Original Research Article

Beyond Borders: The Dynamics of Informal African Communality in Alleviating Acculturative Stress Among International Students

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Abstract: This study explores the role of informal African communality as a culturally grounded mechanism for coping with acculturative stress among African international students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Drawing on a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research investigates how students reconstruct communal networks in a foreign context to navigate social, academic, and psychological challenges. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Findings revealed three central themes: communal living and emotional anchoring, academic collaboration within the community, and religious and cultural affiliation as communal bonds. These informal support systems provided emotional stability, academic guidance, and spiritual reinforcement, often in ways institutional services failed to deliver. The study highlights a disconnect between culturally preferred coping strategies and the formal support structures typically offered by Western universities. It calls for culturally responsive policies, recognizing and integrating informal communal systems into institutional frameworks. This research contributes to a growing literature on culturally specific coping mechanisms. It underscores the importance of recognizing communal ethos as central to the well-being of African international students.

Keywords: Acculturative stress, African international students, informal communality, communal coping, cultural adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global landscape of higher education has witnessed a steady rise in international students migrating to study abroad, particularly in North America and Europe. Among this cohort, African students constitute a unique demographic often navigating academic rigor and profound socio-cultural dislocation. The transition to a new country, often characterized by contrasting societal values, educational systems, and interpersonal dynamics, frequently imposes a psychological and emotional burden collectively referred to as *acculturative stress*. This phenomenon is widely understood as the stress response that arises from the challenges associated with adapting to a new cultural environment (Berry, 1997; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Acculturative stress can manifest in diverse forms, including anxiety, depression, feelings of marginality, and identity confusion, and is often exacerbated by the absence of adequate coping mechanisms and support structures (Berry, Kim, Minde,

and Mok, 1987). For African students, whose home cultures are predominantly collectivist and community-oriented, migration into individualistic societies such as those in the United States may result in the rupture of social and emotional support systems (Triandis, 1995). In such settings, the psychological challenges are not only linked to academic demands but also to social isolation, perceived discrimination, and the loss of familiar communal ties, all of which aggravate the experience of cultural displacement.

Studies such as those conducted by Crockett, Iturbide, Stone, McGinley, Raffaelli, and Carlo (2007) have shown that international students often rely heavily on social support as a buffer against stress. The presence or absence of perceived and received social support significantly influences the capacity of these students to adjust to their new environments. Particularly relevant in the context of African students is the notion of *informal communality*—a culturally ingrained system of mutual aid, shared responsibility, and emotional support that

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extends beyond biological kinship to include co-national peers and culturally similar individuals. This communality is deeply embedded in African traditions, where interdependence and collective well-being are emphasized over individual autonomy (Triandis, 1995). However, much of the existing literature on acculturative stress and coping has focused on formal institutional supports and general social networks without adequately exploring the nuanced, culturally specific informal communal frameworks that African students often reconstruct in host societies. For instance, Yeh and Inose (2003) reported that students with strong host-country networks experienced less acculturative stress, but did not address how ethnically grounded networks may offer distinct psychosocial benefits. Similarly, the study by Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) underscored the role of social support in mental health outcomes but lacked a focus on culturally congruent communal practices.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The phenomenon of acculturative stress has garnered substantial scholarly attention over the past few decades, particularly concerning international student populations. Acculturative stress is broadly defined as the psychological discomfort or anxiety experienced during cultural adaptation, which often includes emotional and behavioral struggles such as isolation, depression, and identity confusion (Berry, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok, 1987). As international students transition into host cultures that often operate on different social, academic, and institutional norms, their psychological well-being is routinely challenged. The severity of this stress tends to vary based on individual, cultural, and structural factors, including the type and degree of social support available (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Social support is frequently highlighted as a critical mediator in the acculturation process. Early research by Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) noted that international students with strong social networks, particularly those that included members of their host culture, demonstrated better emotional outcomes and lower stress levels. Crockett *et al*. (2007) further elaborated on this, indicating that students' perceived social support plays a more consistent role in mitigating acculturative stress than received support. The belief that one has access to helpful individuals can have a profound psychological impact, even when support is not actively utilized.

