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The International Student Social Experience at a Predominantly White Institution

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Acknowledgements

I truly pride myself on my ethnicity, culture, and above all where I come from. It makes me, myself, and makes me stand out. Being given the opportunity, alongside many people that I know to study away from all three factors that help make me who I am, is extremely bittersweet. This is because I have to drift away from all that I know but, simultaneously, I gain so much more. Turning this feeling and experience into a concept so prominent would not have been a possibility without the help of my thesis advisor, Professor Randolph Lee.

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Abstract

Past research has shown widespread disparities in the way domestic students adjust to this transition versus the way international students adjust to the transition of moving into university; especially at predominantly white institutions (PWI) within The United States of America. In many studies, international students have been found to attain elevated levels of anxiety, and experience more difficulty in finding a sense of belonging. Therefore, the present study sought to examine these concerns more carefully. 49 students from all academic years at Trinity College, a PWI, were administered two surveys in order to objectively gauge their levels of anxiety and subjectively understand their personal beliefs and experiences on and within the social climate at the university. Significant findings suggested that while citizenship didn't showcase much significance in depicting a student's anxiety levels, it does play a role in elevating them. Consequently, domestic students obtained a sense of belonging faster than international students enrolled at this PWI, in particular. Additionally, the academic year of the international students played a key role in their ability to find a sense of belonging as well as their levels of anxiety. However, considering that each PWI is different and contains distinct social climates, distinct degrees of diversity, and distinct measures of social support, the results of this study would be very open to change depending on the university being assessed. Future research on this subject could involve the consideration of depression as a variable or be based on the application of new measures set in place with the objective of easing the adjustment process for international students at PWIs.

Keywords: Predominantly White Institution, international students, sense of belonging, anxiety, academic year, social climate

Introduction

The word "transition" is applicable to a variety of different contexts within a person's life. Biologically speaking, people encounter physical transitions through the holistic spans of their lives. In that, they enter as new-borns and transition into infants, then onto toddlers, followed by children, onto adolescence, emerging adults, and so on and so forth. All the same, there are other variations and transitions constantly affecting and shaping these biological stages of life; variations that consistently involve creating adjustments and adaptation. The main factor in this being the environment surrounding a person. That could range from smaller transitions such as from elementary school to middle school, to bigger transitions such as moving out of your childhood home and into a new home, for any reason, whether it is because of marriage, a new occupation, or even simply a new start in a different city.

Transitioning into a new stage of life typically does bring along a tidal wave of emotions. These extend beyond, but could include curiosity, excitement, indifference, anxiety, and even fear. Emotions have been found to be powerful enough to control and drive human beings. They possess the ability to dictate a person's state of mind, and therefore, the lives that human beings lead. A prominent factor that deals with the emotions endured by human beings is their respective environments (Yao et al., 2019). In that, a person's environment is largely made up of the people that they choose to keep in their lives. The company that a person surrounds themselves with has been known to make or break that person's state of mind, their sense of self, and their behaviours, as a result (Yao et al., 2019).

One of the bigger, more generalised transitions within a person's life is that of moving to university with the objective of pursuing higher education. The typical age for this being

eighteen, a person is still within their adolescent stage of life. According to Johnson et al. (2009), the human brain is not fully developed by that age, and within adolescence. Therefore, making the adjustment all the more difficult when moving from high school into university. Alongside this factor, this specific transition presents itself as a clean slate. In that, one possesses the ability to reinvent themselves, meet new people, gain exposure to opportunities that they were not presented before, continue to gain knowledge in the subject areas that inspire the individual, and move closer toward their careers. However, on the other hand, this transition presents numerous obstacles as well (Yao et al., 2019) . This extends beyond, but includes, making new friends, a far more rigorous academic standard that they may not be familiar with, the lack of familiar comfort such as family and friends surrounding them, being forced into independence, a lack of safety and security that comes with familiarity, and even navigating life on their own for the first time (Martinez & Munsch, 2019).

As mentioned previously, a person's state of mind is heavily dictated by their emotions; and a person's emotions are heavily influenced by their environment. Therefore, when entering this new stage of their lives, entirely on their own, where there is excitement, usually, there is also anxiety. While this may be an immense adjustment for students that originally reside within a different city or state in the same country, it is a far greater adjustment for students that are changing continents in order to attend university. This is because, of all the detrimental factors mentioned thus far, the lack of familiarity, security, comfort, and the increase in overall change is a lot more amplified. Therefore, it becomes imperative to find a sense of belonging as quickly as possible; to ease up the adjustment processes, both physical and emotional (Strayhorn, 2018).

The Importance of a "Sense of Belonging"

Adomako (2022) described a sense of belonging to be "a human need and a right". A sense of belonging is, at root, a cognitive proceeding that moulds emotions felt by people and behaviours presented by people (Adomako, 2022). Although at the stage of adolescence, a sense of belonging is synonymous with "fitting in", previous studies have found that it is a concept that extends beyond blending into a crowd, and more so into finding a community that understands a person as they are at their core (Strayhorn, 2018).

Whilst this is a struggle endured by people during any phase of life, in this case, one that is endured by all students entering this transition in their lives, it poses a greater challenge for those that leave all they know behind. This is because this incorporated uprooting their lives as they previously knew it, and moving to a different part of the world on their own; especially those that move from their home countries into predominantly white institutions (PWI) (Yao et al., 2019). Not being able to attain a sense of belonging has proven to result in poorer academic performance, an increase in loneliness, a decrease in one's self confidence and sense of self, the development of mental health disorders including but not limited to anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and an overall deterioration of psychological well-being (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019). Fan et al. (2021), stated a sense of belonging to be an overarching theme within student satisfaction. Therefore, also making it a key factor in "student retention and success" (Fan et al., 2021). This is also because, often times, adolescents with a greater number of differences, such as ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds, will make a greater number of changes within themselves, in order to fit into the crowd that surrounds them as well as to find their community (Yao et al., 2019). This is the product of obtaining a weaker sense of belonging by being part of a minority group within a PWI (Fan et al., 2021).

