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Friendship Within and Across Borders: Perceptions of Social Networks Among First-Year International Students of Color

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ABSTRACT

Establishing social networks can be extremely challenging when international students, particularly those of color, move to a new academic and social environment. We examine the perceptions of social networks among first-year international students of color and how these networks affect their experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI). This study illuminates participants' relationships with U.S. domestic students and the power of language, culture, and shared experiences through a longitudinal narrative inquiry. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are described in-depth for practitioners.

Keywords: first year, international students of color, language, predominantly White institution, social networks

International students, especially those from predominantly non-White and non-English speaking countries (Yao et al., 2019), may experience difficulty establishing social networks on campus (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Coming to the United States requires students to navigate multiple transitions as they encounter academic, personal, and social adjustments due to the differences in culture, language, and separation from family and friends (Pedersen, 1991; Romero, 1981). These transition issues may be particularly salient for international students who may identify as international students of color (Yao et al., 2019). As a result, international students may rely on other students (e.g., co-nationals, U.S. domestic, and broader international networks) to learn about new adjusting to new environments (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Social networks at college often help retain students by connecting them to support, services, and information (Kezar, 2014). Social networks are described as “the sets of acquaintances and friendships that define one’s relations with others” (Thomas, 2000, p. 595). There are many ways in which social networks can be beneficial as they have been noted by Kezar (2014) to “serve many functions such as social support, knowledge, and change” (p. 92). Thus, the role of social networks may be critical for the overall development of first-year students, especially for international students of color who must navigate a new culture, new educational environment, and likely a new language.

The influence of social relationships may be most salient for students who must navigate increasingly complex political and social environments while simultaneously transitioning to higher education as first-year students. In particular, this current study builds upon Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood’s (2013) call to take an internationalist perspective, “which views the non-institutional social networks established among international students as a key aspect of social capital formation that extends beyond the confines of the educational institution” (p. 414), rather than emphasizing an assimilationist approach to international students attending college in the United States. Thus, the purpose of this study is to illuminate the perceptions that first-year international students of color have of their social networks and how this affects their experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI). The research questions that guided this study are as follows: What are the perceptions of social networks among first-year international students of color at a PWI? How do these social networks affect these students’ overall experiences at a PWI?

SOCIAL TIES WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PEERS

A review of research finds that social networks and friendship groups have been found to be influential on international students’ overall experiences in the United States (Gomez et al., 2014; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Yao, 2016; Ying & Han, 2006). International students may arrive in the United States with expectations of constant interaction with domestic U.S. students (Yao, 2016). However, research finds that strong interpersonal relationships with co-national or international peers often provide a sense of belonging and a foundation for navigating an unfamiliar environment (Glass, 2012; Glass & Westmont, 2014). Such findings may provide

insight into the foundational research of Bochner et al. (1977) on the friendship patterns of international students, particularly those who interact with people who they view as similar to themselves, otherwise known as homophily (Centola et al., 2007; McPherson et al., 2001). Homophilic relationships with co-national groups in foreign cultures can reduce uncertainty, aid in fitting in, and encourage expression of cultural values, making them attractive to international students in the U.S. collegiate context (Bochner et al., 1977; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). International students may also be more comfortable going to their peers for advice and feel that there are too many barriers to friendships with domestic students due to cultural differences, language barriers, and racism/xenophobia (Gomes, 2015). Homophily may result in an overall greater sense of belonging in a new environment while maintaining students' culture (Centola et al., 2007; McPherson et al., 2001). Overall, international students may rely on a strong support network of other international students who navigate similar collegiate transitions.

