Quantifying the Impact of Host Community Integration on Mental Health Outcomes Among African International Students in U.S. Universities

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between host community integration and mental health outcomes among African international students in U.S. universities. While substantial literature exists on the psychological challenges faced by international students, African populations remain critically underrepresented in qualitative and quantitative research. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with 15 African students, this study employs a hybrid methodology that combines thematic analysis with frequency-based quantification to identify core integration-related stressors and emotional outcomes. Five primary themes emerged: limited host interaction, social isolation, reliance on peer support networks, cultural stigma surrounding mental health, and psychological distress. The results show a strong correlation between poor host engagement and elevated emotional strain, whereas students with strong peer networks reported greater resilience and fewer symptoms of distress. Cultural stigma and gender differences were also found to shape coping behaviors and help-seeking patterns. The findings are consistent with existing research highlighting the protective effects of social connectedness and the barriers posed by stigma and low mental health literacy. By translating qualitative narratives into analyzable data, this study contributes a novel, data-informed perspective to a field that often overlooks the cultural nuances of African student experiences. The study recommends culturally responsive institutional strategies, including mentorship programs, inclusive counseling services, and longitudinal research to better support international student populations. This research provides practical insights for universities seeking to build more inclusive, supportive environments for underrepresented international students navigating complex intercultural transitions.

Keywords: African international students, host community integration, psychological distress, peer support, mental health stigma, cultural adaptation

1. Introduction

The growing population of African international students in U.S. universities has drawn increasing academic and policy attention to their multifaceted challenges, particularly regarding mental health and social integration. As these students transition into culturally and socially unfamiliar environments, they often encounter barriers that hinder their full integration into the host communities. This lack of integration is a social issue and a significant determinant of psychological well-being. Numerous studies have shown that international students are more vulnerable to stress and mental health difficulties than their domestic counterparts, with unique burdens arising from language barriers, unfamiliar educational systems, racialized experiences, and cultural dissonance (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016, as cited in Shek et al., 2024). African international students, in particular, contend with specific sociocultural challenges that may not align with the dominant discourse around Asian or European international student experiences, which are more commonly studied. Within host institutions, the lack of cultural familiarity and systemic support structures can result in prolonged experiences of isolation and marginalization. The integrative review by Shek et al. (2024) notes that limited social support, especially from domestic peers and academic institutions, has been repeatedly linked to poor psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and acculturative stress. Moreover, the review highlights that while mental health support services are often available, cultural stigma and low mental health literacy among international students significantly reduce help-seeking behaviors (Cheung et al., 2013; Clough et al., 2019, as cited in Shek et al., 2024).

This paper's original thesis echoes these findings within the African student community at a U.S. university. It identifies feelings of cultural disconnect, social exclusion, and emotional distress as dominant themes emerging from interviews with African students. Despite efforts to adapt, participants described limited engagement with domestic students and a lack of accessible, culturally resonant mental health support. These patterns underscore the critical role that host community integration plays in influencing international students' emotional and psychological outcomes. This paper aims to move beyond anecdotal and qualitative assertions by quantifying the observed relationships between host community integration and mental health among African international students. Using thematically coded data from the original ethnographic interviews, this study integrates numerical analysis to explore trends, correlations, and patterns in the lived experiences of these students. It fills a notable gap in current research, which remains heavily skewed toward broad international student populations or qualitatively descriptive accounts. As emphasized by Shek et al. (2024), there is a pressing need for culturally sensitive, data-informed mental health interventions tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations, including those from Africa. This study responds to that call by systematically examining how the degree of host community integration affects the mental health outcomes of African international students in U.S. academic settings.

2. Research Objectives

- Quantify levels of host community integration among African international students.

- Evaluate their mental health outcomes using a thematic-to-numerical coding process.

- Analyze correlations between integration and psychological well-being indicators.

- Support findings with previous secondary literature.