However, the nature of support systems, formal or informal, has a bearing on how effective they are for students from various cultural backgrounds. International students from collectivist societies, such as those in Africa and Asia, are often more comfortable with communal structures where support is reciprocal and embedded in existing social ties (Triandis, 1995; Sue & Sue, 2003). These informal communal frameworks include friendship groups, co-national networks, and culturally specific religious communities, which often mirror the extended family systems typical of their home

environments (Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey, 2004). However, despite these cultural preferences, many Western institutions have historically emphasized formal, individualistic support mechanisms such as counseling services, academic advisors, and peer mentoring programs. This misalignment can contribute to underutilizing support services among African international students, as these structures may feel impersonal or incompatible with their communal coping styles (Mori, 2000; Leong & Chou, 1996). In contrast, informal communal support, though less institutionalized, may offer more culturally appropriate avenues for coping with stress.

Importantly, the communal aspect of African societies is not merely social but deeply ontological, rooted in the belief that an individual exists through relationships with others (Mbiti, 1969). This cultural foundation supports what Gyamerah, Osafo, and Gyasi-Gyamerah (2020) described as *informal communality*, whereby African students engage with peers, family, and religious networks to navigate the challenges of a foreign environment. This aligns with earlier findings by Nwadiora and McAdoo (1996), who argued that collective identity and cultural pride among African-descended populations can serve as buffers against alienation and mental distress in diaspora settings. Language proficiency also plays a significant role in shaping acculturative experiences. Yeh and Inose (2003) found that lower English proficiency correlated with higher stress levels among international students. In culturally homogeneous host environments, the inability to communicate can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and inhibit the formation of support networks. Nevertheless, communal ties can compensate for these barriers, especially when community members share linguistic backgrounds or offer translation and interpretation support (Pedersen, 1991). Furthermore, religious affiliation and communal worship have been shown to provide emotional refuge for international students. Religious communities often offer spiritual solace and material and informational assistance, particularly to newcomers (Constantine *et al*., 2004). For African students, places of worship frequently double as cultural enclaves where familiar values, languages, and foods reinforce their sense of identity and belonging (Obasi & Leong, 2009). Despite extensive evidence on the importance of social support in coping with acculturative stress, most studies tend to aggregate support systems rather than differentiate them by cultural congruence or function. For example, Leong (1984) noted that international students who relied heavily on co-national networks were often less integrated into the host culture. However, this interpretation overlooked the possibility that these networks might offer more relevant psychosocial support. More nuanced analyses, such as that of Sodowsky and Lai (1997), have begun to acknowledge that not all forms of support are equally beneficial across cultural lines, underscoring the need for more culturally sensitive adjustment models.

The literature consistently supports that social support reduces acculturative stress among international students. However, it also reveals a gap in understanding the specific value of informal, culturally rooted support systems like African communality. As this paper aims to demonstrate, such communal practices are not merely coping tools but deeply embedded cultural logics that shape how African students understand and respond to the pressures of studying abroad. Addressing this gap can offer more effective, culturally attuned strategies for enhancing international student well-being.

Over the years, scholarly attention has grown toward understanding the psychological and social challenges international students face, particularly in the context of acculturative stress. While various studies have recognized the importance of social support in mitigating the stress associated with cultural transition, much of this body of work has tended to adopt generalized frameworks that do not sufficiently account for the cultural nuances of specific student populations, such as those from African societies (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Crockett *et al*., 2007). This oversight has created a disconnect between the theoretical models employed in higher education research and the lived experiences of African international students, many of whom come from highly communal, interdependent cultures (Triandis, 1995). Numerous studies have documented the presence and impact of acculturative stress among international students across various contexts. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) developed an instrument to measure acculturative stress and confirmed its prevalence across multiple dimensions, including homesickness, perceived discrimination, and academic pressure. Similarly, Leong and Chou (1996) examined the role of cultural distance and found that international students from collectivist cultures tend to experience greater adjustment difficulties when transitioning into individualistic societies. Despite these contributions, little focus has been placed on *how* collectivist values, specifically African notions of communality, operate as a resilience mechanism rather than merely a background factor.

Some scholars have begun to explore culturally embedded coping strategies. For instance, Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey (2004) investigated the role of cultural congruity and ethnic identity among African and Asian international students, identifying a correlation between cultural alignment and psychological well-being. However, their study primarily emphasized formal support mechanisms and intra-personal traits rather than informal, community-based strategies. Likewise, studies such as those by Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) and Mori (2000) addressed the importance of counseling and institutional support. However, they failed to engage sufficiently with culturally grounded support systems outside university frameworks. The work of Nwadiora and McAdoo (1996) offered a notable exception, highlighting the resilience of African students through the lens of cultural pride and communal identity.

