



## COPING STRATEGIES AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID 19 IN SWEDEN

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### Abstract:

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created disruptions in all people's daily lives. This deadly pandemic tremendously affected the social, economic, and physical systems. International students were a vulnerable population whose adjustment and adaptation processes in Sweden were interrupted. Therefore, we carried out to ascertain the international students' coping strategies during COVID-19. The study thus explores the coping strategies that international students utilise to deal with changes experienced during COVID-19 in Sweden. Theoretically, the study was based on resilience, the social ecology of resilience, and the strength-based perspective of social work. These theories assume that international students have innate skills and capabilities and resources from their external environments that they utilise to bounce back from stressors related to COVID-19. A cross-sectional exploratory research design was utilised for the study, and purposive, convenient and snowball-sampling techniques were used to choose study participants. Data was collected using qualitative in-depth interviews and was analysed using thematic analysis. The finding revealed that international students relied on environmental protective factors such as family, peers, religion, sports, and authentic information. They also used innate individual traits such as innovation, talents, concentration skills in academics, and the ability to multi-task to overcome their distress. In conclusion, even though COVID-19 worsened the pre-existing challenges to the well-being of international students in Sweden, they overcame some of their problems and blossomed even in difficult times.

**Keywords:** coronavirus disease, COVID-19, international students, coping strategies

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Study background

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic struck the world, tremendously affecting everyone's way of living. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021). The WHO organisation confirmed that it was a global pandemic in March 2020, and little is known about the containment of this pandemic as treatments and recommendations change drastically (Rothman, Gunturu, and Korenis, 2020). Various nations restructured their way of living due to panic by imposing different lockdown measures and travel restrictions to contain the spread of the deadly pandemic. Standard Operating Procedures were put in place to guide the day-to-day interaction of the people. The imposed measures greatly affected employment, education, socialisation, and travel (Wernly et al., 2020). People lost jobs, and education was disrupted as some institutions adjusted to digital learning while others were completely shut down. Social gatherings and international or most local travels were restricted. The situation posed uncertainty and unpredictability in conditions of people worldwide (Vasiljeva, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, partly due to mortality accruing from the disease and economic loss (Pomeranz, 2020; Fernández Reino, and McNeil, 2020) and food insecurity (Smith and Wesselbaum, 2020) but owing to the longer impacts on the mental health of the people.

International students are some of the individuals affected by the COVID-19 situation. COVID 19 makes the survival of international students more complex (King et al., 2020). Previously, research has shown that as migrants, international students experience unemployment, language barrier, unconducive weather conditions, limited social networks and psychosocial support. They also face difficulties communicating with families back home and living double lives, worrying about situations in their home and host countries (Guadagno, 2020). Such experiences are predicted to cause diverse challenges among these groups (King et al., 2020). The emergence of COVID-19 has deteriorated the socialisation, work, education, and easy integration of international students.

Sweden is amongst the countries that have been tremendously affected by the pandemic (Pomeranz, 2020). Many adjustments to deal with the pandemic have negatively affected the way of life of international students. The increased emphasis on social distancing and social isolation, coupled with the closure of physical classes and high worker turnover levels, are predicted to drive individuals, primarily international students, into different challenges. Previous studies in Sweden focused on students' experiences in Gothenburg (Kayonga, 2020) before the pandemic outbreak. This particular study, however, focussed on the coping strategies of international students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study gave profound descriptions of how international students navigated through pandemic-related stressors and were able to exhibit a positive outlook on their lives.

## 1.2 Problem statement

The World Bank (2020) noted that by April 2020, 13% (that is, approximately 220 million students) of the world's student population were significantly impacted following the closure of universities and tertiary learning institutions in 175 countries at the onset of COVID-19. COVID-19 has affected approximately 800 million students, more than half the world's student population (UNESCO, 2021). Students have lost two-thirds of the academic year due to the closure of schools in the pandemic. The average full school closure worldwide since the beginning of the pandemic is 14 weeks, and region-specific data shows that Latin America and the Caribbean have 20 weeks, and Europe has ten weeks. Oceania has four weeks (UNESCO, 2021).

Earlier studies carried out on previous pandemics such as influenza, a virus subtype H1N1, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Ebola, and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) revealed that infectious diseases disorganised the normal functioning of various societal levels (Vahedian-Azimi et al., 2020). COVID-19 is among the fatal infections that have enormously led to persistent challenges for multiple groups in the community (Essangri et al., 2020; Eweida et al., 2020; Vahedian-Azimi et al., 2020). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, systems in society have had to restructure and adapt to local measures. Vahedian-Azimi et al. (2020) emphasise that people became anxious because of the uncertainties in their daily activities such as businesses or schooling and were depressed because of the increased social distancing measures and fear of dying.

Broadly, difficulties related to the virus' outbursts were exacerbated and accrued by uncertainties about the durations of the isolations, distrust of the medical and government infrastructure to deal with the situation, and, most strikingly, the ultimate fear of being infected (Kibbey et al., 2020). In addition, extra stressors varying in the specificity of their situations confronted students. These problems consisted of: the closure of significant physical, and academic structures such as libraries and university housing; the uncertainty of the future of their educational journey; loss of part-time jobs; exclusion from essential social networks (friends and family); and sudden alteration to remote learning (Kibbey et al., 2020; Vahedian-Azimi et al., 2020). For instance, approximately 25% of university students in China were stranded due to financial hardships and delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same way, a survey by American Psychological Association (2020) cited in Kibbey et al. (2020) revealed that 67% of college students felt a distortion in their plans and aspirations on account of COVID-19, whereas 82% reported that vagueness/uncertainties about the academic year 2020-2021 was a paramount basis of stresses. A study by Rehman et al. (2020) expounds that due to COVID-19, students in India experienced similar difficulties resulting from changes in their daily routines and learning environments.

