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NAVIGATING CULTURAL DISSONANCE: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADAPTATION IN JAPAN DURING COVID-19: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INTEGRATING HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Shiyun Zhang
Osaka University, Graduate School of Human Sciences, 1-2 Yamadaoka, Suita, Osaka 565-0871, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the experiences of international students, intensifying cultural adaptation challenges and exposing gaps in institutional support systems. This phenomenological study explores how international students in Japan navigated cultural dissonance and systemic barriers during the pandemic, focusing on their emotional resilience and adaptation strategies. Employing Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and phenomenology as an integrated framework, the research examines the interplay between macro-level cultural norms and micro-level lived experiences.

Data were collected through surveys (n=176) and in-depth interviews (n=40) with participants from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds. The findings highlight three key themes: (1) the emotional and psychological toll of adapting to Japan's high-context, collectivist culture, characterized by implicit communication and hierarchical relationships; (2) the critical role of language proficiency in shaping students' academic and social integration; and (3) the dual role of digital technologies as both a tool for connection and a source of alienation in socially distanced environments.

This study reveals that rigid institutional systems, compounded by Japan's high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, often exacerbated students' feelings of exclusion and vulnerability. However, strategies such as peer support, mentorship, and reflective practices enabled students to develop cross-cultural empathy and emotional resilience. The research underscores the need for culturally responsive interventions, including bilingual administrative support, streamlined processes, and digital tools designed for inclusivity.

By bridging systemic cultural analysis with subjective lived experiences, this study contributes to the discourse on cross-cultural adaptation and crisis management. Its findings offer actionable insights for educators and policymakers to foster resilience, inclusivity, and well-being among international students in times of global disruption.

Keywords: International students, cultural adaptation, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, phenomenology, emotional resilience, COVID-19, Japan, higher education, cross-cultural empathy, digital tools.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the experiences of international students worldwide, exposing unique challenges in navigating new cultural and social environments. Globally, students face barriers such as language difficulties, cultural dissonance, and the need to adapt to unfamiliar educational systems (Kim, 2001). In Japan, these challenges are further amplified by the country's distinctive cultural norms, including collectivism, high-context

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communication, and hierarchical relationships (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980). For students from individualistic or low-context cultures, navigating these systemic norms often leads to feelings of isolation and disconnection (Triandis, 1995).

The pandemic exacerbated these challenges by shifting educational and social interactions to virtual platforms, disrupting traditional pathways for cultural immersion (Takahashi, 2020). High-context cultures like Japan, which rely heavily on implicit cues and shared understanding, struggled to adapt to digital environments where such cues are diminished. For international students, this shift compounded existing cultural barriers, creating new layers of dissonance and adaptation challenges.

This study aims to explore how international students in Japan navigate cultural dissonance and systemic norms during a global crisis. By employing Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and phenomenology, the research bridges macro-level cultural analysis with the lived experiences of individuals. While Hofstede's framework identifies systemic cultural tendencies such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, phenomenology uncovers the emotional and cognitive dimensions of adapting to these norms (Moustakas, 1994; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive lens to examine how students negotiate cultural and technological challenges during the pandemic.

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do international students experience and navigate cultural dissonance while studying in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What strategies do they employ to maintain social connections and cope with systemic cultural barriers?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between cultural norms, emotional resilience, and adaptation strategies. It provides actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance support systems for international students in diverse academic environments.

The study focuses on three key themes:

- **Cultural Adaptation and Emotional Well-Being:** This theme investigates how cultural differences influence students' emotional resilience and well-being, particularly in adapting to Japan's emphasis on group harmony and indirect communication.
- **Implicit Social Norms:** This theme explores the challenges international students face in understanding and adhering to unspoken cultural expectations, such as hierarchical relationships and group harmony.
- **The Dual Role of Technology:** This theme examines the reliance on digital tools for maintaining relationships and their role in shaping students' adaptation experiences in a socially distant environment.

To ensure the highest standards of research ethics, the study was conducted under the approval of Osaka University's ethics review board (approval number CCFC202002), adhering to institutional guidelines and ethical principles. Furthermore, the research was supported by the Office of International Exchange (OIE), which facilitated key aspects of participant recruitment and data collection.

By examining these themes, the study contributes to the broader discourse on cross-cultural adaptation and crisis management, offering valuable insights for educational institutions and policymakers. It underscores the importance of culturally sensitive interventions and support

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mechanisms to address the unique challenges faced by international students in times of global disruption.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a dual framework, integrating Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1980) and phenomenology to analyze the lived experiences of international students in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. By combining these perspectives, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between cultural adaptation, emotional resilience, and the challenges posed by a global crisis. This integration bridges macro-level cultural analysis with micro-level subjective experiences, providing a robust foundation for examining how systemic cultural norms influence individual adaptation strategies.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1980) serves as a foundational lens to examine how cultural differences shape international students' adaptation strategies. According to Hofstede, "culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 21). His framework identifies six dimensions of cultural variability that influence behavior and interaction: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, long-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. This study focuses on three dimensions particularly relevant to the Japanese context and the experiences of international students: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Hofstede defines collectivism as a cultural orientation in which individuals "see themselves as part of a 'we' group, where the interests of the group prevail over the interests of the individual" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 51). Japan's collectivist culture places strong emphasis on group harmony, interdependence, and implicit communication. For students from individualistic societies, where "ties between individuals are loose" and personal independence is prioritized (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45), these cultural expectations can create significant dissonance.

In collectivist cultures, high-context communication further complicates interactions. Hall (1976) explains that in high-context communication, "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person," as opposed to low-context cultures, where communication relies heavily on explicit verbal information (p. 91). For international students unfamiliar with these implicit norms, misunderstandings can arise, especially in academic settings where group consensus often takes precedence over individual contributions. Triandis (1995) adds that in collectivist cultures, "disagreeing openly with the group can be seen as selfish or disruptive, even when the disagreement is constructive" (p. 123). This dynamic underscores the challenges international students face in adapting to Japan's emphasis on group-oriented behavior.

Power Distance

Power distance reflects *"the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally"* (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). Japan's relatively high power distance emphasizes respect for authority and hierarchical relationships, both in academic and social contexts. Students from cultures with low

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power distance may find these hierarchical norms unfamiliar or rigid, particularly in interactions with professors or supervisors.

For instance, the use of keigo (formal Japanese language) conveys respect for authority but may feel overly formal to students accustomed to egalitarian communication styles. Kuznetsova (2023) highlights that "*the rigid expectations of honorific language often leave international students feeling disconnected or uncertain about how to appropriately express themselves in hierarchical settings*" (p. 12). Similarly, McMahon, Rentler, and Yoshimura (2024) discuss the challenges international students face when navigating Japanese academic environments that emphasize formal language and hierarchical interactions. Moreover, classroom dynamics in Japan often discourage direct debate or questioning of authority, which can conflict with the participatory styles encouraged in Western educational contexts. Hofstede (1980) observes that in high power distance cultures, *"teachers are treated with respect and expected to initiate communication, while students are expected to follow instructions without question"* (p. 58).

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance reflects the degree to which a culture tolerates ambiguity and uncertainty. Hofstede (1980) describes it as "*the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations*" (p. 113). Japan's strong uncertainty avoidance is evident in its preference for order, structure, and adherence to established norms.

This cultural orientation manifests in the form of detailed protocols, implicit expectations, and a resistance to change. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) argue that "in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, individuals are less likely to engage in behavior that deviates from norms, as such actions are seen as potentially disruptive to social harmony" (p. 25). For international students, these rigid expectations can create barriers to integration, particularly when they are unaware of unspoken rules or cultural conventions. The pandemic heightened these challenges, as it introduced unprecedented levels of uncertainty while limiting opportunities for students to learn these norms through social interaction.

Phenomenology

To complement Hofstede's macro-level framework, this study employs phenomenology, a methodology that emphasizes the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals. Moustakas (1994) states that phenomenology seeks to "*understand the essence of an experience from the perspective of those who have lived it*" (p. 19). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how international students interpret and navigate cultural, social, and emotional challenges during the pandemic.

Phenomenology prioritizes first-person narratives, enabling the study to capture deeply personal processes of adaptation and resilience. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe phenomenology as a method that "*seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences, situating their interpretations within the specific socio-cultural contexts in which they occur*" (p. 3). This focus on meaning-making is particularly relevant for exploring the internal experiences of cultural dissonance, isolation, and adaptation among international students.

Theoretical Integration: Bridging Systemic Norms and Lived Experiences

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The integration of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory with phenomenology creates a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between systemic cultural norms and individual lived experiences. Hofstede's theory provides a structured, macro-level analysis of cultural dimensions such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, offering insight into how these norms shape behaviors and interactions (Hofstede, 1980). Meanwhile, phenomenology complements this by delving into the emotional and cognitive processes through which individuals interpret and respond to these systemic norms, capturing the subjective realities of cultural adaptation (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009).

This dual approach is particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional cultural systems and introduced novel challenges for international students. Hofstede's framework contextualizes the external challenges students face, such as navigating hierarchical relationships, group harmony, and implicit communication in high-context environments like Japan (Hall, 1976, pp. 85–87; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994, p. 45). Phenomenology, on the other hand, illuminates the internal emotional toll of these experiences, including feelings of exclusion, confusion, and the struggle to decode unspoken social expectations (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 27–29; van Manen, 1990, pp. 60–62).

For instance, Hofstede (1980) explains that power distance reinforces hierarchical relationships, creating structured authority dynamics that may challenge students from egalitarian cultures (p. 58). At the same time, phenomenology reveals how these students emotionally process hierarchical norms, particularly in virtual environments where nonverbal cues and informal interactions are diminished. A similar dynamic exists with collectivism: Hofstede highlights group harmony as a central cultural value in Japan (p. 51), while phenomenology explores how students emotionally adapt to implicit communication styles that prioritize indirect expression and consensus (Hall, 1976, p. 91).

By combining these perspectives, this study captures both the macro-level forces shaping cultural environments and the micro-level strategies individuals employ to adapt. This holistic lens is particularly valuable in understanding how systemic cultural dimensions intersect with emotional resilience and adaptation strategies during global crises. It highlights the dual pressures faced by international students: conforming to external cultural expectations while navigating their internal responses and coping mechanisms.

In sum, this integrated framework enriches the analysis of cultural adaptation by bridging the gap between external cultural dynamics and the lived experiences of individuals. It provides a nuanced understanding of how systemic norms and individual agency interact, offering critical insights into fostering resilience and inclusivity in culturally diverse and crisis-affected settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation refers to the process by which individuals adjust to and navigate the norms, values, and practices of a new cultural environment (Kim, 2001). For international students, cultural adaptation is a critical aspect of their academic and social integration, as it influences their ability to build relationships, succeed in academic settings, and maintain emotional well-being. Unlike acculturation, which focuses on negotiating and integrating elements of two or more cultural identities, cultural adaptation emphasizes the strategies individuals use to function effectively within a specific cultural system (Berry, 1997). For example, while acculturation may involve long-term identity transformation, adaptation often entails immediate adjustments to

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implicit social norms, communication styles, and hierarchical structures (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

International students face unique challenges in the adaptation process due to the dual pressures of academic expectations and cultural dissonance. These challenges are particularly pronounced in Japan, where the collectivist ethos, hierarchical relationships, and high-context communication style often contrast with the cultural frameworks of students from more individualistic or egalitarian societies (Hofstede, 1980; Hall, 1976). Understanding the nuances of cultural adaptation in this context is essential for identifying strategies that support international students in navigating these differences effectively.

The purpose of this review is to contextualize the cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students, particularly through Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1980), which provides a macro-level understanding of systemic cultural norms. By focusing on the role of cultural dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, this review highlights the complexities of adaptation in Japan's unique cultural environment. Furthermore, it identifies gaps in the existing literature, particularly in understanding how these cultural dynamics interact with the lived experiences of students during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 International Students and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

General Challenges

International students face an array of challenges in adapting to new academic and cultural environments, with language barriers, academic pressures, and social integration difficulties emerging as the most significant obstacles. Language proficiency remains a critical factor in both academic success and social interaction, often exacerbating feelings of isolation and hindering effective communication (Andrade, 2006). Studies consistently demonstrate that students who are not proficient in the host country's language are more likely to experience academic underachievement, as they struggle to keep pace with coursework and engage in classroom discussions (Kagan & Cohen, 1990).

Furthermore, the pressures of adjusting to different educational expectations can be overwhelming. Students from high-context cultures (Hall, 1976) may encounter difficulty with the low-context communication styles typical of Western academic settings, where communication is explicit, and meaning is derived more from the words used than from shared contextual understanding. In contrast, students from high-context cultures are accustomed to interpreting non-verbal cues, relying on mutual understanding and implicit knowledge (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). This disjunction can create stress, as students may feel misunderstood or excluded from group interactions, leading to challenges in forming both academic and social connections.

The emotional toll of navigating unfamiliar norms is particularly pronounced for students from collectivist or hierarchical societies. In such societies, norms of respect for authority and emphasis on group harmony often clash with the more individualistic and egalitarian expectations in Western contexts. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) emphasize that students from collectivist cultures may face heightened anxiety when confronted with the more informal, egalitarian interactions prevalent in Western academic settings. This dynamic can be further complicated by cultural differences in perceptions of authority, which may hinder students' willingness to engage in classroom discussions or seek academic support (Lee, 2007).

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Cultural Dimensions in Adaptation

Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions provide a useful framework for understanding how cultural values shape the experiences of international students. Of particular relevance are the dimensions of individualism versus collectivism, and power distance, which have been explored extensively in the context of international education. Studies by Yashima (2002) and Triandis (1995) illustrate how the individualistic nature of Western educational systems—emphasizing self-reliance, personal achievement, and competition—can create challenges for students from collectivist cultures, where success is viewed as a collective endeavor and group harmony is prioritized. These cultural differences often manifest in group projects, where international students may struggle to navigate expectations for independent work and self-promotion, leading to tensions and misunderstandings (Chirkov et al., 2003).

While the dimensions of individualism and collectivism have been widely discussed, the dimension of power distance warrants further exploration, particularly in the context of classroom and authority relationships. Power distance refers to the degree to which less powerful members of society accept unequal power distributions (Hofstede, 1980). In educational settings, this dimension can significantly affect students' perceptions of authority and their interactions with instructors. International students from high power-distance cultures may find it difficult to engage with professors on an equal footing, perceiving them as figures to be respected at a distance rather than as approachable mentors (Matsumoto et al., 2002). This can impact both their academic performance and their social integration within the university setting.

Pandemic-Specific Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a range of challenges for international students, including reduced opportunities for face-to-face interaction, a heavy reliance on digital tools, and fewer chances for cultural immersion. Research has shown that social networks among students contracted during the pandemic, with fewer interpersonal ties and diminished role diversity in their connections (Smith et al., 2022). While academic performance did not always suffer, the smaller social networks and limited informal learning opportunities contributed to feelings of isolation (Zhou et al., 2023). The shift to online instruction also placed greater importance on digital platforms, which, although helpful, could not fully replace the social capital and community engagement that students traditionally built through in-person interactions (Sitar-Tăut et al., 2021). Together, these factors exacerbated the already difficult process of cross-cultural adaptation for international students, making it harder for them to establish meaningful support networks and fully integrate into their new environments.

