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Topic: Experience of loneliness and homesickness among international students studying abroad in Japanese universities.

Abstract:

In the globalized world, the decision of studying abroad is becoming more and more popular among young adults. Studying undergraduate or postgraduate degree in a foreign country is regarded as an interesting opportunity to enhance academic ability and enrich multicultural awareness, thus equipping students with globally competent skills. Much as the opportunities are promising, the challenges of settling down in a foreign country for international students are also worth researching which might include language barrier, cultural shock, homesickness, or feeling of loss and loneliness. However, in this paper, the specific field of research will focus on the experience of loneliness and homesickness that international students face. The reasons behind the feeling of isolation vary from the cultural environment of the country or the lack of connections among international students. This research paper aims to discuss the mental distress that international students undergo during the university transition process by accumulating information from scholars and conducting a survey about students' experience. The research found out that the nature of loneliness lied in the lack of meaningful and trustworthy relationships so solutions that equipped students with communication competence would help them in building relationships. Moreover, coping strategies that addressed emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of the experience would also help students in dealing with their distress.

Keywords: Loneliness, Homesickness, International Students, Foreign Universities, Study Abroad.

Introduction:

By studying deeper into these feelings and finding the mutual patterns that make students feel that way, the issue of loneliness can be thoroughly analyzed and the solutions could be effectively suggested and raised.

The general objective of this research is to address the cause and effects of loneliness and homesickness and provide well-advised coping strategies for students to overcome those emotional distress.

The specific objectives consist of:

1. To analyze the cause behind loneliness in psychological and sociological perspective during the transitional period of settling in a foreign country;
2. To address effects of loss and loneliness to students' mental health and academic performance;
3. To understand the common coping mechanism that students apply during difficult times;
4. To suggest effective solutions for students to deal with their loneliness and improve their experience in foreign universities.

A survey was conducted among international students to find out the common pattern in experiencing loneliness and homesickness during the first months at Japan. Students coming from University of Tsukuba , Ritsumeikan Asian Pacific University, Nagoya University, Tokyo City University revealed about what caused them to feel lonely and how they coped.

According to the survey, the most crucial point of loneliness and homesickness is linked to communication and personal connection issues. Lacking meaningful and supportive relationships, together with the difficulties in the first period of transitioning, exacerbate loneliness. The majority of students reported that they lack trusted friends and authentic connections to confide in while others mentioned about their language barrier problems.

Thurber & Walton (2012) pointed out that the adjustment process of international students into foreign universities can be distressing and overwhelming because of various obstacles they might face, which include loneliness and homesickness. (Peplau & Perlman, 1982) explained the nature of loneliness lied in the lack of satisfying and meaningful interpersonal relationships that a person desire.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Transition and adjustment process of first-year college students:

During the life course, people will undergo impactful changes and transition that can bring out both opportunities as well as challenges. Transition process can occur when it comes to changes within a person, or the changes that a person have in terms of connections with others and the outer environment. In short, any significant changes in the mindset of a person or the connection with the surroundings will be regarded as a life transition (Demick, 1996).

Following life transitions, adjustment process is a sophisticated concept that can be defined as an ongoing attempt of creating a relation or forming an appropriate fit to the new surroundings or unfamiliar situation. The adjustment process will play a vital role in the socialization of people into the community, which involves various learning cycles and significant adapting experiences. In establishing this new connection, there are two vital factors including the interactions with the environment and the mental changes occurring within a person (Ramsay et al, 2007). However, among these two factors, (Anderson, 1994) supposed that the active role of the person can outweigh the effects of the environment traits in adjusting and socializing with the social settings.

In the case of transition and adjustment, first-year-students are the subject that are most focused on in the area of education psychology. Not only because first year in college is a fundamental transition for students in their academic and college life, but also for this group is more vulnerable and subjected to obstacles in terms of university adaptation. Additionally, first-year-students suffer from more stress and pressure compared to those in later years. The experience in first year of college will also greatly influence the quality of socializing into university student role and determine their potential in academic performance as well as higher education opportunities (Ramsay et al, 2007).

