

Research Article

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International graduate students' campus and social adjustment experiences at a Japanese university

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to analyze international graduate students' study abroad experiences at a university in Japan. In this qualitative study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). Teacher College Press) grounded in the concept of the sojourner (Siu, P. C. P. (1952). The sojourner. *American Journal of Sociology*, 58, 34–44) were conducted with international students studying in an English-medium graduate program at a university located in the Kanto region of Japan. The five participants, ranging from 25 to 42 years of age, were from Nigeria, India, Peru, and the United States and were enrolled in a master's program in physical education, health and sport sciences. Three recurrent themes were identified: (a) *challenges in overcoming loneliness on campus*, (b) *importance of participation in extracurricular activities (on and off campus)*, and (c) *language barriers and cultural differences in daily living*. To better support international graduate students at Japanese universities, we encourage faculty, international education office staff, and all students to respect, value, and embrace the languages and cultures of international students.

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1 Introduction

Studying abroad can play a significant role in the future academic and professional success of both undergraduate and graduate students (Chong & Razek, 2014; Potts, 2015). Currently, the most popular study abroad destination in 2019 is the United States (1,095,299 students), followed by the United Kingdom (496,570 students), China (492,185 students), Canada (435,415 students), Australia (420,501 students), France (343,400 students), Russia (334,487 students), Germany (282,002), and Japan (208,901 students) (Studee, 2022). One reason why Japan has become a popular destination for study abroad is that the number of colleges and universities offering degree programs using English as the medium of instruction (EMI) has doubled in the past 20 years (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, 2017). Such EMI programs attract and encourage international students to attend colleges and universities in Japan by offering 95% of international students free tuition or substantial financial aid (Hennings & Tanabe, 2018). These have increased in popularity due to a growing awareness of the need for students to study abroad to gain international experience, learn another language, and develop cross-cultural communication skills that enhance their global employability (Sauzier-Uchida, 2017). However, few studies have investigated international students' academic and social experiences at colleges and universities and local community in non-English speaking countries, especially in Japan (Lee, 2017).

In Japan, for example, international students' experiences often involve challenges in adapting to new and different cultural realities and in overcoming difficulties related to discrimination, stereotypes, and language barriers (Tamaoka et al., 2003). Further, international students also find cultural and social conflicts with their own cultural values and academic and social needs (Myburgh et al., 2002). More specifically, for example, they feel that it is difficult to interact with Japanese students on campus because Japanese students may have a discrepancy between their true feelings (*honne*) and their formal behavior (*tatemae*). Additionally, international students may struggle to understand and use the Japanese language's complicated hierarchy of politeness, multiple writing systems, and sentence structure that is different from many other languages (Lee, 2017). Moreover, international students face social challenges while engaging Japanese students, faculty, and staff due to the nature of Japan's strong sense of group-consciousness (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002). Therefore,

international students need to rely heavily on university-led support systems to form peer relationships as their access to social support networks (Paltridge et al., 2010).

1.1 Master's program in physical education, health, and sport sciences in Japan

The master's program in physical education, health, and sport sciences accepts next-generation sport leaders from other countries and provides students with opportunities for learning advanced knowledge using a holistic curriculum including modules related to sport management, sport science and medicine, teaching, and coaching.

The educational goals of the master's program in physical education, health, and sport sciences are for all students to demonstrate the following five components: (a) An understanding of international affairs, global issues, and the mission of sport, (b) The ability to understand cutting-edge information about sport science and demonstrate leadership, (c) An understanding of and the ability to practice the values associated with sport and physical activities, (d) An understanding of Japanese culture as well as communication skills in English, and (e) "Global" practical ability characterized by both a broad international perspective and an awareness of people living in local communities.

The university actively provides an innovative academic kinesiology program in English, which allows students to develop practical competence in international relations through coaching and teaching in sport and kinesiology. The program is founded on the belief that sport is used in a wide range of situations to serve development and peace-building efforts as part of the educational practices of individual development, gender equality, social integration, and health promotion and disease prevention (Gadai, 2019). Upon entering the program, graduate students choose to join one of four education and research fields including Olympic and Paralympic education, sport management (sport business, policies, governance), sport sciences and medicine, or teaching, coaching, and Japanese culture.