However, regardless, the ultimate result of lacking a sense of belonging has showcased students obtaining a significant variety of mental health disorders, with anxiety and stress being the most prevalent (Yao et al., 2019). Hayes and Lin (1994) claimed that this was because of the surrounding barriers that accompanied international students when venturing out of what they know, and venturing into an unknown of sorts, such as when moving into PWIs. These barriers could include differences in academic curriculums and approaches, differences in language, differences in behaviours, differences in lifestyle, differences in nutrition, differences in social norms and societal norms, and especially through cultural barriers and shocks (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Anxiety and its Manifestation within International Students at PWIs

Anxiety manifests itself in a multitude of different manners within college students; this could be generic or it could be situationally based. When it comes to international students, in particular, anxiety may manifest itself as social anxiety (Purdon et al., 2001). Previous research has also indicated that this potentially has ties with the barriers that international students are faced with when transitioning from their home countries or continents to surroundings of their college or university (Purdon et al., 2001).

Another factor that played a role in social anxiety manifesting itself within international college students has to do with physical appearance and attractiveness (Purdon et al., 2001). When applying previous research to this study, international students physically do possess a different appearance. At PWIs, this becomes a lot more apparent which may influence individuals levels of anxiety (Purdon et al., 2001).

Additionally, another two factors, that go hand-in-hand and that played a role in anxiety manifestation within college students, are race and ethnicity (Sümer et al., 2008).

This particular cultural barrier is more likely to create a very clear unsaid divide between international and domestic students that attend PWIs. This is because of the lack of comfort and security that goes hand-in-hand with familiarity; and, in this situation, the lack thereof. This may also increase levels of depression (Sümer et al., 2008).

Furthermore, another factor that played a role in increasing anxiety levels within college students was the adjustment in meeting new academic expectations coupled with the adjustment to the new academic conventions (Khoshlessan & Das, 2019). Although this does not directly relate with the social climate experienced by international students at PWIs, it definitely presents itself as an obstacle for a student to partake in their surroundings, socially. It disables students from obtaining positive social interactions because they have increased anxiety levels relating to the new academic pressure that they face (Khoshlessan & Das, 2019). Therefore, shifting their focus to their academia entirely, and completely side-lining the human need of socializing (Khoshlessan & Das, 2019).

Sociocultural Differences between International and Domestic Students when Attending PWIs

International students have been known to follow into the cycle of sticking with each other, and finding friendships, socioemotional support, and comfort within other international students as opposed to mixing with the domestic students that attend the same college as them (Chavajay, 2013). This stems from the belief that international students may be the only people that truly understand their circumstances due to first-hand experience (Chavajay, 2013). At PWIs, there are even fewer international students for each to turn to. Brisset et al. (2010) mentioned the way in which these circumstances give way to the development of anxiety, attachment anxiety, and psychological distress. In their study, Güzel and Glazer (2019) assessed the manner and degree to which cultural values, uncertainty avoidance, and

power distance relate to the two parts of sociocultural adaptation; social interaction and localising. As a result, Güzel and Glazer (2019) found that students' personal cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, and cultural values played an enormous role in their adaptation processes as well as ability to adapt to the new culture that they were placed within.

In their study of evaluating the psychosocial and sociocultural adaptation of international students to an institution abroad, O'Reilly et al. (2010) found that international students experienced high levels of difficulty in sociocultural adjustment as well as high levels in psychological distress, as a result.

However, it has been understood that social networking may aid international students within their social adjustment processes in connecting with domestic students within the same college (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

A factor that may aid students that face the obstacle of cultural barriers at PWIs is participation in the activities offered by the institutions (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). For example, trying out for sports teams that allow students that are already in attendance at the university to try out for a specific sport. Being a part of an athletic team may give students a sense of belonging and a community (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Therefore, decreasing their levels of anxiety, and taking apart the cultural barriers to some extent, if not entirely.

Language Barriers endured by International Students during Social Interaction at PWIs

According to Mesidor and Sly (2016), transitioning into a member of a new community calls for somewhat of an "an identity negotiation". In that, students tend to change their behaviours in order to acquire the practices and behaviours of the community that they are attempting to blend into (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Language plays a big role in shaping one's identity (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Ergo, when transitioning from one's home

country or continent into a new country or continent, for an opportunity such as higher

education in which the vast change surrounds an individual at all times, their language

socialisation and language identity gets affected as well. For example, according to O'Reilly

et al. (2010)'s study, students that speak fluently, proficiently, or with a high level of fluency

in English, or the dominant language of the host country, endure lesser difficulties in their

adjustment processes. This not necessarily being the case for the majority of international

students, coupled with the difficulty that goes hand-in-hand with having differing accents

from people within the host country, adds to the difficulty levels in their adjustment processes

(O'Reilly et al., 2010).

A person's language identity is a major factor in determining the likelihood and rate

of obtaining a sense of belonging because finding people with similar language identities

helps in building a community (Morita, 2004; Casanave & Li, 2008). Without this sense of

security and familiarity, it is more likely that a person may develop generalised anxiety

disorder, or even social anxiety due to the sense of loneliness it might bring with it (O'Reilly

et al., 2010).

Social Support offered to International Students & Differences made by Academic Year at PWIs

As mentioned previously, international students have been found to gravitate toward

one another as opposed to mixing and creating relationships with the domestic students that

are in attendance at the same college or university (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). As discussed

previously, this is the result of the belief that other international students may be the only

ones to properly understand the students' experiences, not just socially but also personally.