Additionally, the pandemic has intensified broader systemic challenges, particularly those related to uncertainty and rigidity in societal norms. As Hofstede (1980) suggests, crises often reinforce the prevailing cultural values and increase the distance between social groups. This has been especially evident during the pandemic, where public health measures have created rigid societal structures that may conflict with the more fluid, adaptive approaches that international students are accustomed to in their home cultures. As Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue, crises also heighten individual and collective stress, and the increased uncertainty during the pandemic has led to heightened anxiety and difficulty for students in adapting to both their academic and social environments. Furthermore, the rigidity of cultural norms in times of crisis can hinder students' ability to reconcile their home and host cultures, prolonging the acculturation process (Berry, 1997).

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In conclusion, the adaptation process for international students is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural dimensions, language barriers, academic pressures, and, more recently, the unique challenges posed by the pandemic. By exploring these factors through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions and other theoretical frameworks, we can gain deeper insights into the ways international students navigate cross-cultural adaptation and the emotional and academic toll this process entails.

2.3 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Depth

Historical Context and Applications

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, developed in 1980, emerged from his groundbreaking research on cultural differences within multinational organizations, specifically IBM. By analyzing employee surveys across 40 countries, Hofstede identified recurring patterns of values and behaviors that formed the foundation for his six dimensions of cultural variability (Hofstede, 1980). This framework revolutionized cross-cultural studies by providing a systematic method to quantify and compare cultural differences.

Hofstede's theory has since been widely adopted in various fields, including international business, education, and communication studies. Its application to academic and social settings has been particularly impactful, offering insights into how cultural norms shape interpersonal dynamics and institutional practices. For instance, Yashima (2002) utilized Hofstede's dimensions to examine how cultural values influence second-language learning and willingness to communicate, highlighting the relevance of individualism versus collectivism in group-oriented educational contexts. Despite its widespread use, critiques of Hofstede's framework have noted its static portrayal of culture and limited exploration of dynamic cultural adaptation in rapidly changing contexts, such as hybrid or virtual environments (McSweeney, 2002).

2.3.1 Key Dimensions in This Study

Individualism versus Collectivism

Hofstede (1980) defines individualism as a cultural orientation in which "ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after themselves and their immediate family," while collectivism emphasizes "a tightly knit social framework where individuals can expect their in-group to look after them" (p. 45). Japan's collectivist culture places a strong emphasis on group harmony, interdependence, and the subordination of individual preferences to collective needs. These values often manifest in academic settings, where group consensus is prioritized over individual opinions, creating challenges for students from individualistic societies (Triandis, 1995).

Hall's (1976) concept of high-context communication further complicates these interactions, as much of the meaning in collectivist cultures is conveyed indirectly through nonverbal cues and shared context. This communication style can be particularly challenging for international students who are accustomed to explicit, low-context communication. Research by Markus and Kitayama (1991) underscores the psychological implications of these cultural differences, noting that individuals from individualistic cultures may experience alienation or frustration when adapting to collectivist norms that de-emphasize self-expression.

Critically, existing literature has focused on collectivist norms in traditional settings but has yet to explore their implications in virtual or hybrid environments. The pandemic has shifted many academic and social interactions online, where the absence of physical cues and shared context

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may disrupt the dynamics of collectivist communication. This gap highlights the need for further research on how collectivist values adapt to digital interactions.

Power Distance

Power distance refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). Japan's relatively high power distance emphasizes hierarchical relationships, formal authority, and respect for elders and superiors. This cultural dimension significantly shapes academic and workplace interactions, where authority figures are often unchallenged, and deference is expected (Shimada, 2019).

For international students from low power distance cultures, such norms can be disorienting. Shimada (2019) notes that international students in Japan often struggle with the rigid expectations of hierarchy, particularly in navigating professor-student relationships. For instance, the use of *keigo* (formal Japanese language) can signal respect but may also inhibit open dialogue, creating a sense of formality that stifles meaningful interaction.

Existing research predominantly focuses on how high power distance norms affect communication within homogeneous groups. However, there is limited exploration of how international students from egalitarian cultures adapt to such environments, particularly in hybrid or virtual settings. This gap underscores the importance of studying power distance in cross-cultural adaptation during the pandemic, where interactions with authority figures may be mediated through digital platforms.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance reflects a culture's tolerance for ambiguity and its preference for structure and predictability. Hofstede (1980) explains that cultures with high uncertainty avoidance "feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" and therefore establish clear rules and routines to minimize uncertainty (p. 113). Japan's strong uncertainty avoidance is evident in its meticulous attention to detail, adherence to protocols, and reluctance to deviate from established norms (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994).

For international students, these rigid expectations can pose significant challenges. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) highlight that high uncertainty avoidance cultures often expect individuals to intuitively adhere to implicit norms, which may be inaccessible to outsiders. The pandemic exacerbated these challenges by introducing unprecedented levels of uncertainty, further heightening cultural rigidity. For instance, students reported difficulties navigating unspoken expectations in academic group work or adjusting to strict protocols for online classes.

Existing literature has primarily examined uncertainty avoidance in stable contexts but has paid little attention to its dynamic interplay with global crises. The pandemic presents a unique opportunity to investigate how uncertainty avoidance manifests in a crisis and how international students develop coping mechanisms to navigate these challenges.

2.4 Phenomenology and Cultural Adaptation

Phenomenology is a powerful methodological approach for examining the lived experiences of individuals navigating complex cultural systems. It seeks to uncover the subjective meanings and emotional realities underpinning adaptation processes, particularly in environments marked by

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cultural dissonance (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This approach is especially relevant in Japan's collectivist and high-context cultural setting, where implicit norms often conflict with the explicit communication styles familiar to international students from individualistic societies (Hall, 1976; Triandis, 1995).

Unlike Hofstede's macro-level framework, which systematically analyzes systemic cultural dimensions such as power distance and collectivism, phenomenology delves into the micro-level lived experiences of individuals navigating these norms. Hofstede's analysis highlights hierarchical structures and group-oriented values inherent in Japan's cultural ethos, yet it does not fully capture the internal struggles of international students adapting to such systems. For instance, while Hofstede identifies the significance of hierarchical relationships in high power distance cultures, phenomenology reveals the emotional and cognitive challenges students face when adapting to formalities like the use of *keigo* and other honorifics, which can feel restrictive or alien (Shimada, 2019).

By focusing on first-person narratives, phenomenology illuminates the nuanced processes through which international students interpret and internalize systemic cultural expectations, offering critical insights into their coping mechanisms and emotional resilience (Smith et al., 2009). This integration of systemic and subjective perspectives provides a robust framework for understanding cultural adaptation, especially during periods of global disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of cross-cultural research, phenomenology excels in capturing the tension between systemic cultural norms and individual agency. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) argue that phenomenology situates personal experiences within broader cultural frameworks, offering insights into "how individuals interpret and navigate systemic structures that shape their daily lives" (p. 3). This dual focus is particularly relevant for understanding the challenges faced by international students adapting to Japan's collectivist and high power distance culture. Here, implicit social norms often take precedence over explicit instructions, prioritizing group harmony, interdependence, and deference to authority. These norms create a cultural landscape that frequently contrasts with the individualistic and egalitarian expectations of students from Western or low power distance societies (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995).

For example, in academic group settings, Japan's collectivist ethos places a premium on consensus and indirect communication. This reliance on shared understanding can leave students from individualistic cultures feeling excluded or confused. Hall's (1976) high-context communication model underscores how meanings in such environments are often conveyed implicitly, making interactions challenging for those unfamiliar with these norms. Misinterpreted silence or indirect feedback may lead to frustration or alienation among students unaccustomed to these subtleties. Similarly, hierarchical relationships reinforced through formal language like *keigo* (Shimada, 2019) require significant adjustments from students accustomed to egalitarian interactions. These dynamics highlight the critical need to examine how systemic cultural dimensions influence individual adaptation processes.

Phenomenology also excels in exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of adaptation, which are often overlooked in macro-level frameworks like Hofstede's. While Hofstede's dimensions effectively capture systemic cultural tendencies, they do not fully address the internal struggles individuals face in navigating these norms. Finlay (2011) emphasizes that phenomenology "captures the deeply felt, often ambiguous realities of navigating unfamiliar cultural systems, including feelings of isolation, frustration, or growth" (p. 26). This emotional

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depth is particularly relevant when examining the dual pressures of cultural adaptation and pandemic-induced disruptions. International students, for instance, may experience heightened isolation as physical distancing measures exacerbate existing cultural barriers, limiting opportunities for informal interactions and immersion in Japan's implicit social norms.

By prioritizing subjective interpretations and first-person narratives, phenomenology complements Hofstede's structured analysis of cultural dimensions. Together, they enable a more nuanced understanding of cultural adaptation by linking systemic cultural norms to individual experiences. This integrated approach uncovers how systemic norms shape students' emotional resilience and coping mechanisms, offering critical insights into the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation during global crises.

Intersection with Hofstede's Framework

The integration of phenomenology with Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory bridges macro-level cultural analysis and micro-level lived experiences, creating a comprehensive lens for understanding cultural adaptation. While Hofstede's framework systematically identifies and analyzes cultural norms that shape behavior and interactions, phenomenology complements this by delving into the subjective realities of individuals navigating these norms.

Cultural adaptation refers to the process of adjusting to systemic norms and values in a new cultural environment, focusing on managing these differences rather than negotiating bicultural identities (Hofstede, 1980; Kim, 2001). For international students in Japan, adaptation challenges are deeply influenced by systemic cultural norms such as hierarchical authority, group harmony, and unspoken expectations, which often contrast with the individualistic or egalitarian frameworks many students bring from their home cultures (Hall, 1976; Shimada, 2019). These systemic differences become particularly pronounced in high-context cultures like Japan, where much of the meaning in communication is implicit and reliant on shared understanding (Hall, 1976). Situating these challenges within Hofstede's dimensions contextualizes how systemic norms influence students' adaptation strategies, particularly during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hofstede's dimensions—such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance—offer a structured framework for analyzing systemic cultural norms. Power distance, for example, shapes hierarchical relationships in academic and social settings, while collectivism emphasizes group harmony and interdependence. Uncertainty avoidance underscores Japan's preference for structured protocols and established norms. However, while these dimensions effectively capture systemic patterns, they often lack the nuance needed to understand how individuals emotionally and cognitively navigate these norms.

Phenomenology addresses this limitation by exploring the internal experiences of individuals encountering systemic cultural expectations. For example, Hofstede contextualizes the expectation of deference to authority in high power distance cultures, but phenomenology reveals the emotional and psychological responses of students from egalitarian societies, who may grapple with feelings of discomfort or confusion when required to conform to hierarchical norms (Shimada, 2019). Similarly, Hofstede's emphasis on group harmony in collectivist cultures outlines systemic tendencies, but phenomenology uncovers the personal struggles of students who must reconcile individual preferences with collective expectations, such as feeling excluded during group work or being uncertain about implicit norms.

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The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique context for applying this integrated framework, as it amplified existing cultural challenges and introduced new dynamics. Takahashi (2020) highlights how the shift to virtual environments disrupted high-context communication norms, stripping interactions of the implicit cues essential for group harmony and hierarchical clarity. These disruptions created new layers of cultural dissonance, requiring students to develop novel coping mechanisms to maintain emotional well-being and social connections. By combining Hofstede's macro-level insights with phenomenology's focus on subjective experiences, this study explores these coping mechanisms, offering a nuanced understanding of how systemic norms and individual resilience intersect in crisis conditions.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the substantial contributions of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and phenomenology to cross-cultural research, several gaps remain in understanding how cultural adaptation unfolds during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These gaps are particularly significant given the unique challenges faced by international students in navigating systemic cultural norms and personal adaptation strategies under crisis conditions.

Systemic Cultural Norms and Adaptation Strategies

Hofstede's dimensions, including power distance and uncertainty avoidance, have been extensively studied in stable environments, offering valuable insights into how systemic norms shape interactions in academic and social contexts (Hofstede, 1980). However, limited research has explored their influence on adaptation strategies during periods of systemic disruption. For instance, Japan's high power distance reinforces hierarchical relationships in educational settings, where deference to authority is emphasized (Shimada, 2019). International students from low power distance cultures often face difficulties building relationships with professors or supervisors due to differing expectations of communication and interaction.

These challenges are further complicated by the pandemic, which introduced new dynamics, such as the shift to virtual communication. The lack of physical proximity and informal interactions with authority figures may have disrupted the adaptation strategies traditionally employed by students in high power distance settings. Similarly, Japan's strong uncertainty avoidance emphasizes adherence to established norms and protocols, which are designed to minimize ambiguity (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). Yet, the pandemic's unprecedented disruptions challenged these norms, creating additional barriers for students unfamiliar with Japan's implicit expectations. Understanding how systemic cultural norms influence adaptation strategies under such conditions remains an underexplored area, highlighting the need for further research.

Virtual Adaptation Challenges

The pandemic's reliance on digital communication disrupted key cultural norms for international students in Japan, particularly those tied to collectivist and high-context cultures. In high-context cultures, much of the meaning in communication is conveyed implicitly through shared context, gestures, and tone, rather than explicit verbal articulation (Hall, 1976). Virtual platforms, however, strip away many of these nonverbal cues, creating challenges for group interactions and decision-making, especially in academic settings where maintaining group harmony is a central expectation.

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Without the shared understanding that high-context cultures rely on, international students may find it difficult to interpret subtle messages, resulting in misunderstandings or perceived exclusion. Moreover, hierarchical relationships, which are integral to Japan's high power distance culture, are often undermined in virtual settings. In face-to-face interactions, authority is conveyed through nonverbal cues such as body language, seating arrangements, and the use of formal language like *keigo* (Shimada, 2019). These cues are diminished or absent in virtual environments, making it challenging for international students to recognize and navigate authority dynamics. For instance, students from low power distance cultures might misinterpret the lack of overt authority markers in digital spaces, leading to interactions that are perceived as overly informal or disruptive. This dynamic complicates the adaptation process, as students must reconcile their expectations of hierarchy with the ambiguous social dynamics of virtual communication.

The intersection of systemic cultural dimensions and digital adaptation challenges represents a critical area of research that remains underexplored. Takahashi (2020) highlights how the shift to virtual environments disrupted the relational dynamics central to collectivist cultures, where social bonds are often reinforced through informal and nonverbal exchanges. The absence of these cues in digital communication exacerbates feelings of isolation and disconnection, particularly for international students who already face barriers to integration. For example, group discussions conducted via video conferencing platforms often fail to replicate the implicit social dynamics of in-person interactions, making it difficult for students to navigate unspoken expectations around group harmony or deference to authority.

