However, this situation also offers a unique opportunity to study the psychological and emotional mechanisms that people use to cope with this separation. The experiences of these

students can provide valuable insights into how different cultures find resilience and adapt to challenging situations.

Ye (2005), stressed that the greater the cultural difference between a student's home and host country, the more likely they are to experience homesickness and acculturative stress. The cultural diversity of China adds an additional layer of complexity to the homesickness experience. International students from all over the world come to study in China, bringing with them a wealth of traditions, values, and ideas about what "home" means to them. Cao and Meng (2022) suggest that this diversity provides a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which cultural background influences the way we experience and cope with homesickness. Comparing the experiences of students from different parts of the world, such as Africa and Asia, could reveal fascinating insights into the role of homesickness considering geography, language, and cultural norms.

Overall, China's unique cultural landscape and diverse student body, offer a wealth of opportunities for exploring the diverse and complex nature of homesickness. From the isolation and loneliness of pandemic-related travel restrictions to the cultural disorientation experienced by students from other countries, the experiences of homesickness in China are multidimensional and deeply personal. Exploring this fascinating and diverse collage of longing for home can help us to understand not only the negative impacts but also the potential benefits of experiencing homesickness.

3.2. Research methods

This research used inductive qualitative methods to explore the positive impact of homesickness on the lives of international students. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of international students from Yangtze University, focusing on three key areas: (1) the role of the participants' home culture in managing homesickness, (2) any unexpected positive outcomes of homesickness, and (3) the overall impact of homesickness on the participants' lives. Our aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of international students, and to identify any positive aspects.

3.3. Case selection

This study focused on international students enrolled at the Yangtze University East Campus in China. as it is characterized by a high and diverse student body of international students comprising from 69 countries in 3 different regions, thereby offering fertile ground for investigating the experiences of homesickness among international students. This study included both undergraduate and graduate students from various academic disciplines.

3.4. Data collection

Rathakrishnan et al., (2021), and Zulkarnain et al., (2019) noted that a significant number of studies came to a conclusion that all human beings regardless of age and environment experience homesickness. In accordance to the objectives of the study , purposive sampling was used to recruit Yangtze university's international students with diverse cultural background, varying study duration, different arrivals and various academic disciplines in order to gain depth insights on how homesickness can positively impact the lives of international students.

A sample of 10 international students was selected, including 7 females and 3 males. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30. The sample consisted of 5 students pursuing a bachelor's

degree, 5 pursuing a master's degree. The participants originate from a variety of regions, including 5 from Africa, 2 from Asia, and 3 from America. All 10 international students were interviewed face to face using English as a language of communication with interviews lasting between 25 minutes to 30 minutes. The interviews were structured in the way that allowed participants to first describe their overall experiences of studying abroad, before introducing questions specifically related to homesickness. This approach allowed participants to express themselves in a more natural and open manner, allowing us to explore the role of homesickness among international students without bias or preconceptions. Informed consent was obtained prior to the audio recording of the interviews and the data as later transcribed. The characteristics of the sample are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

