Original Research Article

The Impact of Informal Communal Support Systems on Acculturative Stress among International African Students

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Abstract: International students often suffer from intense psychological and emotional stress as they acclimate themselves to new academic and cultural environments. This study explored the role of informal communal networks in managing acculturative stress among Ghanaians and Nigerian students in their first year of graduate academic work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). Using qualitative data from in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study observed that peer-based community networks is an important coping resource in the early stages of cultural change (translocation). Even with institutional resources available to them, most students said they prefer the emotional security, cultural familiarity, and helpful support their fellow African community provide. This informal networks were a buffer against anxiety and a way to preserve self-identity. These findings underscored the significance of culturally based support networks as a primary strategy for coping with emotional and intellectual challenges, as espoused by the Social Identity Theory and the Stress and Coping Theory. The study calls for a more integrative approach that recognizes and leverages informal community structures into university wellness initiatives alongside a gap between institutional support models provided by institutions and culturally specific coping strategies. Therefore, the study recommend the development of an inclusive and adaptable supportive networks for international African students which will contribute to cross-cultural education and efficient education experience for the whole university community.
Keywords: Communal support, cultural identity, acculturative stress, international African students, peer network.

1. INTRODUCTION

International education is not a new phenomenon, it is an age-long practice that has enhanced the spread of knowledge which has significantly contributor to modern civilization. In recent times, it has become a source of profiteering for the benefiting educational institution, a source of economic growth and development for the host economy due to the different skills and knowledge brought by these students to enrich the host nation like the United States (Koo *et al.,* 2021). They have also become an immense source of cultural exchange for the host community by providing diverse and international perspectives within the classrooms and across their campuses. As such, it would be important to provide a conducive learning environment for these sets of students on U.S campuses due to the immense benefit they provide to the main objective of the university system in the country (Wu *et al.,* 2015).

However, studies have shown that while the university experience can be described as one of the most exciting memories in the life of a student, even the international students who move into a new country, it could also be the most stressful period to remember (Slaughter, 2023). Beginning a university journey is a transitional period in the lives of young people which is often accompanied by mental health threats as a result of the change in environment and its accompanying emotions. This includes leaving family and friends behind and the pressure and expectation from home, especially for international students (Szabo *et al.,* 2015). This is in addition to the need to adjust to the new culture; education and social milieu of the new country and institution (Lee *et al.,* 2004; Ejim *et al.,* 2021). These stress levels for international students have been divided by Alharbi and Smith (2018) into different stages. This process starts with experiencing transition or what Szabo et al (2015) referred to as 'uprooting' into a new culture, adapting to the new culture and new academic environment in the host country, financial challenges, and holding on to the network of relationship with friends and family back home, finding new network in the new country and life after school (going back home). Each of these acculturation stages comes with its stress and anxiety, which can even harm the major objective of the student in the host country if it becomes unbearable (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Mirawdali *et al.,* 2018). This process may lead to problems of socio-cultural adjustments i.e. "the ability to 'fit in', to acquire culturally appropriate skills, and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment" (e.g., belonging, social support) (Brunsting *et al.,* 2018, p. 1498); a problem that can lead to major anxiety challenge if not managed. Data on international students in higher education in the United States shows that 24% are experiencing anxiety, while 45% have shown traces of depression (Shadowen, Williamson, Guerra, Ammigan, & Drexler, 2019; Mahihu, 2020). This anxiety has been described by Bouayed et al (2009) as a common emotional reaction to a perceived threat or possible danger. A common problem among university students due to lack of social and psychological connection with a support system (Pidgeon *et al.,* 2014). Social support has been described as an important phenomenon that provides a positive effect on the mental health of college students. This could be from friends, community, or fellow students (Padmanabhanunni *et al.,* 2023).

The international African students are a population that has been identified to quickly form a social network due to shared heritage and experience; this is what is referred to as social identity. This small group or relationship provides the basis for cooperation to solve common problems within their community. A shared identity that is based on 'me' rather than 'I'. This creates an emotional and mental connection between the members in the form of 'we' and 'us' rather than 'I' (Haslam *et al.,* 2022). As such, Ye (2006) observed that international (African) students do not feel discriminated against or feel stressed as an outsiders in a new community when they are happy with their social network, even though the support they enjoy does not take away their anxiety (Fritz *et al.,* 2008).

Most past research only focused on the general support system rather than the informal community structures that organically evolve among international students (Kristiana et al. (2022)), including students from the same region of Africa like Nigerians and Ghanaians. However since it has been established that stress is inevitable during the translocation of international students into a new environment, this study observed that previous studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students have mostly focused on the problem of adaptation to the new culture in the host environment alone, but not much has been known about the effects different social support system available like host community and socio-cultural peer groups in managing the stress and anxiety. Therefore, this study focuses on how first-year graduate students from Ghana and Nigeria in a U.S. university handle acculturative stress and the role of informal communal support structures. The study emphasizes how culturally ingrained support methods might operate as a buffer against the various psychological obstacles that international students encounter during their initial transition phase by concentrating on peer-based connections within culturally comparable student groups.