Kibbey et al. (2020) draw attention to the fact that distresses about the comorbidities of COVID-19 have been widely explored among the general population. Still, little is known about coping approaches, particularly among international university students. Further still, Essangri et al. (2020) observed that previous studies have focused more on the effects of the disease (COVID-19) itself. Still, studies ought to pick interested in expanding research beyond the deficits into looking at the coping

strategies of individuals. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gaps in the literature, as it will display the coping strategies of international students amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The study will be a reference on which international students and other key stakeholders can draw critical lessons and interventions to address future pandemics better. The study will also present new ideas for researchers and provide recommendations for more research opportunities. It will further future research as some research gaps might spring from this study's findings.

The study will provide important information to policymakers, the international community and the Swedish government, which will be a basis for improving international students' living situations and preparing governments to respond to international students' challenges, especially in future pandemic-struck times filled with uncertainties.

### **1.3 Study objective**

To explore the coping strategies devised by international students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

### **1.4 Research question**

What are the coping strategies utilised by international students during COVID-19?

### **1.6 Definition of key terms**

#### **1.6.1 International students**

International students have their studies outside their country of origin or residence (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). International students can also be called foreign students (OECD, 2020). International students specific to this research were students in their higher education who had previously moved to Sweden from other nations within the last two years.

## **2. Literature review**

This section presents literature about the impact of COVID-19 and challenges to well-being among international and local students. Most of the literature used in this chapter reflects a global perspective and not necessarily the Swedish context. The chapter is composed of main themes, which expound on the effects of COVID-19 on the functioning of different countries; the well-being of students; social and psychological distresses arising from COVID-19; the coping strategies and recommendations addressing COVID-19-related psychological distress among international and local students; the gaps in the literature and lastly the literature sources.

### **2.1 The COVID-19 pandemic and related effects; a country-specific overview**

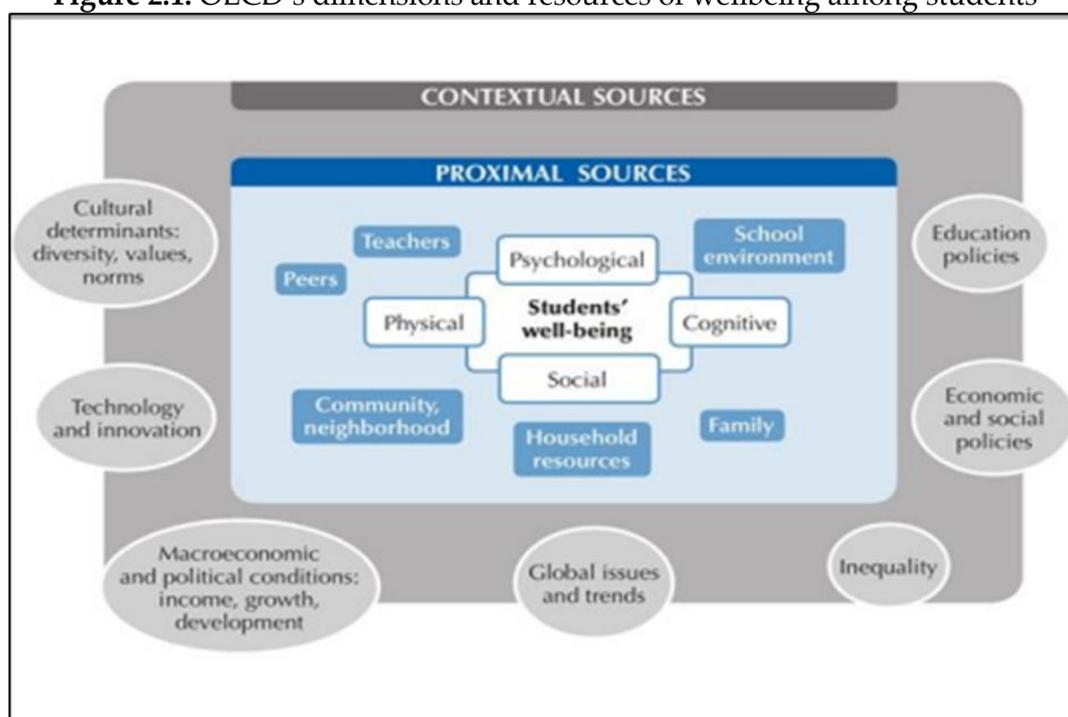
Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) has caused unanticipated and unimaginable health atrocities worldwide. Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China notified the WHO of 27 cases of infectious disease on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019. The WHO declared an

international Public Health crisis due to the widespread of this virus, whereby 83 cases had been identified within 18 countries. The rate at which COVID cases drastically rose to 118,000 in 114 countries with approximately 4291 deaths; the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The immediate closure of institutions due to panic crippled the health, social and economic structures (Gómez-Salgado et al., 2020a). The COVID-19 pandemic affected the physical and psychological health of individuals. Previous research on the pandemics such as influenza, a virus subtype H1N1, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Ebola, and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and COVID-19 reveal that quarantine and lockdown measures have significant distress on the populations. These restrictive measures are highly linked to social and psychological challenges such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and anger, majorly due to social avoidance (Gómez-Salgado et al., 2020a; Gómez-Salgado et al., 2020b).

## 2.2 Well-being of students

Well-being can be regarded as the ability to live happily and be satisfied in life (OECD, 2017). The well-being of students is their ability to function well in the different dimensions of life, such as psychological, social, cognitive and physical aspects. The psychological dimension focuses on the factors such as optimism, self-esteem, self-efficacy, hope, and motivation. The cognitive dimension focuses on the students' intellectual abilities of thinking and reasoning. The social dimension emphasises the quality of social support and networks students rely on. The physical dimension focuses on health and lifestyles such as nutrition and exercise. Well-being is largely influenced by the environment in which students live, as illustrated below.

**Figure 2.1:** OECD's dimensions and resources of wellbeing among students



Source: OECD (2017)

According to Sen (1999; cited in OECD, 2017), when evaluating the well-being of students, consideration must be taken into assessing their state of mind, achievements and the freedom to realise their goals. Such evaluations assist in the development of students' skills that improve their well-being in the present and future (OECD, 2017).