Yet, even in that study, the specific mechanisms of informal communality, such as peer mentoring, co-national networks, and collective coping, were not systematically analyzed. Similarly, Triandis (1995) underscored the significance of collectivism in shaping interpersonal behavior, but its implications for international student adaptation have not been fully explored in applied research.

Moreover, while a growing body of literature examines acculturative stress in African contexts (e.g., Gyamerah, Osafo, and Gyasi-Gyamerah, 2020), these studies are often limited to students studying within Africa. The findings from Gyamerah *et al*. (2020), for example, emphasized that African international students in Ghana reported high levels of stress due to academic and cultural differences and relied heavily on informal social support for coping. This insight is valuable but contextually limited, as it does not capture the added stressors associated with racialization, language barriers, and cultural alienation experienced by African students in Western nations like the United States. Therefore, a clear research gap persists: existing literature does not adequately address the specific role of *informal African communality,* a culturally rooted, informal network of mutual aid and social support, in helping African students navigate acculturative stress in predominantly individualistic host countries. The prevailing focus on formal institutional support overlooks the lived strategies these students deploy within peer groups, cultural associations, and religious circles to manage stress.

This paper seeks to address this gap by investigating the dynamics of informal African communal support structures experienced by African international students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). Through a culturally sensitive analysis grounded in firsthand data, it will illuminate the often invisible but highly impactful role that communal coping plays in promoting psychological well-being and academic adjustment among this underrepresented student population.

Objectives
- Examine how informal African communal networks influence acculturative stress management.
- Identify unique communal coping strategies among African students at SIUE.
- Propose culturally grounded frameworks for mental health support in Western institutions.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical basis for understanding the experiences of African international students in managing acculturative stress is grounded in the Acculturative Stress Model, initially developed by Berry (1997) and further elaborated in his earlier work with Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987). This model provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing the psychological

impact of intercultural contact and the varying degrees of stress resulting from cultural adaptation. Berry posits that acculturation involves cultural and psychological change, and the resulting stress is mediated by various factors, including individual personality, coping strategies, host society attitudes, and available support networks. Central to Berry's model are four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. These strategies describe how individuals manage the relationship between maintaining their cultural heritage and engaging with the host society. Maintaining one's original culture while interacting with the host culture is widely considered the most adaptive and least stressful path (Berry, 1997). However, access to this strategy often depends on the social context, particularly the presence or absence of support systems that validate one's cultural identity.

While Berry's framework accounts for individual and contextual variables, it does not explicitly address culturally specific coping mechanisms such as informal African communality. This gap is critical, as collectivist cultures often rely on communal networks as a primary buffer against psychological distress (Triandis, 1995; Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996). In African contexts, the self is typically viewed with others, and psychological well-being is maintained through sustained social interdependence (Mbiti, 1969). Thus, the absence or disruption of communal life in a foreign context can be deeply unsettling, intensifying the experience of acculturative stress. Recent literature has begun to identify the limitations of acculturation models that privilege Western psychological constructs. For instance, Yeh and Inose (2003) emphasized the importance of social support in lowering acculturative stress among students but did not differentiate between culturally congruent and incongruent forms of support. Similarly, Constantine *et al.* (2004) acknowledged the role of ethnic identity in promoting well-being but focused primarily on internal variables like self-esteem and resilience, neglecting broader communal dynamics. While valuable, these studies underscore the need for theoretical frameworks that account for contextualized, collectivist-oriented adaptation strategies.