The need for commonalities in social networks and how social ties to co-national peers can provide that commonality is a clear indicator as to why international students develop friend groups with others from their own countries or cultures. Interestingly, literature has also noted how international student friendships with co-national peers may arise out of necessity rather than preference. For example, Hendrickson et al. (2011) found that international students with less social capital than their peers may not be able to develop friendships with domestic students, forcing them to form social networks of mostly or only co-nationals. Language skills, familiarity with host country, and the degree to which host countries are receptive toward outside groups can all impact the social capital of an international student, thereby potentially creating additional challenges to host-national friendships (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

Also, while an international student's social capital may increase over time, the general social interactions between international students and domestic students have been found to decrease over time between the two groups (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). While research shows that social connections are important to the social adjustment of international students (Gomez et al., 2014), some of those social networks may be born out of inherent social capital or lack thereof. Whether out of necessity or by preference, international student friendships with co-national peers can provide a sense of belonging and social connection to U.S. campuses they may not receive otherwise.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS WITH U.S. DOMESTIC STUDENTS

The close proximity of student interactions through classes, co-curricular activities, and living on campus are assumed to promote cross-cultural interactions, social engagement, and intercultural dialogue between international and U.S. domestic students (Brustein, 2007; Deardorff, 2006; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Benefits for international students who socialize with U.S. domestic students include higher comfort levels with U.S. culture, increased participation in campus events, and greater retention rates at their institution

(Trice, 2004; Westwood & Barker, 1990). Yet despite the lofty goals for intercultural networking, international students may face barriers that inhibit meaningful interactions with U.S. domestic students.

International students, especially those who may be perceived as being students of color, face interpersonal challenges that may be rooted in racial tensions, discrimination, and language barriers (Lee & Rice, 2007; Yao et al., 2021). For example, Yao (2018) found that first-year Chinese international students experienced neo-racism and othering from U.S. domestic students as a result of language barriers and cultural differences. Overall feelings related to belonging and connections were negatively affected as a result of these discriminatory experiences (Yao, 2016, 2018; Yao et al., 2021). Asian international students may face more discrimination based on their language, appearance, and assumed national origin (Yeo et al., 2019). International students who are identified as being Black also face similar challenges, typically as a result of perceived race and phenotype. Yet foreign-born Black students navigate complications related to their race and ethnicity, resulting in a lack of association with Black American peers (Bailey, 2017; Fries-Britt et al., 2014), in an attempt to thrive and acculturate in the United States (Sanchez, 2013). Thus, the complications of race and ethnicity may lead to feeling like an outsider on their campus while at the same time, developing empathy for the racialized U.S. context that Black American students must navigate (George Mwangi et al., 2019).

International students may feel like “worthy guests” (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013, p. 562), which contributes to feeling unwelcome and marginalized. Although discrimination may lead to decreased self-esteem and feelings of worthiness, the negative experiences may lead to increased identification with the larger international student population on campus (Schmitt et al., 2003) because of their “common treatment from the majority” (Schmitt et al., 2003, p. 5). That is, other international students in the United States may understand discrimination better than individuals from students’ home country in a way that deviates from many U.S. domestic students’ lived experiences.

Overall, interpersonal relations are complicated and complex, especially for international students of color in their first year of college. Beyond race, ethnicity, and cultural differences, relationship development takes time, especially for international students. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) found that time was essential for international students to develop friendships and make sense of interpersonal patterns in a new culture. Yet the experiences of first-year international students of color have been relatively understudied. Thus, this study will provide insights on the perceptions that first-year international students of color have of their social networks and how this affects their experiences at a PWI.

UNDERSTANDING INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS

Our study builds upon previous studies related to intercultural friendship networks for international students (e.g., Bochner et al., 1977; Gareis, 2012; Robinson et al., 2020). The functional model of friendship patterns of international students by Bochner et al. (1977) serves as a foundational model for understanding

intercultural friendship networks. Based on their framework, the authors described that international students tended to form three categories of interpersonal networks: co-national students, host nationals/domestic students, and multinational/other international students. International students were more likely to befriend co-nationals based on shared culture, which is followed by connections with multinational or other international students, for recreational activities. Domestic students or host nationals, who primarily provided academic and professional connections, were found to be the most difficult networks for international students to establish (Bochner et al., 1977).