Despite the importance of these challenges, existing research on Hofstede's framework rarely examines how cultural dimensions manifest in virtual contexts. This oversight leaves significant gaps in understanding how systemic norms, such as collectivism, high power distance, or high-context communication, adapt—or resist adaptation—in digital environments. The pandemic underscores the urgency of addressing these gaps, as global crises are likely to continue driving reliance on virtual communication. By exploring how systemic cultural norms interact with the constraints of digital platforms, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of cultural adaptation in virtual contexts, particularly during times of disruption.

Emotional Resilience and Coping Mechanisms:

Emotional resilience is a critical factor in international students' ability to navigate systemic cultural norms, yet its intersection with Hofstede's dimensions—such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance—remains insufficiently explored. Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt positively to challenges and recover from stress, which is particularly relevant for students managing cultural dissonance in unfamiliar environments (Kim, 2001). In Japan, where hierarchical relationships and implicit social norms are deeply embedded, students from low power distance cultures may find the expectations of deference and formality disorienting, especially when such norms limit open dialogue or spontaneous interaction. The use of *keigo* (formal Japanese language) in academic and social settings, for example, reinforces power hierarchies that can feel restrictive to students accustomed to egalitarian interactions (Shimada, 2019).

Similarly, Japan's high uncertainty avoidance—a cultural dimension reflecting a preference for structure and aversion to ambiguity—can impose additional stress on students from cultures with lower uncertainty avoidance. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) describe how rigid protocols and unspoken behavioral expectations in high uncertainty avoidance cultures demand conformity and

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precision, leaving little room for flexibility or improvisation. For international students unfamiliar with these norms, such rigidity may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or alienation, particularly when they struggle to intuitively grasp implicit rules. These cultural dimensions not only shape students' external challenges but also influence their internal emotional responses, highlighting the importance of resilience in navigating these systemic pressures.

While existing studies on emotional resilience often emphasize individual coping mechanisms, they frequently overlook the systemic cultural constraints that shape these experiences. For instance, research may focus on strategies like self-regulation, mindfulness, or peer support without considering how hierarchical or collectivist norms influence the availability or effectiveness of these strategies. Finlay (2011) emphasizes that understanding resilience in cross-cultural contexts requires a methodological approach that captures both systemic influences and personal interpretations, arguing that resilience cannot be fully understood without situating it within the socio-cultural environment.

Phenomenology provides a valuable tool for exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of resilience, offering insights into how students experience and respond to systemic cultural challenges. By prioritizing first-person narratives, phenomenology uncovers the deeply felt realities of navigating cultural dissonance, including emotions such as frustration, confusion, or growth (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). For example, international students may describe their emotional journey from initial disorientation in hierarchical settings to eventual confidence in managing formal interactions. These subjective accounts not only illuminate the coping mechanisms students employ but also reveal how they interpret and internalize cultural norms over time.

Despite the complementary strengths of phenomenology and Hofstede's framework, their integration remains underutilized in research on emotional resilience. While Hofstede's macro-level analysis provides valuable insights into the systemic cultural norms shaping students' environments, it often fails to capture the nuanced emotional and cognitive processes involved in adaptation. Phenomenology addresses this gap by focusing on the subjective realities of resilience, yet it rarely situates these experiences within a structured cultural framework. This study aims to bridge this methodological divide, offering a holistic understanding of how systemic cultural norms intersect with personal resilience during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Need for Integrated Approaches

Although Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and phenomenology have significantly advanced cross-cultural research, their integration remains underexplored. Hofstede's framework offers a structured, macro-level analysis of systemic cultural norms, such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which shape the environments in which individuals navigate cultural adaptation (Hofstede, 1980). However, it often overlooks the nuanced emotional and cognitive processes that underpin individual adaptation. In contrast, phenomenology delves deeply into personal lived experiences, capturing the subjective meanings and emotional realities of cultural dissonance and resilience (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Despite these complementary strengths, studies rarely combine these approaches to examine the interplay between systemic norms and individual responses in cross-cultural settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for such an integrative approach, as it has both intensified existing cultural challenges and introduced new dynamics, such as the reliance on virtual communication. Hofstede's dimensions contextualize the systemic barriers international

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students face in adapting to hierarchical norms or navigating group harmony in digital environments. At the same time, phenomenology illuminates the internal struggles and coping mechanisms students develop in response to these challenges. By combining these methodologies, this study seeks to bridge the gap between macro-level cultural analysis and micro-level lived experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of cultural adaptation during a global crisis.

Summary of Gaps

Addressing these gaps requires an integrated approach that combines Hofstede's structured analysis of systemic norms with phenomenology's focus on individual lived experiences. Such an approach would provide a more holistic understanding of how international students navigate cultural adaptation during crises, particularly in contexts like Japan, where implicit social norms, hierarchical relationships, and rigid protocols intersect with pandemic-induced disruptions. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the interplay between cultural dimensions and personal adaptation strategies, offering insights that are both theoretically significant and practically actionable.

2.6 Summary and Transition

The review of existing literature highlights the critical role of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and phenomenology in advancing our understanding of cultural adaptation. Hofstede's framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing systemic cultural challenges by identifying macro-level dimensions—such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—that shape cross-cultural interactions. This structured analysis is essential for contextualizing the cultural norms and systemic expectations that international students encounter, particularly in Japan's collectivist and hierarchical society.

Phenomenology complements this macro-level approach by adding depth to the analysis, capturing the nuanced lived realities of navigating cultural dissonance. Through its emphasis on subjective experiences, phenomenology illuminates the emotional and cognitive processes that underlie adaptation, resilience, and coping. This dual lens—systemic and individual—allows for a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between cultural norms and personal adaptation strategies.

Despite the strengths of these frameworks, the review identifies significant gaps in the literature. Research has yet to fully explore how systemic cultural norms, such as high power distance or high uncertainty avoidance, influence adaptation strategies during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, there is a lack of studies examining virtual adaptation challenges, particularly in collectivist or high-context cultures, and the emotional resilience required to navigate these settings. Addressing these gaps requires an integrated approach that bridges macro-level cultural analysis with micro-level lived experiences.

This study's methodology is designed to address these gaps by combining Hofstede's framework with a phenomenological approach. By examining how international students in Japan experience and navigate cultural dissonance during the pandemic, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural adaptation in crisis contexts. The next section outlines the study's methodology, detailing how these theoretical insights inform the research design, data collection, and analysis processes.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of international students in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it investigates how students navigated social isolation, intimacy, and the challenges posed by cultural differences in a pandemic-altered environment. Phenomenology, rooted in the traditions of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was selected for its ability to uncover the meanings, perceptions, and emotions that individuals attribute to their experiences (van Manen, 1990; Smith et al., 2009). This approach seeks to illuminate how participants construct and interpret their realities, providing an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences within a unique socio-cultural and temporal context.

To ensure adherence to ethical standards, the study was approved by Osaka University's ethics review board under approval number CCFC202002. This approval reflects compliance with institutional research ethics protocols, safeguarding participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process. Furthermore, the study was supported by the Office of International Exchange (OIE) at Osaka University, which provided critical resources and logistical support for participant recruitment and data collection.

To complement the phenomenological perspective, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1980) is incorporated as a supplementary framework for interpreting how cultural differences shape adaptation strategies. Japan's collectivist and high-context cultural environment can create challenges for students from individualistic or low-context cultures, particularly in navigating implicit social norms, indirect communication styles, and hierarchical relationships. This theoretical lens sheds light on how cultural dissonance magnifies the emotional toll of isolation and adjustment, providing additional context to the phenomenological insights. For instance, the use of *keigo* (formal Japanese language) or unspoken social expectations around group harmony might exacerbate feelings of exclusion or confusion for students from more egalitarian cultural backgrounds (Hofstede, 1980; Yashima, 2002).

This study builds on prior research exploring the lived experiences of international students during global crises. For example, Takahashi's (2020) investigation of digital technologies and social connections examined how emotional resilience and social dynamics intersect during crises. Unlike these studies, the present research integrates Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1980) with phenomenological analysis to provide a culturally nuanced understanding of adaptation challenges. By combining phenomenology with thematic analysis, this study offers novel insights into the intersection of cultural adjustment and pandemic-related stressors, advancing existing methodologies in cross-cultural research (Smith et al., 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This dual framework ensures that both the subjective lived experiences and broader cultural dynamics are rigorously explored.

The integration of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions with phenomenological analysis uniquely positions this study to capture the interplay between cultural dynamics and subjective lived experiences, providing a dual-layered perspective rarely explored in prior research.

Rationale for Phenomenology

Phenomenology is particularly suited to this study's objectives, as it prioritizes participants' lived experiences and explores the meaning-making processes inherent to adapting to new social and

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cultural contexts (Moustakas, 1994). Unlike approaches that rely on predefined theoretical models, phenomenology allows for emergent themes to arise organically from the data, reflecting the authentic realities of participants during an unprecedented global crisis.

The pandemic introduced unique emotional and psychological stressors for international students, including heightened isolation, limited access to social support networks, and cultural misunderstandings. These experiences cannot be fully understood through surface-level observation or quantification. By embracing phenomenology, the study foregrounds participants' voices, emphasizing their personal narratives, coping strategies, and the meanings they attach to these experiences.

Moreover, Japan's cultural emphasis on collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and subtle communication nuances necessitates a methodological approach that is sensitive to these complexities. Phenomenology captures these subtleties, providing a nuanced understanding of how international students navigated the emotional, cultural, and societal challenges of living abroad during the pandemic.

Strengths of the Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach offers several advantages that align closely with the objectives of this study. One significant strength is its emphasis on the collection of rich, descriptive data through detailed, first-person narratives. By foregrounding the voices of international students, this method ensures a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences, particularly during a period of unprecedented global disruption (van Manen, 1990; Smith et al., 2009).

Another key strength of phenomenology is its contextual sensitivity. This approach prioritizes subjective experiences within specific cultural and social contexts, which is particularly valuable for examining how international students' coping strategies were shaped by cultural factors during the COVID-19 pandemic (Finlay, 2011; Giorgi, 2009). For example, it enables an exploration of how students from individualistic cultural backgrounds adapted to Japan's collectivist and high-context environment.

Phenomenology also facilitates a deep exploration of subjective meaning, making it well-suited for investigating the emotional and psychological dimensions of social isolation, cultural dissonance, and the role of digital technologies. By focusing on the meanings participants attach to their experiences, this approach uncovers the coping mechanisms and sense-making processes employed by students (Moustakas, 1994; Takahashi, 2020).

The iterative nature of phenomenology adds to its flexibility and depth. By allowing themes and insights to emerge organically during data analysis, this method accommodates unexpected findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990).

Finally, the focus on lived experiences and cultural sensitivity makes phenomenology highly relevant to cross-cultural research. It is particularly effective for exploring the challenges faced by international students in adapting to Japan's unique cultural environment, where implicit communication and social harmony are highly valued (Hofstede, 1980; Shimada, 2019). This cultural lens enhances the study's capacity to address the nuanced interplay of cultural adjustment, emotional resilience, and the global crisis context.

While phenomenology offers these considerable advantages, it is also essential to address the methodological limitations inherent to this approach.

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Addressing Methodological Limitations

While phenomenology provides rich insights, it is not without limitations. One challenge is the potential for researcher bias due to the subjective nature of the data. To mitigate this, the researcher employed bracketing techniques (van Manen, 1990), where preconceptions about the research were set aside to ensure an authentic representation of participants' experiences. Reflexive practices were also incorporated throughout the research process to maintain transparency and reduce the influence of the researcher's assumptions.

Additionally, phenomenology's intensive data collection and analysis requirements limit generalizability. However, this study does not seek to generalize findings but instead aims to provide deep, context-specific insights into the experiences of international students during a unique global event. By focusing on the lived experiences of a specific group, the study provides an in-depth understanding of the complex interplay of cultural, emotional, and social factors.

Sample-Related Limitations

The self-selecting nature of the participant sample introduces potential biases. Students who chose to participate in surveys and interviews may have been more socially connected, technologically adept, or otherwise distinct from those who did not respond to recruitment efforts. Additionally, the snowball sampling technique, while effective in expanding the participant pool, may have resulted in homogeneity within the sample due to shared social networks. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among international students during the pandemic.

Pandemic Constraints

The pandemic context introduced several constraints. All data collection was conducted online, which limited opportunities for in-person interaction. While online interviews via video conferencing platforms enabled flexibility, they may have excluded participants with limited internet access or technological resources. Moreover, the virtual format could have impacted the depth of rapport established during interviews, potentially influencing the richness of qualitative insights.

Mixed-Methods Integration

The integration of survey and interview data was central to the study's methodological approach, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Closed-ended survey responses provided broad quantitative insights, identifying general patterns across the participant population, while interviews offered in-depth qualitative narratives that captured the nuances of individual experiences.

For example, survey data revealed trends in participants' reliance on technology and experiences with cultural adjustment. These trends informed the thematic analysis of interview data, guiding the exploration of specific challenges and coping mechanisms. Conversely, interview narratives uncovered unexpected themes, such as the dual role of technology in fostering and hindering connections, which were further examined in open-ended survey responses.

By cross-referencing survey findings with interview themes, the study ensured methodological triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of its conclusions. This approach allowed for a richer and more nuanced analysis, leveraging the strengths of both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth to address the study's objectives comprehensively.

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Methodological Innovations

The study adapted its methods to address the unique challenges posed by the pandemic. All interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms, allowing participants to share their experiences despite physical distancing measures. The interview guide was refined to include questions specifically addressing pandemic-related challenges, such as the emotional toll of social isolation and the role of technology in fostering connections. Additionally, surveys were disseminated through online platforms, ensuring accessibility for participants across different geographic locations. These methodological innovations reflect the study's responsiveness to the constraints of the pandemic, while maintaining rigor and accessibility.

Transition to Data Collection

The phenomenological framework guided the design of data collection methods, which included semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling. These methods were selected to elicit detailed, personal accounts of participants' experiences, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their emotional, cultural, and social realities.

Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, enabling an in-depth examination of key themes such as the psychological impacts of isolation and the role of technology in maintaining social connections. Reflective journaling complemented these interviews by encouraging participants to document their evolving thoughts and emotions over time, enriching the dataset with longitudinal insights.

This iterative and multifaceted data collection approach facilitated a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of international students, aligning with the study's phenomenological and cultural frameworks.

3.2 Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, conducted using video conferencing platforms due to pandemic-related restrictions. These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while adhering to social distancing protocols. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours, providing participants ample opportunity to share their personal stories.

The interview guide covered several themes, including:

- The psychological impacts of social isolation
- Barriers to employment and financial challenges
- Coping mechanisms used during the pandemic
- Shifts in media consumption and the role of technology in maintaining relationships

Probing questions encouraged participants to reflect deeply on their coping strategies and the ways technology shaped their ability to maintain social connections despite physical and cultural separation. Example questions included:

> *"What aspects of Japanese culture were most challenging for you to adjust to during the pandemic?"*
>
> *"Can you describe a specific moment during the pandemic when you felt particularly isolated or disconnected?"*
>
> *"How did your social interactions change after moving to Japan during the pandemic?"*

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"What strategies or activities did you use to handle stress or loneliness while studying in Japan?"