The challenges of the adjustment process into university:

The transition from living at home to settling down in a foreign country imposes various challenges to university students. Even though studying abroad is regarded as a positive transformation in terms of academic and social interactions, many students can find the experience overwhelming and distressing. There are many challenges that students all have to face consisting of managing lives on their own, creating new connections and relationships and adjusting to new habits and schedules. Along with those, international students also have to keep

up with their academic achievements or athletic and artistic pursuits. These obstacles often generate self-doubt or cast adverse effects on academic and social self-concepts. The sudden changes in routine, diet, geographical and social setting also contribute to increased loneliness and homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

For international students, there is the demand to break with old habits and adapt to the routines of the new setting. When students leave home and stay at university's residence, the adaptation process needed includes getting rid of the old routines and adjusting with the new residential environment as well as academic aspects. Therefore, there is no doubt that this group of international students will suffer from more serious psychological symptoms than home-based students (Fisher & Hood, 1987).

Homesickness experienced by university students and its severe impact:

Homesickness is generally defined as the distress and mental suffering resulting from an actual or anticipated separation from home which consists of constant thoughts of home and attachment objects. Students who suffer from homesickness can have symptoms of depression and anxiety and tend to withdraw from the surroundings. They also have difficulties focusing on studying as they are distracted by homesickness. For international students, experience of intense homesickness can cause problematic mental sufferings that will adversely affect their academic performance and inclusion process with their new university environment (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

Essential factors of loss and loneliness:

Loneliness indicates an interpersonal deficit that results from fewer or less satisfying and meaningful interpersonal relationships than a person desires. Loneliness is likely to exacerbate as there exists an increasing gap in what individuals expect and what they actually experience in real life relationships. (Peplau & Perlman, 1982)

Although loneliness exists in every age group, adolescents and young adults tend to be more vulnerable (Brennan, 1982; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). Research also shows that loneliness is a common issue among university students (Cutrona, 1982; Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985).

The effects of loneliness on the overall life experience of students:

Lonely college students are more unhappy and report fewer positive emotional experiences. They appear to be inattentive and unresponsive in their interactions with others. Their perceptions reflect both greater pessimism and dissatisfaction of their interpersonal networks. Finally, the lonely college student is often- times shy and lacks assertiveness. Obviously, these attributes, perceptions, and behaviors would make it difficult for a person to initiate and maintain close relationships. (Ponzetti, 1990)

Recommended treatment for loss and loneliness:

Preventive methods for homesickness prior to departure play a vital role in improving the positive adjustment of the students to the new environment. Emphasizing homesickness prevention also means highlighting the vital role of parents, educators, and mental health professionals available on and off campus. These supporters are significant in providing mental aid and assisting students in coping with homesick feelings (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

There are various methods that parents and educators could apply to provide a better transitioning experience for students. It is recommended to provide chances for incoming students to socialize with peers and familiarize with the environment and the campus before the classes start. In this case, friendly and relaxing networking events or orientation are also suitable choices. Moreover, the most important method is assisting students to view homesickness as a positive reflection of their humanity traits that showcases the loving attachment with home. The feelings of missing home should be normalized as a common experience that everyone could undergo when separating from home. Students should be reminded that they are not alone feeling that way and embracing the emotions is also meaningful for the self-compassion process (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

It is observed that there is a close relationship between loneliness and life goals in which an increase in life goals means a decrease in loneliness. As students participate more in courses and get focused with their academic advancement, their loneliness experience can get less difficult (Bek, 2017).

Student-focused organizations such as student clubs at universities and student wellness centers could be useful in addressing the concerns of international students. Conducting counselor meetings with international students may also be effective in decreasing the amount of loneliness they feel, ultimately improving their overall academic experience (Bek, 2017).

DISCUSSION:

Loneliness in Japan:

Cultural settings and social norms of specific countries also have great influence in the experience of loneliness among students. It is indicated in various studies that Japan ranks high in the number of people who undergo loneliness compared to other regions. A survey executed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 21 countries found that Japan had the largest percentage of men reported that they “do not have much time to spend with friends and/or coworkers.” In 2007, a survey conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on the well-being of children in 24 highly developed countries revealed that Japan ranked first in terms of the percentage (29.8%) of 15-year-olds who felt they were lonely, followed by Iceland in second place (10.3%) and Poland in third (8.4%).” Japanese people are more likely to experience loneliness than people in other countries. (Ozawa-de Silva, 2020)

THE SURVEY:

The survey was delivered to international students in Japanese universities to gather their responses about the experience of loneliness and homesickness during their first months. The objective of this questionnaire is to gain insights into what cause students to feel lonely and what are the effective coping mechanism they apply to overcome difficult times. Additionally, the study aims to focus on the freshmen group, which is considered as the most vulnerable and subjected to change. A total number of 26 students coming from different nationalities and universities were asked to fill in the following questions:

1. Where are you from?
2. What is your university and major?
3. What year are you in?
4. How would you rate your experience in the first 3 months at the university?
5. How often you experience loneliness or homesickness in your first months at the university?
6. Could you please describe briefly what makes you feel lonely?
7. Did you have difficulties resulting from loneliness and homesickness?
8. What did you do to cope with loneliness and homesickness?

