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A Cross-Cultural Scoping Review of Loneliness Among International Students

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ABSTRACT: *This scoping review maps the cultural landscape of research on loneliness among international students. Drawing from 60 studies, including peer-reviewed articles and gray-literature sources, the review examines the cultural distribution of host contexts, patterns of cultural alignment between students' home and host societies, the extent to which international students are analytically differentiated from each other and with domestic peers, and how cultural frameworks are used to conceptualize loneliness. The findings reveal a strong concentration of studies in Western and individualistic contexts, a limited number of international–domestic comparisons, and a predominant tendency to treat international students as a homogeneous group despite diverse cultural origins. In addition, while culture is frequently acknowledged as relevant, explicit theoretical engagement with cultural frameworks remains uneven. Overall, the review highlights the need for more conceptually rigorous and culturally informed research to better inform university policies and interventions that support international student well-being.*

Keywords: *international students, loneliness, scoping review, cultural, cross-cultural, individualism, collectivism, acculturation*

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INTRODUCTION

While growing recognition exists that loneliness is not culturally neutral, there is limited awareness of the extent to which loneliness among international students is studied across cultural divides. This is despite evidence that there are variations in levels of loneliness across the world (Surkalim et al., 2022); that specific cultural norms and dimensions, such as individualism and collectivism, are linked to the experience of loneliness (Barreto et al., 2020; Beller & Wagner, 2020; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2013; Schermer et al., 2023); and that sojourners' experiences with psychosocial challenges are associated with cross-cultural movements and adjustments to the culture of their host society (Du et al., 2014; Kodippili et al., 2025; Saadi & Ponce, 2019).

As such, mapping existing research through a cross-cultural lens is essential to understand how loneliness among international students has been investigated across different cultural contexts. Because international students live and study within cultural contexts that differ from their home environments, they provide a particularly informative lens for examining how cultural norms and social expectations shape experiences of loneliness. A scoping review allows for a structured synthesis of this literature and provides a clearer picture of where research has been concentrated and where gaps remain. This mapping is especially timely as universities intensify efforts to support international students amid growing attention to equity, mental health, and the evolving goals of international education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Loneliness and Culture

Perlman and Peplau (1981) defined loneliness as the distressing experience that arises when one's social relationships are perceived as inadequate in quantity or quality. Although often framed as a universal human experience, growing evidence suggests that cultural contexts shape both the prevalence and the experience of loneliness. Culture informs how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to social and emotional experiences (Heu et al., 2021; Mesquita & Walker, 2003; Oishi et al., 2008). Given that loneliness is a negative emotion rooted in perceived social disconnection, it is reasonable to assume that it is, to a certain extent, culturally contingent.

Cross-national evidence further supports the view that loneliness is shaped by cultural context. In a large-scale meta-analysis covering 113 countries, Surkalim et al. (2022) found substantial variation in loneliness prevalence across world regions. Among adolescents, loneliness rates ranged from 9.2% in

Southeast Asia to 14.4% in the Eastern Mediterranean. For adults, consistent geographic patterns were observed within Europe: Northern European countries reported the lowest prevalence of loneliness across all age groups, while Eastern European countries showed the highest rates, with over one-fifth of older adults in Eastern Europe reporting loneliness. These patterns suggest that cultural, social, and structural factors unique to each region likely shape how loneliness is experienced and reported.

One cultural dimension frequently cited in explaining such regional variation is the continuum of individualism and collectivism, which shapes not only interpersonal norms but also how emotions are constructed and managed. However, studies differ in how individualism and collectivism are found to shape the experience of loneliness. Individualism is defined as a cultural orientation that emphasizes personal autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, whereas collectivism prioritizes group harmony, interdependence, and social belonging (Hofstede, 2011). In individualist cultures, relationships are often viewed as voluntary and self-initiated, which can lead to greater fluidity in social ties but also higher vulnerability to social fragmentation. In contrast, collectivist societies emphasize stable, long-term relationships grounded in familial or communal obligations, which may offer stronger structural protection against loneliness. For example, Taniguchi & Kaufman (2021) found in an analysis of data from 29 countries that individuals living in more collectivist societies were generally less likely to report loneliness, suggesting that cultural norms around social embeddedness may offer a structural buffer.