Overall, friendship networks for international students contain multiple complexities, particularly within the context of contemporary higher education. For example, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) found that international students' social interactions followed four primary patterns: self-segregating with co-nationals; exclusive global mixing with other co-nationals or international students; inclusive global mixing with co-nationals, internationals, and domestic students; and interacting with primarily domestic students. These findings suggest that international students' social identities and capital contribute to social interactions and friendship patterns on college campuses, which complicates the more simplistic framework by Bochner et al. (1977).

Several studies confirm both the benefits and complexities of intercultural friendship networks. For example, Li and Zizzi (2018) found that physical activity was beneficial to international students' multicultural friendship development. Rienties and Nolan (2014) cited the importance of peers in their study of international and host students' friendship and learning networks. Yet, Robinson et al. (2020) found that several factors may constrain cross-cultural friendships, including cultural distance and boundaries between international and host-national students in Canada. As a result, international students tended to have superficial and shallow relationships with host-national students, while building meaningful relationships with co-national and other international students on campus.

Another possible barrier to international students' friendship networks, particularly in Anglophone countries, could be their identities based on their home region (Gareis, 2012). Gareis (2012) found that international students from Anglophone countries and Northern/Central Europe reported higher numbers and higher satisfaction with the quality of friendships with U.S. students; conversely, East Asian international students had lower levels and quality of friendships with U.S. students. Several reasons for dissatisfaction with U.S. friendships were listed, but ultimately, "most students felt that the main problem lay with the American hosts" (Gareis, 2012, p. 320) who had limited interest in engaging in close friendships with international students. As demonstrated by these findings, international students from different home regions may have different experiences in developing and sustaining their friendship networks in college.

The differences in international students' relationships with co-national and host domestic students necessitate a deeper exploration of factors that may contribute to or prohibit deeper friendship networks. In particular, the first year on campus may be critical to international students' persistence and success (Yao et al., 2019). Thus, closer examination of friend networks is important because

adjustment and satisfaction of international students heavily depend on social and friendship networks (Merola et al., 2019; Trice, 2004; Westwood & Barker, 1990).

METHOD

As a team, we desired to understand our participants' stories of their perceptions of their social networks at a PWI. Thus, we used narrative inquiry as the methodological approach for this longitudinal study. We chose Kim (2016) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as primary texts for constructing the research design and to understand narrative inquiry as a framework. Narrative research centers stories and acknowledges experience as a way of knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is through stories that one is able to understand what is meaningful about human experience (Kim, 2016). Given our year-long study, narrative was appropriate as it considers the continuity of experience and the interaction of experience. The continuity of experience describes how new experiences are informed and influenced by past experiences, and the interaction of experience is one's "interaction with his or her situation or environment" (Kim, 2016, p. 71). Over the course of a year, we expected that the social aspects of our participants' lives would demonstrate these principles through their stories.

Participants and Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and participants' consent, we worked with the university registrar's office to identify international students of color who lived on campus and were in their first semester of their studies. In a demographic survey, international students of color self-disclosed their race, ethnicity, and country of origin. Through email solicitation, we invited eligible students to participate in our study with an incentive of a \$10 Amazon gift card per interview. The sample size recommended for narrative studies varies, ranging from one to more than 15 participants (Kim, 2016), making our sample well within the range of an appropriate sample size. We received responses from 19 students, with six identifying as female and 13 identifying as male. Spanning four continents and eight countries, more than half of the participants were from a country in Central Africa ($n = 10$). The other regions represented were South Asia ($n = 4$), East Asia ($n = 2$), South America ($n = 2$), and Canada ($n = 1$; see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Region of origin
Abi*	19	Male	South Asia
Betina*	19	Female	South America
Baby	22	Male	Central Africa
Esther*#	18	Female	Central Africa
Hun*	19	Male	East Asia

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Region of origin
Jan Are*#	21	Male	Central Africa
John Doe	20	Male	Central Africa
Johny*#	20	Male	Central Africa
Lenny*#	21	Male	Central Africa
Maria	18	Female	South America
Alejandra*#			
Muskan	18	Female	South Asia
Natalia*#	18	Female	East Asia
Nike*#	25	Male	Central Africa
NM*#	18	Male	South Asia
P*#	21	Male	Central Africa
Pinky	18	Female	South Asia
Ricky*#	18	Male	Central Africa
Sam*#	17	Male	North America
XL*#	22	Male	Central Africa

Note: * = participation in the second round of interviews; # = participation in the third round of interviews.