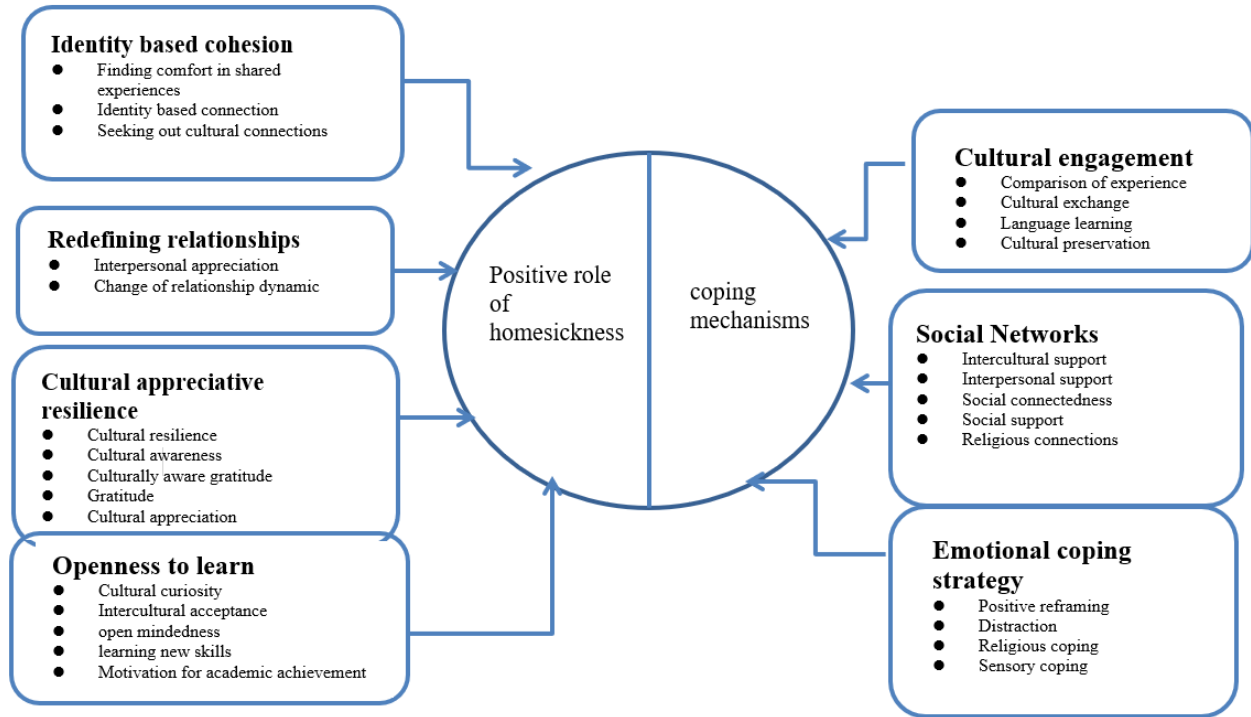
Participants	Gender	Grade Level	Major	Region
P1	Male	Bachelor's	Economics	Africa
P2	Female	Bachelor's	Medicine	Africa
P3	Female	Master's	Law	Africa
P4	Female	Bachelor's	Civil Engineering	Asia
P5	Male	Master's	Medicine	America
P6	Male	Bachelor's	Medicine	America
P7	Female	Master's	Psychology	Africa
P8	Female	Bachelor's	Economics & International Trade	America
P9	Female	Master's	Economics & International Trade	Asia
P10	Female	Master's	Accounting	Africa

4. Result

Following a constructionist epistemology, the study adopted an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) to understand the students' lived experiences through their own interpretations. The analysis began with data familiarization. Interview transcripts and audios were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. We explored the data by, repeatedly reading and making detailed notes on initial impressions, emotions conveyed, and recurring themes. NVivo's coding tools were then utilized to highlight interesting segments, potential codes representing key elements, and emerging ideas. This initial coding phase focused on capturing descriptive elements from the data related to homesickness, its positive impact on the students, and the coping mechanisms they employed. NVivo's coding queries were then employed to identify frequently used words and phrases related to these initial codes, further refining the understanding of the data. The analysis progressed to searching for themes. We reviewed the initial codes, grouping them into broader themes that reflected the students' experiences. This involved considering how homesickness manifested differently for students from diverse backgrounds, whether specific coping mechanisms were more prevalent in certain cultures, and the potential links between specific positive impacts and the utilized coping strategies. Then we organized the initial codes within these emerging themes. Following the identification of themes, a review phase ensured they accurately reflected the data. We examined whether the themes were internally coherent and distinct from each other. NVivo's visualization tools were utilized to explore the relationships between codes and themes, providing a deeper understanding of the connections within the data. Finally, the themes were defined and named. Each theme received a clear and concise name that captured its essence. The researcher

documented their rationale for each theme name using NVivo's memo function, ensuring transparency in the analytical process.