1.2 Theoretical framework and purpose

This study is based on the concept of the *sojourner* (Siu, 1952). Siu (1952) refers to sojourners as immigrants who cling to the cultural heritage of their own ethnic and national group and are psychologically unwilling to organize themselves as

permanent residents in the country of their sojourn. Ward and Kennedy (1999) define *sojourner* more specifically, referring to international students who temporarily visit and live in new places to receive academic knowledge, have social communication, and achieve goals and objectives without assimilation into the host culture. Previous research on sojourners has investigated two broad domains: psychological and sociocultural factors (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychological factors are related to stress and coping, including international students' feelings of well-being and self-satisfaction. Sociocultural factors consist of cultural learning including the ability to negotiate interactions and communication with host nationals (Hsiao-Ying, 1995). Therefore, the major task facing international students in their cultural transition is to develop stress-coping strategies and culturally relevant social skills (Zhou et al., 2008).

These coping strategies and social skills are important for sojourners' adjustment to their new environment. Research has suggested that individuals who integrate with the host culture have fewer social and psychological difficulties than those who separate themselves from the host culture (Berry, 1997). However, full adjustment and acculturation may be difficult for temporary sojourners, such as international students. Church (1982, p. 540) defines *sojourner adjustment* as "the psychological adjustment of relatively short-term visitors to new cultures where permanent settlement is not the purpose of the sojourn." A variety of factors have been found to affect sojourner adjustment, including cultural distance between the home and host culture, quantity and quality of interaction with host country nationals, cultural understanding and participation, language proficiency and use, integration with the host culture, and sojourners' academic, social, and cultural expectations of their sojourn experience (Church, 1982; Pedersen et al., 2011; Pitts, 2009). Sojourners' communication abilities are important for their integration and participation in interpersonal relationships with members of the host society. For example, a sojourner with weaker language skills and a social network comprised predominantly of those from their home culture can be considered less adjusted than a sojourner who has greater language proficiency and is more integrated into the host society (Khan, 1992). Adjustment motivation or the sojourner's desire to learn about and participate in the host society also has a strong effect. According to Dodd (1998), if a sojourner is highly motivated to adjust to their host culture, they become more culturally involved with group membership in the host culture and develop more friendships from the host culture than those who are not motivated to acculturate. However, participation in the host culture may be more difficult in places that are more culturally homogeneous, such as Japan, leading to less sojourner adjustment (Tsai, 1995). Specifically for academic sojourners, adjustment can also be affected by their motivation to

pursue their studies, their satisfaction with their academic performance, and their enjoyment of their lifestyle as a student (Anderson et al., 2016).

When sojourners are unable to sufficiently adjust, they may face various types of culture shock. According to Furnham and Bochner (1986), culture shock is an example of contact-induced stress caused by social skill deficits that are managed and ameliorated on a college or university campus. More specifically, the term “shock” is understood as the stimulus for acquisition of culture-specific skills that are required to engage in new social interactions (Zhou et al., 2008). In order to avoid culture shock, international students generally tend to develop friendships with those from the same or similar cultural backgrounds (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). When they have negative cross-cultural relationships or acculturation experiences on campus in the host culture, auto-stereotypes (in-group perceptions), hetero-stereotypes (out-group perceptions), and reflected stereotypes (how the out-group is perceived to view the in-group) adversely reflect significant differences in behavioral characteristics between international and local students (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to analyze international graduate students' sojourner and study abroad experiences at a public university in Japan. The central research question was: How did international students construct (interpret) their sojourn experiences while attending a graduate program in comprehensive human sciences dealing with sport studies at a public university in Japan? This study also addresses a gap in the higher education literature on international student experiences in Japan.

2 Method

2.1 Research design

This qualitative study used the interview method with an in-depth, semi-structured approach (Seidman, 1998). The lead author conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants who were students in an English-medium graduate program in physical education, health and sport sciences at a public university in Japan.

2.2 Participants and sampling

The research site was a public university located in the Kanto region of Japan. The participants were five male students enrolled in a master's program in physical education, health, and sport sciences. Participants ranged in age from 25 to

Table 1: Characteristics of educational backgrounds of participants.