However, other research complicates the assumption that collectivism universally protects against loneliness. In a pair of multilevel analyses across European countries, Lykes & Kimmelmeier (2013) found that individuals in more collectivist societies reported higher levels of loneliness. Their findings suggest that in cultural contexts where a sense of belonging is strongly emphasized, the absence of close familial ties may be felt more acutely. In contrast, loneliness in individualist societies was more closely associated with the absence of friendships or confidants, reflecting differing relational expectations. These results highlight that the cultural meaning attached to relationships and the particular types of social ties that matter most can shape both the likelihood and the experience of loneliness.

Overall, although findings on the role of individualism and collectivism on loneliness have been mixed (Casabianca & Kovačič, 2024), what remains consistent is that experiences of loneliness differ meaningfully across these cultural orientations.

Loneliness among International Students

International students are particularly vulnerable to psychosocial difficulties due to the complex demands of cross-cultural transition. Adapting to unfamiliar academic systems, navigating implicit social norms, and being separated from preexisting support networks are common sources of distress. These challenges are often exacerbated by structural pressures, such as financial insecurity and the

need to comply with evolving immigration and visa policies (Crumley-Effinger, 2023; Gautam et al., 2016; Glass et al., 2019).

Among the range of psychological concerns international students experience, loneliness emerges as a persistent issue. In some studies, international students have been demonstrated to experience higher levels of loneliness than domestic students, often due to multiple intersecting factors. For example, Neto (2021) discovered that African international students in Portugal experienced higher levels of loneliness than native-born students. This is possibly explained by a confluence of factors, such as financial difficulties, perceived discrimination, and the international student's orientation to the culture of their host country. In another study, Chinese international students in Germany reported significantly higher levels of loneliness than local students, a pattern attributed to limitations in social structures and interpersonal dynamics (Bilecen et al., 2023b). Notably, even emotionally supportive ties were associated with increased loneliness among international students but not among domestic students, which further emphasizes how cultural differences in social expectations and relationship norms may complicate feelings of belonging. In these studies, incongruences between the students' heritage culture and their host societies could play a role in their unique experiences of loneliness. Other studies, however, have not observed significant differences in the prevalence of loneliness between international and domestic students. However, even in these cases, international students appear to face distinct social stressors. For instance, while international students in Australia did not report higher levels of loneliness than domestic students, they reported lower perceived social support (Xiong et al., 2025). Moreover, moderate to high levels of loneliness were observed across the sample, indicating that loneliness remains a salient concern for international students even in the absence of clear group differences. These studies emphasize the need to elaborate further on other cross-cultural comparisons to better understand the nuances of loneliness among international students.

What further connects culture and loneliness among international students is a category of loneliness identified by Sawir et al. (2007): cultural loneliness. This form of loneliness arises from the absence of a familiar cultural and linguistic environment and can affect international students even when they have adequate personal and social support. It reflects the difficulty of being disconnected from the norms, language, and values of one's home culture, which is typically experienced during cross-cultural transitions. Recognizing cultural loneliness highlights the importance of examining the extent to which loneliness among international students has been studied with attention to cultural context and difference.

Research Goal

Overall, the literature underlines that while international students may not always report higher levels of loneliness than domestic peers, the distinct cultural conditions they navigate shape how loneliness is experienced and understood. Given robust evidence that loneliness is deeply intertwined with cultural norms, values, and relational expectations, it becomes critical to examine the extent to

which culture is explicitly integrated into how international student loneliness is conceptualized and analyzed. While individual studies focus on culture's role in shaping these experiences, a comprehensive review that systematically maps how culture is considered in theorizing international student loneliness remains lacking based on a current search of the literature. This emphasizes the need to approach international student loneliness not merely as a psychological concern but also as a phenomenon embedded within the cultural frameworks of both the home and host environment.

Thus, this scoping review examines the literature on loneliness among international students with attention to the culture in which they have been done. It maps existing studies according to (1) the host country's cultural cluster, (2) the host country's cultural dimensions and whether the student matches or mismatches their destination's culture, (3) the extent to which international students have been compared to domestic students in terms of levels of loneliness, (4) whether international students are analytically treated as a homogeneous group or differentiated by relevant cultural, regional, or background characteristics, and (5) the ways in which culture has been used to theorize on the experience of loneliness among international students. Through this approach, this review aims to assess the cultural diversity of existing studies on international student loneliness and explore how this body of literature can inform future research and culturally responsive interventions.

METHOD

In this scoping review, the methodological frameworks of Arksey & O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010) were used to systematically map the literature on the cross-cultural experiences of loneliness among international students. Our methods consisted of (1) identifying the research questions, (2) searching for relevant studies, (3) selecting studies that met the inclusion criteria, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. The review process was guided by the PRISMA-ScR checklist to ensure transparent and comprehensive reporting (Tricco et al., 2018).