Figure 1: Mapping of main themes and sub-themes



4.1. Redefining relationships

The participants narratives indicated that the feeling of homesickness resulted in reevaluation of relationships, marked by altered relationship dynamics and a heightened interpersonal gratitude. Participants displayed a transition towards more profound emotional bonds, enhanced communication, and a heightened appreciation for the assistance and connection offered by their social circles. This reevaluation was particularly evident in the way participants described their relationships with family and friends back home. Participants reported a newfound appreciation for the support and connection provided by their loved ones, leading to deeper and more meaningful interactions. A majority of the respondents voiced having increased communication with their families back home, indicating that missing home and the challenges of adapting to a new environment served as a driving force. The relationship with their family members became one of mutual support and comfort. Students mentioned that they turned to their families for a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, and simply a sympathetic understanding of what they were going through. In return, the families provided emotional support, practical advice, or just any kind word to help them feel better. This back-and-forth exchange of understanding and comfort led to strengthened bonds between students and their families evidenced by quotes like:

"The experience of studying abroad changed my relationship with my dad for the better. Before, we were not as close, but now we share our lives with each other through video calls and have a much stronger bond...." (P4, Asia)

"As for my family i started having a good bond with my mother as she called me frequently to update me about things at home. she vented to me and i supported her." (P5, America)

Furthermore, we also observed that homesickness appears to have had a broader impact on participants' appreciation for all their relationships. The participants expressed that they valued their social connections more deeply and recognized the importance of maintaining strong interpersonal bonds. We further noted that homesickness served as a catalyst for individuals to reflect on the significance of their relationships and prioritize meaningful connections. Participants reported feeling more connected to their loved ones and actively seeking ways to nurture and strengthen their interpersonal bonds. This suggests that homesickness can lead to a more profound appreciation for social connections as a whole, exemplified by the quote:

"and I appreciate the presence of my family which i have taking for granted. (P9, Asia)"

4.2. Identity based cohesion

Participants exhibited a strong sense of identity-based cohesion. This was evident in their active pursuit of cultural connections as a way to cope with homesickness. The participants voiced that engaging in cultural activities, events, and gatherings provided them with the opportunities to connect with others who shared their cultural heritage and values. Participants reported that seeking out these connections helped them feel more grounded and connected to their cultural identity, fostering a sense of community and belonging. As Participant 1 describes:

"So to combat the feelings of homesickness for example with language ah I tried to find as many as Zambians as possible uh that I could interact with in my language , if I could speak my mother tongue to somebody I felt home, i felt was not alone , there was someone that knew me actually, so i found Zambians here and we could interact and also move to other cities to visit my my other country mate that was the copy mechanism and that really helped" (P1, Africa)

This pursuit of cultural connections highlights a cyclical process. Sharing common experiences, such as language, traditions, and values, created a sense of belonging and connection among participants. This sense of connection, in turn, fostered a desire for further shared experiences. Participants also found comfort in shared experiences with individuals who shared similar cultural backgrounds.

Having others who understood their struggles with homesickness and navigating a new culture fostered a sense of solidarity and support within their cultural community. This shared understanding provided a source of comfort and validation, enhancing feelings of belonging and cohesion. As Participant 1 again mentions:

"And keeping in touch with my Zambian friends here in china because we shared a common ground, We are out of the country and we far from home and we all face similar things. So they help you learn well to say, oh, you find that comfort to say you know, alone, not here with somebody you can talk to somebody." (P1, Africa)

This sense of belonging and connection within the cultural community further strengthened participants' sense of identity. The participants described that they formed identity-based connections with others who shared their cultural identity, leading to a sense of unity and solidarity within the group. Participants reported feeling a strong bond with individuals who understood their cultural background and experiences, fostering a sense of connection and belonging. This

mutual understanding solidified their own sense of belonging to a specific cultural group. Participant 2 exemplifies this by stating:

"also there are my country mates that study here with me and i think our cultural traditions brought was together for example, on holidays, like Indonesian holidays, we would celebrate it together in china.....i also think it strengthened my bond with the people of my country and in here we only have each other and i realized that it is important to have people from the same cultural background with me." (P9, Asia)

4.3. Cultural appreciative resilience

We uncovered a fascinating link between cultural background and resilience. Participants shared how sayings or beliefs from their native language instilled a sense of perseverance. Illustrating this point, a participant referenced a proverb that emphasizes overcoming challenges in their home country. This belief translated into a confident mindset – a conviction that they could thrive anywhere . This cultural foundation fueled their resilience, equipping them with determination and confidence when facing new experiences and challenges . *"There was a saying in my language that said if you can survive in Zambia then you can survive anywhere. So it fueled that resilience in you to say there's nothing out there that can uh, you know scare you that can put you out of place from Zambia."* (P1, Africa). Crawford et.al, (2006), also affirms that cultural protective processes such as purification ceremonies, healing rituals, beliefs and other cultural traditions were found significant in offering resilience to people from various cultures.