Name ^a	Age	Gender	First language and country	Past study abroad experiences	Master's program
Kevin	40s	Male	English/USA	Yes/Japan (undergraduate)	Physical education, health, and sport sciences
Solomon	28	Male	English/and Nigerian languages	No	Physical education, health, and sport sciences
Roy	36	Male	Hindi/India	No	Physical education, health, and sport sciences
Kumar	25	Male	Hindi/India	No	Physical education, health, and sport sciences
Jose	36	Male	Spanish/Peru	No	Physical education, health, and sport sciences

^aPseudonym.

42 years and were originally from Nigeria, India, Peru, and the United States (see Table 1 for additional demographic information). This graduate program annually admits a maximum of eight graduate students who pass the university's entrance exam. The other graduate students in the program included two from Japan and one who was residing in other country during the data collection. The program requires a minimum of 30 credit hours, including 11 credit hours of sport and Olympic studies lecture courses; 11 credit hours of kinesiology courses (e.g., international sport marketing, sport medicine, elite sport coaching, sport marketing) and seminar courses and other graduate courses across major; 8 credit hours of internship (domestic and international) and a research-based master's thesis project.

Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and the university to ensure anonymity and protect their identities. Participants were purposefully sampled using a criterion sampling method. The criteria were that the participants (a) were admitted to the master's program in physical education, health and sport sciences at the research site, and (b) were required to read, write, and communicate with classmates and faculty in English during coursework. This program offers English-medium courses including, for example, sport and diversity, Olympic studies, sport law, coaching, exercise physiology, biomechanics, research methods and project management, and various seminars. The logic of criterion

sampling is to select and investigate all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance or interest (Patton, 2002). In this study, approval to conduct the study was granted by the institutional review board at the lead researcher's university, and signed consent forms were collected from all five participants.

2.3 Data collection

2.3.1 Face-to-face interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Interviews were completed in a face-to-face (in-person) format. During the interviews, the lead researcher asked participants questions about their study abroad experiences, academic and social environment, cultural adjustment, campus life and learning experiences. Interviews were conducted in English language and lasted 60–90 min with each participant. The questions were carefully worded to ensure relevancy to participants' environment and experiences. Sample interview questions include:

- (a) What do you think are the advantages of studying physical education and sport at the university. Additionally, are there any points that should be improved?
- (b) From your contact with the students at the university and graduate school do you find that the Japanese students' attitude and approach toward their studies is different from that of the students at universities you attended before?
- (c) What do you consider to be the most important factors in your learning outcomes throughout this study abroad experience? Please tell us the reason you chose these factors. If someone you know wanted to study abroad, would you recommend them to study at the university?

2.3.2 Follow-up e-mail interview

E-mail correspondence was used to support the interview data. E-mail correspondence was used when clarifications, illustrations, explanations, or elaborations were desirable or needed (Meho, 2006). E-mail was useful for confirming the accuracy of the interpretations of interview data from participants regularly and, if necessary, to summarize the participants' responses to previous questions and return the responses to participants for verification.

2.3.3 Data analysis

A constant comparative method (Boeije, 2010) was used to interpret the data. The basic strategy of this analytical process is to constantly compare pieces of data while inductively deriving meaning or themes. More specifically, the transcripts from the set of interviews with each participant were coded independently by the researchers, and the differences were discussed until agreement was reached in relation to themes. In addition, two peer debriefers reviewed the codes to avoid potential researcher bias. Further coded data from the sets of transcripts from each participant were compared to identify similarities and differences. For example, after peer debriefing, the researchers conducted a second round of coding key terms (e.g., culture shock, communication contexts, friendship) in the transcripts of the data sources (i.e., recoded the original ones). Some codes were combined during this process, whereas others were split into subcategories (subthemes). Finally, the researchers examined the final codes to organize them into a hierarchical structure using individual and group coding percentage (how many times key terms appear in the data source). Then all data and definitions of key terms were sent back to all participants for a second round of member checking. Final confirmation from all participants was received and the researchers grouped the codes into thematic categories, which were then refined into recurring themes (Boeije, 2010).

3 Results

The purpose of this study was to analyze international graduate students' sojourner and study abroad experiences at a public university in Japan. The three recurrent themes were: (a) *challenges to overcome loneliness on campus*, (b) *importance of participation in extracurricular activities (on and off campus)*, and (c) *language barriers and cultural differences in daily living*.