### **2.3 Coping strategies and recommendations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the general population, and the realisation that this has created social and physical challenges consoles individuals that the problem is collectively shared. The community as a whole has been affected and not just individuals.

#### **2.3.1 Music as a coping strategy during COVID-19**

Vidas et al. (2021) reveal that music is a very effective coping strategy. Its effectiveness is comparable to other strategies such as regular physical exercises, sleep, religiosity, doing home chores, watching TV, and social interaction. Despite being more psychologically distressed than local students are, international students have relied strongly on music to improve their well-being during COVID-19. Music was positively associated with reducing stress during lock-down, given that it offered proper substitution for the lost social contacts. Listening to music has effectively regulated one's emotions, manages stress, changes bad moods, and reduces tensions (Vidas et al., 2020).

#### **2.3.2 Information about COVID-19**

Facts reduce fear amongst people and therefore enable individuals to prepare better practical safety means to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The World Health Organisation (WHO) made an official guide on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 in response to mental safety and well-being when the deadly COVID-19 pandemic struck the world. People worldwide were cautioned to reduce reading, watching, or listening to news related to COVID-19, as this would escalate feelings of anxiety. Individuals were informed to seek information about COVID-19 from authentic sources and take all the necessary practical precautions stipulated by local public health-related experts and WHO to protect themselves and their families (WHO, 2020). Individuals were further encouraged to regulate checking on the COVID-19-related news at most twice a day. Finding facts about COVID-19 from reliable sources such as the WHO website or the national authorities was encouraged, and misinformation or rumours were discouraged, as these would worsen people's wellbeing (WHO, 2020). It was also noted that accurate information regarding the control measures lowered anxiety and depression symptoms among the populations (Gómez-Salgado et al., 2020a).

The WHO also provided key messages that helped the people cope with social isolation and prevent the spread of the coronavirus. For instance, people were encouraged to keep their social networks alive through regular communication via telephone calls and online platforms such as emails, social media, and video conferencing applications. People were urged to try as much as possible to keep their daily routines or even adapt to new ways of managing their daily lives given unexpected circumstances. To manage the psychological distress arising from COVID-19, people were encouraged

to prioritise their needs and feelings through regular physical exercises, having healthy meals and having enough sleep in regular patterns, and focusing on the activities they enjoyed doing (WHO, 2020).

### **2.3.3 Recognition of mental problems among students and aiding**

Management of emotional strains through peer-group mentoring and self-learning abilities was an essential coping skill for students to deal with pandemic-related stresses. Personal skills such as leadership were vital in assisting the students in coping with stressors (Essangri et al., 2020). Psycho-educational approaches were deemed fundamental in improving sleep quality and boosting student autonomy. For example, maintenance of the regular schedules and patterns of sleep, such as sleep and wake-up times during isolation.

Integration of the health courses within E-learning was envisaged as a mechanism to improve the well-being amidst the pandemic (Yassin et al., 2021). For instance, learning about the causes of stressors among students was considered crucial in enhancing students' learning and psychological wellbeing (Yassin et al., 2021).

Song et al. (2021) suggested that mobile-phone-based applications provide international students with mental health care and therapy. These devices would respond to students' immediate needs since they are a technologically proactive generation. These applications could be used remotely to avoid physical interactions that risk infections and to disseminate correct information about COVID-19 to reduce tensions arising from misinformation.

### **2.3.4 Development of E-learning platforms**

Developing and modifying the E-learning studies to be more engaging, interactive, and fun for the students has been foreseen as an important component to bridging the gap in face-to-face interaction that was disrupted by the pandemic outbreak. In the same vein, emphasis on the professional design of the online tools for the lectures was predicted to captivate the students' concentration and motivation during learning. E-learning would be implemented by supporting small group works, encouraging feedback and focusing on students' independence (Yassin et al., 2021).

### **2.3.5 Addressing language challenges and cultural shocks**

Sümer et al. (2008) recommends counselling services for international students to minimise stressors. Additionally, bilingual counsellors should effectively support students with language proficiency challenges in order to increase uptake and full utilisation of the counselling services. More still, social support groups should be introduced to provide psychosocial support to international students.

International students should be matched with host families that can help them live in a familial environment and facilitate learning the cultures, languages, and lifestyles. Thus, smoothing their integration and adjustment to the new environment (Sümer et al., 2008). In addition, peers who are nationals or senior international students should be voluntarily assigned to new international students to assist them in

familiarising themselves with the new study environment. These peers are a valuable resource that can also offer psychosocial support and enable international students to build social networks with native students or people easily (Sümer et al., 2008).

### **2.3.6 Joint efforts addressing COVID-19-related challenges**

According to Sahu (2020), a task force should be created by the university. It should involve relevant personnel such as counsellors, health workers, technicians, ICT experts, university administrators, and lecturers. This task force should be responsible for reforming the learning environment and the safety of the students during pandemic-hit times. Regular follow-up could be prioritised to ensure the continuity of learning. Due to the students' enthusiasm and youthfulness can quickly adapt to online tools such as ZOOM.

The task force will ensure that all the Standard Operating Procedures to control the coronavirus spread are adhered to. The task should facilitate the instructors in quick navigation of these online technologies.

### **2.4 Mal-coping strategies**

It is imperative to note that the pandemic's underlying mental challenges and stressors doubly affect individuals with substance abuse challenges. Some international students resort to substance use to relieve stress and yet risk infection significantly. Additionally, social distance as a strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19 involves separation from loved ones and social networks, which forces some individuals to resort to substance use to forget their distressed mental health leading to anxiety, depression, paranoid ideations, and PTSD (Essangri et al., 2020).

### **2.5 Theoretical framework**

To examine the coping strategies of international students during COVID-19, we chose resilience theory, the social ecology of resilience, and the strengths-based theory of social work as a starting point for my study. As such, this section examines the three theories.