We further observed that moving to a new country triggered a shift in participants' awareness of their cultural identity. Another participant described a newfound sense of identity driven by the need to explain their background in a different cultural setting. This process of self-explanation became an opportunity to explore and articulate their cultural identity, leading to a deeper appreciation for their roots . *"when I was home, I didn't care about who I am, where I came from, but ever since I came to China, I feel like I have an identity because I have to explain... it is interesting to express yourself."* (P7, Africa).

Gratitude for family, community, and country emerged as a powerful source of support and belonging during times of homesickness. By acknowledging the role of their cultural background in shaping their identity, participants cultivated a deeper appreciation for their heritage . This culturally aware gratitude fostered a sense of belonging and pride in their cultural identity, as exemplified by this quote:

".....I appreciated my family more because they gave me a sense of belonging. They gave me a my family, my community, my country and they give you some feeling of coming from somewhere, having a history, havingA having somewhere" (P1,Africa).

Participants also expressed gratitude by highlighting the contrast between their past and present situations. One participant acknowledged their resilience in overcoming challenges in a *"very underdeveloped country,"* highlighting their appreciation for the opportunities in their current, developed country. By comparing the limitations of their homeland with the abundance of *"technology"* and *"everything at your fingertips"* (P7, Africa) in their current country, participants expressed gratitude for their newfound advantages.

We discovered that Homesickness emerged as a catalyst for cultural appreciation. Participants reported that missing their home country led them to *"appreciate [their] country a little more"*

(P9, Asia). This suggests that homesickness fostered a deeper appreciation for their own culture, likely arising from a heightened awareness of cultural differences experienced abroad. Missing familiar aspects of their homeland may have caused participants to reflect more on the value of their own cultural heritage. Additionally, another participant linked their homesickness to a feeling of *national pride*, stating that their desire to elevate their country fueled their motivation to study abroad (P8, America).

4.4. Openness to learn

We noted that homesickness ignited a strong desire for connection. Missing family and friends from their home country and feeling isolated in a foreign environment due to language barriers motivated students to overcome this obstacle through language acquisition. As stated by participant, *"I have many friends, both Chinese and international, and because of the language, it greatly helped me integrate well into society here"*(P6, America). This statement underscores the significance of language in social inclusion. By mastering the local language, students engaged in more meaningful conversations, grasp jokes and cultural subtleties, and actively participate in social events. This enhanced interaction with the local community nurtured a sense of belonging, potentially alleviating the sense of isolation and loneliness associated with homesickness. In this manner, homesickness became a driving force for language learning, ultimately enabling students to feel more connected and assimilated into their new surroundings. The most significant barrier faced by students was language, which remains a focus of ongoing effort and improvement. Echoing this sentiment, a participant shared, *"The most significant barrier was language, which I am still trying to work on"*(P10, Africa).

The urge to connect with others and overcome feelings of isolation motivated students to step out of their comfort zones. As one student expressed, *"you learn how to interact with other people, you learn how to make new friends."*(P10, Africa). We also noted that Homesickness fosters a need for social interaction, leading students to actively participate in activities and conversations with people from different backgrounds. This openness to interaction became a stepping stone to building new friendships and a sense of belonging in the new environment. Homesickness extended beyond social interaction and manifested in unexpected ways, like a craving for familiar flavors. Another student's experience highlights this, saying, *"also because I was homesick a lot in terms of food, I also learned how to cook."*(P9, Asia). Missing the food from back home sparked curiosity to learn how to cook those comforting dishes themselves.

Homesickness, as we have noted, pushed international students to be open to new experiences and cultures. This openness fosters a crucial element for thriving in a new environment: intercultural acceptance. As pointedly stated by participants, *"When you embrace differences, you either to give you um, a place to be able to say it is okay to coexist even though we are different and you know that really helps."*(P1, Africa) This quote highlights how accepting cultural differences becomes a strategy for navigating the initial discomfort of being in a new place. By embracing these differences, students created a space for peaceful coexistence, even when faced with unfamiliar customs or traditions. The openness to learn new things, initially driven by homesickness, leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the host culture. This fosters a sense of acceptance towards these differences, allowing students to feel more comfortable in their new surroundings.