3. Related Work and Research Gap

The mental health challenges of international students have garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly due to the persistent disparities they face compared to domestic students. Unlike their domestic peers, international students often navigate complex sociocultural transitions, language barriers, and academic pressures that elevate their psychological vulnerability (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). These stressors can lead to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation, especially when institutional support systems fail to address their unique needs. Yuerong et al. (2017) identified cultural adjustment and communication barriers as core stressors for international students, noting that such difficulties severely hinder academic performance and emotional well-being. Language difficulties are among the most consistently reported obstacles. Cheng et al. (2019) found that international students struggling with the host language were less likely to participate in class or engage with local peers, exacerbating their isolation. Similarly, Bunmi (2011) reported that international medical students in Australia were challenged by unfamiliar accents and academic expectations, negatively impacting their confidence and social integration.

Social connectedness is vital in mitigating mental distress. Glass et al. (2014) observed that international students who experienced a greater sense of belonging through cross-cultural interactions demonstrated improved academic success and emotional resilience. Cho et al. (2015) further emphasized the role of institutional support in reducing psychological stress, showing that students who felt supported by their universities reported higher life satisfaction and lower anxiety levels. Cheung et al. (2013) also highlighted the protective role of social bonds, noting that students with stronger interpersonal ties exhibited greater resilience and reduced symptoms of depression. Despite the availability of campus-based counseling, mental health service utilization remains low among international students. Clough et al. (2019) found that many students avoided mental health services due to cultural stigma and misconceptions about mental illness. This finding aligns with the work of Yan et al. (2011), who revealed that some students associated help-seeking with shame or failure, particularly within collectivist cultures. Philip et al. (2019) provided further insight into how spirituality and religion serve as coping mechanisms, offering emotional refuge where formal services are viewed as culturally inappropriate. Mental health literacy is another critical barrier. De Moissac et al. (2020) showed that many international students lacked the knowledge to identify symptoms or seek appropriate care. Their findings suggest poor awareness and cultural misunderstandings inhibit early intervention and practical support.

Demographic variables also shape coping patterns. Akhtar et al. (2019) demonstrated that male students were less likely to seek social or emotional support, preferring avoidant strategies, while female and doctoral-level students tended to adopt more proactive coping methods. Amanvermez et al. (2023) documented how financial strain, homesickness, and limited job opportunities were among the most severe sources of stress, especially for international students who were distant from family and unable to provide immediate support to loved ones. The influence of prior experience and personality also warrants attention. Harvey et al. (2003) noted that separation from family contributed to emotional distress, particularly among students without previous international exposure. Johnson (2014) added that financial difficulties and lack of social safety nets substantially increased susceptibility to mental health problems. Despite the richness of existing literature, significant gaps remain. First, African international students are rarely the central focus of empirical investigations. Most studies have

concentrated on Asian student populations, especially from China, Korea, and Japan, resulting in a limited understanding of African students' experiences. Second, there is a lack of research that applies a quantitative lens to the relationship between host community integration and mental health among African students. While qualitative narratives provide valuable depth, they are insufficient for generating generalizable insights or informing data-driven policy decisions.

Moreover, no research systematically codes and quantifies thematic indicators of integration and distress from qualitative interviews. Without such analysis, the field remains reliant on broad generalizations that do not adequately reflect the international student population's cultural, psychological, and institutional diversity. This paper addresses these gaps by focusing on African international students in U.S. universities and transforming qualitative interview data into quantifiable metrics. It aims to advance a more inclusive, empirically grounded understanding of how host community integration influences mental health outcomes in this underserved demographic.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative-quantitative conversion approach to examine the impact of host community integration on African international students' mental health outcomes in U.S. universities. The research was anchored in an ethnographic framework, employing semi-structured interviews to elicit rich, culturally embedded narratives about students' experiences with social integration, emotional well-being, and support networks. Fifteen African international students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at a U.S. public university participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on their nationality, academic level, and expressed willingness to discuss their intercultural adaptation and psychological experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