And therefore, in that international students find solace (Chavajay, 2013). Previously this has

predominantly stood to be seen only during the early years of college, where international

students are concerned (Chavajay, 2013). Previous findings by Chavajay (2013) have delineated that newer international students, such as first year students, were more likely to reach out and attain socioemotional and instrumental support from their peers, international or domestic, than older international students, such as fourth year students (Chavajay, 2013). This was because by the time international students got to their fourth year, they had "adjusted" to their situation, whether it was one that they had preferred or not (Chavajay, 2013). However, despite this being the case, in other studies, fourth year students have reported significantly less satisfaction and comfort (Fan et al., 2021). Thus, alluding to the understanding that by their fourth year, the "adjustment" that took place was, in actuality, acceptance as opposed to satisfaction (Fan et al., 2021).

Additionally, O'Reilly et al. (2010) found that despite international students being provided with social support and showcasing low levels of loneliness, they were still experiencing high levels of difficulty in sociocultural adjustment as well as psychological distress. Ergo, in agreement with the findings of Chavajay (2013), O'Reilly et al. (2010) discussed the way in which by the end of their time studying abroad, international students had adjusted to their situations. This alludes to the very same understanding, that it took till the end of their time studying abroad to "adjust", in whatever capacity, to their situations (O'Reilly et al., 2010). Consequently, Smith et al. (2022), found that international students are more likely to experience a strong lack of a safe space for them to reside within. Therefore, providing international students with more opportunities for creating strong social networks and campus engagement as a form of social support would aid them in simplifying their adjustment process (Smith et al., 2022).

Contrarily, international students enrolled at certain PWIs, have reported higher levels of social support being the reason they experience lower levels of distress and anxiety, as a result of them being a minority (O'Reilly et al., 2010).

Gaps in the Research

There are an overwhelming number of studies published on the way in which mental health disorders manifest themselves within college students as a result of the social climate, as well as the disparity within a university's social climate as a result of differences within socioeconomic backgrounds. However, there is not a lot of research on the disparity within the social climate as a result of an overall divide between international students and domestic students. And there is even less research on this disparity at a PWI. Often times, the research may delve slightly into the experiences of first generation immigrant college students, however, not those that travel across the world to attend their forms of higher education, and the barriers that affect them along the way and throughout their experiences.

The research that does attempt to cover this subject area, also does not necessarily compare the differences in social experiences of domestic versus international students, but rather solely focuses on the way in which international students may feel as a result of their respective social climates.

Hypotheses

The predominant objective of this study is to understand the social experiences that make up the adjustment processes of international students that attend a predominantly white institution in the United States of America. The sub-foci of this study will be to answer the following questions, (1) does the international student social experience differ at all from the domestic student social experience at PWIs? If so, how? (2) why should there be an objective

difference in the experiences shared by students that are thought of and meant to be in the exact same situation? (3) what can be done about this disparity, in order to decrease the differences in social experiences shared by either party.

Through this study, I hypothesise that international students may experience slightly elevated levels of anxiety in comparison to domestic students when moving into a PWI such as Trinity College. I also hypothesise that domestic students may find a "sense of belonging" a lot faster and easier than international students do when adjusting to the social climate of a PWI such as Trinity College.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

49 participants partook in this study. The participants were all recruited from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. The collection of the participants within this study was conducted through a broadcast email sent out to all of the international students enrolled at Trinity College through the international student advisor. Alongside this, classroom presentations took place within a variety of courses that are offered by the Psychology Department at Trinity College. This includes but is not limited to, Introduction to Psychology, Social Psychology, Evaluation and Treatment of Addictive Behaviour, and Psychotherapy.

The presentations introduced the study and discussed its risks, benefits, and surrounding guidelines. Following this, students were encouraged to participate on a strictly voluntary basis. There was a clear establishment of the inclusion criteria which dictated that

only students above the age of 18 were allowed to participate in the study; and a form of identification would be required to prove their age within both surveys. Students were offered incentive for participation through the opportunity to enter a raffle and potentially win an Amazon gift card.

The aim was to attain at most 30 international students as well as 30 domestic students. 12 students out of each, international and domestic respectively, needed to be first year students.

The objective of this study was to understand the difference between the international student social experience at a PWI, versus the domestic student social experience at a PWI, while assessing the levels of anxiety experienced by both categories of participants, and evaluating the personal experiences encountered by both categories of participants. Considering these establishments, it was imperative to collect an equal number of international and domestic participants.

After data collection had been completed, the data was compiled using SPSS Statistics Application version 28, in order to understand the differences in the social experiences encountered by, both, domestic as well as international students that attend Trinity College. Alongside this, there was great importance placed on understanding the mental health repercussions of their personal experiences. Ergo, their anxiety levels were collected using the Beck Anxiety Inventory, and evaluated using SPSS Statistics Application version 28.

All responses submitted to the study were ultimately anonymous after data analysis. Ultimately, after the study had been completed, all responses were destroyed. There were no identifiable questions presented in this study, apart from identification for proof of age; which was destroyed immediately, after data collection.

Measures

In order to understand the differences in the social experience encountered by international students and domestic students, both, it was important to ask both categories of students the exact same questions. Thus, there were two separate surveys presented to the participants to fill out.

Prior to beginning both surveys, participants were shown a written version of the presentation presented to them within their classrooms. The written version showcased the parameters that enabled participants to partake in the surveys, such as their need to be above the age of 18, as well as the ability to retract participation at any point prior to submission of responses, the risks, benefits, and objectives of the study. Additionally, within both surveys, participants were required to provide consent before carrying forward with their responses.

Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)

The initial survey presented 23 questions, beginning with the participants ethnic background and their academic year within Trinity College, and then followed by questions regarding the symptoms of anxiety that they experience, using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI).