Within African diasporic communities, communal coping theory provides an additional layer of explanatory power. As Afifi, Hutchinson, and Krouse (2006) explain, communal coping involves the shared appraisal of stressors and collective action to manage them. In contrast to individual coping, communal coping emphasizes joint responsibility and mutual aid, which aligns closely with traditional African worldviews. This theoretical orientation is particularly relevant when examining how African students abroad reconstitute communal ties through co-national peer groups, religious associations, and informal mentorship networks. Moreover, Gyamerah, Osafo, and Gyasi-Gyamerah (2020) observed that international students in Ghana, including Africans, experienced acculturative stress due to abrupt academic shifts, perceived discrimination, and misaligned religious expectations. These students frequently leaned on social support from familiar cultural groups, indicating that communal structures continued to serve as primary coping resources. The same dynamic can be observed among African students in Western settings. However, the challenges may be intensified by racialization, cultural alienation, and the lack of institutional recognition of communal support as a legitimate psychological resource. This paper draws on Berry's Acculturative Stress Model as a foundational framework but expands it by integrating culturally specific understandings of coping, particularly communal coping as theorized in African contexts. It emphasizes that while psychological adaptation is often framed as an individual challenge in Western models, it is deeply relational and embedded within communal identities for African students. Recognizing this orientation is essential for developing more inclusive and culturally responsive frameworks to address African international students' mental health and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by a phenomenological approach, which is well-suited to uncovering the lived experiences of African international students as they navigate acculturative stress within a Western academic environment. The methodology is grounded entirely in the data and procedures examining informal communal networks' role among African students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). The use of phenomenology aligns with the broader objective of this research, which is to understand how culturally embedded coping mechanisms are experienced and interpreted by individuals within their specific social and academic contexts. As a research tradition, phenomenology explores how individuals make meaning of their experiences and world. According to Creswell (2007), this approach enables researchers to engage with participants' narratives in a manner that reveals the deeper structures of human experience. In the context of this study, a phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate because it prioritizes the subjective and cultural dimensions of coping, allowing for a rich exploration of how informal African communality operates as a response to acculturative stress.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting African international students enrolled at SIUE. The selection criteria included enrollment as a full-time student, self-identification as African by cultural background, and willingness to discuss their social, academic, and emotional adjustment experiences. This sampling strategy was designed to ensure depth and cultural specificity in the narratives gathered. The sample size reflected the standards of phenomenological inquiry, where data saturation is often achieved with a relatively small group of participants who share a common experience. Data collection was

conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews followed a flexible guide, allowing participants to freely narrate their adjustment journeys while responding to prompts about stress, communal support systems, and coping mechanisms. The guide included open-ended questions such as: "How have you dealt with stress since moving to the United States?", "What forms of support have been most helpful to you?", and "Can you describe any groups or communities you are part of here?". These prompts encouraged participants to reflect on their individual experiences and the communal dimensions of support that shaped their adaptation process.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of the data. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, with pseudonyms assigned during transcription. Interviews ranged from approximately forty-five minutes to just over one hour, providing sufficient time for in-depth reflection and narrative development. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, guided by the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). This approach involved a multi-step process beginning with repeated transcript readings to identify emerging codes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected common patterns across participants. Themes were not imposed but derived inductively from the data, allowing for a grounded understanding of the communal coping strategies that participants described. Analytical rigor was maintained through iterative review and cross-validation of coding among research team members. Three core themes emerged from the analysis: (1) communal living and emotional anchoring, (2) academic collaboration within the community, and (3) religious and cultural affiliation as communal bonds. These themes represent the foundational pillars of informal African communality as experienced by the participants and are presented in the results section with supporting narrative excerpts. The study employed strategies consistent with qualitative research best practices to ensure trustworthiness. These included triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, member checking, and audit trails. By aligning closely with the methodological framework, this study maintains coherence and cultural relevance while contributing new theoretical insights into the role of informal communal networks in mitigating acculturative stress among African students in Western higher education contexts.

RESULTS

As documented, the analysis of interview data from African international students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) revealed a coherent structure of informal communal support mechanisms that students relied upon to mitigate acculturative stress. Through thematic analysis, three primary themes emerged: (1) communal living and emotional anchoring, (2) academic collaboration within the community, and (3) religious and cultural affiliation as communal bonds. These themes demonstrate the significance of African cultural values in shaping adaptive strategies during cultural transition.

1. Communal Living and Emotional Anchoring

A consistent theme among participants was the emotional safety found within informal social circles of co-national and regional peers. These groups provided a protective buffer against loneliness, homesickness, and perceived discrimination. Many students recounted how bonding with fellow African students helped recreate a sense of home and stability in an unfamiliar environment. The Emotional Support Ecosystem identified through the data reveals three concentric layers of support:

- The core group includes co-national peers, students from the same country who often serve as roommates or closest companions.
- The middle layer comprises regional peers from other African countries, who share similar cultural values and offer extended social inclusion.
- The outer layer comprises host community allies such as sympathetic professors, local mentors, and religious leaders who provide occasional, meaningful support.