2. Research Objectives
- To explore how informal communal relationships function as support systems for first-year Ghanaian and Nigerian graduate students.
- To identify specific stressors faced by international students.
- To assess the effectiveness of these networks in reducing the impact of cultural and academic stress.
- To recommend institutional strategies for incorporating informal communal support into student well-being programs.

3. Research Questions
- What are the dominant acculturative stressors experienced by first-year Ghanaian and Nigerian graduate students at SIUE?
- How do informal communal support systems function among study groups?
- In what ways do these communal networks reduce or fail to reduce acculturative stress?

- How can institutions like SIUE enhance their support structures by recognizing these informal systems?

4. Related Work

The adaptation to university life of international students is often associated with significant psychological and emotional demands throughout the acculturation process; this phenomenon has been widely documented in previous literature across disciplines. This stress often leads to worry, frustration, and identity conflict when individuals are required to adjust to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2003; Mori, 2000). The early stages of this transition are often intense when students face new academic systems, social norms, and lifestyle changes (Kristiana *et al.,* 2022). Acculturative stress has been associated with a range of factors such as language barriers, different pedagogical practices, economic burden, social alienation, and experiences of discrimination (Liu, 2009; Bai, 2016). Specifically, students are particularly likely to experience high levels of stress and poor mental health if they are not getting sufficient support from their school or social networks. Bai (2016) reported that over 22% of international students studied had elevated stress levels that might require psychological assistance or therapy. These findings underscore the primacy of early intervention and support systems designed for international students coming into a new academic and cultural experience.

One of the most widely held conclusions in most research studies is that social support is important for buffering against the effects of acculturative stress. Kristiana *et al.,* (2022) confirmed in a systemic review and meta-analysis that certain practical actions and emotional supports significantly reduce acculturative stress in students abroad. The authors found social support, especially from colleagues from similar cultural backgrounds to be one of the most effective remedies for homesickness, imposter syndrome, cultural disorientation, fear, and other effects of acculturative stress. Similarly, (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), argued that coping behaviors that support psychological resilience consist of informational and emotional support. Kristiana *et al.,* (2022) highlighted that friends with the same cultural backgrounds provide not only practical but also emotional support while navigating everyday challenges such as housing, academic expectations, and food customs. This kind of support is often relatable, and immediate, and can make students feel seen and heard. However, a result of low cultural literacy, language barriers, or the stigma associated with asking for help may disengage people from institutional resources (like counseling facilities and faculty contact) (Bai, 2016; Liu, 2009).

Although several studies highlight the importance of social support, little is formulated on the informal community support networks that develop organically among international students from the same region in Africa (Sub-Sahara). There cultures from this region are based on identity, emphasis on interdependence, and mutual support within the group (Mabovula, 2011; Venter, 2004). According to Kristiana *et al.,* (2022), very little attention has been given to peer-based, culture-based support networks compared to family and institutional support specifically within North America. In addition, Bai (2016) found that international students are still exposed to stress despite recording groundbreaking academic performance when they experience poor social integration within the new culture. It means that how well you socialize in the world also affects your emotional well-being significantly, and it does not just have anything to do with how good you are in your academics. Another interesting observation is that students from the Middle East and Africa reported more stress than students from other nations. It is important to point out that this study did not factor students from the United States. This may be due to cultural distance, and lack of representation in the host culture, making peer-based support more critical.

While the protective role of social support is widely acknowledged, there is currently a lack of literature that focuses explicitly on the informal community networks between international African students studying in the United States. These networks, in addition to their cultural importance, might be underleveraged resilience mechanisms acting independently or in concert with institutional efforts. By understanding the makeup and functioning of these informal support networks, institutions can develop more culturally relevant interventions and support plans.

5. Theoretical Framework

It is imperative to develop a paradigm that integrates social and cultural dynamics with psychological reactions to understand how international students deal with acculturative stress. Here, the theories of social identity and stress and coping provide helpful perspectives to this context. These models help to explain how students interpret and respond to cultural changes and how their stress levels are mediated between social and support communities.

Social identity theory

The Social Identity Theory was first proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, the theory suggests that people derive some of their identity (self-concept) from their membership in specific social groups. This theory has been largely applied in education and cross-cultural studies to describe how humans operate in potentially unknown environments. For international students, where cultural differences might result in the loss of familiar roles and conventions, social identity is crucial. For example, Bai (2016) found that being part of a similar cultural group significantly impacted students' level of mental health and sense of security. These peer-based networks become identity anchors that help students maintain cultural continuity while adapting to the new cultural practices of the host nation. Therefore, social identity theory provides a helpful lens through which to understand why students feel compelled to informal social networks which are comprised of individuals from the same national or ethnic similarities. These groups tend to create a sense of family and offer supportive assistance, both of which are important for psychological and emotional stability.