The richness of the data is reflected in anonymized participant responses such as:

"In my first group project, I was confused because no one directly disagreed with ideas they didn't like. I later learned that's part of maintaining harmony, but at the time, it made me feel like I didn't understand what was happening."

"I thought joining a student club online would help me make friends, but it was hard to keep up with the conversations because they were so fast, and I didn't get some of the jokes. It made me feel even more alone."

"I relied on video calls to talk to my family, but it felt strange to share so much with them while feeling like I wasn't part of life in Japan at all."

All interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Transcriptions were carefully reviewed for accuracy, and any ambiguities were clarified through follow-up contact, ensuring a thorough representation of participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Surveys

To complement the qualitative depth of the interviews, surveys were administered to capture broader patterns. The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended questions, gathering demographic information and exploring experiences with digital communication tools, as well as coping strategies during the pandemic. This mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation of findings, integrating both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth to enrich the analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

3.3 Participant Enrollment

3.3.1 Eligibility Criteria

To participate in this study, individuals were required to be international students enrolled at the selected Japanese university during the 2020–2021 academic year—a period significantly shaped by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Proficiency in either English or Japanese was necessary, as these languages were used for surveys and interviews.

3.3.2 Sampling Strategy

Participants were primarily recruited through the international offices of universities, which distributed survey links and interview invitations to international students. This ensured that outreach adhered to institutional protocols and reached a wide audience. Additionally, a snowball sampling technique was employed, whereby initial participants were encouraged to introduce friends or acquaintances who also fit the study's eligibility criteria. This approach helped to expand the participant pool and include students from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds.

No incentives were offered for completing the surveys; however, participants who agreed to take part in the interviews were provided a shopping card worth 1,000 Japanese yen as a token of appreciation for their time and effort. Efforts to ensure cultural diversity within the sample were primarily facilitated through the networks of international offices and participants' connections. While specific measures to balance gender, academic level, or geographic representation were not explicitly implemented, the recruitment methods naturally captured a diverse participant pool. The final sample included individuals from regions such as East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa, as

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well as a range of academic levels (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral), providing a rich dataset that reflects the global nature of the international student body.

A total of 177 survey responses were collected, with 134 responses in Japanese and 43 in English. Some interview participants were recruited from these survey respondents, while others were directly invited through international offices or referred via snowball sampling. After excluding five interviews due to incomplete data or inconsistencies, a final robust sample of 40 interview participants was included in the study.

3.3.3 Participant Characteristics

The final cohort of 40 participants represented over 15 countries and included students from diverse academic disciplines, spanning undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. Geographically, the participants hailed from regions such as East Asia (e.g., China, Korea), Southeast Asia (e.g., Vietnam, Thailand), and Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana). This intentional diversity provided rich insights into how different cultural backgrounds influenced the participants' experiences of social connection and isolation.

Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical protocols were observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was granted by Osaka University's ethics board (approval code CCFC202002). Participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw without repercussions. Informed consent was obtained electronically before each interview.

To address the potentially sensitive nature of pandemic-related experiences, additional measures were taken to prioritize participants' emotional well-being. Resources for emotional support were provided, ensuring an ethical and empathetic engagement process. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all personal data, and data were securely stored in compliance with institutional data protection policies.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-phase method, was employed to systematically analyze the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey responses. This approach is widely recognized for its flexibility and rigor in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within qualitative data, particularly in emotionally charged and contextually complex settings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). It is particularly well-suited for exploring nuanced and subjective experiences, such as those of international students navigating the unique academic, cultural, and social challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Terry et al., 2017).

The analysis process adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic stages, beginning with familiarization, where all transcripts and survey responses were read multiple times to ensure a thorough understanding of the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on specific experiences such as barriers to employment, feelings of social isolation, shifts in media consumption habits, and the role of technology. These codes were then organized into broader themes using a process of constant comparison, which involved iterative refinement to capture both shared and unique aspects of participants' experiences (Guest et al., 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

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Themes were reviewed iteratively to ensure they were coherent, relevant, and reflective of the data, with particular attention paid to cross-cultural variations in participants' perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). The final themes—redefining intimacy, social isolation, the double-edged nature of technology, and resilience—were defined and named to encapsulate the core dimensions of participants' lived experiences. These themes informed the structure of the findings and discussion chapters, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the interplay between academic demands, cultural norms, and the emotional impacts of the global pandemic (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry et al., 2017).

3.5 Clarify Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a cornerstone of this study, ensuring that the researcher's positionality shaped, rather than skewed, the data collection and analysis. The researcher's cultural background, academic focus on cross-cultural education, and personal experiences as a non-native individual navigating cultural differences provided unique insights into the data but also introduced potential biases.

To mitigate these biases, the researcher employed bracketing techniques (van Manen, 1990) throughout the research process. This involved actively reflecting on, and documenting, preconceptions, emotional responses, and assumptions through a reflexive journal (Finlay, 2002). This process not only enhanced transparency but also fostered a continuous awareness of the researcher's influence on the study.

Ambiguities in data interpretation were further addressed through member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which allowed participants to validate preliminary findings. This iterative approach helped ensure that interpretations authentically represented participants' lived experiences, minimizing the risk of misrepresentation through the researcher's cultural lens.

Lastly, the adoption of phenomenology required the researcher to engage empathetically with participants while maintaining a critical distance, thereby balancing subjectivity with objectivity as suggested by Moustakas (1994). This reflexive methodology strengthened the credibility of the study and contributed to a richer, more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences.

3.6 Implications for Culturally Responsive Educational Practices

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on culturally responsive practices in higher education, particularly within the context of global crises. By exploring the lived experiences of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research highlights the need for educational systems to adopt inclusive and adaptable strategies to support diverse student populations.

The findings emphasize the importance of understanding cultural dissonance in shaping students' emotional and social experiences. For example, participants from individualistic cultures faced challenges adapting to Japan's collectivist norms, such as implicit communication and hierarchical social structures. These cultural barriers often magnified feelings of isolation, underscoring the necessity for universities to provide targeted support for students unfamiliar with local cultural expectations (Hofstede, 1980; Yashima, 2002).

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The study also sheds light on the double-edged nature of technology in fostering social connections. While video calls and messaging apps provided crucial lifelines for maintaining relationships, they could not fully replicate the depth of in-person interactions. This finding suggests that educational institutions should balance virtual support services with initiatives designed to foster in-person community-building, even during crises (Takahashi, 2020).

Furthermore, the integration of culturally responsive practices into student support systems can mitigate the emotional toll of cultural adaptation. For example, universities could offer intercultural training programs for both staff and students, creating an environment where diverse cultural norms are acknowledged and respected. Institutions might also consider mentorship programs pairing local and international students, fostering mutual understanding and reducing cultural barriers (Spencer-Oatey, 2013).

Finally, this research underscores the broader need for global education policies to prioritize inclusivity and adaptability. The insights from this study can inform not only crisis-specific interventions but also long-term strategies to support international students in navigating the complexities of cultural adaptation. By fostering resilience and inclusivity, educational institutions can empower students to thrive academically and socially, even amidst unprecedented challenges.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Demographics Overview

Survey Participants

Total Responses

Country	JP Count	EN Count	Total
China	101	8	109
Korea (S. Korea)	7	3	10
Vietnam	10	8	18
India	1	4	5
Taiwan	5	0	5
America (U.S.)	0	5	5
Philippines	0	2	2
Madagascar	0	2	2

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Thailand	2	0	2
Indonesia	1	1	2
France	0	3	3
Singapore	0	1	1
Kazakhstan	0	1	1
Iran	0	1	1
Germany	0	1	1
Europe (unspecified)	0	1	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	1	1
Sweden	0	1	1
Portugal	1	0	1
Austria	1	0	1
Israel	1	0	1
Slovenia	1	0	1
Mongolia	1	0	1
Canada	1	0	1

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Japanese	Version:	133	responses
English	Version:	43	responses

Combined Total: 176 responses

The study analyzed responses from 176 international students, with 133 participants completing the questionnaire in Japanese and 43 participants completing it in English. This division likely reflects participants' comfort levels with language and highlights the linguistic diversity of the sample.

Geographic Distribution

Survey participants represented a wide range of geographic and cultural backgrounds, with notable concentrations from East and Southeast Asia. The majority of respondents (109, ~61.9%) identified as originating from China, while Vietnam contributed the second-largest group (18, ~10.2%). South Korea followed with 10 participants (~5.7%), and smaller groups included participants from India (5, ~2.8%), the United States (5, ~2.8%), and France (3, ~1.7%).

Other participants came from diverse regions such as Madagascar, Indonesia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Iran, Mongolia, and others, with each country contributing one or two participants. While these findings reflect the diversity of respondents, it is important to recognize that the sample may be influenced by accessibility to the questionnaire through specific institutional channels and is not necessarily representative of Japan's entire international student population.

Geographic Distribution of Survey Participants

The survey revealed a diverse range of participants, with the majority originating from East and Southeast Asia, alongside smaller groups from non-Asian regions. Chinese respondents formed the largest group, comprising 109 participants (~61.9%). This strong representation may be influenced by geographic proximity, historical and economic ties, and China's increasing emphasis on international education.

Vietnamese respondents, the second-largest group, accounted for 18 participants (~10.2%). This reflects the growing appeal of Japanese institutions to Vietnamese students, possibly bolstered by bilateral agreements and Japan's efforts to address demographic and labor challenges through educational and professional pathways.

South Korean participants made up 10 respondents (~5.7%), a figure that highlights the importance of regional mobility within East Asia. Geographical closeness, shared cultural ties, and robust academic exchanges between South Korea and Japan likely contribute to these strong numbers.

Beyond these dominant groups, smaller numbers of respondents from India, the United States, France, and other countries exemplify Japan's potential global appeal. While individually these groups are fewer in number, their inclusion underscores the diversity of backgrounds and motivations that draw students to Japanese institutions. Participants also came from regions as varied as Madagascar, Indonesia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Israel, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia, highlighting Japan's reach beyond its immediate region.

This geographic diversity provides a snapshot of participants' mobility patterns and motivations while reflecting the broader context of Japan's role in international education. However, it is important to note that the sample may be influenced by specific institutional relationships and

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access to the survey, limiting its generalizability to the entire population of international students in Japan.

Language Preferences and Implications

While most survey responses (133) were in Japanese, 43 participants chose to complete the survey in English. The predominance of Japanese-language responses suggests that many students either have sufficient Japanese proficiency or have resided in Japan long enough to be comfortable using the language. Meanwhile, English-language responses capture perspectives from those with varying degrees of Japanese fluency or who prefer English as their main communication medium. Overall, these findings reinforce Japan's status as a leading destination for international students, particularly from neighboring Asian countries. China's substantial share mirrors larger regional and global migration patterns, while the presence of students from diverse continents underscores Japan's appeal far beyond Asia. This breadth of participation provides a robust basis for analyzing cross-cultural adaptation, academic motivations, and the multifaceted experiences of international students in Japan.

Interview Participants

Geographic Distribution in Interviews

Country/Region	Count
China	23
Taiwan	2
Vietnam	4
South Korea	3
Indonesia	2
Madagascar	2
Mongolia	1
Slovenia	1
Azerbaijan	1

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Israel	1
Total Participants	**40**

A total of 40 participants took part in in-depth interviews, reflecting trends observed in the survey. China was the dominant country of origin, with participants from various provinces and cities such as Anhui, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Changzhou, Shanghai, Shandong, Shaanxi, and others, totaling 23 participants. Other notable groups included participants from Vietnam (4), South Korea (3), and Taiwan (2). Additionally, several non-Asian countries were represented, including Madagascar (2), Israel (1), Slovenia (1), Azerbaijan (1), and Mongolia (1).
This diversity highlights Japan's global appeal as a destination for international students and provides a nuanced understanding of their experiences in academic and cultural adaptation.

Gender and Academic Levels
Gender

- **Female:** 75%
- **Male:** 25%
- **Undisclosed:** None

Academic Levels

- **Undergraduate:** 60.5%
- **Master's:** 13.0%
- **Doctoral:** 6.8%
- **Other/Undisclosed:** Remaining percentage

The high proportion of female participants (75%) reflects broader patterns in international mobility and subject-area interests, where women often dominate certain academic disciplines. The distribution of academic levels—from early-stage undergraduates (60.5%) to doctoral researchers (6.8%)—captures the diversity of educational trajectories among participants. The "Other/Undisclosed" category includes participants enrolled in exchange programs, specialized courses, or those who chose not to specify their academic status.

Geographic Distribution of Interview Participants

The participants in the study came from a diverse range of geographic and cultural backgrounds, offering insights into the international dynamics of student mobility to Japan. The majority of participants (23 out of 40) identified as originating from China, representing various provinces and cities such as Anhui, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Changzhou, Shanghai, Shandong, and Shaanxi. This significant representation may reflect the accessibility of the survey to Chinese students or the established presence of Chinese students within the host institution. However, it is important to note that this finding is not necessarily indicative of broader trends in international education and should be interpreted within the context of this specific sample.
Participants from Vietnam (4 in total) also contributed to the diversity of the group, with mentions of Hanoi and other unspecified regions. Their presence reflects patterns of regional student mobility within East and Southeast Asia. Similarly, participants from South Korea (3) and Taiwan (2) underscore the prominence of East Asia in Japan's international education landscape. The

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geographic proximity and shared cultural or historical connections between these regions and Japan may influence the movement of students to Japanese institutions.

In addition to participants from neighboring Asian countries, the sample included students from non-Asian regions such as Madagascar, Israel, Slovenia, and Azerbaijan. While fewer in number, these participants highlight the broader international reach of Japanese higher education and its ability to attract students from diverse global contexts.

It is important to recognize that the geographic distribution of participants in this study likely reflects certain biases, such as the role of institutional relationships, regional proximity, and participants' access to the questionnaire through specific international office channels. As such, this distribution should not be generalized to all international students in Japan. Instead, the findings offer a context-specific snapshot of participants' lived experiences, which are shaped by their cultural and educational backgrounds. This diversity enriches the study by providing nuanced insights into the motivations, challenges, and opportunities encountered by international students in Japan.

Key Insights from the Interviews

The 40 in-depth interviews provide a detailed exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by international students in Japan. The participant group reflected notable diversity in terms of geographic origins, gender distribution, and academic levels, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural adaptation and academic motivation.

In terms of geographic distribution, participants primarily hailed from China, with 23 individuals identifying as Chinese and representing various provinces and cities, including Anhui, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Changzhou, Shanghai, Shandong, and Shaanxi. Other notable groups included participants from Vietnam (4), South Korea (3), and Taiwan (2), reflecting regional mobility patterns within East and Southeast Asia. Additionally, participants from non-Asian regions, such as Madagascar, Israel, Slovenia, and Azerbaijan, highlighted the broader global reach of Japanese institutions. While these findings illustrate the diversity of participants, it is important to acknowledge that the sample likely reflects certain biases, such as accessibility to the survey or institutional relationships, and may not fully capture the breadth of Japan's international student population.