The BAI is a self-report measure of anxiety that depicts the severity of physical as well as cognitive symptoms of anxiety within an individual. It is administered to participants using a 4-point Likert scale; 0 - not at all, 1 - mild, 2 - moderate, and 3- severe. The BAI offers 21 questions relating to a variety of symptoms that signify anxiety, ranging from extremely common anxiety symptoms to somewhat rare symptoms of anxiety. The symptoms that are included within the BAI are, *feeling numbness or tingling*, *feeling unusually hot*, *feeling wobbliness in legs*, *unable to relax*, *fear of worst happening*, *feeling dizzy or lightheaded (often, unusually)*, *heart pounding/ racing*, *feeling unsteady*, *feeling terrified or*

afraid, *feeling nervous*, *feeling of choking*, *hands trembling*, *shaky/ unsteady*, *fear of losing control*, *difficulty in breathing*, *fear of dying*, *feeling scared*, *indigestion*, *faint/ lightheaded*, *face flushed*, and *hot/ cold sweats*.

This survey was then evaluated with students selecting the level of severity in which they experienced said symptoms.

This survey was more objective in order to understand whether there was a significant difference in the levels of the anxiety experienced by participants belonging to either category.

Personal Experience Questionnaire

The second survey presented 10 questions regarding the participants' personal experiences and social encounters, pertaining to their personal adjustment processes, that they had endured during their time as a student at Trinity College.

This personal experience questionnaire was not a previously established self-report measure, because it played more along the lines of a written interview. The objective of this survey was to go further in depth regarding the experiences that participants have previously endured within the social climate at Trinity College. The exact same 10 questions remained standard, and were administered to each participant, international and domestic, alike. This was to enable comparable results in order to see whether there was a difference in not only the experiences perceived by either category of participants but also whether there was a correlation with the levels of anxiety experienced by participants from either category, as a result of said experiences. The questions that were included in the survey were, (1) *what had you heard about Trinity's social climate before coming here?* (2) *has Trinity lived up to the expectations you had for your social experiences here? How and/ or how not?* (3) *have you ever experienced any discriminatory encounters during your time at Trinity?* (4) *has your*

experience changed over the course of your time at Trinity (generally)? (5) what would you say your best social experience has been? Briefly describe one event. (6) what would you say your worst social experience has been? Briefly describe one event. (7) have the student associations on campus helped? How and/ or how not? (8) if you were to recommend a new student attend Trinity, how would you describe the social climate to be based off of your experience? (9) what measures do you believe the college has implemented to make it easier to make friends, fit in, and give you a sense of belonging? (10) if you had any suggestions that would make your social experience at Trinity better, what would they be?

These questions were entirely subjective in order to gauge whether there were significant encounters, experienced by either category, and if there was a pattern within those experiences. This is because, if there were patterns within the social experiences and their differences when comparing international and domestic students attending PWI's, it would crucially affect the results of the study.

Anxiety symptoms

Anxiety symptoms were assessed using the 21-item Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck et al., 1988) which asks participants to rate the extent to which they were bothered by symptoms of anxiety during the past month on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (severely). Scores on each item were summed to create a composite measure of anxiety symptoms (α = .94)

Data Analysis

I conducted descriptive analyses of the sample by calculating mean and standard deviation values for anxiety symptoms in the full sample. I calculated the skewness and kurtosis values for anxiety symptoms to test for normality.

I tested our first aim using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the effect of citizenship on anxiety symptoms. I tested our second aim using a two-way ANOVA to examine the interaction of citizenship x year in college on anxiety symptoms.

Results

The final sample consisted of 49 college students, including 28 international students (57%) and 21 domestic students (43%). Most students were in their senior year (45%) or in their freshman year (29%) with fewer in their sophomore year (14%) or in their junior year (12%). Anxiety symptom scores ranged from 0 to 52 and were relatively normally distributed with a mean value of 20.7, a standard deviation of 13.2, and skewness and kurtosis values of less than 1.0.

Aim 1: Is college students' citizenship associated with their anxiety symptoms?

I conducted a one-way ANOVA to analyse the effect of citizenship (domestic/international) on students' anxiety symptoms. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, I did not find an effect of citizenship on students' anxiety symptoms, $F(1,49)=2.95$, $p = .09$, adjusted $R^2 = .04$.

Figure 1

Simple Bar Mean of BAI by International Students
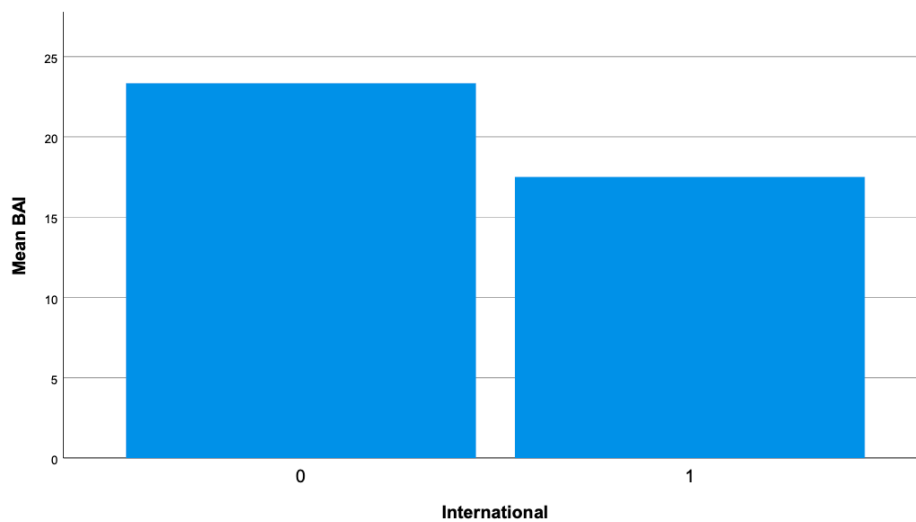
Aim 2: Is the association of college students' citizenship and anxiety symptoms moderated by their year in college?