Longitudinal study design varies based on the aims of the researchers—in this case, an examination of the changes in the social networks of international students of color during their first year of their undergraduate studies—and the availability of resources, which included our participants. Given our choice of methodology, we considered the time commitment from our participants, our relation to them over time, and the type of data (Lal et al., 2012). From September 2017 to September 2018, we conducted three rounds of 60-min interviews. In the fall of 2017, we commenced the first round of individual interviews with 19 participants. The second round of interviews, with 15 students, resumed in the middle of February 2018, and our last round of interviews concluded in the fall of 2018 with 12 participants. As expected, our year-long study experienced attrition of the cohort with seven from cohort not completing all three interviews.

Data Analysis

In this narrative study, we sought to approach data analysis as a process that would help improve our understanding about participants' narratives. This was important to the process as interpretation and analysis often work together as we make meaning of the data (Kim, 2016). To accomplish this, we started the analysis in our collection of data with analytic memos and continued throughout the analysis by means of coding and theming the data. The first step was facilitated during data collection through analytic memos. We used memoing to jot down

our initial thoughts about participant interviews. Memoing also helped us during the data analysis process to reflect on new ways to understand the data (Groenewald, 2008).

We used the questions from our interview protocol to develop a provisional coding list. We were mindful of how our participants' differences in their cultural, political, and social identities could be impacted by the provisional codes that we assigned prior to transcription (Saldaña, 2016). Thus, we also relied on our understanding of the literature to inform our interview protocol and provisional codes (Saldaña, 2016). We used descriptive coding in our first round of analysis. Descriptive coding is "useful for assessing longitudinal participant change" (p. 102) and focuses on the topics in the data. This type of coding assumes a second round of analysis to explore the content of the topics.

We used theming of the data in the second round of coding. This technique allowed our team to analyze larger portions of data to identify repeating ideas and similarities and differences between our participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2016). This form of secondary analysis was led by the first author who organized the themes in data through color-coded sections in collaboration with research team members. The team then created analytic memos that were reflective of the group conversations surrounding emergent codes and themes to make sure that our subsequent representations are genuine interpretations.

Trustworthiness

As a team, it was important that we consider appropriate norming strategies for data analysis, particularly for narrative research, as the validity of the interpretation should capture the meaning that was intended by the participants (Kim, 2016). To ensure trustworthiness, we employed the following analysis tools: memoing, intercoder dependability, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity. Memoing, used during data collection and analysis, "accumulate as written ideas or records about concepts and their relationships" (Groenewald, 2008, p. 506). We adopted a nonpositivist demonstration of dependability similar to that recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in which, prior to analysis, we created subgroups to code the same transcript to make sure our coding was congruent. Afterwards, another member from the team evaluated transcripts to check for variations in coding. Based on the feedback from the intercoders, the team was able to establish consensus and move forward with coding. Peer debriefing also contributed to trustworthiness as the team of researchers openly discussed their interpretation of data as influenced by interviews, observations, and memoing. We invited participants (via email) to review their transcripts, as well as to provide clarification before and after their interviews.

Researchers' Positionality

We engaged in reflexivity to examine our relationship to the research process. We reflected on how the narratives of the participants could be influenced by our racial/ethnic identities, assumed status as U.S. citizens, and the hierarchical power

dynamic of academe in regard to students and researchers. Power, voice, and identity are key areas in which researchers examine their relation to the participants. We offer our positionality as a way of acknowledging our place with the study. First, we explicitly reconciled with our racial and ethnic identities as authors are people of color (two identifying as Black American and one as an Asian American) and two White American researchers. We noticed how Central African participants responded more openly during the data collection process when interviewed by the Black American researchers. Similarly, Chinese international participants appeared to be more receptive to the Asian American researcher. Whiteness also served as an influencer during this study as participants, especially those from Central Africa, seemed reluctant to answer some questions from the White American researchers as they were a part of a government-funded program with the university. These racial experiences were memoed, discussed, and reflected as our positionality at times interplayed with the nature and scope of our study. Continuous reflective practices, including self-reflection and group discussions, helped guide the research team's data collection and analysis approach.