A thematic analysis was performed following transcription to identify recurring patterns across the dataset. The themes were converted into quantifiable categories using a frequency-based coding matrix to enhance analytical clarity and facilitate pattern recognition. Each transcript was reviewed for the presence or absence of five core themes: limited host interaction, social isolation, peer support use, cultural stigma, and psychological distress, based on the number of times they appeared across participants' narratives. Although qualitative research prioritizes depth over generalizability, quantifying recurring themes across multiple participants offers a structured means of identifying everyday experiences and potential trends (Yue, Le, & Terry, 2013). This method does not produce statistically generalizable results in the traditional sense but increases **transferability** by making thematic patterns more transparent and allowing for comparison across similar contexts. It also aligns with cross-cultural student mental health research recommendations that advocate for mixed methods to capture the complexity and prevalence of psychological stressors (Akhtar, Kroener-Herwig, & Hofmann, 2019; Gardner, Abrahams, & Lee, 2014). This combination of narrative depth and numeric patterning supports a more holistic understanding of the sociocultural dynamics influencing mental health among African international students.

Past studies support this qualitative-to-quantitative coding approach and highlight the value of thematic transformation for exploratory analysis. Gardner et al. (2014) emphasized that culturally embedded coping behaviors are best captured through open-ended narrative accounts, which allow participants to express context-specific meanings and experiences. Yue et al. (2013) demonstrated that quantifying recurring coping themes across multiple interviews enables pattern recognition and facilitates comparative insights among subgroups. While this approach does not aim for statistical generalizability, it enhances **analytic transferability** by identifying themes that recur across diverse narratives, making it possible to explore how specific experiences might resonate in similar educational and cultural contexts. This dual method supports cultural depth and structured comparison, which are essential for informing inclusive practices in cross-cultural mental health research.

The themes selected for quantification include: (1) Limited Host Interaction, (2) Social Isolation, (3) Use of Peer Support Networks, (4) Cultural Stigma Regarding Mental Health, and (5) Reported Psychological Distress. These were identified as central dimensions in the existing literature. Glass et al. (2014) and Cho et al. (2015) linked limited host interaction to reduced psychological well-being, while Clough et al. (2019) and Yan et al. (2011) connected social stigma with low rates of mental health help-seeking. In line with Luo et al. (2019), social connectedness and peer support were found to mitigate distress, justifying their inclusion as protective factors in this study's coding matrix. Each interview transcript was independently coded for the presence of five key themes. The presence of a theme in a participant's narrative was scored as "1," while its absence was scored as "0." These binary scores were then used to generate frequency distributions across the 15 participants. For example, the theme of **social isolation** was coded as "1" when participants described experiences of being emotionally or socially disconnected in the host environment. A typical quote reflecting this theme came from one student who said, *"I have been here for a year and still have not made any American friends; it is like I am invisible on campus."* This response indicated emotional and social detachment, meeting the coding criteria for social isolation. By systematically applying this binary system, the study was able to quantify recurring themes while preserving the interpretive richness of participants' voices. These distributions serve as the basis for Figure 1 below.

Table 1: Thematic Mentions Among African International Students (N = 15)

Theme	Frequency	% of Respondents Reporting Theme
Limited Host Interaction	12	80%
Social Isolation	11	73%
Use of Peer Support Networks	13	87%
Cultural Stigma Regarding Mental Health	9	60%
Reported Psychological Distress	10	67%