The initial desire to connect with others, fueled by homesickness, led students to interact more with people from different backgrounds. As participants shared, *"and time went by and interacting with international students. Yeah, they are very fascinated about wanting to know or um what*

your culture is." (P1,Africa). This quote highlights the natural curiosity that arises when people from different cultures interact. Feeling homesick made students more aware of their own cultural background and traditions. This heightened awareness, combined with the curiosity of their international peers, created a conducive environment for learning. Students become more open to sharing their own culture and, in turn, learning about the cultures of others. This openness to learning fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation for diverse perspectives and ways of life. Missing home can trigger a strong desire to return sooner. As one student expressed, *"Missing home motivated me to study hard so I could leave the country earlier."* (P3, Africa). This yearning for home translates into a goal-oriented approach to academics. By focusing on their studies and excelling, students believe they can shorten their time away and return home faster. This focused mindset fosters discipline and a drive to learn effectively. Homesickness creates a sense of isolation and loneliness (Thurber & Walton 2012). Student found solace and escape in the world of books and academic pursuits. Another participant shared, *"being homesick kept me attached to my studies,"*(P7,Africa), highlighting this tendency to use academics as a coping mechanism. This engagement with learning becomes a source of comfort and distraction from the emotional strain of being away from home. The act of reading itself became a gateway for exploration and discovery. Another participant stated, *"I would also get busy by studying and by reading a lot of books."*(P9, Africa). Reading exposed students to new cultures, ideas, and perspectives, broadening their horizons and fostering a sense of intellectual curiosity. This openness to learning can transcend academic subjects, leading to a greater interest in understanding the world around them.

5. Coping Strategies

In response to the challenges posed by homesickness, international students employed a number of coping strategies, these strategies were categorized into three main themes, namely (i) emotional coping strategies, (ii) Cultural engagement and (iii) Social Networks.

5.1. Emotional Coping Strategy

Homesickness can be a significant challenge for international students (Mekonen 2023), but as their narratives show, it can also be an opportunity for personal growth. Throughout these narratives, participants illustrate various strategies for coping with the emotional distress of being far from home.

One powerful coping mechanism, we identified is positive reframing, the ability to see situations in a more positive light (Beck, 1967). This approach was particularly helpful when dealing with cultural differences, as highlighted by the quote: *"The one another thing um one another coping mechanism can you see you get to embrace differences get embrace differences uh when you come out here abroad"*(P1, Africa).

Participants also mentioned using distractions as a way to manage their emotions. *"always doing something, not staying idle, keeping myself busy with activities ,"*(P6, America) highlights how some students stay constantly occupied to avoid dwelling on homesickness. The second quote reinforces this, *"when I miss home I just try to shovel the thoughts about home by distracting with other things like school work, exercising and eventually I will forget about those thoughts,"*(P4, Asia) These strategies offered relief from the emotional strain of missing home.

Religion emerged as another significant coping mechanism. The participant who mentioned nightly prayers exemplifies finding comfort and a connection to something larger than oneself.

Religious practices or values can offer strength, hope, and peace, as suggested by Eggerman & Panter- Brick (2010). Engaging in their faith provided resilience, reminded them of important values and traditions, as shown in the quotes: *"I am a believer of Christianity , so every night i would do a prayer , and i believe it helps with homesickness"*(P9, Asia).

"Also got to join an online group for my belief and it helped me continue having the same level of faith or better, and you meet new people on those platforms, who are experiencing the same thing you are experiencing so you do not really feel alone because you are now a group of people who are feeling the same thing and just trying to move on with life so you have people who are supporting you in a way that helps you and also help with your spiritual journey"(P10, Africa).