3.1 Theme I: challenges to overcome loneliness on campus

This theme captures the participants' feeling that they were sometimes treated as unwelcome outsiders on campus. They felt marginalized, alienated, and lonely, and believed that some Japanese students hesitated to interact with international students. They were burdened with the culturally unique interpersonal rules of Japanese pertaining to collectivism and indirect ways of expression (Tanaka & Okunishi, 2016). For example, Kevin explained that

I had hard time breaking social boundaries with Japanese students on campus. I am not sure if it is because I do not look Asian or not. I think I will be able to communicate with Japanese students individually, but I have a hard time joining in social groups. I see that Japanese students communicate differently when they are alone and in a group. It seems that many Japanese students are interested in learning more about my culture (American), but they do not know how to welcome international students to the particular groups. (Kevin, interviews)

Kevin explained that he was not sure why Japanese students changed social and communication styles between when they are alone and in a group setting. Solomon also shared his experiences with loneliness:

I think that many Japanese students belong to a professor's (academic advisor's) research lab. Many Japanese students hang out together within the group. For example, all seminars were planned and organized by my academic advisors. My academic advisor has several graduate students from various academic programs, so I only see him and his students. It seems that Japanese students do not have many chances to interact with other students with different academic advisors. Plus, almost all Japanese students do not speak English much, so it was difficult for me to join in the social groups. After the seminars, I do not have much time to interact with seminar groups, so I go back to communicate with other international students in my program. I sometimes felt isolated and lonely when I could not communicate with Japanese students on campus. (Solomon, interviews)

In Japanese universities, a "seminar" is a small group of students studying and researching a similar area and advised by the same professor (similar to a research lab). Solomon believed that attending and participating in seminar was a challenge because, while he could get to know the students in his seminar, it inhibited him from meeting other students and created loneliness, a lack of a sense of belonging outside the seminar, and difficulty accessing a satisfying social network.

Some participants also felt isolation because they needed to take more online courses rather than in-person courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Jose explained:

All face-to-face courses were shifted to online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. I wasn't able to meet students in the classroom. I felt lonely and sad because I couldn't see other students. All of my classes were lecture-based and there was no discussion to communicate with other classmates during the class, so I think that encouraging participation in online discussion was important to develop social and interactive learning with classmates. (Jose, interviews)

Jose also explained that online courses made it difficult for him to understand what to expect in his classes or the standard of work required. Without face-to-face interaction with professors and classmates, he continuously faced the challenge of feeling isolated.

3.2 Theme II: importance of participation in extracurricular activities (on and off campus)

This theme arose from participants descriptions of their participation in extracurricular activities on and off campus for building their social network while studying in Japan. They chose to participate in sports with people from the same or similar sport and physical activity background, which helped them to retain a sense of identity, tradition, and cultural beliefs, and to feel more at home (Allen & Lyons, 2019). They believed that participating in sport and physical activities, whether on or off campus, helped them enrich their lives, meet people from Japan, and aid in acculturation. For example, Roy explained that

I am from India, so cricket is a popular cultural sport and physical activity. I traveled by train and bus to participate in cricket weekly. When I spend time on campus, I enjoyed it, but it is overwhelming sometimes because I am older than other graduate students, so it is difficult to connect with students here. I can have my own time and space and meet people outside of campus. That helps me to relax and refresh my mind. I know that it is costly, but it is valuable. (Roy, interviews)

Roy explained that he felt that he struggled to engage in social interactions with Japanese students because of generational boundaries. Therefore, his feeling of marginalization increased. He believed that it is important to hold his own customs, habits, and practices in order to maintain his national identity while living in Japan. Another participant, Solomon, explained that

I am participating in an intramural soccer team on campus. I know that this university has many excellent and outstanding student athletes (soccer players), but I do not play with them. I sought other intramural soccer opportunities and am enjoying playing soccer with non-athletes weekly. It was unfortunate that I felt that I was treated as a guest in the beginning, but I could slowly develop a friendship with them. Intramural sport participation is the only way for me to interact with Japanese students. I do not think I would be able to interact socially with other students unless I participate in intramural sport teams. (Solomon, interviews)