Understanding the research team race and ethnicity required us to discuss and make meaning of our own experiences in developing friendships and social networks on a college campus. Through the experiences shared by the team, we acknowledged that our experiences with international students as undergraduates as well as familial connections influenced our interest to research their experiences at PWIs. Our participation in study abroad; international cultural exchange programs; student organizations; and informal relationships developed through academic collaborations, recreational activities, and/or housing assignments were essential in addressing how we understood the challenges for international students to acclimate, as well as how our own social networks may or may not have provided us with an understanding of the unique challenges for international students of color. While some of us had intimate and lasting friendships with international students of color, others' experiences reflected how international students are often situated as White, by default or under the broad umbrella of "international," which often assumes a racial-ethnic neutrality. As faculty members and scholar-practitioners in the field, we realize how the offices responsible for helping international students adjust and become fully engaged members of the campus sometimes fail to account for nuances of being both international and of color.

Results

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the perceptions that first-year international students of color have of their social networks and how these networks affect their experiences at a PWI. The review of seminal literature coupled with our in-depth analysis uncovered the perceptions of U.S. domestic students' behaviors among first-year international students of color. Specifically, our participants' narratives revealed the ways that international students of color felt unwelcomed, which influenced their relationships with U.S. domestic

students. Further, through storytelling participants described how shared experiences with language and culture aided them with connecting with individuals who shared both similar nationalities and different international backgrounds.

What Social Networks? Relationships with U.S. Domestic Students

Participants described their overall lack of connection with U.S. domestic students throughout their first year on campus. In their narratives, they described their perceptions of how U.S. students all consumed excessive alcohol and engaged in promiscuous behavior. In addition, many participants shared that they felt unwelcomed by U.S. domestic students, and as a result, limited their overall interactions with U.S. students.

Pre-Arrival and First-Year Perceptions of Negative Behaviors

Participants shared detailed accounts of how they perceived U.S. students prior to arriving to the United States. Almost all participants had assumptions about U.S. students and viewed them as drinking excessively and having frequent sexual encounters. These existing perceptions, which often came from participants watching U.S. television shows and listening to the U.S. news, caused participants, especially those from Central Africa, to be reluctant to invite U.S. students into their social networks. For example, Esther shared how they had overall negative impressions of the United States, and how these views transcended into how they saw U.S. students on campus. Esther had myths about people in the United States as “being bad.” She believed that U.S. students acted irrationally and engaged in behavior that was disorderly. She stated, “Some of them are drunk. Some of them smoke. I was so afraid of that thing.” Although Esther initially hesitated to make U.S. friends, she realized over time that “some people are nice.”

Baby shared his reluctance to engage with U.S. students, specifically White students, because he heard that they had issues with race. He described his perceptions of White U.S. students as being racist and unwilling to engage with non-American students. He stated, “I did not expect a White to be my friend. I thought they’d be like, go away. I do not want to talk to you like that.” There were other participants that felt that U.S. students, especially White students, were racist and unlikely to connect with them on campus. Abi from South Asia also described how although he wanted U.S. friends, he was not sure if they would interact with him and if they would be friendly to him because of his race.

Some participants had prior interaction with U.S. students in high school, which led them to believe that U.S. students were different from them. Natalia shared her desires to make U.S. friends, especially friends who were similar to the ones she had in high school. However, she recognized that not all U.S. students were goal-oriented, which was different from what she wanted from her collegiate experience. She stated, “I would like to make friends with who are determined. Really committed to their goals instead of going to party every night.”

Overall, only a couple of participants shared that they were open to having interactions with U.S. students. Ultimately, the majority of participants felt that interacting with U.S. students would taint their experiences in college, and during the early stages of their time on campus, chose to minimize engagement with them. As a result, almost all of our participants identified their social networks as not being very inclusive of U.S. domestic students in their first year on campus.