#### **2.5.1 The theory of resilience**

Resilience empowers individuals by building their capacities to withstand considerable hardships, recover and heal from adverse situations and live fully functional lives (Turner, 2001; Masten, 2015). Resilience can be an inborn or learned behaviour that individuals can adopt through interactions with the environment (Turner, 2001). The components of resilience in an individual may include but are not only limited to the following. The *"sense of humour; a sense of direction or mission; intellectual capacity (or the ability for insight); adaptive distancing (or the ability to achieve independence); self-efficacy (or self-esteem and initiative); and the possession of a talent or skill"* (Wolin & Wolin, 1993; cited in Turner 2001: p.442).

However, to an extent, this theory provides a narrow scope for studying resilience, especially when it underrates individuals' social and physical ecology. For this reason, the social ecology of resilience will be integrated.

### **2.5.2 The social ecology of resilience**

The earlier definitions of resilience have focused on the individuals' abilities to succumb to or manage challenges rather than focusing on the influential processes of their families, neighbourhoods, schools, communities and governments on the individuals' capabilities or traits (Ungar, 2011). The social ecology of resilience is a theoretical framework that Michael Ungar propounded in 2011. This theory extends the focus from individuals to their social ecologies, social and physical environments and how they foster resilience (Ungar, 2011). An assumption underpinning this theory is that every individual is situated in a social and physical environment that involves networks that play a crucial role in enhancing their wellbeing (Ungar, 2011). Ungar (2011, p.14) defined resilience as *"a set of behaviours over time that reflects the interactions between individuals and their environments, particularly the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible"*. In understanding resilience, protective factors and risk factors are essential terms. Protective factors are individual traits, people, places and things within the ecological systems that create a sense of security and safety. Protective factors help individuals to feel confident and protected during risks. On the contrary, risk factors are events or situations that increase stress or trauma among individuals (Ungar, 2011).

According to Ungar (2011), the social ecology of resilience has three dimensions briefly discussed below.

The first dimension of the theory elucidates that the adversities they face are dependent on the quality of the social and physical ecologies within which they are situated rather than personality characteristics, cognitive abilities and talents or skills. Positive family relationships and good neighbourhoods, community services, and cultural practices positively affect the resilience of individuals who are faced with trauma.

The second dimension views resilience as a return to a stage of homeostasis that is a level of the previous normal functioning of individuals after facing challenging situations (Ungar, 2011). The quality of opportunities the environment can provide thus highly determines the individual's ability to overcome stressors.

The third dimension views resilience as an interaction with the environment and a diverse cultural setting that incorporates individual needs and environmental resources to facilitate positive development and coping skills to adversities. Thus, resilience is viewed from a more complex and multidimensional perspective. Resilience looks at individuals, their relationships and broader social factors that enable them to deal with trauma.

### **2.5.3 Strength-based theory**

The strength-based theory postulates that individuals have intrinsic dreams, goals, ambitions, talents, and skills when challenged with various problems (Healy, 2015). The strength-based perspective will offer insights about international students' resources to address distresses accruing from the pandemic. The strength-based system assumes that individuals consistently demonstrate resilience rather than pathologies when challenged by adversities (Saleebey, 2012; Healy, 2015; Trevithic, 2005).

### **3. Material and Methods**

#### **3.1 Research design**

We relied on a cross-sectional exploratory study that ascertained the coping strategies of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research is suitable for uncovering the diverse meanings and understandings of the participants' experiences (Dworkin, 2012; Bryman, 2016).

The interpretivist epistemological approach is appropriate for behavioural studies. Thus, social constructionism was utilised to uncover the individual meanings that international students attached to their coping strategies during the pandemic. Interpretivism assumes that society is socially constructed and individuals have the free will to attach meanings to their situations (Bryman, 2016).

The constructionist ontology posits that individuals socially make their reality. Crotty (1998), cited in Creswell and Creswell (2017), mentioned that individuals create meanings based on the social world they live and work in. Historical, social, and cultural perspectives in which individuals are nurtured shape the understanding of events and situations. The constructivist approach is based on the assumption that individuals are rational beings with the ability to construct their realities about situations and uniquely interpret situations they are exposed to (Green & Thorogood, 2009) and establish ways of adaptation. Inductive research stems from living in the world (Bryman, 2016). The process of this study is fundamentally inductive, given that we generated meanings from the data gathered in the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

#### **3.2 Study context**

The study was conducted in Sweden, located in the Scandinavian region of Northern Europe, with an approximate population of 10,380,245 people (Statistics Sweden, 2021). Sweden is renowned for its generous welfare system that significantly contributes to internationalisation, globalisation, comprehensiveness, and inclusivity (Berhanu, 2011). Hence, it has attracted international students because of its prestigious academic and research institutions with high-quality academic excellence worldwide. The study setting was at one of the universities in Sweden. The University is renowned for its academic excellence nationally and internationally, with a wide range of post-graduate programs that have attracted many international students.

Regarding COVID-19, Sweden did not go into a total lockdown but emphasised the use of standard operating procedures to contain the virus's spread (Kamerlin & Kasson, 2020). Like other nations globally, COVID-19 affected Sweden's welfare system, health, and economy. International students were extensively involved, and thus, the study context permitted exploration of the global students.

#### **3.3 Study population**

The participants were international students who had been residing in Sweden for less than two years. This was intended to explore the adaptation challenges amidst COVID-19. The study involved full-time international students and those on exchange programs

at the University to capture rich data about adjustment experiences and coping with academic completion pressure during the pandemic. The participants were young adults aged between 24 and 42 years.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of the study participants

Name	Gender	Age	Country of origin
1. Jasper	Male	27	Ghana
2. Kingston	Male	30	India
3. Cindy	Female	24	China
4. Kim	Female	29	Finland
5. Salah	Female	26	Uganda
6. Patricia	Female	42	Nigeria
7. Nadia	Female	33	Bangladesh
8. Paulo	Male	25	Spain

### 3.4 Selection and sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used in this study. This type of non-random sampling entails the deliberate selection of people with demonstrated or known characteristics (Crocker, 2009). Palys (2008) emphasises that study participant are not equal. Participants are equipped with the required information relevant to the study and are well placed to develop the research far better than participants selected randomly progressively. For a heterogeneous sample, we included participants with the following characteristics: fee-paying, parent, on scholarship, full-time study, exchange study, and from Africa, Asia, and Europe. The heterogeneity in the sampling was intended to acquire diverse views (Bryman, 2016). Purposive sampling was well suited for this study because of the Standard Operating procedures that were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Thus, we accessed the participants through digital communication platforms (Bryman, 2016).