Stress and Coping Theory

Another idea that is relevant to this exploration is Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory, which depicts stress as an energetic engagement between individuals and their environment. This idea means that stress occurs when someone perceives that the demands placed on them by a situation exceed their ability to handle them. It works through two levels of cognitive evaluation: the first assesses whether an event is dangerous or benign; the second assesses whether the person has the resources to cope with the stressor. This paradigm, applied to the experience of international students, tells us how stress can emerge from the perception of students being unprepared academically, and socially, or having poor language skills needed to be integrated into the new culture. According to Kristiana *et al.,* (2022), when it comes to students' stress levels, it is common for them to experience the highest level of stress in the first year of their education because they have not developed the requisite coping strategies yet. The quality (amount, type, & source) of social support available, particularly from culturally familiar networks, may, however, drastically alter the secondary appraisal and render the stressor more controllable.

According to Kristiana *et al.,* (2022), students who benefit from robust peer support networks employ greater resilience against academic and cultural pressures and experience lower levels of acculturative stress. As a buffer, social support reduces the perceived threat of environmental challenges. Such is in line with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) research which suggested that people might increase their coping efficiency with the help of instrumental and emotional support and thereby reframe stressful contexts.

Relevance of Communal Systems in Collectivist Cultures

In collectivist societies, such as those across Sub-Saharan Africa, identity is closely tied to participation in communal and group life. African cultures have communalism, which facilitates reciprocal help, social responsibility, and shared prosperity, as a basic structuring element (Venter 2004). And, according to Mabovula (2011), African community systems promote unity through informal, everyday interactions rather than through formalized institutions. These communal values manifest themselves in how African students create support systems and approach stress once they are placed in an unfamiliar system like being a foreign student within the American institution. This study specifically addressed the motivations why international African students tap into informal peer networks rather than institutional mental health services (Kristiana *et al.,* 2022) provided by institutions. Their coping mechanism is fundamentally social and culturally based rather than just personal. The community group serves similar, and occasionally better, purposes than official institutional channels by offering emotional support, validation, and common coping mechanisms in strange situations.

Integrative Theoretical Perspective

Theories of social identity and stress and coping provide an integrative perspective on the likely conditions under which co-occurring stressors will either exacerbate or mitigate the effects of the other stressors. The latter shows how access to social resources modulates how humans respond to stress, and the former offers a psychological basis for the high need for cultural adherence and affirmation. When it comes to international African students, these ideas illuminate why social support networks are important for coping with acculturative stress. While these frameworks have been explored in regard to more general research on overseas students, there is yet limited analysis of how they relate to the specific cultural paradigms of Africans enrolled in American institutions. By highlighting identification and coping in informal community structures, this study fills an important gap in knowledge and provides a more nuanced account of culturally entrenched resilience mechanisms.

6. METHODOLOGY

Applying qualitative case study methodology, this study seeks to better understand

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how informal community support networks facilitate coping with acculturative stress for first-year Ghanaian and Nigerian graduate students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). The data and thematic findings were drawn exclusively from Oluwatobi Adeyoyin's thesis; *The Role of Informal Communality in Managing Stress and Anxiety among International African Students in SIUE (2024)*, which was referenced as the source of the data and thematic findings. A grounded theory approach was used to understand the experiences of African graduate students in managing stress and anxiety during their academic transition in a Western country specifically, the United States.

This study is underpinned by constructivist epistemology, which emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings and social realities that people construct and that shape their circumstances (Charmaz, 2006). This paradigm was ideally suited to exploring the complex social and emotional coping mechanisms of African students, especially as informed by cultural identity and shared experiences. Moreover, the methodological framework aligns with psycho-legal methodological frameworks that emphasize first-person narratives as a way of theorizing psychosocial processes (Berry, 2006; Mori, 2000).

Participant Selection and Demographics

Fifteen African graduate students purposively selected based on their nationality (Nigerian or Ghanaian), program status (first-year), and their current enrollment at SIUE, comprised the participants. Moreover, snowball sampling was employed via word-of-mouth and referrals from WhatsApp groups among African students within the institution. All the participants were enrolled in graduate programs in business administration, engineering, public health, and mass communication.

Demographic data were collected to contextualize participants' lived experiences. The age, gender, and academic field of participants varied, with the majority being between 25 and 35 years old (see Table 1). The sample had a fairly even gender distribution, consisting of eight Nigerians and seven Ghanaians.