Feeling “Unwelcomed”

Almost all of our participants described the difficulties that they experienced obtaining U.S. friends during their first year. The most cited reason for these difficulties was how unwelcoming U.S. students were to international students of color. This caught the majority of participants off guard as they had prior expectations that they would have many U.S. friends. For example, Hun thought it would be relatively easy to make U.S. friends, but quickly learned this was not the case due to how large the campus was and how the majority were not as willing to engage with international students.

This notion of being “unwelcomed” was something many explicitly shared their perceptions about. For example, Benita described U.S. students as, “They do not say hi, or you feel that they do not want to talk. Because they say hi, you ask them questions, they just answer you and do not ask anything.” Similarly, Nike shared how he felt that domestic students wanted “cliché” hi-and-bye relationships. He stated:

You are meeting always and you are not connecting for a while so that you can build a real relationship. You are just there always having cliché with people. Just, hi, how are you? That’s it. There is no other deep information with the peers.

Johny noticed also how U.S. students wanted surface-level friendships with international students. He shared how much of their conversations would be about his home country or American football. While he believed that U.S. students were curious about what his life looked like prior to coming here, he also recognized how the frequent questions at the time made him feel uncomfortable. However, Johny used the interactions with U.S. students as learning opportunities to get acquainted with their culture and people.

P described his difficulty making friends with students from the United States and how it was very dependent on the person and if they wanted new friends. XL believed that the reason for this was due to U.S. students’ busy schedules because they “were always so busy.” XL stated that he only had two U.S. friends “because it seems like they are very busy” and because they were busier than him, it was “harder to stay connected.” Esther gave a different perspective on why she believed it was so difficult to maintain friendships with students from the United States. She shared her experience and described it as,

In the first semester, my experience was bad because I did not have friends from the U.S. I had friends from my country only, those were my

closest friends. In spring semester and in this fall semester, I do have international friends from South Asia and Asia and we work together, and live in harmony. American friends they change every semester, every semester.

While Esther's friendship networks shifted after gaining international friends, she was still not sure why she only had transactional friendships with American students and why those friendships changed from semester to semester. Esther assumed the reason for the disruption in friendship was that U.S. students often lived in off-campus housing more than international students. However, similar to other students, Esther felt an underlying message that U.S. students did not want to engage with international students.

Building Meaningful Relationships: The Power of Language, Culture, and Shared Experiences

Despite grappling with their perceptions of U.S. students in their first year, participants learned the importance of making friendships within their own national networks and beyond into other international networks over time. Participants described the significance of building homophilic friendships with students from their same countries of origin due to shared language and culture. Yet the connections with the broader international student community were valuable as well, especially considering their shared experiences of being new members of their campus. Overall, participants found comfort in engaging in social networks with international peers, especially with co-national students, because of their surface-level friendships with U.S. domestic students.

Feelings of Comfort with Co-National Students

While there was some variation between how participants shared insights regarding their friendship network, the overall consensus was that almost all participants valued their relationships with peers who were similar to them in culture. For example, Abi primarily had South Asian friends and noted these friendships allowed him to speak his language and participate in cultural group activities. Hun shared that he only spent time with friends from his home country. He believed that his friendships with people from his own country helped him as it related to his experiences at university. Muskan also found herself befriending individuals from her home country. She realized that she felt more comfortable around people who were similar to her, specifically those who liked to go out to eat and cook spicy food that reminded her of home.

The Central African participants described that they were friends with individuals from their home country. Nike, who met the majority of his friends during orientation week, shared his experiences having friends from his home country. He stated, "We share stories, how we are experiencing the college." Nike believed that those relationships have benefited him the most since coming to the United States. Ricky noted another reason why his friends are primarily co-nationals was that they have classes together and live together. Baby similarly

shared how one of his friends that he has known since middle school became one of his best friends on campus. He stated, "Everywhere he goes, I go there." While he knew him since middle school, he said they were never close until they came to the United States.