### 3.5 Data collection methods and tools (in-depth interviews)

We used in-depth interviews to understand participants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. (Bryman, 2016; Kumar, 2010). We conducted eight in-depth interviews in English, given that the study participants were proficient in using it. Information was captured using recorders and notebooks after seeking consent from the participants (Bryman, 2016; Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

### 3.6 Data management and analysis

Initially, we transcribed using a verbatim approach (Bryman, 2016). While refining the transcriptions, we used a denaturalisation method where we focused on understanding the participants' critical messages, meanings, and perceptions (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005).

Data analysis is not straightforward, and thus it is a back-and-forth process (Crocker, 2009). We used a thematic data analysis method to analyse the qualitative data gathered since it is sufficiently flexible to identify key themes, patterns, constructs, and

new issues (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Based on its theoretical freedom, we utilised thematic analysis to provide rich, detailed, complex, and semantic or latent data by extensively interpreting various aspects. We analysed the data by familiarising, translating, structuring, coding, searching, identifying, and defining themes. We used NVIVO to code and analyse the data (Bryman, 2016). Data analysis involved deductive and inductive processes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **3.7 Study challenges experienced and how we resolved them**

All the interviews we conducted were virtual and not physically conducted, which affected the study results. Non-verbal expressions were not captured due to the absence of relevant observations with the participants. Additionally, there were internet disruptions. To minimise this challenge, we used ZOOM, a virtual platform that enabled us to capture and observe the participants' facial and other non-verbal expressions.

Some participants had high expectations of instant changes regarding their situations from the research study. For instance, immediate actions were addressed to the university stakeholders after participating in the study. However, to resolve this, we elaborated to the participants that the study was intended for academic purposes. We clarified that the findings would be utilised to improve their situations in the long run regarding practice, services, and policies rather than instantly.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

Permission to conduct this study was sought from the University Ethics Committee after reviewing and approving the research proposal. An information guide about the study's aim and purpose was provided to the participants. A written consent form was provided via email, and at the onset of the interviews, the participants also verbally consented to participate in the study.

Participants participated in the study voluntarily. Privacy and confidentiality were highly upheld throughout the research process. The participants' names and other personal details were removed, and participants were given pseudonyms.

Harmlessness was at the forefront of the research. All precautions and standard operating procedures were followed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distance was prioritised, and thus interviews were conducted on ZOOM.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Demographics of research participants**

The international students comprised of three males and five females between the ages of 24 and 42. Furthermore, the international students identified Ghana, India, China, Finland, Uganda, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Spain as their countries of origin, suggesting a vast diversity in the international students recruited for the study.

## 4.2 Coping strategies of international students to psychological distress during COVID-19

This theme explores how international students solved personal and interpersonal challenges during COVID-19. The adaptation efforts of the students were reported as personal skills, talents, and aspirations and controlled by the social environment.

### 4.2.1 Sleeping as a coping strategy

It is interesting to note that some international students maintained regular sleeping patterns and enjoyed sleeping to escape from overthinking about Coronavirus. One of the participants mentioned that sleep was a tool that enabled him to relax and calm down his anxieties.

Jasper stated that:

*"Yeah, it was okay, I didn't really struggle with sleep. Sleep helped me to cope with the situation, and helped me not to miss my peers so I never cared about anything. So I would just sleep to hide from what was going on, so I wasn't disturbed."*

Sleeping enough is helpful to minimise negative thoughts, lessening the chances of getting sick or health problems such as heart disease and most importantly, reducing stress and improving an individual's wellbeing. Sleeping enabled some international students to think clearly, focus on studies, work, and positively connect with people. According to Ellenbogen (2005), sleep is essential for boosting the brain and repairing body tissues, which thus helps in reducing somatic symptoms such as aches and pains in the body. Sleep generally improves individuals' productivity and physical activities, thereby helping individuals manage well during pandemic times.

### 4.2.2 Listening to music

Music is powerful because it speaks to people of all ages in whichever situation or mood they experience. Music makes individuals healthier. They relax with music, their bodies and moods become organised, and they manage to deal with painful situations (Vidas et al., 2020). Most international students reported that music was a powerful tool that helped them endure the pandemic's hardships.

Individuals were motivated and inspired by music that helped them to overcome worries and fears. According to Vidas et al. (2020), listening to any music has been helpful to international students in ways such as keeping them company, helping them escape from negative thoughts, and relaxing their moods.

*"I would only listen to music and instead of sitting down to worry and when tired of listening to gospel music or watching movies, I also tried to sleep."* (Nadia)

The music carried messages of hope that the pandemic could be dealt with. Music helped international students relax, soothe their minds, better deal with stress, and improve their psychological health. Music generally improves the human health

performance of tasks. Larwood and Dingle (2021) and Vidas et al. (2021) articulate similar advantages of music in restoring emotion and calming people's moods during COVID-19. Music carries hope, inspiration, and encouragement, especially in trying moments and distressing situations (Larwood & Dingle, 2021; Vidas et al., 2021).

#### 4.2.3 Social networks

Family is a backbone of individuals where they build attachment, run to during times of hardships and fall back on any form of assistance. Families have played a pivotal role during the pandemic for international students. International students faced with the COVID-19 impact resorted to seeking refuge from their families. Families, through constant communication with international students, provided emotional and psychological support. International students found communication with their families very therapeutic, thus calming their anxieties. International students needed people they could trust to pour out their grievances, frustrations and miseries. Their families were readily available to mediate and intervene positively in their situations, as expounded by King et al. (2020). Families of international students cared about them a lot during COVID-19 to ensure that they were in good physical, emotional, and psychological state.

