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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS SEEKING
INTERNSHIPS DURING OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) PROGRAM

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
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This dissertation, submitted by Yue Lyu in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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During Optional Practical Training (OPT) Program

Department College of Education and Human Development

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Yue Lyu
02-13-2022

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The world's best family members!

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	2
Theoretical Conceptualization	11
Rationale and Purpose of the Present Study	12
METHODOLOGY	13
Participants	13
Participant Recruitment and Selection Process	14
Data Collection and Transcription	15
Data Analysis Procedures	16
Quality Control	17
Research Team	19
Statement of Positionality	19
RESULTS	20

Superordinate Theme 1: Perceived Obstacles	21
Superordinate Theme 2: Emotional and Physical Well-being	29
Superordinate Theme 3: Resources and Coping strategies	32
Superordinate Theme 4: Growth	38
DISCUSSION	43
Outcome of Research Inquiries	44
Research Outcome, Question 1	44
Research Outcome, Question 2	47
Research Outcome, Question 3	49
Implications	52
Clinical Implications	52
Policy-related Implications	53
Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions	55
REFERENCES	59

LIST OF TABLES

Tables	Page
1. Major of Participants.	14
2. Years of Residency in the U.S.....	14
3. Summary of superordinate and sub themes.....	20

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Chinese international students currently in search of internship positions during their Optional Practical Training (OPT) program after completing their degrees in the United States. Specifically, this study employed an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) for exploring participants' experiences during the internship-seeking process—encompassing aspects such as their perceived employment barriers, the impacts of this experience on their mental and physical well-being, as well as their resources and coping strategies. A total of four (4) superordinate themes emerged from the results. Participants described their perceived external and internal barriers that led to adverse impacts on their emotional and physical health. Additionally, the participants also identified strengths, resources, and coping strategies that they utilized for overcoming these challenges. Furthermore, the participants reported gaining growth from various aspects after this overwhelming experience. This study served to address several understudied topics within the literature regarding Chinese international students—including their transition from school to work, the impacts of the current immigration laws, their internal and external resources, alongside their coping strategies. The study concludes with discussions on its implications, future directions, and potential policy recommendations.

Keywords: Chinese international students, employment barriers, Optional Practical Training (OPT), phenomenological qualitative research, strength-based

Introduction

International students are individuals who enroll in higher education institutions in a foreign country as neither citizens nor immigrants. They represent a large portion of college students in the United States (U.S.). For example, according to the Open Doors 2019, a total of 1,095,299 international students were enrolled in universities and colleges in the U.S. during the academic year 2018 – 2019 (Institute of International Education, 2019). Moreover, the population of international students consisted of 5.5% of the total U.S. higher education population and contributed \$44.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2019). Among the large number of international students, in the academic year of 2018 – 2019, Chinese international students made up 33.7% of the total international students in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2019). These numbers indicated the important contributions Chinese international students made in terms of improving the diversity of universities as well as promoting the U.S. economy.

According to the current studies, international students experience a lot of barriers when searching for internships that would fulfill the OPT program, which provides international students with eligibility to get work-related experiences in the U.S. after earning their degree (USCIS, 2019). Examples of such barriers included cultural adjustments, dealing with neo-racism due to their countries of origin, and a lack of support systems in the U.S. (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000; Lee, 2016; Monahan, 2018). However, there is a lack of research about Chinese international students' experiences in this process, such as their perceived barriers and how these barriers have impacts on their mental and physical health. Furthermore, most of the current studies used a negative lens to explore this process. There is limited information about Chinese international students' strengths, resources, and coping strategies. Therefore, the purpose of this

study is to utilize a strength-based approach and explore Chinese international students' lived experiences when seeking internships during their OPT program.

Literature Review

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Researchers have noted that many international students wish to stay in the U.S. after their graduation (Loo, Luo, & Ye, 2017). For example, in a study of international students' career decisions after graduation, Loo et al. (2017) found that 48% want to stay in the U.S. due to future job opportunities. In terms of getting employed after graduation, many researchers have pointed out that having work-related experiences (i.e., internship experience) could be helpful (Nunley et al., 2016; Luecking & Fabian, 2000). However, unlike domestic students, international students are not allowed to work off-campus as full-time students because of their F-1 visas (Neufeld, 2019). This might limit international students' competitiveness compared to their peers who have been working off-campus for several years when applying for jobs (Monahan, 2018).