I conducted a two-way ANOVA to analyse the effect of citizenship (domestic/international) and year in college (senior/underclassman) on students' anxiety symptoms. As shown in Figure 2, I found a statistically significant interaction between citizenship and year in college, $F(1,45) = 7.44$, $p = .009$, adjusted $R^2 = .14$. Simple effects analyses indicated that senior international students reported more anxiety symptoms than senior domestic students ($M_{diff} = 16.78$, $p = .003$). Underclassmen international students and underclassmen domestic students did not differ in their anxiety symptoms ($M_{diff} = -3.00$, $p = .55$).

Figure 2

Anxiety symptoms in domestic and international students by their year in college
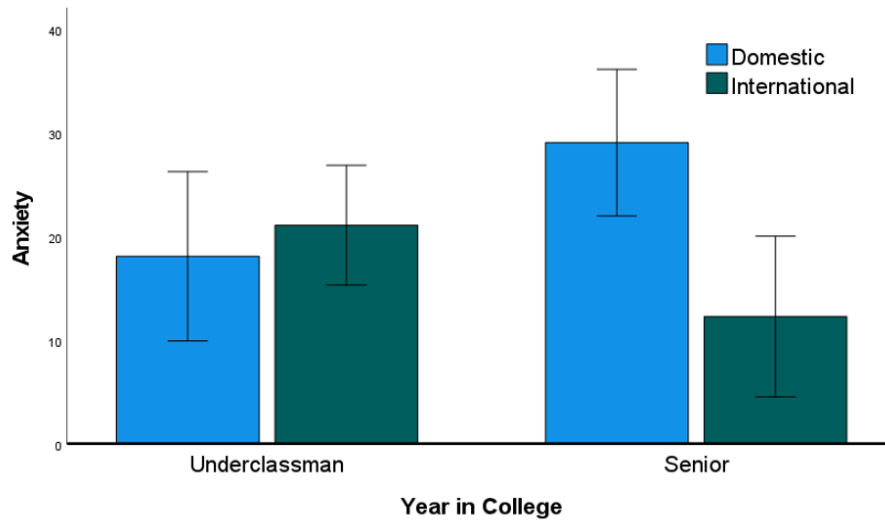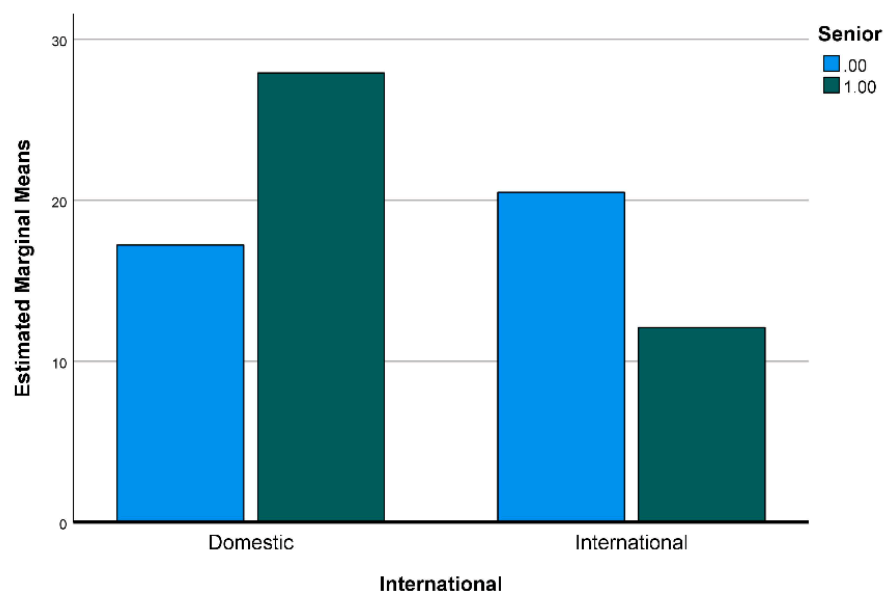

Figure 3

Estimated Marginal Means of BAI by year

Note: fourth year students in green, first year students in blue.

Aim 3: What were the patterns found between the social experiences encountered by international students versus the patterns found between the social experiences of domestic students? Was it as easy for international students to find a "sense of belonging" as it was for domestic students?

Identifying the patterns within the individual responses submitted by domestic students and international students, respectively, at Trinity College, enabled me to understand the subjectivity within each individual experience. There were statistically significant patterns within the experiences had by international students and the experiences had by domestic students, as two distinct groups. However, the results indicated that it was not as easy for international students to find a "sense of belonging" as it was for domestic students to find a "sense of belonging".

Aim 4: Are the differences in the social experiences encountered by students moderated by their year in college? What were the reasons?

In addition to the patterns acknowledged through the assessment of Aim 3, there was a secondary distinction found. In that, the students that were in their earlier two years of college showcased better experiences with the social climate at Trinity College in comparison to students in their final two years of college. This was true for, both, international students and domestic students. However, it was more so true for international students in their first years in comparisons to their fourth years. In that, the results on this study indicated that international students within their first years, entered with a more diverse class, and therefore, had a more moderated college experience, whereas fourth year international students, entered with a far less diverse class, and therefore, experienced a very different social climate during their four years at the college.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1: I hypothesise that international students may experience slightly elevated levels of anxiety in comparison to domestic students when moving into predominantly white institutions such as Trinity College.

The results gathered in this study that adhered to this hypothesis showcased two connected results. The first half of the results elucidated that citizenship, whether a student was domestic or international, did not have a significant role in depicting their levels of anxiety. However, the second half of the results aided in delineating that although citizenship did not play a role in being the stressor or the reasoning for anxiety being there, it certainly played a role in elevating the levels of anxiety experienced by international students in comparison to domestic students. On the other hand, domestic students also exhibited elevated levels of anxiety, especially as the years progressed and students moved from their first years to their fourth years.