SURVEY ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Among the participants of the survey, there were 12 Vietnamese, 4 Chinese, 2 Americans, 2 Koreans, 1 Syrian, 1 Filipino, 1 Indian, 1 Karakhstan, 1 Indonesian, 1 Nepali, 1 Thai.

The students belong to various universities including University of Tsukuba (19) , Ritsumeikan Asian Pacific University (5), Nagoya University (1), Tokyo City University (1).

The percentage of freshmen accounts up to 68% of the total students which makes it the majority group. Students from second year or above takes up to 32% of the group.

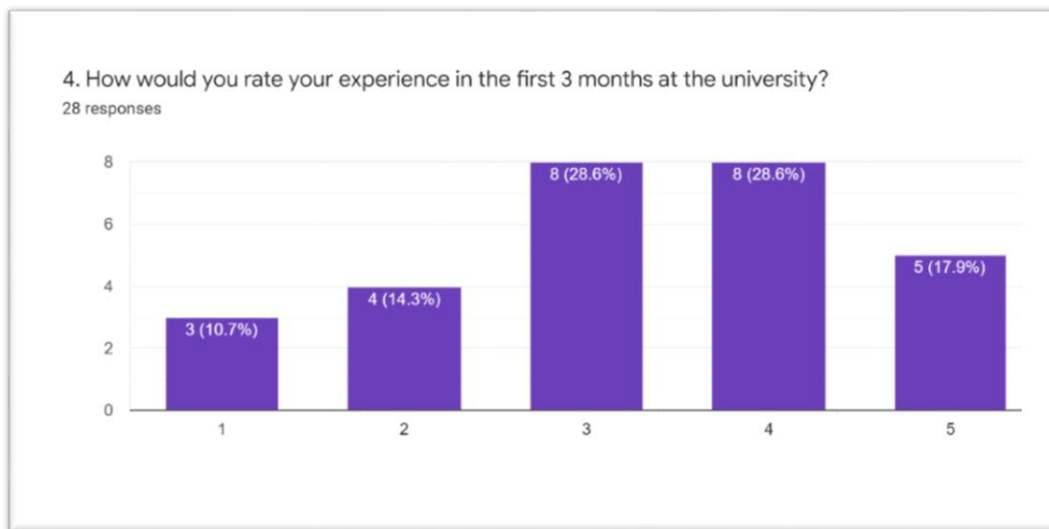


Figure 1: Students rate their experience from 1 to 5

Figure 1: The question ranged from the scale of 1 “Very difficult” to 5 “Very satisfactory”.

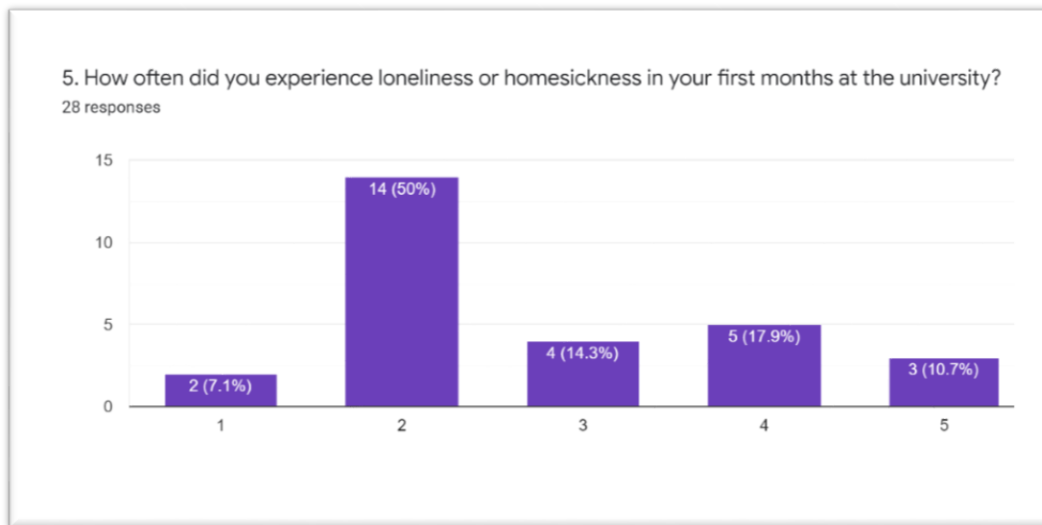


Figure 2: Students rate their experience of loneliness or homesickness from 1 to 5