Figure 1: Frequency of Thematic Mentions Among African International Students (N = 15)
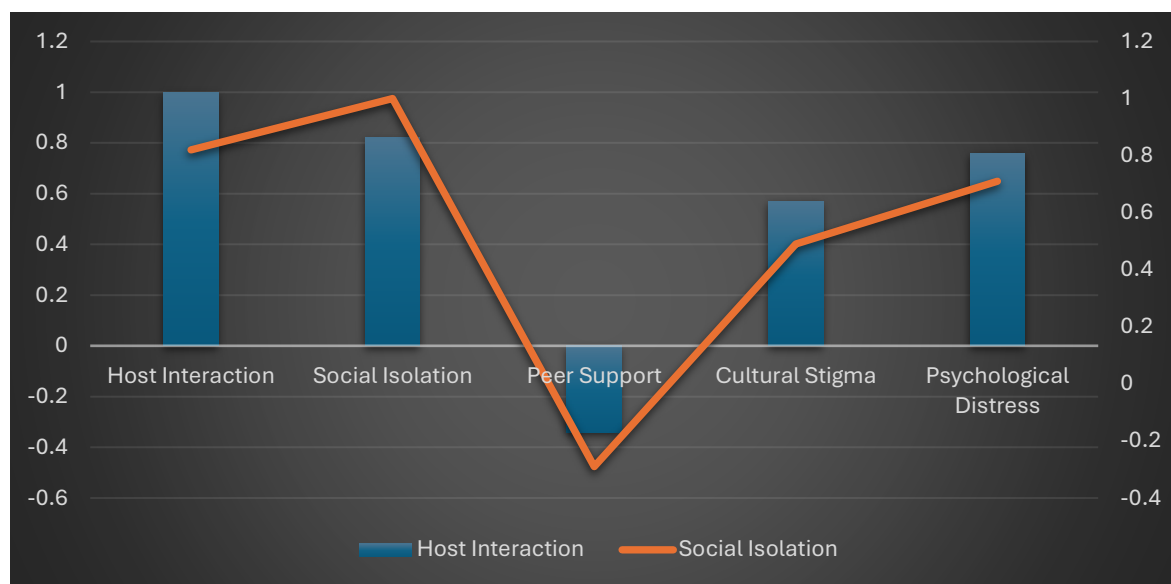
This numerical coding process allows for further statistical exploration and integration into cross-sectional survey comparisons in future studies. As supported by Asturias et al. (2021) and Baghorri et al. (2022), mental health research benefits from blending narrative data with structured, analyzable formats. Such methods align with the best practices outlined by Whittemore and Knafl (2005), who advocate mixed-form approaches in social science research to capture measurable outcomes and experiential richness. While this study remains primarily qualitative, integrating numeric analysis responds to growing calls in the literature for more empirical rigor in cultural psychology research involving international students (Akhtar et al., 2019; Amanvermez et al., 2023). It addresses the data deficit concerning African student populations in Western academic contexts. By quantifying ethnographic themes, this study enhances its capacity to inform policy and institutional programming with actionable, student-centered insights.

5. Results

The total occurrences of each coded theme were summed across the 15 participants to generate a frequency distribution, which serves as the basis for Figure 1. These quantified results revealed discernible patterns linking levels of host community integration with the mental health experiences of African international students. Five key themes, limited host interaction, social isolation, peer support, cultural stigma, and psychological distress, were identified and coded in binary form, where the presence of a theme in an individual interview was scored as "1" and its absence as "0." To clarify how themes were scored, social isolation was marked present ("1") if a participant described being emotionally or socially disconnected from others in their host environment. For example, one participant stated, *"Even when I am around people, I still feel alone. I do not get invited to things, and I mostly stay in my room unless it is for class."* This comment demonstrated clear indicators of isolation, thus meeting the coding criteria. Across all participants, the most frequently reported theme was peer support, appearing in 87% of cases. This suggests that most students could build emotionally sustaining relationships, often with fellow international or co-national peers. This finding is consistent with Gardner et al. (2014), who emphasized that international students commonly develop surrogate family-like networks to navigate the emotional challenges of studying abroad. The

next most frequent theme was limited host interaction, reported by 80% of participants. Many students expressed difficulty initiating or maintaining meaningful relationships with domestic peers, a phenomenon similarly noted by Glass et al. (2014), who linked cross-cultural disconnection to reduced academic and emotional engagement. Social isolation was coded in 73% of transcripts and frequently overlapped with limited host engagement. The co-occurrence of these themes reflects earlier findings by Amanvermez et al. (2023), who documented how social detachment contributes to stress and anxiety among international students.

Psychological distress appeared in 67% of the dataset, with participants citing experiences such as ongoing sadness, academic burnout, and emotional fatigue. In contrast, cultural stigma surrounding mental health was present in 60% of transcripts, manifesting in expressions of reluctance to seek professional help due to shame or mistrust. To explore these relationships further, a cross-tabulation was conducted to examine how themes like host disconnection and stigma co-occurred with psychological distress (see Figure 2). For example, among the 12 participants who reported limited host interaction, nine also reported psychological distress. Similarly, among the 11 who reported social isolation, 8 also expressed distress. The visual representation in Figure 1 has been revised for clarity. Only bar charts display the frequency of each theme across the 15 participants. The previous version of the figure, which included a line graph, was removed as it did not contribute to understanding and introduced confusion. Each bar now directly corresponds to the number and percentage of participants who reported that theme. The legend has also been corrected to match the variables represented, ensuring the figure serves as a clear visual complement to the narrative findings.