This structure is represented in Figure 1: Emotional Support Ecosystem in African Informal Communality, which categorizes the nature and function of each support tier.
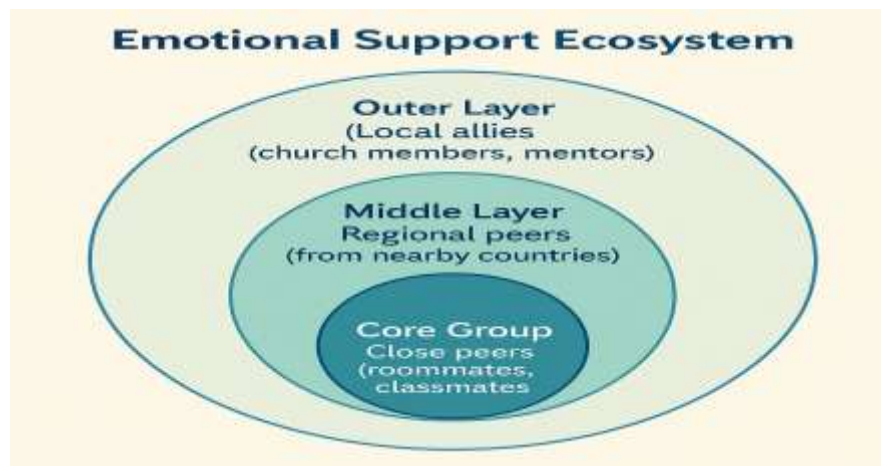
Figure 1 - Emotional Support Ecosystem

2. Academic Collaboration within the Community

Another critical coping mechanism identified was academic collaboration within communal networks. Students frequently relied on more experienced peers or co-nationals to navigate the unfamiliar academic systems. These support roles emerged organically and varied in form, from assistance with course registration to sharing study materials and past exam questions. Participants frequently mentioned the roles of informal mentors and peer study partners who helped with academics and boosted morale and confidence. These roles can be systematically understood through the Communal Academic Support Framework, depicted in Figure 2, which outlines the informal but structured network of roles contributing to academic resilience among African international students.

This figure categorizes support roles as:
- **Mentor**: guides academic planning and transition.
- **Study Partner**: assists with learning and coursework collaboration.
- **Informational Guide**: helps navigate bureaucratic hurdles and course selection.
- **Resource Connector**: shares materials and insider tips for academic success.
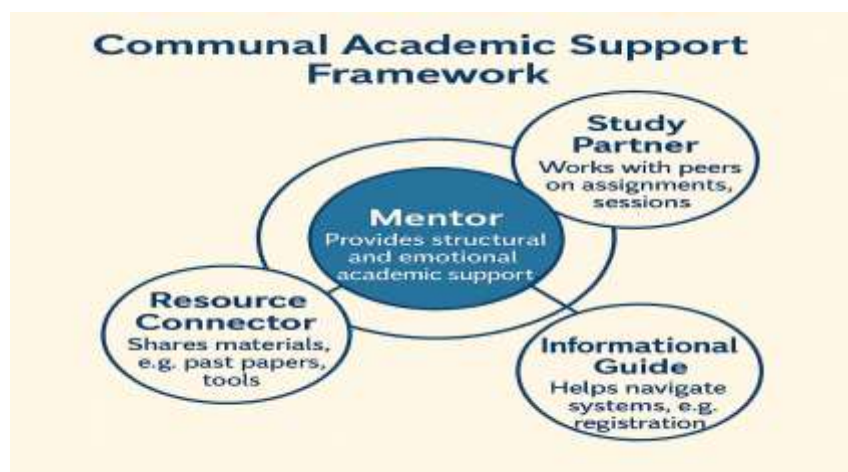

Figure 2 - Communal Academic Support Framework

3. Religious and Cultural Affiliation as Communal Bonds

The third major theme centers on how faith-based gatherings and cultural communities functioned as safe psychological and spiritual reinforcement spaces. Churches and mosques frequented by African students often doubled as cultural hubs, offering both worship opportunities and meals, community events, and moral guidance. These institutions were integral in maintaining continuity with students' cultural identities, offering emotional nourishment and reducing the sense of alienation. The intersection between religion, culture, and mental health is presented in Figure 3: Intersection of Faith and Communal Identity. This Venn-inspired model categorizes the overlapping roles of religious communities:
- As facilitators of religious practice,
- As preservers of cultural continuity, and
- As providers of psychosocial support.