Table 1: Demographic Overview of Participants

Participant ID	Nationality	Age	Gender	Program of Study	Year of Study
P01	Ghanaian	27	Male	Public Health	First
P02	Nigerian	29	Female	Civil Engineering	First
P03	Nigerian	31	Male	Business Administration	First
P04	Ghanaian	25	Female	Mass Communication	First
P05	Nigerian	28	Male	Mechanical Engineering	First
P06	Ghanaian	30	Female	Public Administration	First
P07	Ghanaian	26	Male	Sociology	First
P08	Nigerian	27	Female	Health Informatics	First
P09	Ghanaian	32	Male	Business Analytics	First
P10	Nigerian	33	Male	Engineering Management	First
P11	Nigerian	35	Female	Public Health	First
P12	Ghanaian	30	Female	Educational Administration	First
P13	Nigerian	28	Male	Mass Communication	First
P14	Ghanaian	34	Male	Environmental Studies	First
P15	Nigerian	40	Male	Applied Communication Studies	First

Data Collection Procedures

Due to convenience and accessibility, data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experience of stress and coping strategies during 30- to 45-minute interviews, a flexible guide allowing for this open-ended discussion. All interviews were conducted with informed oral consent, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To complement the interviews, the researcher added auto-ethnographic notes, which assisted in interpretation and enriched the process of triangulating themes. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages—as detailed below: stage 1—becoming familiar with the data, stage 2—initial coding, stage 3—searching for themes, stage 4—reviewing topics, stage 5—defining and naming themes, stage 6—producing the report. NVivo was used to aid in coding and organizing themes. Amongst these nine, four of the emerging themes bear particular relevance to the study's focus on informal peer support and stress in the first year.

These themes were most commonly matched with stress management and social support:

- The first stage of the acculturation process is the most stressful.
- Shared problems build community.

- A social life reduces stress and anxiety among these students.
- Students prefer informal peer support to formal institutional support systems.

These issues were the most frequent across participant interviews, which is reflected in Table 2 and suggests general agreement on the importance of informal social support in managing stress.

Table 2: Frequency of Key Themes Across Participants

Theme	Number of Participants Referencing Theme
The first few months are the most stressful	13
Informal support from fellow African students	14
Preference for communal networks over institutional help	12
Social gatherings and shared activities reduce anxiety	11

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from SIUE's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that all data would be kept confidential. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms or participant codes were used instead of real names.

Integration with Existing Literature

Our analysis coincides with the existing research on the protective role of social support under acculturative stress (Kristiana *et al.,* 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These findings are also in line with Bai (2016), whose study found that even though students coming from underrepresented regions (such as Africa) reported higher levels of emotional stress, they relied less on institutional services. The act of using social connections to cope aligns with findings on foreign students, who tend to prefer familiar social connections over deeper institutional ties (Mori, 2000; Poyrazli *et al.,* 2004). The African community system also becomes an informal but effective therapy space in this regard and is a social and emotional learning system through humanitarian and functional strategies for the resolution of cultural conflict. These findings show the importance of incorporating cultural values into the international student support systems.

7. Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcript shows important patterns that exposed how the first-year Ghanaian and Nigerian graduate students at SIUE use informal communal support networks to manage stress faced in the course of their academic journey. Using thematic coding and qualitative content analysis, four key themes emerged that were closely tied to the main research questions of our study: the early intensity of acculturative stress, the preference for communal support over institutional resources, the emotional impact of shared peer experiences, and the gradual reduction in anxiety as communal ties deepen.

Patterns of Acculturative Stress

The data reveals a clear trend in the emotions felt by the person during the first semester. Most of the students reported experiencing their highest levels of stress in the first three to four weeks after arriving, mainly due to culture shock, financial constraints, academic responsibilities, and a sense of isolation. However, stress was progressively reduced as kids grew closer to their African peers. On average, participants rated their emotional stress level on a 10-point scale as approximately 9 in Week 1, but it was reduced to around 4 in Week 12 (Figure 1). "Even close friends can provide a long-term buffer to stress." This pattern shows how people adjust emotionally and how informal support systems can serve as a prolonged stress buffer.
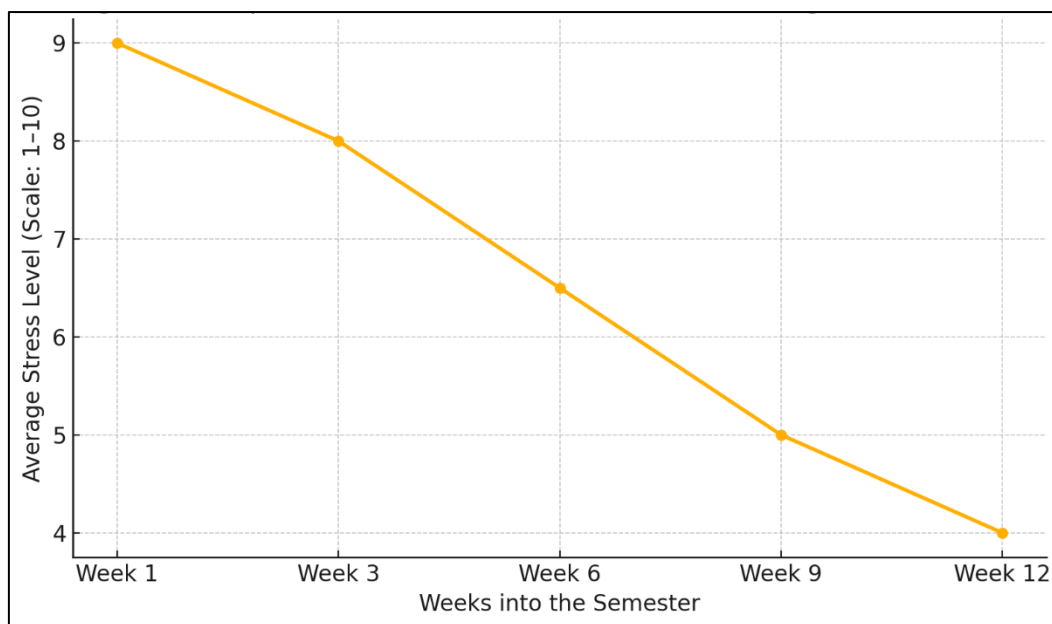
Figure 1: Reported Emotional Stress Levels During First Semester