Solomon felt that it was important to seek out local students as much as possible to develop his social network because without developing his social network, he felt isolated and felt that he lost opportunities to learn Japanese culture and habits. Another participant, Kevin, explained that

I am former professional ice hockey player in the United States. I tried to find ice hockey practice opportunities off campus because there is no ice hockey rink on campus. When I was an exchange student at a private university several years ago, I contacted Japanese friends who knew about an ice hockey club team, but I had to travel to Tokyo. When I got there, I was

treated as a foreigner and I felt that I was not welcome, but I felt good to be on the ice hockey rink. I was a professional hockey player, so I tried to give useful feedback to the Japanese players, but they did not want to listen, because they said “that is not how we practice and play ice hockey in Japan.” It was difficult to connect with Japanese people, but dealing with the sport I loved off-campus was a way to help reduce my loneliness (Kevin, interviews).

Kevin believed that although it was difficult to develop a social network that included Japanese people outside of campus, exercising off campus helped him to improve his mood and have better mental health.

3.3 Theme III: language barriers and cultural differences in daily living

This theme captures the participants' belief that they had language barriers that presented challenges in dealing with daily life. For example, many participants struggled to read Japanese, such as food ingredient information on packages. They tried to overcome this challenge by using language translation applications on their cell phones. They also had some problems registering their “My Number,” a 12-digit national identity number given to all residents in Japan, including non-Japanese nationals. This number is used for administrative purposes such as social security, taxes, and disaster prevention and is issued at city halls in Japan. For example, Roy explained that

I didn't know anything about taxes, My Number card registration, or disaster prevention. It was difficult trying to read Japanese letters and Chinese characters. I think what made it more difficult was that it is not only language barriers and I had to deal with, but also cultural differences and my position in the community. That was hard. I had an international faculty member who is from the same country, so I could ask many things to him. However, I do not think other Japanese professors and administrators would be able to explain the details of the My Number card system in English. (Roy, interviews)

Roy also explained that registering his My Number card was important and he felt protected as an international student as well as resident in the city. Another participant, Kevin, experienced cultural differences when he had to deal with the health insurance system in Japan.

I'm from the United States, so the health insurance system in Japan is different from the United States. Japan's national health insurance system provides universal coverage. In my country, in the United States, we need to purchase health insurance and only use hospitals and clinics through our health care network. We need to visit our primary doctor and ask them to write a referral in order to see specialists. In Japan, you can visit all hospitals and clinics anytime. I was shocked when I learned that. (Kevin, interviews)

Kevin shared that the United States has no single nationwide system of health insurance; instead, health insurance is purchased in the private marketplace or provided by the government to certain groups of people. He believed that living in Japan made him rethink how he understands a new situation in relation to health care. Another participant, Kumar, started working at local convenience store near campus. Although he was nervous and anxious when he started to work at the convenience store, he felt that having a part time job at a convenience store allowed him to have eye-opening cultural and social experiences while he lived in Japan. International students visas allow part time employment up to 28 h weekly. For example, Kumar said that

I believed that having a part time job at a convenience store was scary, but I had to be brave and take a chance. I could not speak, read, and write Japanese, so I was afraid of making mistakes, but I felt that I might be able to learn something from the mistakes. The convenience store (where I work) is located near campus, so there are many undergraduate students I have seen on campus. I started to have conversation with them while I was working as a cashier at the convenience store. They told me, “I have seen you on campus” ... Then they came back to the store again. Through part time job opportunities, I am learning to speak and read Japanese. I think I have improved my Japanese competency a lot (Kumar, interviews).

Kumar believed that off-campus work experiences allowed him to explore cultural experiences as well as practice and learn Japanese. Thus, he said “although it was a tough challenge for me to take this opportunity, I had better cultural and professional learning experiences.” His part time job experience can provide him with opportunities for skill development, career formation, and language competency which bridge roles between his study abroad life and career experiences in Japan.

4 Discussion

The themes that emerged from this study highlighted international graduate students difficulties in overcoming cultural differences including beliefs, behaviors, languages, practices, and expressions. Culturally, the students had difficulty adjusting to Japanese social norms (e.g., social and emotional distance from Japanese students and community). More specifically, the international students had situational anxiety in regard to communicating on campus. Situation-specific anxiety directly and negatively affects an individual in a specific situation (e.g., speaking on and off campus) (Woodrow, 2006).