Figure 2: Scaling of the question is marked as followed:

1-Never; 2-Rarely; 3-Occasionally; 4-Frequently; 5-Always

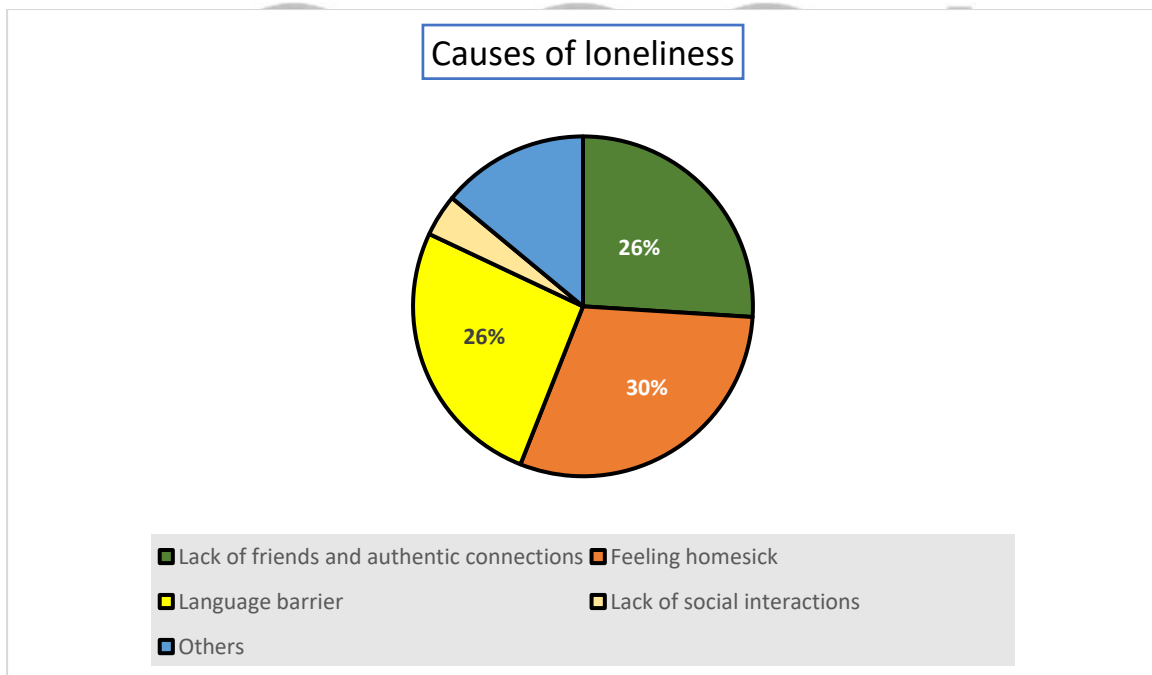


Figure 3: Causes of loneliness

9. Did you have difficulties resulting from loneliness and homesickness?
28 responses

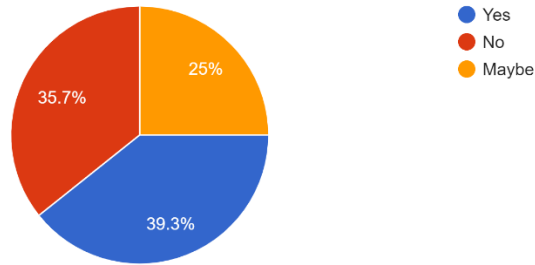


Figure 4: The percentage of students who have difficulties from loneliness and homesickness

Regarding the difficulties that students face resulting from loneliness and homesickness, there were various cases reported. 3 students mentioned that they lost interest in socializing and joining social events, while 2 others stated that their motivation to study also decreased. Moreover, they also found it difficult to hang out with friends and felt discouraged in cleaning their rooms or doing daily tasks. Some said that they went through depression, lack of appetite and sleep deprivation. Others have communication problems such as being incapable of expressing themselves due to language barrier or feeling uncomfortable talking to certain groups of people. Students also described their difficulties as “Sometimes I want to complain something with my friends such as my depression but they are not always available because they have their own life” and “There were times that I could not stop myself from crying out of missing home”. There was also a case in which a student mentioned about the identity crisis as a part of the problems.