Student narratives consistently mentioned these spheres as essential to building resilience during cultural transition.

Figure 3 - Intersection of Faith and Communal Identity

These three themes underscore how African students reconstruct informal communal frameworks in host societies to confront the psychological and practical demands of studying abroad. Rather than depending on institutional services that may feel foreign or inadequate, students draw upon culturally familiar mechanisms rooted in mutual aid, shared experience, and collective identity. These findings provide a culturally contextualized understanding of coping that is often overlooked in generalized models of international student adjustment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the profound role that informal African communality plays in mediating the effects of acculturative stress among international students. Unlike the dominant discourse, which emphasizes formal institutional support and individual coping mechanisms, the participants' lived experiences reveal a preference for culturally familiar, communal approaches to managing the challenges of academic life and social integration in a foreign environment.

First, the data confirms previous observations by Triandis (1995) that collectivist cultures, such as those found across the African continent, foster interpersonal interdependence and shared responsibility. This orientation directly shapes how students respond to the challenges of cultural adjustment. Rather than approaching stress as an individual problem to be solved independently, African students tend to mobilize peer networks for emotional and academic support. These findings build upon the cultural framework outlined by Mbiti (1969), who asserted that in traditional African societies, "I am because we are," reflecting a worldview in which identity and resilience are inherently communal. Moreover, the preference for peer-based, informal support networks reflects a gap between what Western institutions offer and what African students culturally recognize as effective. Although Yeh and Inose (2003) identified the importance of host-country social networks in reducing acculturative stress, they did not sufficiently explore how culturally congruent networks composed of co-nationals or regional peers might offer greater psychological comfort and utility. Similarly, Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) developed the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) to measure everyday stressors. However, they did not account for how culturally embedded strategies, like communal coping, mediate these stressors.

The value of these informal communal frameworks is particularly evident in the realm of academic support. Participants in this study described how peer mentorship and co-national study groups not only helped them understand course materials but also alleviated feelings of academic intimidation. This echoes the findings of Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey (2004), who noted that ethnic congruity and shared cultural norms can enhance academic confidence among minority students. However, while Constantine and colleagues focused primarily on ethnic identity as an internal variable, the current study reveals how that identity is operationalized through action, specifically, through informal networks of support that function outside institutional boundaries. Religious and spiritual

institutions also emerged as central components of communal coping. The role of faith-based communities as both spiritual anchors and social support systems mirrors findings from earlier research by Obasi and Leong (2009), who found that religion often provides an emotional and moral compass for African and African-descended populations navigating systemic discrimination and alienation. Participants in this study spoke of churches and mosques not only as places of worship but as extensions of home, where food, language, and music fostered a sense of belonging that offset the cultural dissonance experienced on campus. This aligns with Gyamerah, Osafo, and Gyasi-Gyamerah (2020), who observed similar dynamics among international students in Ghana, although the stakes were somewhat different due to the shared continental context.

Interestingly, the reliance on informal communal structures sometimes occurred in tandem with a deliberate distancing from institutional services. Several participants expressed a lack of trust or cultural misalignment with counseling centers and other official support mechanisms, a finding consistent with Mori (2000), who argued that international students often underutilize these services due to stigma, unfamiliarity, or cultural mismatch. In the context of African students, this disjunction may be even more pronounced, as formal psychological services in many African societies are either non-existent or approached with caution due to cultural and religious beliefs about mental health (Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996). The gendered nature of communal coping also surfaced subtly in the narratives, with female students more frequently referencing emotional conversations and mutual support, and male students emphasizing practical exchanges such as shared resources or navigation of bureaucratic systems. While this was not the central focus of the study, it aligns with observations by Leong and Chou (1996), who suggested that coping styles often differ by gender across cultural groups, with women tending toward relational strategies and men toward task-oriented ones.