Identifying the Research Questions

The scoping review aims to address the following questions:

1. How are studies on loneliness among international students distributed geographically and across cultural clusters and dimensions?
2. To what extent do studies include comparisons between international and domestic students in terms of analyzing loneliness?
3. Are international students treated as homogeneous groups in studies on loneliness or differentiate them by origin or background characteristics?
4. To what extent is culture used to theorize on international students' loneliness and how?

Search for Relevant Studies

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify studies relevant to the research questions. The search was conducted across multiple databases, including SCOPUS, JSTOR, EBSCOHost (Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, ERIC, and Teacher Reference Center), PubMed, and ProQuest. The Boolean search string used was (“international student*” OR “foreign student*” OR “exchange student*”) AND (“loneliness”). No filters were applied for year of publication (see Figure 1).

Selecting Studies that Meet the Eligibility Criteria

The database search yielded a total of 484 articles. After removing duplicates, 299 unique records remained. These were then screened for eligibility based on title, abstract, and full-text review. The following eligibility criteria were applied: (1) the study must be published in English and available in full text; (2) the study must be empirical and peer-reviewed except for dissertations and theses; and (3) loneliness must constitute a substantive focus of the study, operationalized as being explicitly hypothesized, theorized, or intentionally examined as an independent construct (e.g., through stated hypotheses, research questions, or extended conceptual discussion). Loneliness did not need to be the sole focus of the paper.

Papers were excluded if they were not published in English or not available in full text; focused on nonuniversity populations (e.g., primary or secondary students, informal adult learning settings); or nonempirical (e.g., theoretical or review papers). Importantly, studies in which loneliness was included only as an indicator or subcomponent of a broader construct (e.g., general well-being, adjustment, or mental health composites) without independent conceptual treatment were also excluded. Qualitative studies in which loneliness emerged solely as a post hoc theme rather than an a priori focus of the study were excluded as well. This decision was made to ensure that loneliness was intentionally examined as a distinct psychosocial phenomenon rather than as a proxy for broad constructs such as general well-being or mental health, thereby allowing for clearer conceptual mapping and more meaningful synthesis across studies. Furthermore, studies involving international students living in exceptional circumstances (such as war or civil unrest) were also excluded.

Charting the Data

Two researchers independently screened studies at the title, abstract, and full-text levels. Discrepancies regarding eligibility were resolved through discussion with reference to predefined inclusion criteria. Following inclusion, data were systematically charted using a structured Notion database to ensure consistency and transparency in data extraction. For each study, the following information was recorded: (1) title; (2) journal and year of publication; (3) authors; (4) geographic location of the host country, including assignment to cultural cluster based on the GLOBE framework (House et al., 2004) and cultural dimensions derived using an online interactive country comparison tool (<https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool>) (e.g., individualist,