The variation of coping strategies that students applied consist of doing exercises, talking a walk at nature or hanging out more with friends. Some students tend to join clubs, have more activities and find more friends with common interest to feel less lonely, while others prefer to stay alone and figure their feelings out on their own. Some other methods were spending quality time with friends or romantic partners and calling the family and friends from their hometown. A student also mentioned “I talk to my family and friends in Viet Nam more frequently. I also try to make Vietnamese food or go to a Vietnamese restaurant.” While some students tried to make themselves busy by studying or conducting more personal projects, others reported that they indulged in playing video games, eating or watching movies to cope with the distressing situation. Moreover, some students would combine multiple methods to make them feel better as

one described it as “Met my friends, had a walk in the nature, cycled a lot, found myself some activities, did some meditation and self-reflection to understand my emotions and feelings.”

Causes of loneliness:

One of the explanations for loneliness is the concept of learned helplessness. This situation occurs when individuals undergo a loss of control and they start to internalize feelings of hopelessness, distrust and self-derogation. These emotions will damage the self-esteem of the individual and make them lose faith in themselves. (Ponzetti, 1990)

In the case of lonely college students, they showcase this pattern of learned helplessness in blaming themselves for their inadequacy in building interpersonal relationships (Ponzetti, 1990). They also have the tendency to spend little attention on any positive feedback they might receive as a result of being preoccupied with negative thoughts and feelings. This habit could cause harm to their ability and autonomy in dealing with aspects of loneliness that they could learn to control. As a result, either they make fewer attempts or their efforts become less effective in establishing connections with others. Therefore, it is obvious that learned-helplessness becomes a great obstacle for college students in creating meaningful connections with others as well as learning to cope with loneliness effectively.

As pointed out by Ponzetti (1990), the obstacles of building meaningful relationships block students from connecting themselves with the surroundings thus exacerbating loneliness. Acquired from the responses of the international students, it is indicated that lack of authentic connections and trusted friends to confide are one of the major causes of loneliness as this aspect accounted for more than 26%. Other factor such as language barrier which took up to 26% also contributed to the quality of communication and relationships that students can acquire. There are multiple reasons why effective communication and quality relationships challenging to obtain during the first months of university transition. The cultural difference and language barrier that students face when settling in a foreign countries make it harder to build trustworthy relationships. Moreover, the element of time also plays a vital role in connections so it is rather difficult to find quality friends in the first few months at the university. As a result, students suffer from loneliness and its adverse mental effects that might damage students' self-esteem and lead to depression.

Understanding the effects of loneliness:

Loneliness can have severe impact on the function of an individual in terms of socialization, academics as well as daily activities. Several students reported that loneliness and homesickness caused them to lose the motivation to study and lost interest in socializing with others or joining events with friends. Some said that they started to isolate themselves and refrained from going out. As students started to internalize loneliness, they would be occupied with their intrusive thoughts and feelings which make them feel less anticipated in forming new connections. This repeated cycle could worsen the negative mental effects of loneliness thus affecting students' academic performance as well as state of well-being.

Recommended coping mechanism:

Effective coping strategies must concentrate on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of the loneliness experience. (Ponzetti, 1990)

The coping strategies that focus on emotional aspects enable individuals to manage the emotional distress of loneliness without being taken over by it. Lonely students can be encouraged to conduct more self-reflections with the aim of understanding their feelings more privately by completing exercises such as writing diaries or keeping a journal (France, McDowell, & Knowles, 1984). Additionally, providing safe space for lonely students to express their feelings and seek for mental help by creating support groups is also considered an effective choice.

“Cognitive-focused coping consists of modifying thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, or attributions that interfere with or inhibit appropriate interpersonal behavior”. Cognitive coping strategies assist students in identifying and eliminating unrealistic expectations or irrational beliefs that contribute to loneliness. The negative mindset and perceptions that lonely students have about relationships should be reassessed to eliminate the blockage in building relationships. Mental health specialists or educators can help students redefine their expectations of relationships by guiding them to the understanding that there is no perfect partner or ideal friend (Booth, 1983)

Behavior-focused coping concentrates on the role of competent communication skills and the motivation to apply them in establishing relationships. This can help eliminate dysfunctional emotions and cognitions including hopelessness and self-blaming attributions. As one of the reasons behind loneliness is the unawareness of how to behave in social scenarios, providing effective communication skill can help prevent that. (Ponzetti, 1990)

METHODOLOGY:

The methodology for this manuscript was based on qualitative research. Accumulation of scholarly articles, textbooks, and research papers adds up data and formulates the foundational context of this research project. A qualitative survey was conducted to gather responses from university students and analyze their experience of loneliness. There were 26 responses coming from international students studying in Japanese universities that include University of Tsukuba, Ritsumeikan Asian Pacific University, University of Nagoya and Tokyo City University.