Finally, participants used various sensory experiences to create a sense of comfort and normalcy when feeling homesick. By engaging their senses in positive ways, they alleviated the emotional distress associated with missing home. This includes: physical activity, (*"I joined the gym , it helped to relieve a lot of tension and stress"*P10, Africa), taste (*"Food from home really helped more especially snacks like biltong and simbas (South Africa's potato chips) made be feel at home even though i am not P2, Africa*), sight (*"I read books, watched my favourite series,"*P3, Africa) and touch & hearing (*"..And also another copy mechanism is stay in touch with family back home, face time them, um WhatsApp call them. You know, talk to them, call them, tell them you Miss them, you know and they call you back P1, Africa*).

5.2. Cultural engagement

The participants narratives in this study highlighted various cultural engagement strategies used by international students . One of such approach was cultural comparison. This is exemplified by a participant who stated: *"Like especially the fact that, you know, coming from home you get to learn a lot of things and according to different cultures, you know, everyone's different. So we get to experience a lot here. And since Chinese culture was extremely different from our culture, I got to learn how students here (Chinese students) when they come back from their homes, how they cope with it"* (P6, America). This quote demonstrates how students viewed cultural differences as a learning opportunity, enriching their experience abroad. Their interest in how Chinese students coped with returning home suggests they sought to understand similar challenges from another cultural perspective. This cultural comparison might have helped them discover new coping mechanisms or simply feel less alone in their struggles.

Cultural exchange emerged as another strategy for managing homesickness. Sharing their own culture and food (gastronomy) was not just about introducing something new; it fostered connection and reduced feelings of nostalgia. Representing their homeland provided a sense of identity and purpose in a new environment. This is evident in the quote: *"By coming here, I know that I am representing my country, I try to share the culture and gastronomy that my country has, which makes me feel less nostalgic"* (P8, America). Sharing cultural aspects allowed participants to build relationships and combat the isolation. By focusing on the positive aspects of their heritage through cultural exchange, these students created a more positive association with being homesick. It was not just about suppressing their longing for home, but also celebrating their roots and feeling less disconnected from them.

Finally, cultural preservation served as another coping mechanism. Students found comfort in actively engaging with their traditions, from cooking familiar dishes to listening to music from their homeland. For example, one participant tried their best to recreate familiar dishes from Ecuador with limited ingredients (P8, America). This act reconnected them to their roots and

provided comfort. Similarly, another participant listened to music from Laos (P4, Asia), immersing themselves in familiar sounds that offered a sense of belonging and connection to their cultural identity. Another participant also highlighted the importance of *preserving traditions by preparing food exactly as they would back home* (P7, Africa). This act ensured a sense of continuity and comfort during a time of displacement, reminding them of their heritage. By actively engaging with their traditions, these students used cultural preservation as a tool to manage the emotional challenges of being far from home.

5.3. Social Networks

Participants voiced using social networks to manage homesickness through various forms of connection. They described finding friends from South Africa, Lesotho, and Namibia (P8, Africa). While these countries may have had distinct cultures, their geographical proximity within Africa likely offered some shared experiences and understanding with participants home country. This connection with others from a similar region fostered a sense of belonging. More importantly, their narratives emphasized that these friendships became a source of emotional support. Participant 8 further stressed that, *"they felt like family away from home,"* highlighting the deep connection they formed with these friends. Having a social support system of people who understood the challenges of being abroad, even if from slightly different cultures, proved to be a powerful tool to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are major contributors to homesickness. Similarly, other participants voiced having intercultural support: *"I do have a country mate, I also have my counterparts from southern Africa and we speak a similar language so I would always connect with them and every time I talk to them I feel at home and I feel happy, our cultures are similar, the way we eat, the music we listen to, so when we are together a lot of things connect us immensely so it is always positively uplifting for me"* (P7, Africa).

The importance of interpersonal support, particularly through close friendships, was also evident in the experiences of participants. Upon arrival, their roommates went above and beyond, offering *"incredible kindness and generosity"* (P4, Asia & P7, Africa) to help navigate the challenges of being in a new environment. This immediate support system provided a sense of security. Participants narrated that bonds transcended a typical roommate relationship. The participants described being treated *"as if I were a member of her own family,"* signifying a deep level of emotional support that filled the void left by being far from home. This interpersonal support was not just temporary; the participants further explained that *"even now we have a strong bond...we support each other in times of need"* (P4, Asia & P7, Africa). This enduring friendships serves as a source of ongoing emotional connection, helping the participants manage feelings of homesickness even in the long run.