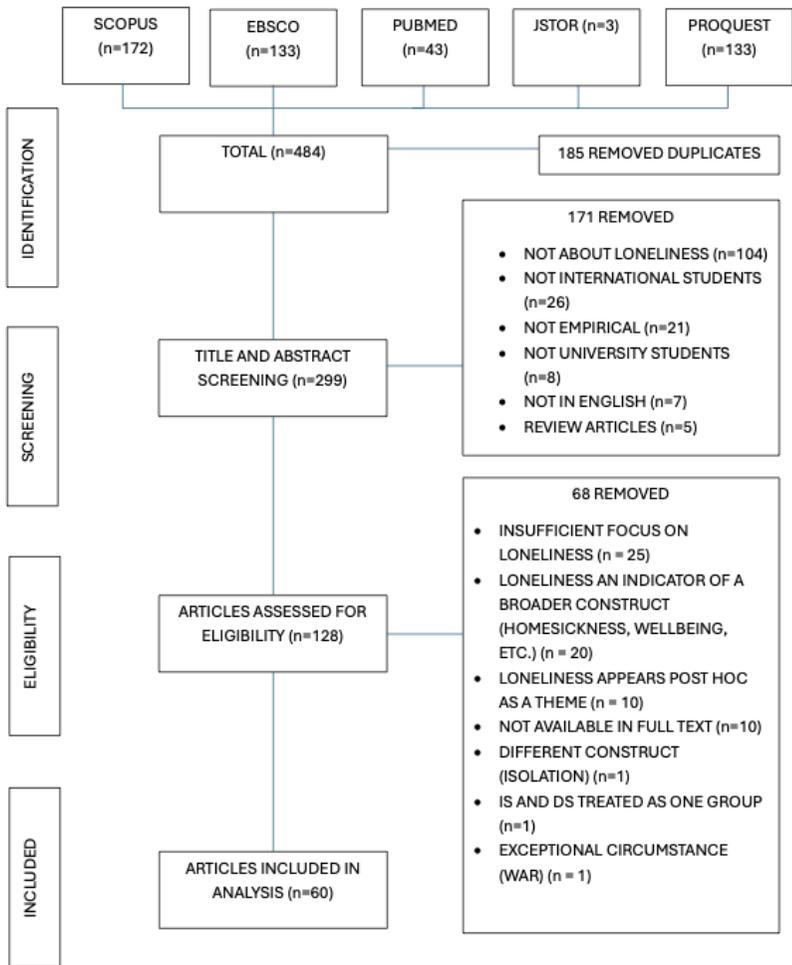


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart of the study selection process. IS refers to international students and DS refers to domestic students.

collectivist). Because Northern Cyprus is not included in the Culture Factor country comparison database, cultural orientation for studies conducted in Northern Cyprus was inferred from published literature indicating that Turkish Cypriots, the dominant population in Northern Cyprus, tend to exhibit more collectivist cultural orientations (Zorba, 2015); (5) geographic location of students' home countries, similarly classified by cultural cluster and cultural dimensions, with samples comprising students from multiple home countries coded as "mixed"; (6) study design; (7) whether the study included comparisons between international students and domestic students; (8) whether international students were analytically treated as a homogeneous group or differentiated by country or region of origin; (9) theoretical frameworks used to conceptualize or explain loneliness; and (10) loneliness-specific conclusions.

Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results

Frequency counts were used to determine the number of studies falling under categories included in the extraction form: (1) study design; (2) host country cultural cluster; (3) students' home and host country cultural dimensions (individualist, collectivist, or mixed); and (4) whether the study involved comparisons between international and domestic students.

In addition, theoretical frameworks used to understand loneliness were examined. Studies were first categorized based on whether they employed an explicit cultural framework. Frequency counts were then used to determine how often cultural frameworks were applied across the corpus. For studies that drew on cultural frameworks, an analysis was conducted to identify and synthesize the types of cultural frameworks used to conceptualize loneliness.

RESULTS

Overview of Reviewed Articles

The final corpus comprised 60 studies, including 52 peer-reviewed journal articles and 8 gray-literature sources (theses and dissertations). The reviewed studies span a publication period from 1982 to 2025, with 39 studies published from 2020 onward, indicating recent scholarly activity on the topic. In terms of study design, the majority employed quantitative methods ($n = 47$), followed by qualitative studies ($n = 7$) and mixed-methods designs ($n = 6$).

Geographical and Cultural Distribution

The reviewed studies were conducted across a range of host countries. The United States accounted for the largest share ($n = 21$), followed by Japan ($n = 7$) and China ($n = 7$). Australia was represented by five studies ($n = 5$), and both the United Kingdom and Portugal contributed four studies ($n = 4$) each. Smaller numbers of studies were conducted in Germany ($n = 2$), Italy ($n = 2$), Northern Cyprus ($n = 2$), and Türkiye ($n = 2$). Single-study host countries included South Korea, Taiwan, Poland, the Netherlands, and the United Arab Emirates (each $n = 1$). Three studies involved multiple host countries: two collected data in both

Japan and the United States, and one was a global study that collected data from multiple countries around the world.

To examine cultural distribution across host contexts, studies were also classified using the GLOBE Project framework. The GLOBE framework was used because it groups countries into empirically derived cultural clusters based on shared cultural values and practices, allowing for systematic cross-national comparison beyond single-country classifications.

Using this framework, the majority of studies were situated within the Anglo cluster (n = 28), followed by Confucian Asia (n = 14). Latin Europe accounted for six studies (n = 6), while Germanic Europe and the Middle East were each represented by three studies (n = 3). Eastern Europe was represented by one study (n = 1). Because Northern Cyprus is not designated within the GLOBE framework, it is categorized under “Unclassified” (n = 2). Studies conducted across both Japan and the United States were coded as spanning the Anglo and Confucian Asia clusters (n = 2). One additional study involved multiple host countries across different cultural clusters and was coded as mixed (n = 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Studies Based on Cultural Clusters