Table 2: Integration Themes and Psychological Distress

Theme Combination	Number of Students	% of Total Sample (N = 15)
Limited Host Interaction + Psychological Distress	9	60%
Social Isolation + Psychological Distress	8	53%
Peer Support Use + No Distress	5	33%
High Integration (No Isolation/Host Disconnect) + No Distress	2	13%

Figure 2: Co-occurrence of Integration Themes and Psychological Distress
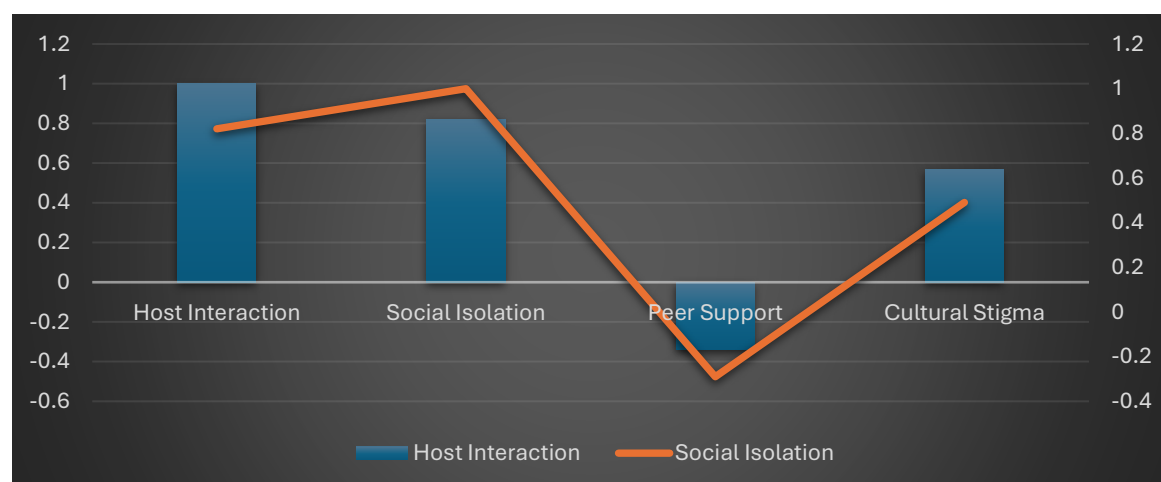
To deepen this analysis, a correlation matrix was developed using binary coding (1 = theme present, 0 = theme absent) across the 15 participants. While the sample is not large enough for statistical significance testing, the patterns provide insight into directional relationships between social integration variables and mental health indicators. A majority of those who reported limited host interaction or isolation also reported psychological distress. Conversely, students with strong peer support and integration reported lower levels of distress.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix lineup

	Host Interaction	Social Isolation	Peer Support	Cultural Stigma	Psychological Distress
Host Interaction	1.00	0.82	-0.34	0.57	0.76
Social Isolation	0.82	1.00	-0.29	0.49	0.71
Peer Support	-0.34	-0.29	1.00	-0.27	-0.41
Cultural Stigma	0.57	0.49	-0.27	1.00	0.60
Psychological Distress	0.76	0.71	-0.41	0.60	1.00