Regarding gender, a significant majority of participants (75%) were female, while 25% were male. This gender distribution may reflect trends in international mobility or academic disciplines, although further research would be needed to draw specific conclusions.

Participants represented a range of academic levels, with 60.5% pursuing undergraduate degrees, 13.0% enrolled in master's programs, and 6.8% engaged in doctoral studies. The remaining participants were classified as "Other/Undisclosed," reflecting either non-degree programs or individuals who chose not to specify their academic status.

Taken together, the interviews offer a rich dataset for examining the nuances of cultural adaptation, academic motivation, and resilience among international students in Japan. By capturing diverse lived experiences across a variety of cultural and educational contexts, these findings provide a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of international education in a Japanese academic setting.

Survey: Language Proficiency

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Participants reported varying degrees of Japanese language use, categorized by frequency in everyday life. Notably, 29.9% indicated they used Japanese "Very Often," particularly in academic or professional settings where high proficiency was necessary. Another 32.8% used it "Often" (about five days a week), while 27.1% used it "Sometimes" (two days a week). Meanwhile, 10.7% reported "Rarely" using Japanese, typically citing linguistic challenges that hindered their social and academic engagement.

These findings highlight the central role of language proficiency in shaping students' experiences. Participants with strong Japanese skills felt more confident navigating daily life, participating in classroom discussions, and interacting with university faculty. One undergraduate participant reflected:

> *"Once I became comfortable speaking Japanese, I could finally ask for help in class. I felt less isolated and more like I belonged."*

Conversely, students with lower proficiency described feelings of exclusion and discouragement. A student from Southeast Asia explained:

> *"I try my best to speak Japanese, but I can tell people lose patience when I make mistakes. It discourages me from practicing."*

Overall, the data suggest a strong relationship between Japanese language ability and students' sense of integration. Higher proficiency levels corresponded to greater academic engagement, confidence, and social connectedness, whereas language barriers often heightened isolation and diminished access to enriching opportunities.

4.2. Key Themes

4.2.1 Cultural Adaptation, Emotional Resilience, and Language Proficiency

Challenges of Adapting to Cultural Norms

Participants reported profound difficulties adjusting to Japan's high-context, collectivist culture, where indirect communication, group harmony, and shared responsibilities often contrasted with their home country norms. Survey data indicated that 67.2% of respondents struggled to interpret implicit norms, such as recognizing when silence signaled respect versus disinterest.

One participant shared, *"There were so many unspoken rules. It felt like everyone knew what to do except me. I spent so much time second-guessing myself because I didn't want to make mistakes."* This sense of uncertainty highlights the emotional toll of navigating a culture where implicit expectations often outweigh explicit guidance.

A North American participant reflected, *"I thought I was being polite by staying quiet, but others saw it as not contributing. It felt like everything I knew about communication was upside down."* Similarly, a Chinese participant recounted, *"When I was in group discussions, it felt like I didn't exist. No one asked for my opinion, and when I tried to contribute, it was as if they didn't even hear me."* These experiences reveal how cultural norms emphasizing harmony and nonverbal communication left many feeling excluded or invisible.

Language Proficiency and Its Impact

Frequency and Contexts of Usage

Language proficiency was a critical factor shaping adaptation. Participants with stronger Japanese skills described feeling more confident and integrated. One student explained, *"Once I became*

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comfortable speaking Japanese, I could finally ask for help in class. I felt less isolated and more like I belonged."

In contrast, those with limited proficiency faced challenges in both academic and everyday settings. A Southeast Asian participant shared, *"During seminars, I'd often stay silent because I was afraid my pronunciation would embarrass me."* Another said, *"Going to the hospital was so stressful. I had to rely on translation apps for everything. It made me avoid seeking help unless it was absolutely necessary."*

These barriers extended to formal communication as well. A Chinese participant reflected, *"Writing emails to my professor was nerve-wracking. I'd revise every sentence multiple times, worrying that I'd use the wrong tone or phrase and come across as disrespectful."* The formality of keigo (honorific Japanese) added an extra layer of complexity, often leading to anxiety. However, some participants reframed the experience as a learning opportunity. As one Vietnamese student noted, *"At first, keigo felt like a barrier. But as I practiced and got guidance, I started to see it as a way of showing respect and building trust. It's something I'm proud of now."*

Barriers Beyond the Classroom

Administrative processes compounded these challenges. A participant shared, *"The visa rules kept changing, and no one could give clear answers. It felt like I was constantly chasing paperwork just to keep up."* This lack of clarity intensified feelings of vulnerability, as noted by another: *"Every interaction with officials felt like a test—one misstep, and I feared it would jeopardize my status."*

Navigating Hierarchies and Authority

Interactions with authority figures were often intimidating due to Japan's hierarchical norms. A Southeast Asian participant described the shift to online communication during the pandemic as particularly challenging: *"My professor rejected using Zoom or any other online teaching system that allowed direct contact, so everything had to be sent via email. It became so time-consuming. Normally, I could ask questions after class or during office hours, but now, I had to rely on emails. It felt too formal and distant, and I was always worried about my tone or bothering them too much with questions."*

This formalized interaction style led some students to hesitate in seeking help, as one participant noted, *"The process was so intimidating that I didn't want to ask for help. I felt like if I asked questions, I would be seen as incompetent or disrespectful."* However, mentorship and peer support played key roles in easing these concerns. A South Asian participant reflected, *"We exchanged tips on how to approach professors and manage the formalities. Knowing that I wasn't the only one struggling helped me cope better."*

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Peer Support and Mentorship

Participants emphasized the importance of shared experiences and mentorship in adapting to cultural and academic norms. One participant explained, *"Sharing our experiences helped us feel less alone. Sometimes, just knowing someone else sent a similar email and it was okay gave me confidence."*

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Mentorship often extended beyond providing templates for formal communication. A Vietnamese participant shared, *"A mentor didn't just give me phrases to copy; they explained why those phrases mattered. That made me more confident."*

Personal Resilience

Despite these challenges, many participants developed strategies to maintain a sense of control. One participant said, *"I created my own structure—simple things like setting a study schedule or checking in with friends. It was the only way to stay grounded."* This proactive approach helped students navigate the unpredictable and formal aspects of their experiences.

Personal Growth Through Cultural Adaptation

While the process was often daunting, participants described their eventual growth through adaptation. A South Asian participant shared, *"At first, I was overwhelmed by how different everything felt. But over time, I started journaling my thoughts and comparing them to what I observed in my peers. It was a way to process my frustration, but it also made me realize how much I could learn from their way of thinking."*

Others reframed their challenges as opportunities for self-improvement. A North American participant noted, *"Adapting didn't mean giving up who I was. It was about learning to fit into their world while staying true to myself."*

4.2.2 Living Contexts and Social Integration

Participants' living arrangements significantly influenced their experiences of cultural and social integration in Japan. Survey data revealed that 10.5% resided in international dormitories, 5.3% in shared housing, and 84.2% in independent living. These choices reflected participants' practical, financial, and personal priorities, but also presented unique challenges and opportunities for cultural engagement.

International Dormitory Living: Convenience but Limited Community Benefits

International dormitories provided participants with a private bedroom while sharing facilities such as kitchens, bathrooms, and lounges. These dormitories were specifically designed to support international students, offering structured assistance for new arrivals. Many participants appreciated the convenience of dormitory living, especially during their initial transition to Japan. A participant explained:

> *"It was such a relief not to have to worry about furniture, utilities, or house hunting. Everything was ready when I arrived, which made the transition much easier."*

Dormitories also reduced living costs through shared utilities and facilities, enabling participants to budget more effectively while living in a new country. However, the community benefits were limited, as dormitory residents were often other international students rather than Japanese peers. A participant from Africa noted:

> *"The dorm mostly housed other international students, so I didn't get the cultural exchange I was hoping for. It felt like a comfortable bubble, but it kept me separate from Japanese society."*

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While dormitories allowed participants to form friendships with fellow international students, these relationships did not necessarily facilitate cultural immersion or language practice. A Southeast Asian student shared:

> *"I made great friends in the dorm, but we mostly spoke English, so I didn't get to practice Japanese much."*

Shared Housing: Peer Support and Practical Benefits

Participants who opted for shared housing with fellow international students highlighted the practical and emotional benefits of this arrangement. Shared housing allowed for cost-sharing and provided an immediate support network for navigating challenges such as language barriers or cultural misunderstandings. A European participant shared:
"Living with other internationals meant we could help each other figure out things like how to register at the ward office or what to say at the convenience store. It made things less intimidating."
However, shared housing rarely included Japanese roommates, which limited participants' opportunities for cultural immersion. One participant explained:

> *"It was nice to have people to rely on, but we didn't interact with Japanese society as much because we stayed in our own group."*

Independent Living: Freedom and Isolation

The majority of participants (84.2%) chose independent living, often renting private apartments. This arrangement appealed to those seeking autonomy and flexibility in their daily routines. A participant shared:

> *"I liked having my own space—it gave me the freedom to manage my time and focus on my studies."*

However, independent living also came with challenges, particularly for participants unfamiliar with navigating Japanese systems. Tasks such as signing rental agreements, setting up utilities, and understanding local rules required significant effort. A master's student explained:

> *"It was overwhelming at first to figure out everything on my own, but it made me more confident in the long run."*

Independent living often encouraged greater engagement with Japanese society, particularly through daily interactions like shopping, using public transport, or accessing local services. Yet, it could also feel isolating, especially for those struggling with language barriers or cultural adjustment.

Implications for Social Integration

Accommodation choices had direct implications for participants' cultural immersion and social networks. International dormitories and shared housing provided cost-effective options and emotional support but often limited opportunities for interaction with Japanese society. Independent living offered greater autonomy and chances for immersion but required participants to rely on their resilience and adaptability.

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Participants who thrived in these settings often sought additional opportunities to connect with local communities. A participant shared:

> *"Joining a local activity group helped me feel more connected. I needed something outside my apartment to build relationships and practice Japanese."*

These findings underscore the interplay between practical considerations and cultural adaptation, illustrating how living contexts shaped participants' ability to integrate into Japanese society and grow emotionally.

4.2.3 Technology as a Double-Edged Sword

Virtual platforms became a critical lifeline during the pandemic, enabling international students to continue their studies and maintain connections with peers. However, these tools also introduced new challenges, particularly for participants navigating Japan's high-context communication norms. Survey data revealed that 57.8% of respondents found virtual communication "Less Effective" or "Not Effective" compared to in-person interactions, citing the lack of nonverbal cues as a primary limitation.

Participants frequently expressed frustration with how online communication stripped away essential relational dynamics. A student from Vietnam described the difference between online and in-person interactions:

> *"When we were in a classroom, I could just glance at someone and immediately understand their reaction—whether they agreed, disagreed, or needed clarification. Online, it's like half the conversation is missing. You're left guessing, and that can lead to misunderstandings."*

This absence of nonverbal cues, such as gestures and tone, often disrupted group dynamics. Group projects conducted through platforms like Zoom frequently failed to replicate the subtle relational cues integral to Japanese communication norms. A European participant recounted:

> *"In group meetings, I struggled to read the room. Back home, we rely on words, but here, so much meaning is conveyed through silence and pauses. Online, it all felt flat, and I never knew if my input was welcome or if I was interrupting."*

Virtual settings also flattened hierarchical cues, such as seating arrangements or formal greetings, which are central to navigating authority in Japan's high power distance culture. A South Asian participant noted:

> *"In person, you can tell who's leading the meeting or who you should defer to based on where they sit or how they're introduced. Online, those signals disappear, and it's easy to accidentally overstep or not show enough respect."*

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability, leveraging creative solutions to bridge communication gaps. Many relied on visual aids like emojis or detailed email templates to convey tone and intent. A Chinese participant shared:

> *"I started using emojis strategically, not just casually. A thumbs-up or smiley face could help clarify that my message was positive, even if the words felt formal or cold."*

Other participants emphasized the importance of preparation and structure in virtual settings. A student from Africa highlighted how pre-written agendas and structured discussions eased the challenges of online meetings:

> *"Having a clear agenda helped a lot. It made the conversation more predictable and less reliant on subtle cues, which are so hard to pick up online."*

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Despite these efforts, many students expressed lingering feelings of disconnection. A Southeast Asian participant described the emotional toll of virtual interactions:

> *"Even with all the tools we had, it felt like something was missing. The warmth of face-to-face conversations, the small moments that build trust—they just couldn't be replicated online."*

Ultimately, these narratives illustrate the dual role of technology as both a bridge and a barrier. Virtual platforms enabled students to sustain academic and social connections but also magnified cultural dissonance by removing key elements of high-context communication.

4.2.4 The Pandemic as a Catalyst

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly amplified the cultural, social, and emotional challenges faced by international students in Japan, creating unprecedented barriers to adaptation and cultural immersion. Survey findings revealed that **62.7%** of participants reported "Reduced Opportunities" for cultural engagement, with many describing the pandemic as both a disruptor of cultural adaptation and a catalyst for emotional resilience.