GLOBE Cluster	Host Country	Studies
Anglo	(n=3) Australia, United Kingdom, United States,	(n=28) (Aldarweesh et al., 2025); (Brunsting et al., 2019); (Dingle et al., 2022); (Dost, 2025); (Ennis, 2013); (Han et al., 2025); (Hojat, 1982); (Hojat, 1983); (Huu, 2007); (Irwansyah, 2005); (Jabalameli, 1993); (Kaysner-Jones & Abu-Saad, 1982); (Liu et al., 2016); (Low et al., 2023); (Luz & Thomas, 2023); (Maleku et al., 2021); (Morris et al., 2021); (Moss, 1985); (Ng, 2001); (O’Dea & Stern, 2022b); (Sawir et al., 2007); (Sebastian, 1989); (Smith & Shwalb, 2007); (Su et al., 2021); (Tsai et al., 2016); (van Essen, 2024); (Wallen et al., 2024); (Wawera & McCamley, 2019)
Confucian Asia	(n=4) China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan	(n=14) (Chang et al., 2022); (Gao et al., 2025); (Haaand & Elham, 2025); (Imai & Imai, 2019); (Imai, 2017); (Imai, 2023); (Jiang et al., 2018); (Kim & Amar, 2025); (Saeed, 2020); (Sakellarios, 2024); (Tang et

GLOBE Cluster	Host Country	Studies
		al., 2025b); (Ying et al., 2024); (Yuan et al., 2024); (Yulong et al., 2024)
Latin Europe	(n=2) Italy, Portugal	(n=6) (Altin et al., 2024); (Cipolletta et al., 2025); (Kulari et al., 2025b); (Neto & Wilks, 2017b); (Neto, 2021); (Neto, 2024)
Germanic Europe	(n=2) Germany, Netherlands	(n=3) (Bilecen et al., 2023); (Bilecen et al., 2024); (Heu et al., 2020)
Middle East	(n=2) Turkiye, United Arab Emirates	(n=3) (Bek, 2017); (Kuşci et al., 2023); (Mosanya, 2020)
Eastern Europe	(n=1) Poland	(n=1) (Wilczewski et al., 2021)
Anglo - Confucian Asia	(n=1) United States - Japan	(n=2) (Ivanova et al., 2025); (Zheng & Ishii, 2023)
Mixed (multiple unidentified countries)	-	(n=1) (Zheng et al., 2023)
Unclassified	(n=1) Northern Cyprus	(n=2) (Jarrar & Nweke, 2025); (Manyeruke & Ergün, 2022)

Note. 1) n=number of studies. 2) Northern Cyprus is not formally classified in the original GLOBE framework and is listed as Unclassified.

Cultural Dimension Pairings Between Home and Host Countries

To further map out the global distribution of loneliness research among international students, we next cross-classify every study by the cultural orientation of both the host country and the students’ home countries. This snapshot makes clear which collectivist-individualist pairings dominate the literature and highlights the cultural contexts that remain understudied.

Table 2: Student Home and Host Country Cultural Dimensions

Home Orientation	Collectivist	Individualist	Mixed
Mixed	(n=14) (Gao et al., 2025); (Imai & Imai, 2019); (Imai, 2017); (Imai, 2023); (Jiang et al., 2018); (Manyeruke & Ergün, 2022); (Mosanya, 2020); (Saeed, 2020); (Sakellarios, 2024); (Tang et al., 2025b); (Wilczewski et al., 2021); (Ying et al., 2024); (Yuan et al., 2024); (Yulong et al., 2024)	(n=27) (Aldarweesh et al., 2025); (Altin et al., 2024); (Bek, 2017); (Brunsting et al., 2019); (Cipolletta et al., 2025); (Dingle et al., 2022); (Dost, 2025); (Ennis, 2013); (Han et al., 2025); (Heu et al., 2020); (Irwansyah, 2005); (Jabalameli, 1993); (Kayser-Jones & Abu-Saad, 1982); (Kulari et al., 2025b); (Kuşci et al., 2023); (Liu et al., 2016); (Luz & Thomas, 2023); (Maleku et al., 2021); (Morris et al., 2021); (Moss, 1985); (Ng, 2001); (Sawir et al., 2007); (Sebastian, 1989); (Smith & Shwalb, 2007); (van Essen, 2024); (Wallen et al., 2024); (Wawera & McCamley, 2019)	(n=2) (Ivanova et al., 2025); (Zheng et al., 2023)
Collectivist	(n=5) (Chang et al., 2022); (Haaand & Elham, 2025); (Jarrar & Nweke, 2025); (Kim & Amar, 2025); (Zheng & Ishii, 2023)	(n=13) (Bilecen et al., 2023); (Bilecen et al., 2024); (Hojat, 1982); (Hojat, 1983); (Huu, 2007); (Low et al., 2023); (Neto & Wilks, 2017b); (Neto, 2021); (Neto, 2024); (O’Dea & Stern, 2022c); (Tsai et al., 2016); (Su et al., 2021); (Zheng & Ishii, 2023)	(n=0) -
Individualist	(n=0) -	(n=0) -	(n=0) -