We observed that social connectedness was used to manage homesickness. Participants described calling parents, sisters and friends a lot, highlighting the comfort and sense of belonging gained through regular communication. This frequent contact, even across vast distances, allowed them to feel *"like I am still part of them even though I am miles apart"* (P2, Africa). Similarly, another participant emphasized the role of social media in fostering a sense of connection. They described staying in touch with people *"from back home on social media platforms"* (P7 Africa, P1 Africa, P3 Africa). Seeing and interacting with loved ones virtually, through "videos" and messages, helped them feel a sense of closeness despite the physical distance. By maintaining these social connections, both through phone calls and social media, participants were able to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Social support was also used by participants for comfort and guidance. One participant (P6, America) employed a strategy of *"trying to stay accompanied by someone at all times,"* highlighting their desire for companionship to combat feelings of isolation. Another participant found particular strength in the support they received from their country mates. They described how *"when I first got here the people that helped were from my country, they helped me a lot"* (P9, Asia). This assistance was especially valuable because participants *"did not speak Chinese at all."* The support from those who shared a similar background went beyond just practical help; it offered a sense of familiarity and understanding. In essence, both seeking companionship and finding support from country mates demonstrate the power of social connections in helping students cope with the emotional challenges of being far from home.

6. Discussion

While homesickness presents a challenge for international students, It can be deduced from the study's findings that homesickness can also play a positive role in the lives of international students, it can trigger the utilization of their existing resilience (). This occurs as students naturally seek support from others, building strong relationships with friends, peers, and country mates . These connections mirror the supportive social environment highlighted by Ungar (2013), which plays a crucial role in overcoming adversity and fostering resilience. research consistently shows the presence of supportive individuals plays a crucial role in mitigating stress and navigating challenging experiences. A longitudinal study by Werner (2000) found that even having just one caring person provides significant support for health and learning, highlighting the crucial role of strong social connections in overcoming challenges. This aligns perfectly with the observation that international students facing homesickness benefit from building a support network through reaching out and forming strong bonds in their new environment. By nurturing these connections, international students not only mitigate the stress of homesickness but also develop coping mechanisms and enhance their overall resilience. This newfound strength equips them to handle the inevitable challenges encountered while living abroad.

Mbiti (1990) emphasizes the profound impact of religion on the thoughts and lifestyles of individuals, highlighting its significant influence on communal living. He underscores that traditional religions are not solely for personal benefit but are integral to the collective identity of the community. Consequently, an individual's connection to their religious group is essential for maintaining ties to their heritage, security, and social network, which collectively shape their sense of existence (Mbiti, 1990, p. 5). This underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within a broader community, where the community plays a pivotal role in fostering individual self-realization (Theron et al., 2013). This aligns with our findings of Cultural appreciative resilience among international students. Prior to coming abroad, participants did not actively explore their cultural identity. However, navigating a new cultural environment necessitated explaining their own heritage. This process of explaining and navigating differences forced them to confront their background in a new light. They became active interpreters of their culture, strengthening their awareness and appreciation for their cultural roots. This newfound appreciation for their heritage, combined with the inherent connection to a larger community (Mbiti, 1990), fostered openness to the host culture. Participants became more receptive to cultural differences, building resilience in the face of challenges.

Since participants were separated from their social networks and were only able to stay in touch virtually, they had to progressively overtime re-establish their physical social connections and find a sense of belonging. Through this process, they developed a sense of community and belonging through identity based cohesions, that provided comfort and solace Thus, homesickness

was not only a source of difficulty, but also a catalyst for community building, connection and cultural engagement. These findings are consistent with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness, which argues that humans have a basic need for social connection and acceptance. This need is satisfied through frequent interactions with others and the development of close bonds, which are characterized by mutual concern, stability, and a sense of future continuity (Ferrara, 2020). Participants sought to create a community of shared culture and values, which helped to resist the dominant influences of the host country. By drawing on their cultural heritage, they were able to create a renewed sense of cultural identity and belonging. This process of cultural affirmation and connection were critical in helping the participants adjust to their new environment.