Systemic Barriers During the Pandemic

The pandemic imposed significant systemic barriers, particularly concerning mobility restrictions, financial instability, and uncertainty. Strict quarantine requirements, canceled flights, and the high costs of returning home left many participants feeling trapped and disconnected from their families. A Chinese participant shared:

> *"If I wanted to go back home, I'd have to quarantine for weeks in a hotel—and the cost was too much for me. It felt like an endless hole of expenses and restrictions."*

Participants from Southeast Asia and South America echoed these struggles, emphasizing how canceled flights and shifting policies created financial and emotional strain. One participant noted:

> *"Flights were canceled all the time, and each rebooking cost more than the last. I couldn't afford it, so staying here felt like the only option."*

New international students faced even greater challenges due to delayed visa applications, canceled academic schedules, and constantly changing travel rules. A first-year Chinese student described the experience:

> *"It felt like I was chasing a moving target—visa rules kept changing, flights were uncertain, and my academic start kept getting pushed back."*

Despite these systemic barriers, some students expressed an understanding of the intent behind pandemic measures. A participant remarked:

> *"Even though it's frustrating, I know they're doing it to protect people. It's hard, but I don't blame them for being cautious."*

Impact on Mental Health

The pandemic-induced shift to text-based seminar sessions significantly impacted participants' mental health. Professors' unfamiliarity with digital platforms often led to prolonged email chains for discussions. One student explained:

> *"We would start in the morning with a few questions from the professor, and by evening, we were still replying to emails. It was mentally draining because there was no clear end to the discussion."*

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These asynchronous interactions lacked the immediacy and feedback of in-person seminars, contributing to feelings of isolation. Another participant noted:

> *"In a normal seminar, you can see people's reactions, ask follow-up questions, and understand the tone. But through emails, everything felt rigid and formal. It was hard to gauge if my responses were correct or if I was even contributing meaningfully."*

This overwhelming nature of prolonged online interactions led some students to contemplate leaving their programs. A Southeast Asian participant shared:

> *"I've never felt this level of stress from the professor before. I seriously thought about quitting or taking a break for my mental health."*

Loss of Cultural Immersion Opportunities

Physical distancing measures during the pandemic resulted in a stark loss of cultural immersion opportunities. Activities such as attending festivals, participating in local events, and engaging in casual conversations were severely curtailed. A South American participant reflected:

> *"Before the pandemic, I could join cultural events, festivals, or even casual meetups to learn about Japan. During COVID, I felt like I was stuck in a bubble with no way to connect."*

These disruptions were particularly evident in academic settings, where virtual interactions eliminated informal learning mechanisms. A Chinese participant described their frustration:

> *"Without the small talk and gestures before class, it felt impossible to gauge what others thought of me. I felt like I wasn't even part of the group."*

Isolation and Stagnation

Isolation was a recurring theme among participants, with many describing the pandemic as a period of cultural stagnation. Some students found solace in connecting with fellow international peers, while others reported a halt to cultural learning. A Chinese participant explained:

> *"It was already hard to understand Japanese norms in person, but without those face-to-face interactions, it felt like I wasn't learning anything new about the culture."*

This stagnation also intersected with feelings of identity disconnection. One participant shared:

> *"I felt like I didn't belong anywhere—not in Japan and not at home. The pandemic made me feel stuck between two worlds."*

Compounding Financial and Visa Uncertainties

Financial instability and visa uncertainties further exacerbated participants' challenges. Many students struggled to make ends meet as part-time jobs disappeared. A Vietnamese participant shared:

> *"When my part-time job was cut, I had no idea how I'd pay my rent. The stress of figuring out finances on top of everything else made me feel completely overwhelmed."*

Visa-related anxieties added another layer of stress. A participant from Southeast Asia explained:

> *"I didn't know if I could stay in the country. Every few weeks, I'd hear new rumors about restrictions, and it felt like my future was out of my hands."*

Mental Health and Coping Strategies

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Mental health concerns were prevalent among participants, who described the pandemic as a period of heightened stress and emotional exhaustion. Universities offered online counseling services, but these were often inaccessible due to language barriers or cultural disconnects. A participant from Africa noted:

> *"The counseling sessions felt disconnected. I wasn't sure if they understood where I was coming from, culturally or emotionally."*

Despite these challenges, participants adopted various coping strategies. Journaling, mindfulness practices, and virtual check-ins with friends and family became essential tools. A Vietnamese student reflected:

> *"Journaling became my way of staying grounded. It was the only way to stay positive when everything felt so uncertain."*

Virtual platforms also played a role in fostering connection. One participant noted:

> *"Checking in with friends and family every day, even just for a short call, kept me sane. It reminded me that I wasn't completely alone."*

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Integrating Hofstede's Framework

This study draws on Hofstede's dimensions—collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—to explore how systemic cultural norms shaped the experiences of international students in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Hofstede (1980) offers a robust framework for understanding broad cultural structures, integrating phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how these cultural norms are navigated and internalized on an individual level. By blending these approaches, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of both the systemic constraints and personal agency in international students' adaptation to Japan's academic and social environment.

5.2 Dimension 1: Individualism vs. Collectivism

5.2.1 Navigating Tensions Between Self-Expression and Group Harmony

Adapting to Japan's collectivist norms posed significant challenges for international students, particularly those from individualistic, low-context cultures. Hofstede (1980) defines collectivism as a cultural orientation that prioritizes group harmony, shared responsibilities, and implicit communication over individual autonomy and direct expression. These norms are deeply embedded in Japan's academic and social environments, where achieving consensus often outweighs the expression of personal opinions.

Participants frequently reflected on the difficulty of aligning their cultural values with Japan's emphasis on group harmony. In group settings, explicit disagreement was often perceived as disruptive, creating a dissonance for students accustomed to openly voicing opinions. A North American participant explained:

> *"In my culture, we value speaking up and showing initiative, but here, it felt like my contributions were out of place. I had to unlearn habits that were second nature to me."*

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these challenges by reducing opportunities for informal, face-to-face interactions that are critical for learning and adapting to collectivist norms. Without the benefit of observing nonverbal cues or engaging in spontaneous discussions, many participants felt isolated within group dynamics. As highlighted in the findings chapter, virtual

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platforms often stripped away the subtle interactions that foster inclusion in high-context, collectivist cultures. A Chinese student described their experience in virtual group settings, noting that they felt "invisible" and unable to gauge the group's reaction to their contributions.

This tension between self-expression and group harmony aligns with Hall's (1976) concept of high-context communication, where meaning is conveyed through shared understanding, nonverbal cues, and unspoken expectations. For students from low-context cultures, where clarity and directness are valued, the implicit nature of Japanese communication created significant barriers. A European participant described this experience:

> *"Sometimes, I felt like I was doing everything wrong, even when no one said anything directly. It was all in the silences and unspoken expectations."*

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated adaptability, with many developing strategies to navigate collectivist norms. For example, observing peers, seeking feedback from mentors, and practicing self-reflection emerged as common approaches. This aligns with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) concept of interdependent self-construal, where individuals redefine their sense of self in relation to the collective. A South Asian participant explained:

> *"It was humbling. I learned to listen more, to read the room better, and to appreciate the value of waiting instead of rushing to speak."*

Participants from individualistic cultures expressed difficulties navigating Japan's emphasis on group harmony. These cultural norms often led to feelings of exclusion, particularly when contributions in group discussions were overlooked. Phenomenology reveals the emotional toll of these experiences, highlighting how students internalized their perceived marginalization and adapted by observing peers and seeking mentorship.

For example, one North American participant noted:

> *"I thought speaking up in group discussions would show initiative, but it felt like I was breaking some unspoken rule. It took time to realize that sometimes silence is considered more respectful."*

Over time, students developed strategies to align with collectivist norms, such as observing peer behavior and seeking advice from mentors. These adaptations not only facilitated integration but also fostered personal growth, with many students reporting an increased capacity for patience and empathy. Phenomenology thus highlights the transformative potential of navigating collectivist norms, revealing how students internalize and reinterpret these expectations.

5.2.2 Contrasting Collectivist Values: Cultural Conflicts in Crisis **Management**

Hofstede (1980) defines collectivism as a societal tendency to prioritize the needs of in-groups over individual desires, with loyalty being exchanged for protection and security (p. 76). For many international students, the COVID-19 pandemic had already underscored the importance of communal measures in their home countries, where collective well-being often took precedence over individual convenience. These students had adapted to stringent pandemic measures, viewing them as essential sacrifices for the greater good of the community.

However, Japan's comparatively more lenient approach to pandemic management created a stark cultural dissonance for these students. While Japan's response was based on a more flexible, self-regulated approach to measures like social distancing, quarantine, and mask-wearing, students from countries with stricter regulations found it difficult to reconcile this difference. One participant highlighted the sense of unease they felt:

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"At home, everyone follows strict rules for the sake of the community. Here, it seems like the response is less coordinated, which makes it harder to feel safe."

This perception of Japan's pandemic measures as "less coordinated" reflects a significant cultural contrast in how collectivist values were enacted. While both Japan and the students' home countries shared collectivist principles, the application of these values during the pandemic diverged sharply. For students accustomed to clear, rigid policies intended to protect the community, Japan's more flexible and sometimes ambiguous response complicated their sense of security and trust in the collective system.

This dissonance underscores the variability in how collectivist values are manifested across different cultural contexts. The strict regulations in some countries reinforced a clear, communal sense of responsibility during a crisis, whereas Japan's less rigid approach highlighted the adaptability of collectivism, allowing more personal responsibility but creating ambiguity for those less familiar with such flexibility. The contrast reveals the complexities of collectivism—while it aims to create group cohesion, its application can vary widely depending on national context, leading to different expectations, experiences, and interpretations of communal responsibility.

For international students, this cultural dissonance further complicated their adjustment process, creating a sense of isolation as they navigated a system of pandemic response that felt at odds with their ingrained understandings of collective action. It also calls attention to the need for deeper insight into how collectivist values can differ not just in theory but in practice, especially during global crises like the pandemic. Understanding these variations in collectivist responses is crucial for supporting international students as they navigate the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation.

5.2.3 Experiences of Exclusion and Marginalization

While Japan's collectivist culture emphasizes group harmony, it can inadvertently marginalize individuals who are perceived as outsiders to the cultural norms, creating significant barriers to full participation. Many participants described feeling excluded during group discussions, particularly when their contributions were overlooked or dismissed. This dynamic highlights a tension within collectivist norms: while they aim to foster cohesion and unity, they can also leave individuals feeling isolated or invisible if they do not immediately align with the group's implicit expectations.

The experience of being disregarded often led participants to question their sense of belonging, and in some cases, they felt their voices did not matter within the group. This exclusionary experience, while an unintended consequence of collectivist values, can have profound emotional effects. Participants spoke of frustration, self-doubt, and, in some instances, a desire to withdraw from group interactions altogether. These responses reflect the emotional toll of exclusion, underscoring the isolation participants felt when excluded from the cultural and relational dynamics of their groups.The emotional toll of such exclusion is significant. Phenomenological perspectives on exclusion emphasize the psychological impact of being marginalized, where the individual's sense of self-worth becomes intertwined with their acceptance by the group. The frustration and self-doubt expressed by participants who felt sidelined point to deeper issues within collectivist environments—issues that are often overlooked in the pursuit of harmony.

These experiences also suggest that, for individuals from outside the cultural framework, group cohesion may come at the cost of personal validation. The emotional impact of exclusion—whether through silence, disregard, or direct rejection—can lead some participants to withdraw entirely, either from group discussions or from broader social interactions. This withdrawal can be

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seen as a defense mechanism against further emotional distress, but it also reinforces the cycle of marginalization.

In reflecting on these experiences, it becomes evident that while collectivist values promote solidarity and shared purpose, they also require a nuanced understanding of how such norms affect individuals differently. The challenge, therefore, is finding a balance where group harmony does not inadvertently exclude those who, due to their cultural or social background, do not immediately conform to these relational expectations.

5.2.4 Strategies for Adaptation and Personal Growth

The challenges posed by collectivist norms and high-context communication initially seemed overwhelming for many participants, yet their responses reveal remarkable adaptability. In navigating these expectations, participants employed various strategies that not only facilitated their adjustment but also contributed to their personal growth.

A significant strategy for adaptation involved closely observing peers to better understand the subtleties of group dynamics and implicit cultural cues. This approach underscores the importance of learning through social interaction, where participants were able to pick up on unspoken norms that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Moreover, mentorship was often crucial in this process, with many participants seeking guidance from those more familiar with the cultural landscape. This highlights the role of mentorship as a tool for bridging the gap between cultural expectations and personal behaviors.

Perhaps most striking was the role of self-reflection in the adaptation process. Participants often found that recalibrating their own behaviors and expectations was necessary to align with collectivist values. For instance, one participant explained how their communication style shifted from a more direct approach to one that prioritized listening and understanding group dynamics. This kind of self-awareness is not only indicative of cultural adaptation but also reflects a broader personal transformation—one that aligns with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) concept of interdependent self-construal. Through this lens, participants redefined their sense of self, not in isolation, but in relation to the collective, emphasizing group harmony and implicit communication over individual expression.

In addition, some participants came to appreciate the value of silence within collectivist communication. Rather than viewing it as an absence of speech, they began to recognize it as a meaningful space for reflection and respect for others' perspectives. This shift in understanding can be seen as a key example of the personal growth participants experienced. It reflects a deeper engagement with the cultural values they initially found challenging and points to the potential for transformation that arises from navigating cultural differences thoughtfully.

Overall, while collectivist norms presented challenges, they also offered opportunities for profound personal growth. Participants who engaged deeply with these norms not only adjusted their behaviors but also expanded their worldviews, developing greater empathy and a more nuanced understanding of the cultural context in which they were operating. The ability to adapt and grow within such a system suggests that intercultural experiences, even those fraught with initial difficulty, can serve as catalysts for personal transformation.

5.3 Dimension 2: Uncertainty Avoidance

5.3.1 A Double-Edged Sword

Japan's high uncertainty avoidance, is identified as '*a cultural trait characterized by a preference for structured environments and a tendency to minimize ambiguity through strict rules and clear*

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expectations (Hofstede, 1980, p. 113)', provides a sense of stability and predictability under normal circumstances. However, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the effectiveness of this cultural preference, exposing the fragility of rigid systems when faced with rapidly changing global conditions. The very structures that are designed to maintain order and security often became sources of confusion and frustration for international students, as the constantly shifting policies disrupted their attempts to adapt to an unpredictable crisis.

The rigidity of Japan's uncertainty avoidance seemed poorly suited to the dynamic nature of the pandemic. For many students, the frequent changes in rules created a sense of instability rather than reassurance. As one participant expressed, the constant updates and new regulations made it feel as though they were starting over repeatedly. This sentiment of perpetual uncertainty contrasts sharply with the usual expectation that Japan's strict regulations would offer predictability and security. The pandemic highlighted a critical limitation of high uncertainty avoidance cultures: while these systems may function well in stable environments, they struggle to provide the necessary flexibility in times of crisis.

International students faced particular challenges with bureaucratic processes, such as visa renewals and travel arrangements, as policies shifted frequently. This constant state of flux contributed to feelings of insecurity and anxiety, as many students found it impossible to plan or feel confident about their future. The tension between Japan's desire for order and the unpredictable nature of a global pandemic demonstrates the difficulty of applying rigid systems to situations that demand adaptability and responsiveness.

Despite these challenges, international students exhibited considerable resilience. The strength of their peer networks and familial support systems emerged as key coping mechanisms during the crisis. These social networks served as buffers against the cultural stress associated with Japan's high uncertainty avoidance. According to Gudykunst and Nishida (1994), strong social ties help reduce the psychological strain of cultural adaptation, particularly in environments with high uncertainty avoidance. For many students, sharing experiences, offering emotional support, and providing practical advice allowed them to manage the constant uncertainty they faced. One participant noted how simply knowing that others had successfully navigated similar challenges helped them maintain their composure.

In addition to relying on social networks, students developed personal routines to create a sense of stability in their disrupted lives. By establishing study schedules, staying connected with friends, and adhering to other self-imposed structures, students were able to impose a semblance of order in an otherwise chaotic environment. This creative adaptability highlights the cognitive and emotional labor involved in adjusting to a high uncertainty avoidance culture during a time of crisis.

Phenomenologically, these experiences underscore the delicate balance between systemic rigidity and individual agency. While Hofstede's framework emphasizes the stability that uncertainty avoidance cultures provide, it is clear from these findings that rigidity can become a barrier in contexts that require rapid adaptation. Students from diverse backgrounds, including those from China and other collectivist cultures, struggled with the unspoken rules of Japanese society, often

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second-guessing their actions due to fear of making mistakes. This reflects the cognitive burden of adapting to a system where cultural norms are deeply ingrained but not always transparent.