Note. 1) n = number of studies. 2) Neto (2021), Chang et al. (2022), and Low et al. (2023) involved participants from multiple home countries; all home countries represented in these studies were classified as collectivist. Zheng & Ishii (2023) are categorized into both collectivist-collectivist and collectivist-individualist categories because their research involved these two configurations in two studies.

Table 2 presents the distribution of papers according to the cultural dimensions of students' home and host countries. In this review, countries were classified as individualist or collectivist based on established cultural-dimension categorizations. A mixed home-country designation indicates that a study included international students originating from multiple home countries spanning different cultural dimensions, whereas a mixed host-country designation indicates that a study examined more than one host country from different cultural dimensions. Forty-six studies in the corpus were identified as involving international students from multiple home countries; forty-three of these studies involved international students from countries with differing cultural orientations and were therefore classified as having mixed home-country designations. For analytical efficiency, three studies with multiple home countries (Neto, 2021; Chang et al. 2022; Low et al. 2023), all of which were collectivistic, were classified as having a collectivistic home country designation.

The most common configuration involved mixed home-country samples in individualist host contexts ($n = 27$). Studies with mixed home-country samples in collectivist host countries were also observed ($n = 14$), while mixed home-mixed host configurations were relatively rare ($n = 2$). Among studies with collectivist home-country samples, the majority were conducted in individualist host countries ($n = 13$), followed by collectivist host countries ($n = 5$). No studies were categorized as having a collectivist home orientation hosted in mixed host countries. Furthermore, no studies were identified in which students from individualist home countries were hosted in collectivist, individualist, or mixed cultural contexts.

Comparisons and Analytic Treatment of International Students

Out of the 60 reviewed studies, 13 studies (approximately one-fifth) included explicit comparisons between international students and domestic students with respect to loneliness. All studies that conducted international-domestic comparisons were situated in individualist host-country contexts, with no such comparisons identified in collectivist or mixed host settings. In terms of cultural clusters, these studies were distributed across Anglo contexts ($n = 6$), Latin Europe ($n = 5$), and Germanic Europe ($n = 2$).

Among the 46 studies that included international students from multiple home countries, 41 studies (89.13%) treated international students as a homogeneous group, meaning that international students were analyzed as a single category without differentiation by country, region, ethnicity, or cultural background. Within this group, several studies identified or reported students' countries or regions of origin descriptively but did not incorporate these

distinctions into their analytic comparisons and thus still treated international students as a single analytic group.

In contrast, five studies (10.87%) made explicit efforts to differentiate international students within mixed samples. Of these, four studies compared international students based on ethnic group, while one study (Jiang et al., 2018) differentiated international students according to whether they originated from individualist or collectivist cultural backgrounds.

Use of Cultural Frameworks in Explaining Loneliness

While culture was referenced by almost all reviewed studies as a relevant contextual factor in discussions of loneliness among international students, only 22 out of 60 studies explicitly positioned loneliness through the lens of cultural frameworks. Most studies drew on social-cognitive theories or general psychological theories (e.g., cognitive discrepancy theory of loneliness, typology of loneliness) to explain loneliness among international students, either exclusively or as a primary framework alongside other theories.

In this review, cultural frameworks refer to theoretical approaches that conceptualize loneliness as embedded within shared systems of meaning, values, norms, and social expectations that are produced and sustained within particular sociocultural contexts. Consistent with cultural psychological perspectives, these frameworks treat culture not as a static background characteristic or demographic label but as an explanatory lens through which psychological experiences such as loneliness are shaped by culturally patterned ways of construing the self, relationships, and social obligations (e.g., orientations toward independence–interdependence, collectivism, power distance, and relational norms). From this perspective, loneliness is understood as arising from the dynamic interaction between individuals and the cultural contexts they inhabit rather than as a purely individual or context-free psychological state (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

As shown in Table 3, the application of explicit cultural frameworks in loneliness research among international students was highly uneven. Acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) was the most frequently employed framework, appearing in 14 studies, accounting for the majority of studies that theorized culture in relation to loneliness. These studies typically framed loneliness in terms of processes of cultural adjustment (Imai, 2023), acculturative stress (Kim & Amar, 2025), or acculturation orientation in host societies (Zheng & Ishii, 2023).

Cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2001) and individualism–collectivism (Triandis, 1995) were each applied in three studies, indicating more limited but recurring engagement with culture beyond acculturation-based explanations. In these studies, culture was used to explain loneliness either through adaptation and communication processes in intercultural contexts (Haaand & Elham, 2025) or through broad cultural value orientations shaping social expectations and relational norms (Wawera & McCamley, 2019). All remaining frameworks were used sparingly. Cultural model theory (Hofstede, 2011) appeared in one study, as did relational mobility theory (Yuki & Schug, 2012).

Table 3: Cultural Frameworks Applied in Loneliness Research Among International Students

Cultural Framework	Studies
Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997)	(n=14) (Brunsting et al., 2019); (Gao et al., 2025); (Imai, 2023); (Ivanova et al., 2025); (Jabalarneli, 1993); (Jarrar & Nweke, 2025); (Kayser-Jones & Abu-Saad, 1982); (Kim & Amar, 2025); (Luz & Thomas, 2023); (Neto & Wilks, 2017b); (Neto, 2021); (Neto, 2024); (Tsai et al., 2016); (Zheng & Ishii, 2023).
Cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2001)	(n=3) (Haaand & Elham, 2025); (O’Dea & Stern, 2022c); (Yulong et al., 2024)
Individualism-Collectivism (Triandis, 1995)	(n=3) (Jiang et al., 2018); (Sawir et al., 2007); (Wawera & McCamley, 2019)
Cultural Model Theory (Hofstede, 2011)	(n=1) (Kulari et al., 2025b)
Relational Mobility Theory (Yuki & Schug, 2012)	(n=1) (Heu et al., 2020)

Note. 1) n=number of studies. 2) Kayser-Jones & Abu-Saad (1982) do not explicitly use the term “acculturation”; however, it was classified under acculturation theory because its analysis is conceptually consistent with later acculturation frameworks.

DISCUSSIONS

Western and Individualist Dominance in International Student Loneliness Research

The distribution of studies across cultural clusters reveals a pronounced concentration of research on international student loneliness in Anglo host countries, with a smaller but notable body of work situated in Confucian Asian

contexts. This pattern points to a persistent Western dominance in how loneliness among international students has been empirically examined. While this concentration partly reflects broader global mobility trends where students from collectivist societies disproportionately pursue education in Western, individualist systems (OECD, 2025), it also reveals an uneven cultural lens through which loneliness has been conceptualized and studied.

From a demographic perspective, this focus is understandable. However, it also results in a narrow evidentiary base that privileges a limited set of host environments and cultural assumptions. Research conducted predominantly in individualist contexts tends to foreground loneliness processes aligned with Western norms, such as autonomy, independence, and reduced relational embeddedness. From the perspective of culture-as-situated-cognition theory (Oyserman, 2015), this reflects how individualist contexts influence how loneliness is understood and studied. As a consequence, existing findings may overrepresent loneliness as an individual-level experience rooted in personal adjustment, while underexamining how loneliness is experienced, expressed, or mitigated within more relationally oriented cultural systems. The relative scarcity of studies situated in non-Western or Global South host contexts further limits the generalizability of current insights and constrains their relevance for institutions operating outside dominant Western education systems.

These patterns have implications for diversity and equity in international education. When the empirical literature disproportionately reflects a narrow range of cultural and institutional contexts, institutional practices informed by this research may implicitly privilege individualist models of belonging and support. This risks marginalizing students whose social expectations, identity orientations, and relational needs do not align with these norms. Addressing this imbalance requires a more culturally inclusive research agenda that reflects the diversity of international student trajectories and host environments.

Limited Comparisons Between Domestic and International Students

We also observed a relative scarcity of studies that directly compare international and domestic students in their experiences of loneliness. Such comparisons are valuable because they provide a critical baseline for determining whether loneliness among international students reflects culturally specific vulnerabilities or more universal transitional challenges. In the limited literature that does include domestic student comparisons, findings remain inconclusive. Some studies report that international students experience higher levels of loneliness and related mental health concerns (Bilecen et al., 2024; Kulari et al., 2025b; Neto, 2021). Others find no significant differences between the two groups (Aldarweesh et al., 2025; Cipolletta et al., 2025), and a few even suggest that domestic students may experience greater loneliness in certain contexts (Dingle et al., 2022; Altin et al., 2024). These mixed results reinforce the need for more systematic, culturally informed comparisons between international and domestic students to better understand the dynamics and determinants of loneliness, especially among international students. More importantly, this allows for more tailored university programs that address the specific experiences of loneliness

among international students separate from the equally unique concerns of domestic students.