The international students found themselves in cross-cultural relationships, but they had social distance with Japanese students on and off campus (Sawir

et al., 2008). Although Japanese language competence is one key factor that linked loneliness and low self-esteem of the international students, they had social loneliness (boredom and a sense of exclusion on and off campus) due to a lack of an engaging social network with Japanese students who share their concerns or views of the campus climate (Osterman, 2001). According to Tanaka and Okunishi (2016), many Japanese students, faculty, and staff in higher education are unaware of how to deal with international students from unfamiliar cultures. Japanese communication customs are quite culturally unique. Previous research has also suggested that international students have difficulty in understanding Japanese ways of communication in which people make effort to sense others' thoughts and feelings while minimizing verbal exchange of ideas (Sano, 1988). Additionally, there are culturally unique interpersonal rules of Japanese pertaining to collectivism and indirect ways of expression (Emura, 1995; Tanaka & Okunishi, 2016; Uehara, 1990). Indirect expression is a significant feature of the Japanese culture and can be a source of difficulty for international students. Therefore, international students are sometimes treated as outsiders and suffer from unwelcome treatment and social barriers at Japanese college and university campuses (Tanaka, 1992). If sojourners establish smooth relationships with their hosts (e.g., students and faculty), it would be an advantage to both problem-solving and support-receiving (Tanaka & Okunishi, 2016).

This study found that the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted international students' well-being, academic performance, and social gathering due to loneliness on campus during online education (see also Telyani et al., 2021). More specifically, the students did not have proper communication with professors and fellow students. In addition, their motivation for learning in online courses was negatively impacted by their loneliness, stress, nervousness, and anxiety. Such a decrease in motivation for learning can severely impact sojourner students' academic adjustment, as suggested by Anderson et al. (2016).

The international students participated in various extracurricular activities as a strategy to adjust to their new culture and community because they perceived that many Japanese students had a strong sense of group consciousness (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002). Extracurricular activities are important activities that help international students interface with the wider community as well as the college and university network (Gatto, 2005). Through sport and physical activities, for example, the international students may be motivated and gain different social skill benefits such as teamwork (international – team building) skills, communication skills, and relationship skills (Metsapelto & Pulkkinen, 2012). Compiegne (2021) explains that host national students (Japanese students in this case) already have well-established social networks and often do not seek or need extra friendships as much as international students. International students who do not

develop connections with local students over time are more likely to experience higher levels of stress (Geeraert et al., 2014). Off-campus extracurricular activities (e.g., cricket, ice hockey) may provide social supports that help international students enhance cross-cultural adjustment and continuity in international students' feeling of cultural identity, which contributes to reduction of acculturative stress of cultural differences and linguistic difficulties while studying abroad (Tanaka & Okunishi, 2016).

This study found that the international students chose to participate in sport and physical activity as extracurricular activities on and off campus, through which they may be able to build connections with others who have similar interests and goals. However, they perceived that many Japanese college and university students were closed off (*heisateki* in Japanese) which made it difficult to interact with them on campus (Lee, 2017). They used their coping strategies for taking control of the acculturation stress (e.g., problem solving or removing the source of stress), to seek information or assistance in handling the situation, and to remove oneself from the stressful situation (Demes & Geeraet, 2015). As sojourner experiences, the international students had acculturation stress regarding stepping out from the safety zone of their home country and leaving familiar resources, culture, and communication. Therefore, they had growing feelings of disorientation, confusion, and anxiety (Hannigan, 1997). It is important for them to increase their own intercultural awareness, sense of belonging, and well-being when they are exposed to various cultures and foster a sense of commonality through sport and physical activity as extracurricular activities (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

The international students had various challenges and struggles in dealing with cultural differences and language barriers in daily life. For example, unfamiliar foods and dietary restrictions, household chores, social security, taxes, and address changes became challenges for the international students. For example, they had difficulty registering for their My Number card, which is used to link personal information across multiple government agencies (The Japan agency for local authority information system, 2022). Through the registration process, they expressed concern about providing documents to public agency personnel because of language barriers and cultural differences. However, the students appreciated that there is a national health care system that guarantees universal coverage for all citizens (see also Borroto Gutierrez et al., 2003). This means that under the universal medical care insurance system, all residents are obligated to subscribe to one of the public medical insurance plans and are compensated for necessary medical care. Kevin, for example, had culture shock that the Japanese health insurance policy was different from his home country, as the United States does not have a public health insurance system to cover all citizens universally.