For example, Kim said,

*"Okay, so I had a friend, a best friend that I have leaned on for a very long time for the whole of this COVID period and most of the times when I'm down when I'm feeling frustrated about a situation, I would pour it on him. Therefore, I think he is the main reason why I was able to go through this and the fact that I am able to call my mum on WhatsApp. There was a time I think I was depressed, and they had to call her. I talked to her and I was okay. So those two people, I think, really took me through what seemed like hard days."*

Patricia also added that:

*"Coronavirus increased communication for me. I say this because for me corona made me understand the importance of family. The importance of people that you really care about and staying in touch with them. So, for me, it reached sometimes when every morning and every evening we would communicate via FaceTime for prayer which has continued since April last year to date. And during the day I call all three of my children separately to see how they are doing every day."*

Regular communication and contact with families back home were vital to international students. They felt loved and cared for due to frequent follow-ups from family members using virtual communication. COVID-19 helped restore healthy and stronger bonds and attachments between international students and their families, lessening feelings of isolation and loneliness. Healthy communication during the pandemic enabled people to be more empathetic and sympathetic in their socialisation, enabling a sense of collectivism and belongingness (King et al., 2020; Song et al., 2020).

Participants also reported that their classmates were very instrumental in providing social support, as mentioned by Paulo below:

*“Therefore, the main social network I have had during this period are my classmates because we organise small gatherings, but I cannot call them parties. But I can’t call them parties but mainly dinners or we meet at one of our classmates’ houses, we make food together, we eat together, we drink a little bit, dance. So now, we have had to organise things together and in the summer. We used to go to the beach with some pizza. We just go and eat together.”*

Peers also provided emotional and psychosocial support to the international students, enabling them to deal effectively with the pandemic. Friends provided physical company and were available to support each other during stressful times. Sometimes international students cannot apprehend the stress, so physical contact with supportive networks is crucial in facilitating positive coping with COVID-19-related challenges (Masten 2001; Masten, 2015; Pine, Costello & Masten, 2005). Therefore, based on the findings, social capital from friends, teachers, church leaders, and role models facilitated positive coping among international students.

With the social ecology of resilience theory, international students are persons in the environment who influence and are influenced by the environment. As persons in the environment, students could utilise resources from different systems within their environment; hence, family and peers were some of the available social systems that could effectively help them cope with the pandemic. It is imperative to note that families and friends in the form of social capital can provide social, emotional, financial and psychological support (Ungar, 2011). In addition, the location of the University in an urbanised area of Gothenburg city also facilitated the individuals' coping. It can also be argued that the ability to move around the city and see new things within an urbanised setting created a sense of hope and optimism that the pandemic could not stop the functioning of the people and businesses entirely (Yassin et al., 2021).

#### **4.2.4 Religion as a coping strategy for COVID-19**

Some participants with a Christian religious background mentioned reliance on prayer, preaching from family, gospel music, church meetings, and biblical quotations. It is crucial to note that participants were filled with a greater sense of hope and optimism that God would change their distressing situations and those of the entire world affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Patricia reported:

*“Well, I listen to music a lot, especially gospel music. I listen to a lot of preaching. I follow one every morning, I gain strength from there and then I pray with the kids. That is all I do. It’s all about my spiritual health right now”*

Cindy also said:

*"Yeah, if you believe in God, it helps you deal with anything. Like God is in control and is able to do everything and anything so...at his own pace, He's going to deal with this situation, and it really helped our mental health really positively."*

From the above statements, there is a positive relationship between religion and well-being. Spirituality or religiosity conveys hope and optimism to the believers (Hart & Koenig, 2020; Ganga & Kitty, 2013). It is a form of consolation where people vent their problems and fears, for example, those strongly attributed to the pandemic. Religion offers a therapeutic opportunity for individuals to cast out their grievances, and painful experiences, and hope for new beginnings free from fear, worries, frustrations, and negative emotional distress (Ganga & Kutty, 2013). Spirituality improves the holistic functioning of the emotional, physical, social and mental wellbeing. Individuals strongly believe in a 'High Power' that enables them to overcome their challenges. Through religion, thus, people have a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Zittel et al., 2002).

Biblical scriptures and messages are filled with motivations and inspirations that help individuals to face their challenges confidently and have a strong outlook on their situation. Religiosity made international students strong and faithful that the pandemic would be defeated and the world would soon get a vaccine. The faith in Supreme Being boosts self-confidence and self-image and motivates individuals to live purposeful lives. Individuals felt they could not handle every challenge, so they left God to intervene and improve the situation. Thus, some international students coped by engaging in prayer with families and friends and attending virtual religious meetings where they were updated with relevant information related to the virus. Religious meetings provided consolation, social capital and relevant information that enabled international students to thrive during COVID-19.

#### **4.2.5 Control or regulation of media content about COVID-19**

International students had to minimise the media content that they watched about coronavirus. Binge-watching, reading, and listening to COVID-19 news or updates was the major cause of fear among the participants. Therefore, they resolved to limit any form of information from unregulated sources.

For example, Salah said:

*"So, for some reasons, after a month or two of COVID-19, I needed to filter out what I fed my mind. I decided I actually left social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, for like a month. I was off all kinds of social media because I felt like people were saying things they are not sure about. It was not just about the cases of Corona but also how they would try to find origins and how to trace the origins of this deadly virus. People could write different conspiracies, different theories that I thought were actually ridiculous that could not make sense. So, with all this kind of confusion, I felt like I could not handle the fact that the media was piling up my head with many false and true stories. So, I decided to cut myself off for some time until I felt like maybe I'm ready for return."*

The lesser the international students followed the COVID-19 news, the lesser they were psychologically distressed. WHO also advised the world to avoid watching misinformation from unregulated sources and minimise the frequency checking of COVID 19 on National and WHO pages to at least once a day. Trusted sources of information that WHO encouraged were their portal/website and national health authorities at the local levels (WHO, 2020). Raising awareness during the pandemic is required, and mental health interventions based on substantial credible information are vital in reviving the emotional and mental health of the population. Precise information can be instrumental in equipping policymakers and practitioners with sustainable interventions for health that can be used after the pandemic or even during future pandemics (Gómez-Salgado et al., 2020a).