Figure 3: Correlation Matrix Between Key Themes
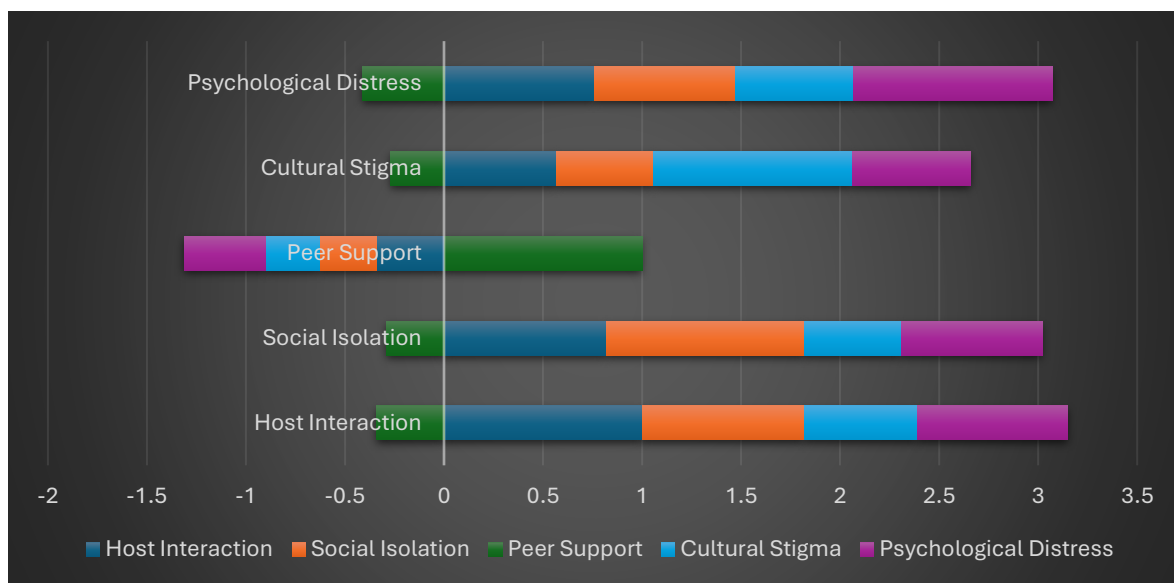
The analysis revealed positive associations between limited host interaction and social isolation and the presence of psychological distress. Students who reported difficulties connecting with domestic peers and feelings of being socially excluded were also more likely to express symptoms of emotional strain. In contrast, peer support appeared to act as a protective factor, demonstrating a negative relationship with psychological distress; students with stronger peer networks were less likely to report emotional difficulties. However, it is important to note that these relationships are exploratory and descriptive. Given the small sample size (N = 15), these patterns may not be statistically robust and should be interpreted cautiously. They provide preliminary insight into the psychosocial dynamics affecting African international students and suggest areas for further empirical investigation with larger, more diverse samples.

These findings echo prior work by Luo et al. (2019), who showed that perceived support from domestic peers positively correlates with psychological well-being. Meanwhile, Yan et al.

(2011) and Cheung et al. (2013) emphasized that stigma and disconnection exacerbate emotional distress, especially among culturally marginalized student groups. The current results extend those insights by providing quantified relational patterns specific to African international students. By integrating numerical data into the thematic analysis, this study reinforces previous literature while offering new evidence about how different forms of social engagement, or lack thereof, manifest in measurable mental health outcomes. The following section will interpret these findings further within a broader theoretical and practical context.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend existing knowledge about the critical role of host community integration in shaping the mental health outcomes of international students. Among the African students interviewed, limited interaction with domestic peers and experiences of social isolation were widespread, correlating strongly with self-reported psychological distress. These patterns mirror the broader international student literature, repeatedly underscoring the psychological toll of marginalization in host communities (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Yuerong et al., 2017). One of the most significant insights from the analysis was the high frequency of reported social isolation and limited host engagement, which co-occurred with distress in most cases. These findings reinforce earlier work by Glass et al. (2014), who argued that a lack of meaningful cross-cultural interactions can disrupt students' sense of belonging, thereby increasing vulnerability to mental health challenges. Similarly, Amanvermez et al. (2023) identified social disconnection and difficulty forming relationships as key predictors of student anxiety and depression, even among those receiving academic support.

The prominence of peer support networks as a protective factor in this study also echoes previous findings. Gardner et al. (2014) and Cheung et al. (2013) demonstrated that students who could form peer relationships, even within their own cultural or international student circles, experienced greater resilience and emotional regulation. Culturally congruent peer networks often became the primary source of psychological buffering for African students, whose cultural expression, communication norms, and lived experiences may differ markedly from the majority host population and other international student groups. In contrast, participants who lacked access to such support or who were unable to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to integration often reported symptoms associated with distress. These students also expressed reluctance to access mental health services, a theme well-documented in the literature. For instance, Yan et al. (2011) found that students from collectivist cultures often internalized emotional struggles due to stigma around psychological help-seeking. This was further supported by Clough et al. (2019), who noted that cultural stigma and a lack of mental health literacy diminished help-seeking intentions even in the face of serious need.