This graph depicts participants' average self-reported stress levels across five key points during their first semester. The decline in stress correlates with increased communal interactions.

Use of Support Systems

Another major finding from the data is the growing reliance on peer-to-peer support networks, particularly among African students. A lot of interviewees mentioned the reliance on friends or help in WhatsApp groups, communal living, and informal religious meetings, for support, guidance, and solace. These peer groups offered immediate and culturally nuanced coping strategies. Institutional support mechanisms such as health services, faculty advising, and campus counseling were less utilized and generally viewed as inaccessible or culturally distant. This divide is reflected in Figure 2. Peer help climbed in usage scores from 3 to 10 throughout the semester, while institutional help only minimally increased from 2 to 4. Unlike formal structures, this study highlights students' comfort and trust in community-based support.
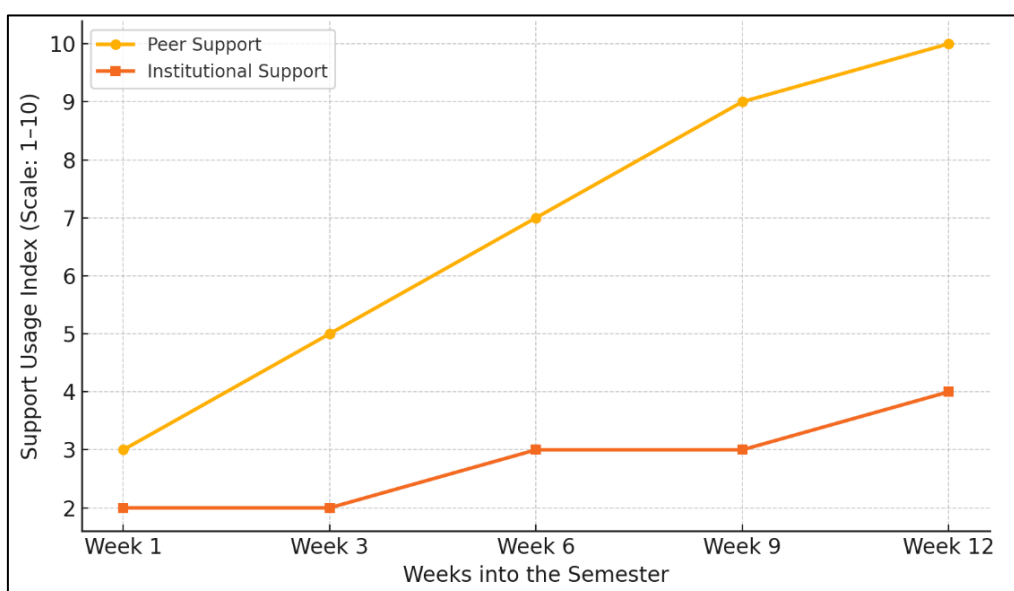

Figure 2: Usage of Peer vs. Institutional Support Systems Over Time

This graph compares the reported increase in the use of informal (peer) versus formal (institutional) support systems. It highlights the preference for communal structures among African students.

Thematic Illustration: Quotes from Participants

Recurring narratives reinforced these trends. One participant stated:

> "In the first two weeks, I almost gave up. However, the Nigerian student group helped me figure out where to get groceries, how to navigate classes… It was like finding a family."

Another shared:

> "I was depressed. I did not even think of counseling. It just did not feel like something I would do. Instead, my roommate—he is Ghanaian too—talked to me, and we handled it together."

These qualitative accounts reinforced the quantitative patterns observed in the course of this research and they show similarity with larger studies which also observed that international students from the same or similar culture often depend on interpersonal networks for social support (Kristiana *et al.,* 2022; Mori, 2000).