Ultimately, the experiences of these students point to the critical role of flexibility in institutional responses, particularly in times of crisis. While Japan's high uncertainty avoidance culture may typically provide stability, the pandemic revealed the need for greater adaptability and support systems that allow individuals to navigate uncertainty with resilience. These findings emphasize the importance of peer networks and the necessity for institutions to provide more flexible frameworks to assist international students during times of global instability.

5.3.2 Adapting to Japan's Preference for Structure

Japan's high uncertainty avoidance, as described by Hofstede (1980), emphasizes the importance of structure, formal rules, and predictability. These systemic norms are designed to reduce ambiguity and maintain social and organizational stability. However, for international students, these same norms often created challenges, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the disruption of daily routines and shifting policies resulted in an unpredictable environment.

While Japan's preference for structure is typically seen as a stabilizing force, the pandemic revealed its limitations in rapidly evolving situations. International students, unfamiliar with Japan's strict and often opaque norms, found it difficult to adapt to an environment where clarity was frequently absent. Many students expressed frustration over the ambiguity of unspoken rules, feeling as though they were constantly second-guessing their actions and struggling to align with expectations that were not always transparent.

Hofstede's framework suggests that high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to reinforce strict norms during crises in order to preserve order. However, this reliance on rigid systems can inadvertently exclude those who are unfamiliar with these unspoken rules. In the case of international students, the lack of clear communication and consistency, particularly in bureaucratic processes such as visa renewals and public services, exacerbated feelings of alienation. The frequent changes in rules and policies created a sense of instability, where students felt unable to plan or feel secure in their future.

These experiences illustrate how Japan's preference for structure can clash with the unpredictable realities of a global crisis. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, deviations from established norms can heighten anxiety, particularly for outsiders who are not fully embedded in the system. The pandemic's disruptions forced students to navigate a bureaucratic and cultural landscape that was both rigid and inconsistent, increasing their sense of confusion and stress.

Despite these challenges, the resilience of the international students was evident in their efforts to adapt. In the face of uncertainty, peer networks became an essential resource. Students leaned on one another for emotional support and practical advice, finding strength in shared experiences. Additionally, many students developed personal routines to impose structure on their disrupted lives, such as creating study schedules or maintaining regular check-ins with friends. These strategies helped to counteract the instability of their external environment, providing a sense of control and stability during a time of crisis.

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The adaptive strategies employed by participants reveal the importance of balancing conformity with personal agency. While Hofstede's framework focuses on the stability offered by high uncertainty avoidance cultures, this study highlights the creative and adaptive ways in which individuals navigate these structures in real-time. By developing coping mechanisms, such as creating personal routines and relying on peer networks, students were able to manage the ambiguity of their environments, demonstrating resilience in the face of uncertainty.

5.4 Dimension 3: Power Distance

5.4.1 Emotional Toll During the Pandemic

Japan's high power distance culture, as outlined by Hofstede (1980), emphasizes the acceptance of hierarchical structures and authority without requiring justification. This cultural dimension significantly shapes interactions within the educational system, influencing how students engage with professors, administrative staff, and other authority figures. Academic communication in Japan typically adheres to formal protocols, which are further reinforced by societal respect for authority.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified these hierarchical norms, especially as education transitioned online and bureaucratic processes adapted to remote settings. For international students, this shift introduced new challenges in navigating academic and administrative systems. Before the pandemic, informal interactions, such as office hours or after-class discussions, provided accessible ways to clarify questions or address issues. With the shift to online education, email became the primary communication mode, introducing a layer of formality that many students found isolating and time-consuming.

For students unfamiliar with Japan's formal communication systems, the reliance on email highlighted the rigidity of hierarchical norms. Students expressed concerns about crafting emails in a tone that conveyed respect while avoiding potential missteps. This shift to formal, asynchronous communication often led to heightened anxiety, as students were left second-guessing their wording and intent without the immediate feedback of face-to-face interactions. Those from more egalitarian cultural backgrounds found this adjustment particularly challenging, as they were accustomed to more direct and informal communication styles.

Hofstede's framework captures the systemic nature of these challenges, but phenomenology provides additional insight into the emotional and cognitive toll of adapting to Japan's high power distance culture. Many students described the mental strain of navigating these norms, from revising communications multiple times to hesitating to seek help out of fear of being perceived as incompetent or disrespectful. The lack of informal communication channels further exacerbated this tension, as students struggled to gauge their professors' reactions or assess the appropriateness of their contributions.

Japan's bureaucratic systems, characterized by their rigidity and formal procedures, also became increasingly burdensome during the pandemic. Frequent policy changes, especially those related to visas and travel, added layers of stress for international students, who often felt overwhelmed by the stakes involved in every interaction with officials. The fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood further discouraged students from seeking help, highlighting the alienating effects of hierarchical systems during times of crisis.

Despite these challenges, many students demonstrated resilience by developing strategies to navigate these formalities. Peer networks and mentorship were invaluable in helping students learn

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cultural norms such as keigo (formal Japanese speech), which initially felt intimidating but eventually became a source of cultural pride. Through practice and guidance, students were able to reframe these formalities as a way to demonstrate respect and build trust within the academic environment. This transformation from anxiety to cultural competence underscores the interplay between emotional resilience and skill development in adapting to Japan's high power distance culture.

The pandemic revealed both the strengths and limitations of Japan's hierarchical systems. While these systems provide stability and structure under normal circumstances, their rigidity during a crisis often exacerbated the challenges faced by international students. The lack of flexibility in communication and bureaucratic processes increased feelings of isolation and anxiety, making it clear that hierarchical norms need to be adapted to prioritize accessibility and well-being, especially during global disruptions.

5.4.2 Strategies to Overcome Hierarchical Barriers

Despite the challenges posed by Japan's high power distance culture, international students demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt and navigate these hierarchical dynamics. The resilience they exhibited reflects not only their determination but also their capacity for creative problem-solving in the face of systemic barriers. Their strategies for managing formal communication and navigating bureaucratic systems provide insight into how individuals respond to rigid cultural norms, particularly during times of heightened stress such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the most common adaptive strategies was leveraging peer networks. By forming community-based support systems, students were able to share practical guidance and emotional encouragement. Peer groups often became informal hubs for exchanging advice on navigating hierarchical structures, from crafting culturally appropriate emails to managing the complexities of bureaucratic processes. This collective approach underscores Hofstede's observation that high power distance cultures, while emphasizing hierarchical relationships, do not entirely preclude collaboration and mutual support. In this context, peer networks acted as a critical buffer, reducing the emotional toll of hierarchical stressors and fostering a sense of solidarity among students.

These collective efforts illustrate the students' ability to creatively engage with systemic challenges. For instance, many students developed formal communication skills tailored to Japan's hierarchical norms. Some relied on shared email templates to ensure their tone conveyed respect, while others studied keigo (formal Japanese speech) to align with cultural expectations. This process of mastering formalities was not only practical but also transformative, as it allowed students to cultivate cultural competence and confidence. By actively learning and applying these norms, students navigated the cultural and structural barriers with increasing proficiency, transforming initial frustration into a sense of achievement.

The reliance on peer networks and shared experiences highlights the importance of community as a coping mechanism. In high power distance cultures, where formal interactions with authority figures can feel intimidating, the emotional reassurance provided by peers played a crucial role in mitigating stress. Students reported that knowing others had successfully navigated similar challenges provided them with the confidence to persist, emphasizing the psychological benefits of shared experiences. These findings align with Gudykunst and Nishida's (1994) argument that strong social networks act as buffers against cultural stress, particularly in environments with rigid hierarchical norms.

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However, the challenges faced by international students also reveal the dual-edged nature of hierarchical structures. While these systems provide stability and order, they can alienate individuals unfamiliar with their formalities, particularly during crises. The pandemic magnified this tension, as the reliance on rigid formal communication and bureaucratic systems exacerbated feelings of disconnection and stress for many students. These challenges highlight the limitations of hierarchical systems in accommodating the needs of diverse and international populations.

The adaptability demonstrated by international students during this time underscores the importance of balancing respect for hierarchy with more accessible and flexible communication systems. Institutions must recognize the barriers that high power distance norms can create, particularly for those unfamiliar with such systems. By providing culturally sensitive resources, such as workshops on formal communication or mentorship programs, and creating opportunities for informal engagement with faculty and staff, institutions can help international students feel supported while maintaining respect for hierarchical norms.

The findings from this study also point to the broader implications of fostering inclusive academic environments. Flexibility in communication channels and a proactive approach to supporting international students can reduce the emotional toll of navigating hierarchical systems, particularly during crises. Ultimately, institutions that strike a balance between cultural respect and inclusivity are better positioned to support the success and well-being of their diverse student populations.

5.5 Synthesis: Implications for Adaptation and Cross-Cultural Research

The interplay between Hofstede's cultural dimensions—collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—and the systemic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a multifaceted lens for examining how cultural norms shape crisis adaptation. This study reveals how these dimensions intersected with international students' lived experiences in Japan, exposing both systemic constraints and the potential for individual agency to drive resilience. By synthesizing macro-level insights from Hofstede with the nuanced, micro-level realities of phenomenology, this discussion advances an integrative understanding of cultural adaptation during crises, emphasizing both the barriers and the transformative opportunities inherent in cross-cultural engagement.

5.5.1 Cultural Adaptation: Navigating Systemic Barriers

Structural Inflexibility and the Need for Institutional Agility

Japan's high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance, as identified by Hofstede (1980), create a cultural preference for structured systems and hierarchical relationships. These traits, while fostering stability under normal circumstances, became sources of significant stress during the pandemic, particularly for international students navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic landscapes. Participants frequently expressed frustration with shifting visa policies, inconsistent communication, and unclear administrative procedures. As one first-year student recounted, *"The visa rules kept changing, and no one could give clear answers. It felt like I was constantly chasing paperwork just to keep up."*

This systemic rigidity reflects a cultural emphasis on predictability and order, yet it also highlights the vulnerabilities of such systems in dynamic and unpredictable contexts. The findings underscore the urgent need for institutional agility, including the adoption of transparent, student-centered

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policies. Providing bilingual support staff, streamlining administrative processes, and maintaining consistent updates could help mitigate the alienation and anxiety that students experienced.

The Interplay Between Systemic Barriers and Individual Resilience

Despite these systemic challenges, students demonstrated remarkable resilience by employing a variety of adaptive strategies. Peer networks emerged as critical support structures, offering emotional reassurance and practical advice. A South Asian participant shared, *"We relied on each other's experiences—just knowing someone else got through the same issue helped me stay calm."* This reliance on community aligns with Gudykunst and Nishida's (1994) emphasis on the role of social networks in high uncertainty avoidance cultures.

Additionally, students created personal routines to impose a sense of stability on their disrupted lives, such as establishing study schedules or organizing virtual meetups. These strategies highlight the tension between systemic constraints and individual agency, showcasing how students transformed barriers into opportunities for growth.

5.5.2 Emotional Resilience: Phenomenological Insights

a) Cognitive and Emotional Labor in High-Context Cultures

Japan's high-context culture, which relies heavily on implicit communication and unspoken norms, posed significant challenges for international students. Participants frequently described the emotional and cognitive labor involved in deciphering these expectations. As one Chinese student explained, *"It felt like everyone else knew the rules except me. Every mistake felt like a step backward."*

Phenomenology provides a lens to explore these lived experiences, capturing the psychological strain of navigating unspoken rules and implicit expectations. Hofstede's dimensions offer a structural understanding of cultural norms, but phenomenology adds depth by revealing how students internalize these challenges, often developing greater patience, empathy, and cultural sensitivity as a result. A Vietnamese participant reflected, *"I realized that silence wasn't just about not speaking; it carried its own meaning. Adapting to this way of thinking taught me to respect others' perspectives."*

b) Resilience Through Community and Adaptation

Community-based coping mechanisms were central to participants' resilience. Peer networks provided not only emotional support but also practical guidance on navigating academic and administrative challenges. Additionally, students adapted by observing peers, seeking mentorship, and engaging in self-reflection, demonstrating their ability to align personal behaviors with cultural expectations. These strategies underscore the dual role of collectivist values and individual agency in fostering resilience, offering insights into how systemic norms can be negotiated to mitigate cultural dissonance.

5.5.3 Technology as a Double-Edged Sword: Disruptions to High-Context and Hierarchical Norms

The shift to virtual communication disrupted key elements of Japan's high-context and hierarchical culture. High-context communication, which relies on nonverbal cues and shared understanding, was particularly challenging to replicate in online environments. A Vietnamese participant described the experience: *"In class, you can feel when it's your turn to speak just by reading the*

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atmosphere. Online, there's no way to sense that flow, and it felt like I was constantly guessing." This loss of context often left students from high-context cultures feeling disoriented, as they struggled to decode group dynamics without the benefit of relational cues.

Conversely, students from low-context cultures, who are accustomed to direct and explicit communication, often felt that virtual interactions amplified existing cultural dissonance. The absence of nonverbal signals necessitated over-explanation, further straining cross-cultural interactions. However, some participants observed that virtual platforms flattened traditional hierarchies, creating opportunities for more equitable participation. A South Asian participant noted, *"In online meetings, I didn't feel as intimidated as I did in person. It felt easier to contribute because everyone was on the same level, at least visually."*

5.5.3.1 Institutional Implications for Digital Adaptation

The mixed experiences with technology highlight its dual role as both a disruptor and an enabler of cultural adaptation. While virtual platforms diminished the relational subtleties essential to high-context cultures, they also allowed for new forms of engagement, particularly in flattening hierarchical dynamics. Institutions should invest in culturally adaptive digital tools that replicate nonverbal cues and foster inclusivity. Features such as breakout rooms, real-time reactions, and multilingual interfaces can bridge the gap between high-context and low-context communication styles, ensuring that virtual environments meet the diverse needs of international students.

5.5.4 Bridging Hofstede's Framework and Lived Realities

5.5.3.2 The Interplay Between Structural Norms and Individual Agency

By integrating Hofstede's macro-level insights with the micro-level perspectives of phenomenology, this study highlights the dynamic interplay between systemic cultural norms and personal adaptation. While Hofstede provides a theoretical foundation for understanding structural challenges, phenomenology captures the lived realities of navigating these challenges, emphasizing the cognitive and emotional labor involved in cultural adaptation.

For instance, one North American student reflected on the tension between self-expression and group harmony: *"I thought speaking up in group discussions would show initiative, but it felt like I was breaking some unspoken rule. Over time, I realized that sometimes silence could be more respectful."* These narratives underscore the transformative potential of cultural dissonance, as students not only adapted to systemic norms but also redefined their identities and behaviors in the process.