#### **4.2.6 Exercising regularly and involvement in sports**

Like music, sports are physical exercises that have vital benefits in improving health among individuals faced with adversities. Sporting activities such as playing football were considered crucial in dealing with stress. For instance, Jasper said:

*"I used to run a lot. I still run but not as much. In the beginning, I would just go out and run. When I would feel sad. I would try to run my anger out if I'm feeling sad when I'm angry or I'm lonely or I feel depressed. When I try to feel like I am running away from my problems. I will run up hills and actually, I got so used to running that I would run maybe five, eight kilometres, and I am not tired almost every day, you know. Therefore, running was also something I coped with. In addition, when I get the opportunity to play football also, yeah, I play football. So, it's also one of my coping strategies."*

International students pointed out that football was a means of socialisation, integration and ensuring their physical fitness and wellbeing. It should be noted that the restrictions of COVID-19 in Sweden were a bit lifted to guarantee interaction with people in regulated numbers. International students, therefore, seized this opportune moment to rebuild the lost social networks and forge/build new ones.

*"I'm a sports person. I play football now with a club and I have different informal teams where I play. So, one of the teams has both men and women. We are like a social family also, with many activities together outside of football. When one of us has a birthday party, we organise it and buy a cake for them. We play cards and play board games. Through these people from this team, we get to meet their families. And for me that has made me feel like I have somewhere I belong in Sweden."* said Salah.

Through football, social networks have expanded. These come with advantages such as getting to know friends who can provide emotional and psychological support, provide a familial-like environment, help them learn the Swedish language and culture, and facilitate access to services and job opportunities easily. Sports and physical exercises create new beginnings for international people to explore and enjoy previously exciting

activities and hobbies (Lundkvist et al., 2020; Malm, Jakobsson & Isaksson, 2019), similar to a feeling before the pandemic outbreak. International students have been able to socialise and have outdoor parties in regulated numbers, but they are still cautious about the standard operating procedures for COVID-19.

#### 4.2.7 Engaging in various activities

One of the participants mentioned that she was engaged in many projects at home through online channels while continuing with academics and her daily routines to reduce worrying about COVID-19.

Kim reported that:

*“I got so busy; I got involved in a lot of projects like GO-GREEN in environmental conservation and prevention of gender-based violence and sensitisation about COVID-19. So, when I would be bored, I got busy, and it’s through this COVID period that I really realised, I have a lot of time for myself, I’m not meeting friends.”*

Concentrating on other tasks consumed some international students’ time, so they stopped worrying about the pandemic. The busyness helped some international students to focus on developmental projects and thus contributed to positive social change.

One of the strengths-based model principles states that everyone possesses a uniqueness that allows them to evolve and move along their journey. Students could tap from different potentials, abilities, and talents (Healy, 2015), such as playing football, practising religion, playing indoor games, reading books, and holding online discussions to cope with the COVID-19 situation.

#### 4.2.8 Financial support

The participants who had scholarships were not worried about survival, and their stipends enabled them to access meals and accommodation thus, their financial situations were not antagonised by COVID-19. For example, Jasper said.

*“Work, I wasn’t working and because I’m Erasmus Mundus scholar, my stipends were sorted you know. I got my money in time, so I didn’t have to stress about how to get my next meal or anything because they gave me my monthly stipend, so I was okay”.*

Having their stipends sorted in time helped international students to concentrate on their studies and positively manage stressors related to COVID-19. Thus, economic stability was a key predictor of well-being among international students during the pandemic (Yassin et al., 2021).

### 4.3 Discussion

The emergency of COVID-19 interfered with international students' psychological, biological, social, and spiritual dimensions. However, amidst all the COVID-19-related challenges, the students were able to devise survival techniques. The pandemic affected

not only the international students' social processes but also their social ecologies. For example, in a broader context, countries imposed national and travel bans to reduce the spread of the disease and the uncertainty that this causes.

#### **4.3.1 Individual capabilities**

Healy (2014) suggests that individuals have natural strengths and learned behaviour that facilitates their survival in the face of adversities. International students possessed innate skills and capabilities that enabled them to deal with COVID-19-related stressors. These traits are unique and vary among individuals, even in dealing with stressors related to the pandemic. For example, some participants could focus more on their studies and get better grades. This indicated the levels of commitment they had towards their studies program. Given that they had much time alone in their rooms, some positively channelled their energy into reading course materials, building a solid knowledge base to excel in their assignments and examinations. Others used time as a resource to carry out many virtual tasks aside from learning, including various social projects such as environmental conservation and the prevention of gender-based violence.

Additionally, some participants engaged in the fight against the pandemic by encouraging persons in COVID-19 risk categories, such as the elderly, to vaccinate through sensitisations. Another interesting example is the participant who reflected upon the behavioural risks of drinking too much alcohol and replaced them with positive habits of physical exercise. Other intrinsic traits that fostered the resilience of international students included talents in sports and a positive outlook on life.

#### **4.3.2 The social ecology of resilience**

International students have had to develop survival strategies to deal with unforeseen situations. These strategies have pushed them to tap into the existing social ecologies that enabled their coping mechanisms. There are diverse resources from the environment that international students have utilised. These included friends, family, sports, outdoor physical activities, religious meetings, preaching, and information to Swedish authorities. These resources provided emotional and psychological support, hope and optimism, and the consolation that the effects of the pandemic are equally shared.

Religion played a significant role in counselling, comforting, and providing reliable information to international students as a resource. Religion enhanced the abilities of international students to have a positive outlook on situations of pandemics such as COVID-19 and fostered positive coping. It is imperative to note that considering the person-in-environment, the religious structure is one of the social systems individuals can tap into to address some of the needs and problems they might be facing at a particular time (Ganga & Kutty, 2013). This paradigm is supported by the social ecology resilience model, which encourages individuals to use their environment as the immediate support they can rely on during adverse situations (Ungar, 2011).