Anxiety and its Manifestation within International Students at PWIs

Anxiety, as a mental health disorder, has become increasingly more apparent, not just human beings overall, but especially in college students. There is anxiety manifestation in all formats for students, whether it relates to academia, athleticism, or social anxiety. Of all of the more common forms of anxiety manifestation, international students enrolled at PWIs have been known to suffer from heightening social anxiety (Purdon et al., 2001). However, parallel studies have indicated that a lot of the anxiety experienced by international students relates to the barriers and obstacles that stand between moving from their home countries to the country that hosts their university (Purdon et al., 2001).

In contrast, the findings of this study do not entirely go hand-in-hand with the findings of previous research studies. A potential reason for this may be because the participants decided to attend Trinity College after already having awareness regarding there being a potential distinction and separation between international students and domestic students, as well as the potential differences in the social experiences. For example, within the second survey, numerous international student participants answered the first question of "what had you heard about Trinity's social climate before coming here?" along the very same lines. Some more specific responses were "*despite Trinity being diverse, most students self-segregated and are rather cliquey*", "*I heard that school was a PWI and students were incredibly wealthy, these two generalisations would make socialising with the majority of the campus a bit difficult if you weren't a part of either groups*", "*all I knew was that the students were predominantly white and wealthy*", "*I had heard that this is a friendly campus where people respect each other, however, I had also heard that international and domestic students tend to have their own social groups and don't generally hang out with each other*". Maintaining this pre-existing notion could have played a role in international students having lower anxiety levels than hypothesised.

In addition, the results of this study very interestingly depicted a stark contrast between fourth year students and first year students regardless of their citizenship. Correspondingly, during their first year, international students displayed higher levels of anxiety in comparison to domestic students. On the other hand, in their fourth year, domestic students displayed a 17 point surge in the levels of anxiety experienced in comparison to international students, as displayed in Figure 2.

Furthermore, another key observation and finding was that fourth year domestic students experience far higher levels of anxiety than fourth year international students did. A potential reasoning for this may be because international students possess the ability to go

back to their home countries which reinstates their familiar sense of security. Another potential reasoning for this result may be because Western culture is home to the stereotype of children dictating their own lives by getting jobs and moving out after graduation, whereas Southern and Eastern cultures generate the stereotype of family being a solid security blanket for them to go back to post graduation from university.

Sociocultural Differences between International and Domestic students when attending PWIs

Mesidor and Sly (2016) found that international students have been found to stick with one another and create meaningful relationships with each other as opposed to mixing with domestic students that are enrolled in the same university. Consequently, Güzel and Glazer (2019) established that students' personal cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, and cultural values played a critical role in their ability to adapt to their new cultural surroundings. Both previous study findings prevail within this study as well, considering the results of this study showcased first year international students to have further elevated levels of anxiety in comparison to first year domestic students, as shown in Figure 2.

Social Support offered to International Students & Difference made by Academic Year at PWIs

Mesidor and Sly 's (2016) finding regarding the behaviours that international students exhibit of opting out of mixing with domestic students was also most significant during the early years of college. During those years, international students have been found to be more likely to branch out and obtain socioemotional and instrumental support from their peers (Chavajay, 2013). The results of this study showcased that approximately 44.9% of students, overall, actually did not reach out or find the student associations at Trinity College helpful,

at any point of their time as students at the college; this is inclusive of students in their later years at the college as well as students in their early years at the college.

However, alternative to previous findings, the results of this study found that international students were equally as likely to experience a strong lack of a safe space for them to reside within as they were to experience a strong safe space for them to reside within during their time at Trinity College. In that, of the 28 international students that participated in this study, 57% found student associations to have played a role in helping them ease into the motions at college. For example, within the second survey, an international student participant answered the seventh question "have the student associations on campus helped? How and/ or how not?" with "*some of them have made me feel included*", another with "*yes, at times, more than the college itself*", and another with "*they were crucial in making me feel more settled and comfortable*". These findings actually align with O'Reilly et al. 's (2010) study that claimed that certain PWIs being the reason that international students experience comparatively lower levels of anxiety and stress as the product of their being a minority.

Hypothesis 2: I hypothesise that domestic students may find a "sense of belonging" a lot faster and easier than international students do when adjusting to the social climate of predominantly white institutions such as Trinity College.

The results of this study that adhered to this hypothesis were also illustrated in two connected manners. The first half of the results did confirm that domestic students did, in fact, attain a sense of belonging a lot faster than international students enrolled at Trinity College. However, simultaneously, the academic year within which each participant resided played a definitive role in understanding the rate at which international students found a sense of belonging at Trinity College. This was especially apparent; not only because participants within this study that were domestic students or from other cities within the

United States of America showcased little to no difficulty in attaining a sense of belonging within their earlier years as students at Trinity College, but also because the degree of diversity within the fourth year participant's graduating class greatly differed from that of the current first year class.

The patterns identified through the data showcased international students predominantly finding a sense of belonging during their second or third year's at Trinity College, whereas domestic students finding a sense of belonging during their first year at the college.

The Importance of finding a Sense of Belonging

Being considered as a "human need and a right" (Adomako, 2022), a sense of belonging was imperative for college students, specifically. It aids students in feeling as though they have a community, and a safe space (Strayhorn, 2018). This feeling extends beyond "fitting in" (Strayhorn, 2018). Therefore, it stands excessively apparent for international students, and even more so at PWIs, because of the lack of familiarity. The results of this study stands in agreement with both previous findings because the patterns, more specifically, depicted that international students seemed to enter Trinity College with the preconceived impression and notion that it was going to be predominantly white, segregated into cliques, becoming more diverse but not exactly there yet, and a toxic social culture.

Another pattern identified was that majority of the participants, domestic and international, but inclusive of all ethnicities, had not personally experienced any discriminatory encounters during their time at Trinity College. This certainly aided participants in the process of attaining a sense of belonging, aside from the exceptions, because they were not singled out in any manner.