The hypothesis stated that there are various factors that can cause international students to feel lonely and homesick during their study in Japan. The reasons behind feeling of isolation could vary from the cultural environment of the country or the language barrier to the lack of connections among international students. Among the challenges, the experience of intense homesickness and loneliness can cause problematic mental sufferings that will adversely affect their academic performance and inclusion process with the new university setting.

The theoretical framework in this study is based on understanding the challenges of the transition into university when international students leave their countries to settle at a new environment. Moreover, the research also aims to identify the causes and effects of loneliness to suggest effective coping mechanism for international students. Thurber & Walton (2012) pointed out that there are various obstacles that international students face when adapting to their new foreign university that can make the transitioning process distressing and overwhelming, one of which consist of loneliness and homesickness. (Peplau & Perlman, 1982) explained the nature of loneliness lied in the lack of satisfying and meaningful interpersonal relationships that a person desires. Based on that understanding, preventive measures that enable students to socialize and form new connections is significant in reducing the effects of loneliness. Moreover, positive coping strategies should also be provided to help students manage the distressing experience more effectively (Ponzetti, 1990).

CONCLUSION:

Objective 1 stated that: To analyze the cause behind loneliness in psychological and sociological perspective during the transitional period of settling in a foreign country. The experience of transitioning into university in a foreign country could be distressing and overwhelming due to the various challenges that might occur. For international students, there is the demand to break with old habits and adapt to the routines of the new setting. They have to leave the familiarity of their hometown, family and friends and adjust to a new environment with

different culture and language. This intense challenge cause students to suffer from adverse mental problems and feelings including homesickness and loneliness.

Moreover, as indicated by the survey, the most crucial point of loneliness and homesickness is related to communication and personal connection issues. The fact that students lack meaningful and supportive relationships, combined with the difficulties in the first period of transitioning, exacerbate loneliness. The majority of students reported that they lack trusted friends and authentic connections to confide in while others mentioned about their language barrier problems. All of these could be classified as the difficulties in expressing themselves or having a safe and supportive space to communicate authentically.

Objective 2 stated that: To address effects of loss and loneliness to students' mental health, academic performance and life quality. Loneliness can have severe impact on the function of an individual in terms of socialization, academics as well as daily activities. Several students reported that loneliness and homesickness caused them lost interest in socializing with others or joining events with friends. Some said that they started to isolate themselves and refrained from going out. As a result, lonely college students usually appear to be inattentive and unresponsive in their interactions with others. Moreover, students also have difficulty concentrating in classes or lose the motivation to study, which can adversely affect their academic improvement. Additionally, loneliness could result in depressive symptoms including lack of appetite, sleep deprivation and self-isolation. These mental effects can damage students' self-esteem and negatively affect the overall life experience at university.

Objective 3 stated that: To understand the common coping mechanism that students apply during difficult times. The coping strategies consist of increased socializing and interactive activities, having more hometown-related activities and spending more time on one own. Some students tend to join clubs, have more activities and find more friends with common interest to feel less lonely, while others prefer to stay alone and conduct self-reflections. Some other students prefer to spend quality time with friends or romantic partners and call the family and friends from their hometown. Another common method is distracting oneself from the negative feelings by studying more intensively or indulging into hobbies and habits such as playing video games, watching movies or eating.

Objective 4 stated that: To suggest effective solutions for students to deal with their loneliness and improve their experience in foreign universities. Coping strategies should address and focus on on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of the loneliness experience. Students

should be prepared with the mindset and skills to manage the emotional distress of loneliness without overthrown by it. Educators or mental health advisors should encourage students to understand and reflect on their emotions by writing diaries or keeping journal. This act of self-compassion is extremely useful for students to navigate their emotions and maintaining a good state of mental health on their own. Regarding cognitive-focused methods, mental health professionals or students' supporters should collaborate to modify the negative and self-destructive thoughts and actions that prevent students from building connections or enjoying university life. For behavioral aspects, students should be equipped with competent language ability and communication skills to reduce the effect of language barrier and improve the chances of having social support system.

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