Some international students got opportunities to engage in sports activities such as playing volleyball and football. These activities were essential in improving their physical and mental well-being. Through sports, individuals bonded together and

created long-lasting relationships that enabled them to overcome stressors. Sports activities were a form of linkages to proper adjustment and adaptation to the Swedish systems and cultures as the forged networks enabled newcomers to navigate challenges and stressors (Lundkvist et al., 2020; Malm et al., 2019; Spaaij et al., 2019).

Aspects of migrant communities or networks from host countries enabled the individuals to cope. These associations joined efforts to create a suitable and home-like environment for the newcomers, including international students. Lundkvist et al. (2020) also affirm that the continuity of cultural language, similar patterns of associations and social interactions create a sense of belonging and togetherness, which is a crucial trait in building individuals' resilience and strengths. The collective nature of solving problems improved the well-being of international students.

With the strength-based model in social work, music became a promising intervention strategy for international students to cope with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even further, they practised music as a therapeutic process under a strength-based perspective (Davis, Gfeller, & Thaut, 2008) to promote personal development by meditating and thus calming their stressors. Larwood & Dingle (2021) also consider music an effective and efficient approach to dealing with stress, for instance, relaxing or concentrating on activities with composure. Therefore, music is a form of consolation and restitution to people challenged by adversities (Larwood & Dingle, 2021) such as COVID-19.

Online platforms enabled the opportunity for students to stay in touch with their family and peers abroad. Support from the home countries was fundamental through COVID-19. The relationship with family and friends from home countries was strengthened. International students communicated often with more care and compassion during the pandemic. The fear of losing their loved ones prompted them to be more responsive, loving and concerned about their home relations. International students were cared for by their families through calls on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, FaceTime and Zoom. Families provided emotional, financial, spiritual and psychological support to the international students.

The Swedish approach to handling COVID-19 has a crucial aspect in facilitating the coping of international students (Kamerlin & Kasson, 2020). Sweden implemented partial lockdown measures that helped individuals keep some form of physical interactions but strongly observed the Standard Operating Procedures in dealing with the COVID -19 pandemic. This implies that some places were accessible for international students. Thus, they never felt completely alienated during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the structural policies were considerate of the people's mental well-being. Food stores, public transport and some spaces such as parks and sports grounds were accessible to international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants pointed out that the university course coordinators and teachers created virtual meeting sessions to discuss some of their challenges or seek guidance regarding their choices. These sessions enabled international students to make guided decisions regarding general life, which relieved their frustrations. The shift of online classes and quick modifications of course content by the teachers at the university created

continuity of studies. International students continued to study remotely despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the academic schedules were antagonised, the online initiatives to continue learning enabled the pandemic situation. Thus, some students focused on their academic completion and graduation, which lessened their worries since they kept engaged with learning and research.

Remarkably, despite the interference with the social ecologies, international students could tap into the external or environmental resources to boost their resilience (Ungar, 2011) and improve their wellbeing. The protective factors within the environment necessitated international students to thrive through the hardships posed by the pandemic. At a macro level, the flexible restrictive measures of the Swedish government and information from WHO and Swedish health authorities helped international students to manage the pandemic positively. International students utilised the meso-structures such as religious institutions, family and peer support, sports clubs, virtual learning initiatives and support from program coordinators. These meso-structures thus enhanced the resilience of international students (in the microsystem). For instance, individuals acquired resilient attributes, as expounded by Ungar (2011), such as a sense of belonging and powerful identity, safety and support, stronger relationships, rights and responsibility.

## **5. Recommendations**

### **5.1 For social workers and other practitioners**

Social work practitioners can use these study findings: to develop more effective strategies to help international and national students cope during global pandemics and adverse situations such as COVID-19. This implies that the findings can be supportive for social workers to design theories, models, and frameworks that can be applied in adverse situations to help people cope. Further, the study findings can also help to find better ways of blending different theories such as the strength-based model and the social ecology of resilience model to develop strategies that can help individuals.

Transnational communication between families was important for the emotional and psychosocial well-being of individuals. Practitioners have a fundamental role in ensuring reciprocity and continuity of familial relationships across borders. This can help improve international students' psychological well-being, especially in pandemic times. This is because the outbreak of COVID-19 caused a negative impact on transnational families as they were affected emotionally, psychologically, and financially when their loved ones were far away from them. The familial relations of international students with their families also involved the provision of remittances, especially food items and medical care, which were constrained during the pandemic.

### **5.2 For policymakers**

Policymakers can also use these study findings to formulate better policies to help international students cope with global pandemics like COVID-19. Policies are always designed to address access to basic services such as food, accommodation, and health

care. With the study findings, policymakers have the opportunity to focus on the psychosocial effects of COVID-19. For instance, in the outbreak of such public health emergencies, proper counselling and support for international students can help to improve their mental health and thus improve their performance in studies or daily routines.

### **5.3 Specific key players in the university**

University administrations should assign professional practitioners responsible for international students' well-being, especially during pandemics. Professionals can also design welfare services for international students, especially in pandemic-stricken times.

### **5.2. Study limitations**

The study was carried out among international students studying at one of the universities in Sweden. It might not apply to other international students due to the different university policies and approaches to learning. Given the snowball sampling procedure, the data captured from the participants might have presented similarities in experiences and susceptible sampling biases and the small sample of the participants, the findings might not be generalisable.

The study findings were obtained using only in-depth interviews. Future research studies need to consider integrating surveys, Focus Group Discussions, mixed methods, and follow-up interviews to capture more generalisable data.

## **6. Conclusion**

COVID-19 has caused significant disruptions in the learning experiences of international students and overall general experience studying in Sweden, which has negatively affected their psychological well-being. It should be known that international students are susceptible to adaptation and adjustment stressors, but the outbreak of COVID-19 posed more challenges. The ecological resources within the environments and personal attributes of resilience have helped international students to cope with the traumatic experiences exacerbated by COVID-19. The uncertainties of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic still test international students' strengths and resilience.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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