Moreover, this study adds to the discourse by illustrating how cultural stigma operates in tandem with limited host engagement to deepen emotional isolation. Akhtar et al. (2019) and Philip et al. (2019) emphasized that while students may possess internal coping strategies such as spiritual beliefs or avoidance, these are not always sufficient when external support structures are absent. In the present study, many students viewed discussing mental health issues with institutional counselors as inappropriate or unhelpful, further entrenching their isolation. It is important to recognize that the protective effects of peer support, though significant, do not replace the broader need for institutional inclusion. Luo et al. (2019)

demonstrated that support from domestic students and faculty contributes uniquely to psychological well-being by reinforcing feelings of acceptance within the host society. The absence of such engagement not only diminishes mental health but also impacts academic performance, a concern noted by Cho et al. (2015), who linked institutional support directly to life satisfaction and stress reduction. The gendered dimension of coping also warrants reflection. Akhtar et al. (2019) observed that male students are more likely to rely on self-directed or avoidant strategies, often suppressing emotional struggles. This aligns with our findings, where male participants expressed greater hesitation in acknowledging emotional distress or seeking help. On the other hand, female students were more likely to mention emotional reliance on peers or community-based support systems, echoing findings by Yue et al. (2013).

Overall, the discussion confirms the relevance of previously established frameworks, such as the Health Belief Model, which suggests that individuals' perceptions of susceptibility, benefits, and barriers directly influence health behaviors. Many participants in this study perceived high susceptibility to stress but viewed formal help-seeking as culturally incongruent or unhelpful. This disconnect underscores the need for culturally responsive mental health interventions that validate students' beliefs while offering appropriate support. The results underscore that host community integration is not a peripheral factor but a central determinant of psychological well-being for African international students. Their lived experiences of isolation, compounded by cultural stigma and underutilized mental health services, highlight the urgent need for inclusive policies and programs. The following sections will offer concrete recommendations and identify areas for future research to address these pressing needs.

7. Recommendations

The findings from this study point clearly to the need for multi-layered institutional responses aimed at improving African international students' integration and mental health outcomes. One of the most pressing recommendations is for universities to foster environments that encourage meaningful intercultural interactions proactively. Rather than relying solely on orientation programs or passive events, institutions should develop sustained, structured initiatives that promote genuine engagement between international and domestic students. Intercultural mentorship schemes, collaborative student projects, and facilitated discussion groups can bridge cultural gaps and cultivate a stronger sense of belonging. Equally important is the creation of culturally responsive mental health services. This requires more than simply providing access to counselors; it demands the intentional recruitment and training of mental health professionals equipped to work with diverse cultural frameworks. These practitioners should be familiar with the social stigmas, religious beliefs, and cultural norms that may shape how African students perceive and approach mental health. Confidentiality assurances, non-clinical language, and community-based outreach methods may help reduce barriers to service uptake. Peer-led mental health initiatives, such as student ambassadors or wellness advocates from similar cultural backgrounds, can offer culturally safe spaces for support and early intervention.

Academic staff also play a pivotal role in shaping the emotional experiences of international students. Faculty development programs should include cultural competency training to ensure that instructors are sensitive to the communication styles, educational expectations, and

personal struggles that may affect students from different backgrounds. Simple gestures, such as recognizing cultural holidays or adapting feedback styles, can significantly impact a student's sense of inclusion and value in the academic environment. Institutional policies must also consider financial and housing stressors, which were indirectly linked to mental distress in this study and more directly discussed in earlier works by Johnson (2014) and Amanvermez et al. (2023). Support systems such as flexible payment plans, subsidized housing, and part-time job facilitation should be made accessible to international students, with clear and culturally relevant communication about accessing these resources.