International Students as a Homogenous Group

Despite cross-cultural references throughout the literature, there remains a tendency to treat international students as a homogenous group, especially in studies that aggregate culturally diverse participants without analytically disaggregating their experiences. Even in studies that include cross-national or ethnic subgroup comparisons, cultural variation is often acknowledged without being deeply theorized. In some cases, this is understandable, as delineating between cultures could have implications for sample sizes. Nevertheless, this is a notable limitation, given growing evidence that one's home culture can shape how loneliness is experienced, expressed, and coped with (Barreto et al., 2020). Without attention to cultural specificity, loneliness risks being conceptualized as a universal psychological condition rather than a culturally embedded experience. The current review highlights the need to move beyond tokenistic mentions of culture and toward a more nuanced, comparative, and culturally situated understanding of loneliness among international students.

The Extent of Cultural Frameworks in International Student Loneliness Research

Only a minority of studies in the review offered in-depth discussions of how specific cultural constructs such as individualism, collectivism, and acculturation may shape international students' experiences of loneliness. Some notable examples include an exploration of the role of cross-cultural communication apprehension of loneliness among Afghan students in China (Haaand & Elham, 2025), how the individualism and collectivism of an international student's cultural origin can influence their experiences of loneliness (Jiang et al., 2018), and how incongruences in cultural orientations can lead to "cultural loneliness" (Sawir et al., 2007). These studies demonstrate that cultural theorizing can illuminate not only whether international students feel lonely but also why loneliness may take particular forms in specific cultural contexts. However, such theoretically grounded approaches remain uncommon.

The overall pattern suggests that culture is frequently treated as a descriptive attribute rather than a theoretical construct. This limits the field's capacity to conceptualize loneliness as a culturally embedded experience shaped by norms around relationships, communication, and belonging. Without explicit cultural theorizing, loneliness risks being framed primarily as an individual psychological outcome of transition rather than as an experience produced through ongoing interactions between students and culturally structured educational environments.

This gap has important implications for equitable international education. When cultural processes are undertheorized, institutional responses to international student loneliness may rely on generic support models that assume a relatively uniform transition experience. Such approaches risk overlooking how institutional norms, expectations, and practices are culturally patterned and may inadvertently disadvantage students navigating unfamiliar educational systems.

More explicit cultural theorizing can help institutions better recognize and address structural and cultural mismatches that contribute to unequal experiences of belonging and wellbeing.

Overall, the findings indicate that while culture is frequently acknowledged in international student loneliness research, it is rarely theorized in ways that meaningfully advance understanding of the phenomenon. Strengthening cultural theorizing is therefore critical for developing more nuanced explanations of loneliness and for informing institutional practices that are responsive to the complex cultural realities of international students.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This scoping review is subject to several limitations. First, it is constrained by the availability of published scholarly literature, which may limit the comprehensiveness of the review. Relevant studies not indexed in the selected databases or published in less accessible venues may have been excluded. Second, the review was limited to studies published in English. These criteria may have influenced both the breadth and distribution of the studies captured, particularly in underrepresented regions. The exclusion of non-English sources may inadvertently reinforce existing publication biases, especially given that researchers from the Global South often face structural barriers to publishing in high-impact international journals (MoChridhe, 2019). As a result, the current review may underrepresent perspectives and research contexts outside dominant academic publishing networks.

For researchers, we recommend further mapping of the extent to which cultural frameworks are used in studies on loneliness among international students. In addition, we recommend that studies disaggregate international student samples whenever possible to avoid overgeneralizing their experiences and to account for the diversity of cultural backgrounds. For universities hosting international students, especially in underrepresented regions, investing more in research on international student loneliness could facilitate programs and interventions that can be tailored to the needs of the international students in their respective institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

This scoping review maps the current landscape of research on loneliness among international students through a cross-cultural lens, revealing both the strengths and gaps in the field. While loneliness is widely acknowledged as a pressing concern, the literature remains heavily concentrated in Western, individualistic contexts, with limited attention to how cultural background and host environment interact to shape students' experiences. Cultural frameworks are frequently referenced but seldom deeply integrated, and international students are often treated as a homogenous group despite evidence that home culture influences perceptions of loneliness. By synthesizing how and where culture features in this body of research, this review underscores the need for more culturally informed,

theoretically grounded, and globally representative scholarship to better support international students in higher education.

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