An additional pattern identified was the widespread agreement within the responses of international student participants regarding the measures set in place to enable a sense of belonging. The results, from all academic years, unanimously elucidated that the college had not set many measures at all in aiding international students find a community for themselves, in which they felt they belonged within. For example, within the second survey, an international student participant answered the ninth question "what measures do you believe the college has implemented to make it easier to make friends, fit in, and give you a sense of belonging?" with "*not much for my year, but the newer classes are a lot more diverse, that must help*", another participant responded with "*I think they try to do that with all the orientation stuff, it works sometimes, not because of the reasons they want it to be, but because everyone usually bonds over how useless they are*", and a domestic student participant with "*student activity fairs…I cannot think of too much else*".

Social Support offered to International Students & Difference made by Academic Year at PWIs

In finding a sense of belonging alongside the general adjustment process, social support has proven to be an integral part of the process. Chavajay (2013) and Fan et al. (2021) found that by the time international students moved to their fourth year at university, they hadn't necessarily adjusted to their social climate, but rather accepted it for what it was, whether it was their preferred situations or not. Congruently, Fan et al. (2021) found that by the time international students reached their fourth year, they reported drastically lowered levels of contentment and security. Moreover, the results of this study were predominantly in agreement with previous findings; this was especially when concerning fourth year students. For example, within the second survey, a fourth year international student participant answered the second question "has Trinity lived up to the expectations you had for your

social experiences here? How and/ or how not?" with "*it has not for the most part, as time went along, I had the unfortunate experience of seeing racism, and sexism being carried out, the division among internationals and domestic students was unreal, for the most part, the cliques had formed within the first few weeks, or even before among the domestic students; leaving the international student minority to mingle amongst themselves*". Another fourth year international student responded with "*no, I had more expectations about Trinity's social experience, we usually don't meet people at Trinity if it's not at frat parties*". Another fourth year international student stated "*no, the community is nowhere as close as I had thought, most of the social activities and interactions revolve centrally around Greek life and athletic teams which are not nearly as welcoming or friendly as one would hope*". Distinctly, a first year international student responded with "*I have found a very good set of people I could call my friends, the only thing that disappoints me is that I've made very few American friends*". Therefore, proving the way in which the academic year played a significant role in depicting international students ability to find a sense of belonging. The newer years being enrolled have expanded their degree of diversity, whereas the older years, left numerous international students feeling like minorities.

Regarding the factor of social support, within the second survey, an international student participant responded to the tenth question "if you had any suggestions that would make your social experience at Trinity better, what would they be?" with "*I think they should have like a monthly event where they invite people from the different groups to hang out and do something fun*". A domestic student responded with "*I think having more diverse students is really necessary to counterbalance the white culture that dominates Trinity*". Another international student stated "*efforts to make social life less separative among several groups (athletes, Greek life, academic, cultural*". Therefore, elucidating the lack of social support surrounding international students on the campus, and the need to

continue expanding the degree of diversity in order to provide international students with social support. This also heavily correlates with Mesidor and Sly's (2016) findings regarding international students finding most solace among one another, and a lack in international students may be directly proportionate to a lack in social support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the international student social experience, in general but even more so at a PWI, is one that should be acknowledged and recognized a lot more. This is for a wide range of reasons, especially including providing all students, equally, with a sense of community, and inevitably leading them to have a pleasant college experience, dealing with the importance of mental health implications that may arise from the lack of a sense of belonging or community, and even just supporting international students slightly more so that they feel just as comfortable in their new surroundings as they would in their home continents. It is imperative to provide a sense of sensitivity toward the international student social experience because their, just as any other student – domestic or international, they may have predetermined mental health issues that may worsen or be further amplified by a lack in support, community, or even because they don't have the same comfort and support systems as domestic students do, especially in terms of proximity to their families and familiarities.

Limitations

A limitation of this study includes the obvious factor that every university is different from one another; therefore, each predominantly white institution may be different from one another. These differences may range from the different social climates that exist within

universities, the different degrees of diversity cultivated by universities as new incoming classes increase, as well as the extents to which social support is provided to students at respective universities. These differences between universities definitely possess the ability to alter the results of this study if the focus and measures were applied to a different predominantly white institution.

Future Research

Future research on this subject could go in numerous directions. It could include depression as a variable alongside anxiety and the way it affects social experiences. This is not only because the two mental health disorders are known to be comorbid but also because depression is just as prevalent if not more, especially on college campuses, and at predominantly white institutions, as well as specifically within international students because of the trials and barriers that they face, as mentioned in this study.

Another direction for future research may be to assess eating disorders and/ or disordered eating due to depression and/ or anxiety within both international and domestic students on college campuses, at predominantly white institutions, especially as a result of the social climate present at said institutions.

Additionally, a third direction for future research on this subject could be based on the application of any new measures set in place with the objective of easing the adjustment process for international students at predominantly white institutions.

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Appendices

Recruitment Email and Script of Classroom Presentation

Hi! My name is Arianna Patel and I am a senior at Trinity this semester and will be conducting my thesis on the international student social experience at Predominantly White Institutes (PWI) using Trinity as an example.

This study is conducted with the supervision of Professor Randolph Lee and is IRB approved. The objective of this study is to explore the issues relating to the adjustment process of international students versus that of domestic students, incorporating measures of social culture, "sense of belonging" development, levels of anxiety, social interactions, and social behaviour, at Trinity College.

All students of and over the age of 18 are eligible to participate in this study and some form of identification will be necessary to show. You can email me at: apatel@trincoll.edu with any questions or concerns about this. The study will be conducted through 2 Google forms. Although you will need to provide your name on each form, as soon as you submit the forms, and the results are encoded, in order to obtain and maintain anonymity, any form of identification will immediately be disposed of permanently.

To compensate you for your participation in this study, there will be a raffle at the end of the study in which a random draw will offer 3 students, individually, a $25 Amazon Gift card.