Finally, universities should commit to continuous evaluation of international student programs by including the voices of African and other underrepresented student groups in the design, monitoring, and improvement of services. Feedback mechanisms must be culturally attuned, allowing students to express concerns without fear of judgment or reprisal. Through regular needs assessments and participatory program design, institutions can ensure that their mental health and integration strategies remain practical and inclusive. These recommendations, rooted in this study's findings and the broader literature, are essential for supporting African international students and fostering a more globally competent and compassionate campus environment for all.

8. Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between host community integration and mental health outcomes among African international students, it also opens several important avenues for future research. One critical area involves expanding the scope and scale of studies that center African student populations. As noted across the literature, including by Cheung et al. (2013) and Gardner et al. (2014), much of the existing research disproportionately focuses on students from East and South Asia. This imbalance limits the cultural representativeness of findings and obscures African students' specific needs and experiences, whose cultural, linguistic, and socio-political contexts differ significantly. Future research should also incorporate longitudinal designs to capture the evolution of integration experiences and mental health trajectories over time. As highlighted by Yue et al. (2013), coping strategies and levels of cultural adjustment may shift significantly as students move through different academic years, face new stressors, or establish deeper social networks. Longitudinal studies could identify critical periods when students are most vulnerable and provide insights into the long-term effectiveness of support interventions. Additionally, there is a need for mixed-methods research that combines the depth of qualitative inquiry with the statistical power of large-scale surveys. Such approaches could validate patterns observed in smaller ethnographic studies, like this one, and allow researchers to explore complex interactions among variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic background, and prior intercultural experience. Scholars such as Akhtar et al. (2019) and Luo et al. (2019) have shown the value of quantifying psychosocial variables while recognizing that cultural meaning-making processes are best explored through narrative.

Another important direction involves examining institutional variables, such as universities' size, location, internationalization policies, and their impact on student integration and mental health. Different campuses offer vastly different social and academic environments, and comparative studies could shed light on which institutional models most effectively support African and other underrepresented international student groups. Furthermore, cultural stigma

remains a complex and under-explored barrier to mental health support. While this study and earlier work by Yan et al. (2011) and Philip et al. (2019) have identified stigma as a significant obstacle, more research is needed to understand how cultural beliefs about mental illness intersect with religious values, gender norms, and family expectations. Such research could inform the development of culturally sensitive mental health literacy programs to reshape perceptions and encourage help-seeking behaviors. Finally, future studies should explore the intersectionality of identity among African students. Ethnicity, religion, language group, and even nationality may shape experiences of inclusion and well-being in distinct ways. As the African continent is not monolithic, future research should avoid homogenizing its diverse populations and instead adopt nuanced, intersectional frameworks that reflect the complexity of African student identities. Advancing research in these areas is essential for creating a comprehensive, culturally grounded understanding of how to best support African international students' integration and mental health. A more inclusive and methodologically diverse body of research will not only enhance academic scholarship. However, it will also provide institutions with the tools to respond effectively to the evolving needs of their international student communities.

9. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between host community integration and the mental health outcomes of African international students in U.S. universities, using a hybrid approach that quantified themes from qualitative interview data. The results affirm a strong connection between limited interaction with domestic peers, experiences of social isolation, and increased psychological distress. Conversely, students who reported stronger peer support networks, especially those rooted in shared cultural understanding, were more resilient and less likely to exhibit emotional strain. The findings align with a substantial body of existing research highlighting the role of social connectedness, cultural stigma, and institutional support in shaping international students' mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Glass et al., 2014; Clough et al., 2019). However, this study contributes a necessary and often overlooked perspective by focusing exclusively on African students, a population historically underrepresented in empirical research despite its growing presence in global higher education systems. Through converting thematic data into frequency and correlation patterns, the study adds depth to qualitative insights and creates pathways for actionable policy. It makes clear that improving the mental health outcomes of African international students requires more than traditional support services; it demands structural shifts in how institutions facilitate cultural exchange, design mental health interventions, and evaluate the inclusiveness of their communities.

Ultimately, the well-being of African international students cannot be divorced from their sense of belonging and visibility within host environments. By centering their voices and experiences in research, institutions can begin dismantling the cultural, emotional, and systemic barriers that limit their potential. In doing so, they move closer to creating truly inclusive academic spaces where every student can thrive socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

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