This study explored how international students manage homesickness. The findings echo those of Mohamad (2019), who examined coping mechanisms used by international students experiencing homesickness but not interested in counseling. Similar to Mohamad's study, which identified talking to trusted peers, engaging in social activities, and positive self-talk as common coping strategies, this research found students employed several key mechanisms: social networks, cultural engagement and emotional coping strategies. Denovand & Macaskill (2013) further support these findings. Their interpretative phenomenological analysis of the first-year experience in higher education revealed that social support systems were a crucial coping mechanism. Pargament and Cummings (2010) suggest that religious beliefs and practices can be a powerful resource during life stressors. They argue that religion can help individuals maintain a connection to the sacred during difficult times, potentially leading to positive growth and transformation. This aligns with our study findings, where religious coping emerged as a sub-theme among the coping strategies employed by international students experiencing homesickness.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of social networks, cultural engagement, and religious practices, in fostering resilience and positive adjustment for international students experiencing homesickness.

7. Implications and recommendations

The study findings reveal the complex role of homesickness and its potential to act as a powerful agent for positive change among international students. It identified ways in which homesickness can spur students to openness to learning, solidify their cultural identity through identity-based cohesion, encourage the redefinition of relationships, and nurture a resilient appreciation for their cultural roots. These findings question the traditional view of homesickness as solely detrimental, instead suggesting that it may play a constructive role in student development.

In practical terms, social workers and other practitioners supporting international students can draw on these insights to adopt a strength-based perspective in interventions that recognize and amplify the positive aspects of homesickness. This fresh approach not only acknowledges the discomfort associated with homesickness but also seeks to leverage it to empower students, helping them uncover and cultivate their strengths and resources. Recognizing how homesickness can motivate students to connect with their heritage and fostering a sense of belonging can lead to a deeper appreciation for both their roots and the host culture. Building strong relationships with peers and mentors from both cultures can further combat feelings of isolation and provide a valuable support system, guiding international students towards personal growth & a sense of mastery. Additionally, the study also contributes to understanding how navigating a new environment can lead to a reevaluation of personal connections and cultural identity, informing the development of support services that can better assist international students during their transition. By fostering cultural engagement opportunities and strengthening social networks,

institutions can play a crucial role in promoting positive adjustment and academic success for international students experiencing homesickness.

8. Limitations and future research

This study was conducted at a single university in China with a predominantly African participant population, which may impact the transferability of the results to other populations or settings. The specific demographic composition of the participants, primarily originating from Africa, may limit the generalizability of the findings to international students from different regions or cultural backgrounds. Cultural differences, language barriers, and unique experiences related to homesickness may vary among international student populations, making it important to consider the specific context in which the study was conducted. Additionally, the study's focus on a single university in China may not capture the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by international students in other educational institutions or countries. Therefore, while the insights gained from this study provide valuable perspectives on homesickness among African students in a Chinese university, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to broader international student populations. Further research involving diverse participant demographics and settings would be beneficial to enhance the generalizability and applicability of the study's results. To further understand the potential positive role of homesickness in the lives of international students, future research should employ longitudinal data collection methods that includes tracking changes in participants' attitudes, behaviors, and coping strategies related to homesickness over an extended period. Analyzing how these factors evolve over time could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of homesickness on student development. Future research could also probe into how strength-based interventions may affect the adaptation and growth of international students.

9. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of homesickness on international students, revealing a multifaceted experience with both challenges and opportunities for growth. Homesickness fostered a deeper appreciation for existing relationships, particularly with family and friends back home. Increased communication and a desire for emotional support strengthened these bonds. The study suggests that homesickness can serve as a catalyst for reevaluating the significance of interpersonal connections, motivating students to prioritize and actively nurture them.

Participants actively sought connections with others who shared their heritage, finding comfort and belonging within this cultural community. Furthermore, their cultural background emerged as a source of resilience, with participants drawing strength from sayings and beliefs from their native language. Homesickness thus appears to trigger a heightened awareness of cultural identity and appreciation for one's roots. Homesickness also ignited a strong desire for connection, motivating students to overcome language barriers and learn the local language. This openness to learning fostered a sense of belonging and an appreciation for cultural diversity. The study also identified various coping strategies employed by students, including emotional coping mechanisms, cultural engagement activities, and maintaining strong social networks. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the role of homesickness among international students.

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