One of the main reasons that participants felt more at home with international students from their same country was because of their preconceived perceptions of U.S. students. Our Central African participants who were unsure about connecting to U.S. students offered examples based on how they viewed their behaviors. For example, XL almost always socialized with people from his country. He said,

When choosing my friends, I like to see their behaviors, so for example, I do not like to be connected that much to those who used to be drunk or those who having sex, things like that. Those whom we can talk, have more jokes, also help one another in different ways, so those are the friends I like and also those are the ones I have.

While XL recognized variations in personalities and recognized that not all U.S. students acted this way, he knew that individuals from his home country embodied similar behaviors and characteristics. Therefore, XL gravitated to students from his home country more frequently instead of U.S. students as he viewed them as constantly partying on campus.

Expanding into Broader International Student Networks

Over half of our participants shared how they eventually moved beyond their comfort zone and made new connections with people from other countries. Maria Alejandra described how she felt more comfortable hanging around international students and had expanded her social circle to include international students from other countries outside of her country of origin. She especially valued her international student network with peers from the Middle East and South Asia because they "know how to make jokes and we are really sarcastic, and no one gets offense about it."

Johny, who originally only socialized with friends from his country, described how his friendships evolved by the end of the first year to include non-African international students. He shared how these connections have influenced his understanding of other international students' culture, stating,

We share culture is just the way when you're having conversations, they may ask you many questions. You may ask them many questions about their country and they ask you about your country, what things you can find in your country, interesting activities.

During the weekends, Johny noted how he had attended "Chinese or Japanese cultural shows and activities to get to know the cultures." By engaging in these activities, he expanded his knowledge and learned about other cultures, which has helped him open up and meet new friends.

Jan Are shared how he met friends from different countries, such as Germany, Latvia, and China, through his orientation group. He enjoyed the diversity of his friend group and valued the opportunity to meet individuals who were from different countries but have similar interests such as speaking German. Overall, toward the end of the first year, participants recognized how important it was to learn about different nationalities as they believed that these experiences expanded what they knew about other cultures and how they perceived international students' experiences on campus.

DISCUSSION

Participants described their relationships and perceptions of U.S. domestic students during the pre-arrival and first year, and how they primarily built homophilic relationships with co-national students and with international students of color from different countries. Prior to arrival, almost all participants expressed hesitancy in engaging with U.S. domestic students, often avoiding interaction altogether during their first year. For some, the possibility of a racist encounter influenced their lack of engaging with domestic students similar to findings by Yao (2016, 2018) and Yao et al. (2021), while others felt that U.S. students' behaviors, cultural values, lack of academic seriousness, and personal interests were contrary to their own cultures and upbringing. Our participants reported the lack of interest from U.S. domestic students in developing relationships, as they often felt unwelcomed or as Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) described, as "worthy guests" (p. 562). As a result, many participants perceived that domestic students desired only cursory pleasantries.

Our Black African participants shared negative perceptions of interactions with U.S. domestic students due to issues of race and ethnicity, similar to research by Bailey (2017) and Fries-Britt et al. (2014). These incidents often influenced participants' lack of comfort in pursuing friendships with U.S. domestic students, mainly as they tried to avoid unwarranted encounters that might subject them to xenophobia, microassaults, intelligence ascription, and other behaviors of racism and nativism (Yeo et al., 2019). Despite participants' negative perceptions and experiences with U.S. domestic students, a small number of participants developed relationships with domestic students. However, the friendships were often short-lived, and it was unclear if participants considered whether U.S. domestic students had been beneficial for their professional and academic development.

Like other scholarship by Yao (2016), our participants believed that they would have frequent interactions with U.S. domestic students, yet they were faced with the reality that many U.S. domestic students maintained surface level or minimal contact with them. This led many international students of color to develop friendships and social networks primarily with co-nationals, as similarly found in Hendrickson et al. (2011). All of these experiences led our participants to appreciate and value co-national groups by building homophilic relationships

as outlined in previous literature by Centola et al. (2007) and McPherson et al. (2001). True to form, these homophilic relationships with co-nationals provided participants with stability to navigate the collegiate setting and build a greater sense of belonging. While there may be many reasons for the lack of friendships formed among participants and U.S. domestic students (e.g., race, ethnicity, perceived prejudice), we acknowledge how many of our participants were able to gain more domestic student friendships over time, which differed from work by Rienties and Nolan (2014).