Comparative Alignment with Literature

Interestingly, this consistent preference for social support aligns with previous research done by Bai (2016) which identified perceived university support as a weak predictor of stress reduction, compared to more individualized forms of support. Furthermore, Kristiana *et al.,* (2022) observed that culturally based peer support has been demonstrated to be more effective and psychologically helpful to students from similar cultures or experiences than college-wide interventions. Overall, these findings indicate that African graduate students are more accustomed to informal communal networks, which further exert a functional impact to buffer some of the psychological stress associated with acculturation, particularly in the early stages of their academic careers.

8. FINDINGS

Findings indicated that cultural identification, peer-based support networks, and acculturative stress experienced by first-year graduate students from Ghana and Nigeria at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) interacted in nuanced ways. This data shows that although acculturative stress occurs most strongly in the first stage of an academic transition of students, Socio-cultural support through informal social networks is the most useful in alleviating academic anxiety and emotional suffering.

The First Period of Acculturation Is the Most Stressful

The initial weeks in the United States were described as a stage of shock and confusion by nearly all participants. These stressors included troubles with accommodation, understanding institutional processes, adjusting to academic expectations, and cultural shock in both social and academic environments. These findings are consistent with Kristiana *et al.,* (2022) who found that international students tend to experience more stress during the first semester, especially because of the new learning environments, language barriers, and limited social integration. Emotional signs of this early-phase stress include anxiety irritation, and in some cases, loneliness. These difficulties were exacerbated by the cultural gap between the participants' host community and their home environment which they are used to. Similarly, several participants in Bai's (2016) study linked the absence of close family members and academic pressure to cases of "mental shutdown" or " emotional collapse."

Peer Support as an Immediate Coping Mechanism

Most of the participants rapidly connected to other African students, forming peer-based support networks they relied on heavily to help navigate early feelings of stress and alienation as they settled in. These ad hoc connections were often done through student WhatsApp groups, religious organizations, shared housing, and classroom partnerships. Peer support from individuals who share the same culture provides emotional reassurance as well as practical strategies for solving daily problems like getting food, interacting with teachers, and completing school-related tasks (Kristiana *et al.,* 2022). Many participants preferred this type of group support to any official institution services. As one person pointed out:

> "When I arrived, the university had orientation, but it was general. What helped me was talking to another Ghanaian student who had been here for a year. He told me where to shop and how to manage my time. That was more helpful than anything else."

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found that emotional and informational support can alleviate stress significantly in people because such support provides practical coping strategies. This also aligns with Bai's (2016) study which affirms that perceived support (especially culture-based support) is a significant predictor of reduced acculturative stress.

Shared Problems: Build Community

The communal reality of participants is based on common struggles and shared identity. Some of these shared challenges are employment limitations (for instance, the 20-hour-a-week work caps for international students), the problem of paying rent every month (compared to the annual rent payment system in most African countries), and managing loneliness and homesickness. As students

faced these common challenges, they began to draw strength from shared experience, moral support, and empathy for one another and shared solutions.

This agrees with Kristiana *et al.,* (2022), who identified the perception of shared experience as one of the primary ingredients in effective social support. This pattern was well demonstrated by Mabovula (2011), who described African communalism as a set of shared burdens and solutions that in diaspora contexts, adaptively work as a relief for stress. The data further show that this communal resilience is culturally grounded in African social values of Ubuntu and collective survival.

Limited Engagement with Institutional Support Systems

While SIUE offers a range of support services, including career services, academic advising, and counseling, many of the study participants did not utilize them or did not know how to do so. The general reluctance to participate among those who did know was driven by cultural distrust or discomfort with institutional processes perceived as unfamiliar or impersonal. One student pointed out:

> "I did not think counseling was for me. In my culture, we talk to friends or elders, not strangers. It is not that I did not have problems—I did not feel like going to someone I did not know."

This sentiment is supported by Bai (2016) who points out that international students, particularly those from Africa and the Middle East, made much less use of institutional support services than their Asian or European counterparts. The reluctance was mainly due to differences in help-seeking behaviors, stigma associated with mental health, and lack of exposure to Western-style counseling services.

Gradual Reduction of Stress through Communal Integration

Most of the respondents noted a tangible decrease in anxiety levels by the middle of the semester, attributing it to their growing familiarity with the new environment, and even more significantly, to their growing engagement with communal networks. The results support stress buffering (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which posits that social ties enhance a person's capacity to endure chronic stresses. Peer networks were priceless, offering continuous loops of feedback for support, problem-solving, and emotional stabilization, however, they did not eliminate barriers. Longitudinal findings by Kristiana *et al.,* (2022) also support this. Their findings state that international students who formed closer social ties experience stronger emotional stability and lower attrition from their academic program during the first six months of their studies. The results show that informal community or peer support and social networks are very vital for African graduate students and they are important in managing and going through the emotional trauma in the initial process of acculturation. While formal institutional services are important, they are underutilized as a result of cultural mismatch, perceived inaccessibility, and the extent of intra-community trust. Therefore, the findings suggest that student support systems need to be more culturally attuned and acknowledge informal peer-based models of care.