The layered complexity of acculturative stress and the culturally grounded responses observed in this study suggest a need for more inclusive theoretical frameworks. Berry's Acculturative Stress Model (1997) remains useful in outlining broad strategies of integration and marginalization. However, it does not adequately account for how cultural practices such as informal communality mediate these strategies. Similarly, Crockett *et al*. (2007) highlighted the moderating role of perceived support, but the question remains: From whom does perceived support come? For African students, it is clear that co-national peers and culturally familiar institutions provide a more trusted and effective form of support than the host society offers. This discussion confirms and extends existing research while challenging the dominant focus on formal support services. It shows that culturally embedded practices such as communal coping are not peripheral but central to the lived

experience of African students abroad. These practices alleviate stress, affirm identity, foster belonging, and build resilience in the face of systemic and cultural adversity. As such, any comprehensive approach to supporting international students must include individualized psychological support and a recognition and integration of the communal systems that many students bring with them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study point to a critical need for institutions of higher learning, particularly those in Western contexts, to re-evaluate and expand their support structures for international students in a culturally responsive and inclusive manner. As evidenced by this study, African international students rely heavily on informal communal networks rooted in shared cultural values, emotional interdependence, and mutual responsibility. However, these culturally familiar support systems often operate in the margins of campus life, unrecognized by the formal structures designed to assist. Therefore, the first and most fundamental recommendation is for universities to acknowledge and integrate these informal systems into their broader student support frameworks. Universities should begin by developing culturally informed orientation programs that explicitly address the unique adjustment challenges students from collectivist cultures face. These programs should go beyond logistical information and include sessions on intercultural communication, managing academic expectations, and building community across cultural boundaries. More importantly, institutions should involve existing African student organizations in the planning and delivery of such sessions. These groups are often well-positioned to provide culturally grounded advice and can serve as a bridge between new students and the broader university environment.

In addition, student affairs offices should provide logistical and financial support to sustain and expand the activities of cultural student associations. As shown in this study, these associations are not just social outlets but critical sources of academic, emotional, and psychosocial support. By formally partnering with these organizations, universities can help facilitate mentoring programs, peer advising networks, and academic workshops reflecting the communal problem-solving approach preferred by many African students. Another vital recommendation is to diversify the delivery of mental health services. Traditional Western models of one-on-one counseling may not always be appropriate or effective for African international students, who may perceive such services as alien, stigmatizing, or impersonal. Instead, universities should consider offering group-based mental health workshops or discussion circles facilitated by culturally competent staff or trained peer leaders from similar backgrounds. These formats may feel more natural and less intimidating, fostering shared understanding and

reducing the isolation often associated with formal counseling settings.

Furthermore, religious institutions and faith-based student groups should be recognized as partners supporting students' emotional well-being. As this study revealed, places of worship often double as cultural and communal spaces where African students find identity reinforcement and psychological refuge. Universities should actively collaborate with these groups, offering logistical support for interfaith programming and creating referral pathways between campus services and religious communities students trust. In doing so, institutions can leverage existing community strengths without imposing culturally incongruent forms of care.

Faculty and administrative staff also play a critical role and should receive training in cultural sensitivity and inclusive pedagogy. Participants in this study reported confusion and stress due to abrupt academic changes, perceived discrimination, and unclear communication. Training programs should help educators understand how cultural expectations around authority, learning styles, and communication can differ significantly for international students. Faculty members should also be encouraged to be proactive in checking in on international students, especially those who may appear disengaged or confused, as this small gesture can disproportionately positively impact students who feel marginalized.

Finally, universities should institutionalize feedback mechanisms that allow international students to share their experiences and challenges anonymously and safely. These insights can help institutions remain responsive to the evolving needs of their diverse student bodies. Feedback should be acted upon through tangible policy adjustments, not merely collected for compliance purposes. A culturally grounded rethinking of student support is essential for addressing the needs of African international students. Institutions must move beyond a one-size-fits-all model of support and adopt practices that recognize the legitimacy and effectiveness of informal communal networks. By doing so, they enhance African students' well-being and academic success and contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic campus culture for all.

Future Research

The current study provides valuable insight into African international students' culturally grounded coping strategies, particularly using informal communal networks to manage acculturative stress. However, it also opens several avenues for future research to deepen, broaden, and contextualize these findings across various academic, cultural, and geographic settings. Recognizing informal African communality as a potent support mechanism begins a broader scholarly conversation that future studies should explore in more diverse and methodologically robust ways.