Thus, an unfamiliar cultural environment and sociocultural barriers exacerbated their living problems (e.g., communication with locals, language differences) (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Yan and Sendall (2016) explain that special adjustment sessions in the new student orientation may be helpful for the international students. These sessions should enhance international students' awareness by introducing them to various aspects of adaptation and activities to improve physical, psychological, and social adjustment to daily life in Japan (Marinenko & Snopkova, 2019).

In order to improve cultural intelligence and Japanese language skills, some students thought that part time job opportunities on or off campus allowed them to gain valuable learning, personal development, and emotional growth (see also Derous & Ryan, 2008). The term *cultural intelligence* is defined as individuals' ability to function and work in situations in which cultural diversity exists (Early & Ang, 2003). Ang and Van Dyne (2008) explain that there are four components of cultural intelligence, including cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral factors. Cognitive factors affect the ability to know a new cultural environment in the workplace. Metacognitive factors affect an individual's ability to plan, monitor, and revise their own cultural norms to adjust to a new workplace. Motivational factors affect an individual's self-confidence and ability to interact with people from culturally different backgrounds in the workplace. Behavioral factors refer to the ability to behave and act verbally and non-verbally in line with the new workplace. Through the part time job opportunities, the students became better able to live and integrate with a new workplace culture. Elfondri and Amril (2021) explain that international students would have less culture shock when encountering new things if they have prior knowledge of those things, even if they have never experience them first hand.

4.1 Study limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the participants were deliberately selected from just one public research university in Japan. Statistically speaking, therefore, the findings are not generalizable. From a qualitative perspective, however, the reader may assume transferability to the context of colleges or universities elsewhere in cases where there are contextual similarities with international students (Leininger, 1994). Second, the number of participants was small and they are all studying in the same field (kinesiology) in an English-medium program, which may also limit the generalizability of the findings. However, qualitative inquiries, including case studies, typically use small samples and variation sampling, the intent of which is to capture and describe the central themes that cut across a vast

array of participant variation (Patton, 2002). Our intent in using this sampling approach was to uncover common themes reflecting international students who were interested in study abroad in Japan.

4.2 Recommendations and conclusions

Based on their study abroad experiences at a Japanese university, the international students experienced loneliness as a result of cultural and linguistic differences. Japanese colleges and universities need to do more to promote cross-cultural learning and positive relationship outcomes between Japanese students, faculty, staff, and international students.

First, this study recommends that universities in Japan that welcome international students should establish conversation programs and find Japanese students to act as campus mentors who teach new international students what to do and not to do on campus (Sato, Burge-Hall, & Matsumoto, 2020). Such conversational partners could be an important tool to help international students to succeed. In this way, students' loneliness may be prevented or relieved by communicating with their conversation partners, who may be able to provide advice regarding cultural and psychological adaptation (Neto, 2021).

Second, international students need more exposure to a larger community beyond their seminar group and even beyond the university network (see also Gatto, 2005). International students can participate in extracurricular activities in their community, or they can participate in volunteer activities with elderly, disabled, or youth populations, so that they can integrate with and give back to the community. Barber, Mueller, and Ogata (2013) explained that participating in extracurricular activities generates a sense of belonging to the community as a whole, which inspires students to be contributing members of community.

Third, it is important that Japanese students help international students be exposed to language development (in either English or Japanese). International students need opportunities to communicate with other students about rules, routines, and daily life through conversational partnership (Sato & Miller, 2021). This opportunity may provide information about potential cultural differences (between international students and Japanese students). In order to improve international students' transition to a new culture, one key component is to raise the Japanese conversation partners' awareness of other cultures (Mason & Eva, 2014) and find and solve various issues and concerns of sociocultural and general living challenges.

To better support international graduate students at a Japanese university, we encourage faculty, study abroad office staff, and all students to respect, value, and

embrace the languages and cultures of international students. This will contribute to a greater appreciation of the richness of diversity and to provide meaningful academic, cultural, and social experiences available at Japanese college and university campuses for all students.

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