9. DISCUSSION

Results highlight the important role that informal community support systems may have on first-year Ghanaian and Nigerian graduate students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) in successfully navigating acculturative stress. Thereby, these results corroborate previous studies regarding culturally grounded coping mechanisms among international students (Bai, 2016; Kristiana *et al.,* 2022) while also reinforcing and expanding on theoretical bases previously established within the scope of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Communal Belonging and Identity Preservation

According to the Social Identity Theory, communal support is preferred to institutional engagement. African students form peer-based groups that offer emotional support and reaffirmation of cultural identity since they are separated from their familiar cultural values. The study's participants demonstrated how connections with other African students shielded them from the disorienting effects of acculturation. In an otherwise strange and sometimes alienating environment, these informal networks helped sustain a sense of belonging, stability, and familiarity in an isolating environment. This community experience is in agreement with Venter's (2004) and Mabovula's (2011) findings that African culture is essentially collective, rooted in shared experience and mutual accountability. In the context of those in the Diaspora University, this cultural tendency for group identification is a source of resilience. At SIUE, these cultural norms underpin informal support systems established by Ghanaian and Nigerian students used to manage practical and emotional problem-solving in a culturally safe environment.

Informal Support as a Stress Buffer

According to the Stress and Coping Theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping occurs as a result of the assessment of resources. Individuals

judge their ability to manage or overcome stressors faced in the course of the academic program. When peer networks that are strong and culturally aligned systems exist, students' feelings about stress are dramatically transformed from overwhelming to manageable. Overall, informal structures of the community act as stress buffers, demonstrated through the consistent downward trend in self-reported stress over the semester (see Figure 3), coincided with increased engagement in these peer networks (see Figure 4). This finding supports Bai's (2016) claim that for students who believed they were more supported, acculturative stress is drastically lower. Bai, however, does identify a downside of institutional support models that overlook cultural specificities. This study substantiates that view by illustrating that African students often find such institutional support irrelevant or culturally inaccessible. Thus the peer communities become the primary source of support, not a fallback, especially in the initial stages of cultural acclimatization.

The Gap between Institutional and Cultural Realities

One of the most jarring findings of the study is the disconnect between students' actual help-seeking behavior and the support systems colleges have built. Although SIUE offers academic advising, seminars, and counseling, students often show an unwillingness to utilize these services. The lack of confidence in these systems and the stigma surrounding mental health are consistent with other research (Mori, 2000; Liu, 2009; Kristiana *et al.,* 2022). Instead of seeing it as resistance or ignorance, it should instead be addressed as a mismatch between institutional templates on the one hand, and culturally preferred methods of resilience on the other. The decision to turn to a friend or an elder instead of a mental health professional reflects a broader cultural logic in which healing, stress relief, and decision-making are socially dispersed rather than individually focused.

Social Integration through Cultural Similarity

The findings also suggest that shared cultural backgrounds are important for trust to be quickly established, which is vital for emotionally vulnerable new students. Several participants said that conversations with other people who shared their cultural backgrounds were more helpful than any orientation event organized by the institution. This highlights a major institutional weakness where support services and orientation programs consider international students as one homogeneous group. It ignores its intra-group cultural variation. Adopting a pan-international student orientation may seem inclusive, but in reality, it may dilute the cultural uniqueness that makes support efforts effective. Similarly, Kristiana *et al.,* (2022) emphasized the importance of adjusting student support services to cultural contexts. The compelling data presented in this study indicates that support structures based on shared languages, religions, food, and social norms are preferred and effective in reducing acculturative stress, especially during the first semester.

Reinforcing Informal Systems: A Missed Opportunity?

The implications of these findings are striking: although informal support networks effectively work, institutions do not recognize or promote them. Institutions often miss the opportunity to either invest in thriving informal communal organizations or preemptively legitimize their formal structures instead, and while growing capacities around dedicated counseling facilities or general cultural workshops may be on the agenda, these specific communities are more often than not neglected. If universities want to bridge this gap, they might consider conducting intercultural training with staff, building greater relationships between peer groups and institutional services, and even developing peer-led mentorship programs that publicly recognize the importance of these communities. This would also add to student confidence and the broader use of campus resources, in addition to decreasing stress levels.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study indicate that informal community support networks play a significant role in aiding SIUE's first-year Ghanaian and Nigerian graduate students to overcome acculturation barriers. At a time of high stress and needed adjustments, these systems provide coping mechanisms that are practically useful, emotionally safe, and culturally relevant. They are, however, outside the institution's official student assistance structures. To increase the academic success and overall wellness of international African students and other foreign student groups, universities need to recognize, acknowledge, and highlight the value of current informal peer ties. This could be accomplished by forming alliances with informal student groups and student-led organizations. Institutions should also view these organizations as potential partners, not only in social endeavors but also in academic orientation and mental health outreach initiatives. This can also be encouraged by institutional validation of support networks both informal and formal.