First, future research should consider conducting comparative studies across multiple institutional settings. While this study focused on Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), the experiences of African students may differ significantly depending on institutional size, location, student demographics, and the presence or absence of existing African student organizations. For instance, a student's experience at a large metropolitan university with a well-established African diaspora may differ markedly from that of a student in a rural or predominantly white institution with limited cultural diversity. Comparative case studies would allow for identifying patterns and distinctions that can inform context-specific interventions.

Second, quantitative and mixed-methods research is needed to complement the qualitative insights presented here. While phenomenological approaches are ideal for exploring lived experiences, incorporating quantitative instruments such as the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) developed by Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) or Berry's acculturation strategy measures can help validate the prevalence and intensity of communal coping strategies among a broader population. Mixed-methods designs can also explore correlations between the use of communal support and academic performance, mental health outcomes, or retention rates.

Another important area for exploration is the intersectionality of identity. This study touched briefly on potential gendered patterns of coping, but further research is needed to examine how gender, age, socioeconomic status, and religious affiliation intersect with communal coping. Do male and female African students access and benefit from communal networks similarly? How do Muslim students experience and interpret communal support compared to their Christian peers, especially in religiously plural or secular academic environments? These questions can illuminate the diverse pathways through which cultural identity shapes adaptation. Furthermore, future studies could explore longitudinal trajectories of communal support. How does the nature and function of informal communality evolve from a student's first semester to their final year of study? Are there critical transition points, such as the first exam season, personal crises, or changes in immigration status, where communal networks are most heavily relied upon or strained? Longitudinal research would provide insight into the sustainability and adaptability of communal support systems across the student life cycle. Additionally, there is a need for research that investigates the receptiveness of host institutions to integrating informal communal structures into formal student support systems. What institutional barriers exist that limit the recognition of cultural student organizations as legitimate mental health partners? How do university policies and administrative attitudes influence the visibility or invisibility of African communal practices?

This line of inquiry would move beyond student experience and begin critically assessing institutional frameworks and their alignment-or misalignment-with the cultural needs of international populations.

Lastly, future research could examine the digital dimensions of communal support, particularly in the post-pandemic era. With increased reliance on virtual platforms for connection, learning, and socialization, how have African students leveraged online spaces such as WhatsApp groups, social media, and faith-based virtual communities to maintain communal ties? This research could uncover new forms of digital communality and their effectiveness in replicating or enhancing traditional forms of support. Future research should expand the conversation on informal African communality from a cultural footnote to a central theme in understanding international student adaptation. By embracing comparative, intersectional, longitudinal, and digital perspectives, scholars can offer richer, more actionable insights that help institutions build environments where culturally diverse students survive and thrive.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how informal African communality functions as a culturally grounded mechanism for coping with acculturative stress among African international students, specifically at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Through a qualitative phenomenological analysis of students' lived experiences, it became clear that communal values, rooted in collective responsibility, emotional interdependence, and shared identity, play a decisive role in shaping how these students navigate the social, academic, and psychological demands of life abroad. Rather than relying primarily on formal institutional support systems, students turned to familiar cultural frameworks that reflect their upbringing in collectivist societies. These informal support structures, often organized around co-national peers, religious institutions, and regional networks, not only helped mitigate stress but also sustained students' cultural identity and sense of belonging. As seen in support's emotional, academic, and spiritual dimensions, African students reconstructed a community in a foreign environment to buffer themselves against alienation and anxiety.

The findings support and extend existing literature on the importance of social support in student adaptation, while challenging the assumption that institutional services alone are sufficient. While models such as Berry's Acculturative Stress Model provide a helpful foundation, they must be supplemented with culturally specific understandings of how support is conceptualized and enacted. Moreover, this study underscores that effective coping is an individual psychological process and a culturally mediated, relational experience. The implications are significant for institutions of higher education that serve international students. To foster environments supporting student success, universities must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and incorporate culturally responsive strategies. This includes recognizing the legitimacy and value of informal communal networks and creating space for them within broader student support ecosystems.

In closing, this research emphasizes that for many African students, surviving and succeeding in a foreign academic context is not simply about integration into host culture norms. It is about carrying forward a communal ethos, adapting it to new circumstances, and using it as a foundation for resilience. Understanding and respecting this dynamic is not just an academic exercise but a practical imperative for creating inclusive, empathetic, and effective institutions.

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