To access the study you will need to complete and submit the following two forms (preferably one right after the other), all in all, it shouldn't take more than 7 minutes and 15 minutes, respectively.

https://forms.gle/vWSauXumyLyyoKQXA

https://forms.gle/vM2oKxnhqaU6qiet8

I would really appreciate and encourage participation in this study because the benefits of this study include improvements within the social climate based off of the data that is gathered, and hopefully provide measures to make the social climate less hostile, and more integrated. There are no risks of this research to the individual participant or others as it will be entirely confidential.

Thank you so much!

Arianna Patel

Beck Anxiety Inventory Questionnaire

The BAI was devised to assess and measure levels of anxiety by describing the symptoms that you may have felt. The initial few questions will be to obtain consent for your participation. Following this there will be 21 symptoms of anxiety mentioned that you will need to mention if you've ever experienced as a result of a social experience or just socially generally during your time at Trinity.

You would scale it as either "Not at all (0)", "Mildly, but it didn't bother me much (1)", "Moderately, it wasn't pleasant at times (2)", or "Severely, it bothered me a lot (3)".

Please be completely honest because no one will have access to this information and it will be digitally accumulated and then disposed of, immediately after the results are encoded in order for the maintenance of anonymity.

As mentioned previously, participation within this study is entirely consensually based, and is completely voluntary. Individuals can choose to opt out of this study at any time during their participation. Confidentiality will be maintained because although I would require the names of the participants to correlate the anxiety scale with the interview, after creating the individual set of data for each participant, the set will be numbered and the names will be removed. Therefore, although you will need to provide your name on each form, as soon as you submit the forms, and the results are encoded, in order to obtain and maintain anonymity, any

form of identification will immediately be disposed of permanently. We are interested in experiences, not who experienced it.

All students of and over the age of 18 are eligible to participate in this study and some form of identification will be necessary to show.

To compensate you for participating in this study, there will be a raffle at the end in which a random draw will offer 3 students, individually, a $25 Amazon Gift card.

If you have any questions about this study or want more information, you are free to contact:

Arianna Patel, apatel@trincoll.edu, Trinity College

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: irb@trincoll.edu

Please state your name: _____

How old are you? Please provide identification (it can simply showcase your name and date of birth): _____

Please sign your initials within the space below: I understood that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty. _____

Please sign your initials within the space below: I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty. _____

Please state your initials within the space below: I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential, and will be used only for research purposes. _____

Please provide todays date: _____

What is your ethnic background? Where are you from? _____

What academic year are you in?

- o   Freshman (first year)
- o   Sophomore (second year)
- o   Junior (third year)
- o   Senior (fourth year)

Feeling numbness or tingling

- o   0
- o   1
- o   2
- o   3

Feeling unusually hot

- o   0
- o   1
- o   2
- o   3

Feeling wobbliness in legs

- o   0
- o   1
- o   2
- o   3

Unable to relax

- o   0
- o   1
- o   2
- o   3

Fear of worst happening

- o   0
- o   1
- o   2
- o   3

Feeling dizzy or lightheaded (often, unusually)

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Heart pounding/ racing

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Feeling unsteady

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Feeling terrified or afraid

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Feeling nervous

- o 0
- o 1
- o 2
- o 3

Feeling of choking

- o 0
- o 1
- o 2
- o 3

Hands trembling

- o 0
- o 1
- o 2
- o 3

Shaky/ unsteady

- o 0
- o 1
- o 2
- o 3

Fear of losing control

- o 0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Difficulty in breathing

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Fear of dying

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Feeling scared

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Indigestion

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Faint/ lightheaded

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Face flushed

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Hot/ cold sweats

- o   0

- o   1

- o   2

- o   3

Personal Experience Questionnaire

This form will include questions regarding your personal social experience at Trinity. The initial few questions will be to obtain consent for your participation. Following this there will

be 10 short answer questions that don't require more than 5 sentences, but you can choose to write more if you prefer in order to answer the questions.

As mentioned previously, participation within this study is entirely consensually based, and is completely voluntary. Individuals can choose to opt out of this study at any time during their participation. Confidentiality will be maintained because although I would require the names of the participants to correlate the anxiety scale with the interview, after creating the individual set of data for each participant, the set will be numbered and the names will be removed. Therefore, although you will need to provide your name on each form, as soon as you submit the forms, and the results are encoded, in order to obtain and maintain anonymity, any form of identification will immediately be disposed of permanently. We are interested in experiences, not who experienced it.

All students of and over the age of 18 are eligible to participate in this study and some form of identification will be necessary to show.

To compensate you for participating in this study, there will be a raffle at the end in which a random draw will offer 3 students, individually, a $25 Amazon Gift card.

If you have any questions about this study or want more information, you are free to contact:

Arianna Patel, apatel@trincoll.edu, Trinity College

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: irb@trincoll.edu

Please state your name: _____

How old are you? Please provide identification (it can simply showcase your name and date of birth): _____

Please sign your initials within the space below: I understood that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty. _____

Please sign your initials within the space below: I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty. _____

Please state your initials within the space below: I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential, and will be used only for research purposes. _____

Please provide todays date: _____

What had you heard about Trinity's social climate before coming here?

Has Trinity lived up to the expectations you had for your social experiences here? How and/ or how not?

Have you ever experienced any discriminatory encounters during your time at Trinity?

Has your experience changed over the course of your time at Trinity? (generally)

What would you say your best social experience has been? Briefly describe one event.

What would you say your worst social experience has been? Briefly describe one event.

Have the student associations on campus helped? How and/ or how not?

If you were to recommend a new student attend Trinity, how would you describe the social climate to be based off of your experience?

What measures do you believe the college has implemented to make it easier to make friends, fit in, and give you a sense of belonging?

If you had any suggestions that would make your social experience at Trinity better, what would they be?