An effective approach to mitigate early acculturative stress is to create a peer mentorship program that pairs incoming students with older peers from the same cultural background. These

mentors can also provide newcomers practical support in day-to-day activities such as navigating campus; finding housing, healthcare, and even understanding academic norms. Research shows that such shared cultural and language backgrounds tend to correlate with a preference for seeking help from one another (Kristiana *et al.,* 2022; Bai, 2016). Structured but culturally flexible peer mentorship programs could be beneficial for SIUE and other universities. Outdoor sessions are held if possible and sessions are held by peer groups of student facilitators, more often if they are from African countries. By creating early relationships that develop trust—the kind of inclusion that would allow students entering the college to hear first-hand accounts of transition, challenges, and culturally supportive solutions. Other sessions might feature panels on navigating the rigors of academia, understanding American housing customs, or overcoming a lack of funds or job prospects; all were cited in this study as early stressors.

University instructors, staff, and counselors should receive intercultural training tailored to the specific cultural situations of the African student population. Having a broad knowledge of collectivist ideals, group coping mechanisms, and the stigma of mental health across society will help staff in building rapport and providing relevant help. As Bai (2016) suggests, many students are hesitant to enter therapy because they assume the counselors may not fully understand their values, unique backgrounds, or their struggles. This barrier could be improved upon with a culturally sensitive approach. Institutions need to consider the development of "bridge programs" that connect such informal peer networks with university support services. This may include assigning liaison officers to work directly with African student leaders or peer representatives to identify emerging needs and refer students to relevant resources on campus as well as maintaining their communal ties. This will enhance trust and easy transition between informal support systems and institutional resources when needed. Thereby creating a process that eases the foreign students into the new culture till they are soaked into the new culture fully.

For example, participants often cited the cost of rent and the difficulty of securing accommodation before arriving as their biggest early challenges. Providing tools for financial planning, access to vetted landlords or housing cooperatives, and clear housing recommendations could help institutions better support these international students before they arrive. More so, their arrival can be pre-empted by proactively guiding local leasing offices to reduce barriers to entry (such as requiring a guarantor based within the United States). The result is that for

schools to better understand what is needed for international students, schools cannot rely on one-off surveys or comments after they have done their orientation. Instead, they need to establish continuous feedback systems like focus groups with members of the international student community and regular forums. These platforms will ensure institutional responses are timely and relevant whilst providing valuable insight into students' evolving needs.

These recommendations underscore the need for institutions like SIUE to rethink support both as an official, top-down process and as a social space that's ingrained into the culture. There is potential for universities to enhance the well-being of their students, foster inclusivity, and mitigate the psychological and academic repercussions rooted in acculturative stress, by acknowledging and leveraging the support and networks that are already flourishing within African student communities.

11. CONCLUSION

The study examined the effect of informal community support on acculturative stress for first-year graduate students from Ghana and Nigeria at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). The findings illuminated the lived experiences of African students transitioning through the early stages of cross-cultural and academic adjustments in the United States higher education institutions utilizing qualitative data drawn from in-depth interviews with grounded thematic analysis. Results showed that students have the greatest acculturative stress in the initial weeks of arrival and these were linked to issues related to housing, new academic systems, financial uncertainty, and social isolation. The assistance of peer-based systems of community i.e. relationships borne of similar culture or background, nationality, language, religion, and lived experience to manage those stressors. Participants tended to seek academic, practical, and emotional help from fellow African students, rather than from formal systems that were perceived, by many students, as impersonal or culturally unfamiliar.

Two relevant theoretical perspectives (social identity and stress and coping theories) were used to explain the intricacies and connections to the subject of study. The social identity theory argues that culturally relevant peer groups facilitate a sense of self and connectedness during an identity-threatening process. When institutional resources are inadequate, informal networks of support provide a buffer against stressor overload. Stress and coping theory provides a theoretical background to this observation. Taken together, these models illustrated the significance of collective identity in promoting psychological resilience. Importantly, this

research contributes to an emergent body of literature that argues that universities should frame informal student networks as critical infrastructures of well-being for students as opposed to peripheral, or socially exclusive spaces. The findings bring new pressure to bear on colleges to include culturally "normed" student experiences in official support systems, such as housing, counseling, mentoring, and orientation. Institutions of higher education must cultivate cultural empathy. More so, there is a need for administrators, faculty, and staff to understand the many ways international students experience, perceive, and navigate stress and provide services for students whose needs are increasingly shaped by a rapid translocation. Conventional methodologies are inadequate for African graduate students. It also needs to consider the cultural, emotional, and social resources they bring and often reinvent when faced with new circumstances.

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