Toward a Holistic Understanding of Cultural Adaptation

This dual framework reveals the complexity of cultural integration during crises. Students simultaneously conformed to systemic expectations and developed strategies that balanced cultural conformity with personal growth. Their experiences challenge static interpretations of cultural dimensions, emphasizing the fluid and evolving nature of cross-cultural adaptation. These findings highlight the importance of adopting an integrative approach to understanding cultural norms, one that accounts for both structural influences and individual agency.

5.6 Gaps in the Literature

Bridging Systemic Norms and Lived Experiences

This study significantly advances cross-cultural research by bridging macro-level analyses of

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systemic cultural norms, as articulated by Hofstede's (1980) framework, with micro-level explorations of individual lived experiences through phenomenology. Hofstede's dimensions—collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—serve as valuable tools for understanding the structural dynamics that shape cultural adaptation. However, these systemic perspectives often fail to address the nuanced emotional and cognitive labor required to navigate these norms, particularly during periods of crisis. By integrating phenomenology, this study uncovers the intricate ways international students in Japan reconcile systemic cultural expectations with their individual lived realities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This dual approach offers a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the interplay between systemic cultural structures and individual agency, addressing critical gaps in the existing literature on cultural adaptation.

Emotional Labor and Adaptation

Existing research on collectivism, such as the work by Triandis (1995) and Markus and Kitayama (1991), highlights the importance of group harmony and interdependence. However, these studies often overlook the substantial emotional labor required to align individual values with collective expectations. This study extends these findings by documenting the internal struggles and reflective processes international students experience as they adapt to collectivist norms in Japan. A North American participant articulated this challenge:
"It felt like I had to suppress my personality just to fit in. It wasn't just about learning the rules—it was about unlearning so much of what felt natural to me."
Such accounts illustrate the psychological toll of adaptation, wherein students constantly assess and adjust their behaviors to align with implicit norms. This process involves not only cognitive adjustments but also the cultivation of emotional resilience and strategic peer interactions to mitigate cultural dissonance.
Similarly, research on power distance, including Shimada's (2019) exploration of hierarchical relationships, tends to focus on the structural implications of these norms while neglecting their lived impact. This study provides critical insights into the anxiety and self-doubt that students experience in navigating hierarchical academic and social systems. For instance, a South Asian participant described their apprehension with keigo (formal Japanese language):
"Every email felt like a test—one wrong phrase, and I worried I'd offend someone. It wasn't just stressful; it made me second-guess everything I said."
This example highlights the intense emotional labor involved in adhering to formalities within high power distance cultures, emphasizing the need for cultural competence and emotional resilience as prerequisites for successful adaptation. By bringing these personal dimensions to the forefront, the study underscores the critical role of emotional resilience and adaptive strategies in overcoming systemic challenges.

Systemic Norms During Global Crises

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional mechanisms of cultural learning and adaptation, creating unique challenges for international students. Previous studies on uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994) suggest that rigid cultural norms provide stability during times of ambiguity. However, this study demonstrates that such norms can become counterproductive during crises characterized by rapid changes and unpredictability. Participants frequently

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described their struggle to adapt to evolving rules and expectations. As a Southeast Asian student shared:

"The rules kept changing, and I felt like I was constantly catching up. It was frustrating, but it also taught me to adapt in ways I never had to before."

These findings reveal that while uncertainty avoidance typically fosters predictability, its inflexibility can exacerbate stress and hinder adaptation during crises. The study highlights the creative strategies students employed—such as forming peer networks, establishing personal routines, and leveraging digital tools—to navigate these challenges. These findings enrich the existing literature by showcasing how systemic cultural norms intersect with crisis-specific disruptions, emphasizing the importance of adaptability and collective support mechanisms.

Bridging Systemic Norms and Individual Agency

By integrating Hofstede's cultural dimensions with phenomenological insights, this study bridges the macro-level systemic structures of cultural adaptation with the micro-level lived realities of students. Hofstede's framework contextualizes the structural constraints imposed by collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, while phenomenology reveals the emotional and cognitive strategies individuals use to navigate these constraints. This integration provides a comprehensive understanding of cultural adaptation, particularly in high-stakes scenarios such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, collectivist norms prioritize group harmony, often challenging individualistic students to suppress direct communication styles in favor of implicit, high-context interactions. Similarly, high power distance cultures amplify the emotional labor involved in formal academic interactions, such as mastering keigo or navigating hierarchical relationships. These challenges were intensified by the pandemic, which limited opportunities for observational learning and casual interactions, forcing students to rely on personal resilience and peer support networks to navigate these barriers.

Future Research Directions

To further enhance the understanding of cross-cultural adaptation, future research should explore the long-term impacts of these adaptation strategies. Longitudinal studies could examine how international students' experiences during the pandemic influence their cultural integration, identity formation, and career trajectories over time. Additionally, comparative research could analyze how collectivist and high power distance cultures in other countries, such as South Korea or China, shape international students' experiences and coping mechanisms, providing broader insights into regional variations in cultural adaptation.

Another promising avenue for future research lies in investigating the role of digital platforms in cross-cultural adaptation. The shift to online communication during the pandemic disrupted traditional high-context norms, creating both obstacles and opportunities for students navigating collectivist and hierarchical cultures. Future studies could explore how digital tools and virtual learning environments can better accommodate these cultural dimensions, offering actionable insights for institutions seeking to enhance inclusivity and support for international students in virtual settings.

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By addressing these gaps, this study not only contributes to the growing body of research on cross-cultural adaptation but also provides a roadmap for future inquiries into the interplay between systemic cultural norms and individual lived experiences, particularly in the context of global crises.

5.7 Discussion on Research Questions

RQ1: Experiencing and Navigating Cultural Dissonance

Research Question 1: How do international students experience and navigate cultural dissonance while studying in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Systemic Dimensions Shaping Dissonance

International students in Japan grappled with cultural dissonance primarily shaped by three interconnected cultural dimensions: collectivism, high power distance, and strong uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980). These systemic dimensions—integral to Japanese academic and social norms—became particularly pronounced during the pandemic. The abrupt shift to online learning, reduced informal interactions, and rapidly changing institutional policies further magnified these cultural tensions.

In Japan's collectivist and high-context culture, maintaining group harmony and relying on implicit communication are paramount (Hall, 1976). For students from individualistic, low-context backgrounds, adapting to these norms required significant emotional and cognitive effort. A Chinese student described feeling "invisible" in virtual group settings due to the absence of nonverbal cues essential for navigating group dynamics. Such struggles illustrate how the pandemic disrupted opportunities for cultural learning and amplified the emotional labor of interpreting unspoken expectations.

Similarly, Japan's high power distance norms, which emphasize deference to authority and formal hierarchical interactions, created challenges for students accustomed to egalitarian systems. The pandemic intensified these challenges by replacing casual in-person clarifications with formal written communication. A South Asian participant likened emailing professors to "walking on eggshells," highlighting the anxiety of mastering hierarchical norms, particularly in a digital environment where nonverbal reassurance was absent.

Uncertainty avoidance, which traditionally fosters stability through structured rules, proved to be a double-edged sword during the COVID-19 crisis. As policies around visas, travel, and campus operations shifted frequently, students described feeling "constantly catching up," which compounded their stress and sense of isolation. While typically a source of security, the rigidity inherent in high uncertainty avoidance became a barrier, exposing the limitations of inflexible systems during crises.

Phenomenological Insights: Emotional and Cognitive Labor

From a phenomenological lens, these systemic factors translated into heightened emotional and cognitive labor. Participants recounted second-guessing their behaviors, feeling isolated in virtual group settings, and struggling to reconcile their personal communication styles with implicit hierarchical norms. For instance, a North American student remarked, "I thought being direct would show initiative, but here, it felt disruptive." This underscores the internal conflict many students faced as they attempted to align their behavior with the subtle, collective expectations of Japanese culture.

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Agency and Adaptive Strategies

Despite these barriers, students demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency. They established peer networks, formed online communities, and sought mentorship to navigate "unwritten rules" and mitigate feelings of invisibility. Through strategic observation, reflective practices, and consistent efforts to align with collectivist norms or hierarchical formalities like keigo, they cultivated cultural competence.

One South Asian student explained how their WhatsApp study group was a lifeline: "*It wasn't just about academics; it was about understanding daily life, sharing struggles, and celebrating small wins together."* These strategies highlight the transformative potential of cross-cultural experiences, even when constrained by a global crisis.

Summary for RQ1

The findings illuminate how cultural dissonance in Japan arises from the interplay of collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, all magnified by the disruptions of COVID-19. While students faced substantial emotional strain, their resilience—bolstered by peer support, reflective practices, and resourceful navigation of online spaces—demonstrates how individuals actively shape their adaptation processes even amidst significant systemic barriers.

RQ2: Maintaining Social Connections and Coping with Systemic Cultural Barriers

Research Question 2: What strategies do international students employ to maintain social connections and cope with systemic cultural barriers?

Peer Networks as Anchors of Support

A central coping strategy involved forming **peer support networks**, which provided both emotional encouragement and practical assistance. These communities became vital in navigating bureaucratic hurdles, understanding implicit cultural norms, and combatting isolation. Platforms like WhatsApp and LINE were instrumental in facilitating these connections, enabling students to exchange advice and foster solidarity.

A Vietnamese participant reflected on how these networks eased the burden of cultural adaptation: "*Having friends to talk to and share experiences with made a profound difference. It helped me feel less isolated and more capable of managing challenges."* Such networks resonate with Gudykunst and Nishida's (1994) assertion that strong social ties can buffer stress in high uncertainty avoidance contexts.

Reflective Practices and Personal Agency

In addition to communal support, many students engaged in reflective practices such as journaling, mindfulness, and systematic goal-setting. These methods allowed them to process the emotional labor of adapting to unfamiliar norms and maintain a sense of personal growth. A North American student explained, "*Writing down my experiences wasn't just about adapting to Japan—it was about finding opportunities to grow through the challenges.*"

These practices align with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) concept of interdependent self-construal, illustrating how students' self-perception evolved in response to collective cultural expectations.

Technology: Challenges and Opportunities

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The shift to virtual platforms during the pandemic introduced both obstacles and opportunities for maintaining connections. While the absence of nonverbal cues in online interactions often complicated communication, some participants found digital environments less intimidating. A South Asian student observed, "*Online, everyone was on the same level visually, which made it easier to speak up.*"

However, others noted the limitations of digital platforms in replicating high-context relational dynamics. Participants who successfully navigated these challenges employed structured approaches, such as organizing study groups or crafting meticulously worded emails, to mitigate the emotional toll of navigating hierarchical norms online.

Mitigating Systemic Barriers

Through a combination of peer support, reflective practices, and digital adaptations, students managed to maintain social ties and mitigate the systemic barriers imposed by collectivist norms, high power distance, and heightened uncertainty avoidance. A Southeast Asian participant noted that a WhatsApp group offering tips on navigating academic and cultural challenges not only provided practical solutions but also cultivated a sense of solidarity.

Summary for RQ2

Students' strategies for maintaining social connections and coping with systemic cultural barriers reveal the dynamic interplay of individual agency and structural constraints. By leveraging peer networks, engaging in reflective practices, and creatively utilizing digital tools, they were able to sustain emotional well-being and foster meaningful connections despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

6. CONCLUSION

This study bridges macro-level cultural frameworks, exemplified by Hofstede's (1980) dimensions, with micro-level lived experiences through phenomenology, offering a comprehensive exploration of international students' cultural adaptation in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. By contextualizing systemic norms—such as collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—alongside students' personal resilience, the research uncovers the nuanced interplay between structural barriers and individual agency.

6.1 Key Contributions

6.1.1 Advancing the Understanding of Cultural Adaptation

The study illuminates how systemic cultural norms shape international students' experiences of dissonance and adaptation, particularly during global crises. Japan's collectivist expectations, hierarchical norms, and high-context communication styles posed unique challenges for students, especially under the heightened uncertainty of the pandemic. Despite these structural barriers, students displayed remarkable adaptability, employing strategies like peer networks, reflective practices, and creative digital tools to navigate and overcome obstacles. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural adaptation as a dynamic process shaped by both systemic structures and individual agency.

6.1.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

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Theoretically, this research enriches cross-cultural studies by integrating Hofstede's cultural dimensions with phenomenological insights, capturing both the systemic and experiential aspects of cultural adaptation. Practically, the study identifies actionable strategies for educators, institutions, and policymakers to better support international students. Interventions such as intercultural training, peer mentorship programs, bilingual administrative services, and culturally adaptive technologies are critical to fostering inclusivity and resilience in diverse academic settings.

6.2 Future Directions

Building on these findings, future research should explore several key areas to deepen the understanding of cultural adaptation:

1. **Longitudinal Studies on Cultural Integration**
   Future research should track students' adaptation trajectories over time to examine whether short-term resilience strategies lead to lasting integration. For example, do students from individualistic cultures internalize collectivist norms through prolonged exposure, and how do such changes influence their professional and personal identities?
2. **Comparative Cross-Cultural Analyses**
   Expanding this research beyond Japan to include other high-context cultures (e.g., South Korea, China) and low-context ones (e.g., the United States, Germany) could uncover universal and localized dynamics of cultural adaptation. Comparative studies would provide a broader understanding of how systemic norms influence students' strategies across diverse cultural contexts.
3. **Exploring Digital Adaptation**
   The pandemic highlighted the growing role of digital platforms in shaping cross-cultural interactions. Future research could investigate how digital tools replicate or disrupt nonverbal cues essential to high-context communication or flatten hierarchies in high power distance settings. Insights into digital adaptation could inform the design of inclusive virtual environments that better support international students.
4. **Emotional Resilience Across Cultural Dimensions**
   Emotional resilience emerged as a critical factor in this study, but its intersection with cultural dimensions warrants further exploration. For instance, do students from high uncertainty avoidance cultures develop more structured coping mechanisms, and how might institutions tailor interventions to foster mental health and resilience across diverse student populations?
5. **Evaluating Institutional and Policy Interventions**
   Institutions must evaluate the effectiveness of culturally sensitive policies, such as bilingual administrative services and intercultural training, to identify best practices. Policymakers should also focus on creating inclusive frameworks that address systemic barriers and enhance the adaptability of educational systems to support international students in global crises.
6.

6.3 Bias in the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of international students adapting to Japanese cultural norms during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to

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acknowledge its inherent biases. The overrepresentation of participants from East Asia, particularly China, may limit the generalizability of the findings to international students from other regions with distinct cultural norms and adaptation experiences. Additionally, the reliance on virtual interviews and surveys due to pandemic restrictions could have influenced the depth of participant responses and excluded individuals without consistent access to digital communication platforms.

Moreover, the self-selecting nature of the participant sample, as well as the snowball sampling technique, might have introduced biases, such as favoring individuals with more social connections or stronger linguistic capabilities. These factors should be considered when interpreting the findings and applying them to broader contexts.

Addressing these biases in future research would involve recruiting a more geographically diverse participant pool, employing a mixed-methods approach to capture in-depth qualitative insights alongside broader quantitative trends, and exploring alternative data collection strategies to ensure inclusivity.

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