Our study adds to scholarship by Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) that confirms how international students, especially those from non-White and Western countries, rely on social interactions from co-nationals, host country/domestic students, and international students to thrive on collegiate campuses. Indeed, our participants' stories point to the duality and need to mix relationships among international students of color as cross-cultural friendships are necessary. Participants seemed to rely more on the bonds they had established with other international students for their professional and academic aspirations, likely due to their shared interests, backgrounds, and cultures, similar to work by Gomes (2015). In addition, our study aligns with the research by Robinson et al. (2020) that adds to the body of work on how cultural dissonance and boundaries can especially invade friendships between international and host-national students in the current home region such as Central Africa. Findings confirm some of the justifications for why international students of color experience superficial passive interactions from U.S. domestic students, including why they had meaningful homophilic relationships with international students and co-nationals. Ultimately, our participants' narratives challenge previous scholarship by Gareis (2012) that international students' main problem lies with U.S. domestic students when forming friendships. Rather, our findings confirm how international students of color are heavily influenced by their pre-arrival preconceptions, which may also influence their interaction and ability to make friends with U.S. domestic students.

Limitations

Our investigation into the friendship and social networks of international students of color during their first year of college limited our sample to engaging for only 1 year. Although our sample and study provide a better understanding of how international students of color tell stories about their experiences with establishing social networks during their first year, we do not know how these social networks may change over the course of participants' collegiate career. Additionally, a larger sample of students from Central Africa were from the same country. Given the familiarity of cultural values, political systems, languages, and educational values, our findings are highly representative of the experiences of students from that region.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Higher education institutions in the United States often expect international students to seek out friendships with U.S. domestic students as part of their transition. However, as indicated by the findings, developing co-national friend groups may be beneficial to the overall adjustment and transition of international students of color to a PWI. Thus, we recommend that higher education practitioners establish space and opportunity for international students of color to socialize and engage with students who share their culture, especially around their arrival to their institution. In doing so, culturally responsive practices may assist new international students of color in feeling more secure and connected as new arrivals to the United States.

Outside of their friendships with primarily co-national students and occasionally domestic students, the participants in this study reported forming relationships with other international students. Many institutions push the integration and assimilation of international students to the domestic student population; yet, as evidenced by our study, the value of connecting with the larger international student population appears to bring more benefits to overall student satisfaction and feelings of belonging. Practitioners can use this finding to enhance social opportunities for all international students, with an emphasis on cross-cultural programming and community building across the larger international student community. In addition, the establishment of peer mentors who are also international students of color may assist in the transition for first-year international students, which creates a generational support network for first-year students.

We acknowledge that this study is confined to one year and thus may not have provided the study participants enough time to build up broader intercultural friendship networks that included co-nationals, other international students, and domestic students. However, it is possible an intercultural friendship network may not be reached without focused interventions by higher education institutions. In paying attention to the temporal nature of building social networks, institutions may be able to move toward actualizing goals of cross-cultural interactions, social engagement, and intercultural dialogue between international and U.S. domestic students (Brustein, 2007; Deardorff, 2006; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Implications from this study also raise the question of how graduate preparation programs can better cultivate globally competent higher education professionals (Shelton & Yao, 2019) who can work across multiple functional areas to support the international students of color population on campuses.

For future research, a suggestion includes continuing this line of inquiry to create an updated and more comprehensive friendship network model. In addition, a lengthier longitudinal study that follows the same group of international students of color may assist in understanding how social networks may shift and morph over the span of a student's collegiate career. Finally, with the growing visibility of ideological divisions and geopolitics on college campuses, a study on how current global politics affect the social networks of international students of color would be timely in contemporary contexts.

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