However, since 1950, if international students want to gain work-related experiences, there are two training programs identified by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which are Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT) (USCIS, 2019). When applying for CPT, international students must prove that this practical training experience is a requirement of the curriculum of a degree program (Monahan, 2018). However, OPT provides international students with opportunities to stay in the U.S. on their student visas right after their graduation for a limited time (Neufeld, 2019). USCIS provides the definition of OPT on their website (USCIS Practical Training, 2019):

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment that is directly related to an F-1 student's major area of study. Eligible students can apply to

receive up to 12 months of OPT employment authorization before completion of their academic studies (pre-completion) and/or after completion of their academic studies (post-completion).

The length of OPT might vary based on different majors. Specifically, for all international students holding F-1 visas, they are eligible to receive up to 12 months of OPT employment authorization (USCIS Practical Training, 2019). However, for international students in certain science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) areas, they may apply for a 24-month extension of their post-completion OPT employment authorization (USCIS Practical Training, 2019).

According to the Open Doors 2019, there were 223,058 international students on OPT programs in 2018-2019, representing a 9.6% growth compared from the previous academic year (Institute of International Education, 2019). In terms of the benefits of OPT, international students can get significant job-related experience in this process, which could contribute to their future career, especially when they are not allowed to work off-campus before they finish their degree (Monahan, 2018). Furthermore, it is also an opportunity for international students who want to transit their F-1 visas onto longer-term work visas, such as H-1B (Neufeld, 2019). Moreover, OPT not only brings benefits to international students, but also brings valuable human capital to the U.S. labor force (Neufeld, 2019). For example, Neufeld (2019) described the OPT program as “the largest high-skilled worker recruitment program, bringing in over 200,000 new high-skilled foreign workers” (Neufeld, 2019, p. 2). Furthermore, because universities are responsible for immigration related service supports for international students during the OPT program, employers can have high-skilled international employees working for them without spending time and money to deal with the immigration regulations (Monahan, 2018).

Given the current large population of international students in the U.S. as well as the potential benefits they could bring to the U.S. labor market, there is a specific population of international students that we could not ignore—Chinese international students. From 2018 - 2019, Chinese international students made up 33.7% of the total international students in the U.S. Specifically, the report mentioned that there were 369,548 Chinese international students in the U.S. in 2018 - 2019, which remained as the largest population of international students in the U.S. for the past ten consecutive years, 2008 - 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2019). Even though the number of Chinese international students in the U.S. is tremendous, there is limited research about the adjustment experiences of Chinese international students in the U.S. (Ching et al., 2017). Furthermore, even within the few research studies about Chinese international students, the focus is on their experiences in colleges, instead of their experiences during the transition from school to work environment. Therefore, it is important to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students during their school-to-work transitions.

The Strengths of Chinese International Students

Many studies have used a negative lens when exploring international students' experiences in the U.S. (Kuo, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007), such as their difficulties with language proficiency (Kuo, 2011), adjusting to U.S. culture (Reynolds et al., 2007), and social isolation (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). However, only a few studies have addressed the transitional experiences from a strength-based perspective (Liu & Brown, 2014; Neri & Ville, 2008; Yakunina et al., 2013). The few strengths that researchers have identified included personal growth initiative, hardiness, and universal-diverse orientation (Yakunina et al., 2013); intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural adaptation, and environmental mastery (Kim, 2017;

Sinicrope et al., 2007); as well as intercultural competencies (Jones, O'Connor & Boag-Hodgson, 2018).

Generally, strengths are defined as “ways of behaving, thinking or feeling that an individual has a natural capacity for, enjoys doing, and which allow the individual to achieve optimal functioning while they pursue valued outcomes” (Quinlan et al., 2012, p.1146). In terms of international students’ strengths, most researchers focus on on-campus international students and how their strengths can contribute to their education experiences. For example, Yakunina et al. (2013) used a sample of 336 international students and found that personal growth initiative, hardiness, and universal-diverse orientation have positive effects on international students’ adjustments (Yakunina et al., 2013). Furthermore, previous research found evidence that intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural adaptation, and environmental mastery are indicative of international students’ strengths (Kim, 2017; Sinicrope et al., 2007). Specifically, researchers conducted a study about international students’ cross-cultural competence (Aldawsari, Adams, Grimes & Kohn, 2018). They found that cross-cultural competence can significantly predict international students’ autonomy, which is helpful for them to resist social pressures in the host country (Aldawsari, Adams, Grimes & Kohn, 2018). Additionally, Jones et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study and found that international postgraduate psychology students generally used intercultural competencies, personal attributes, transition skills, and situational awareness to enhance their learning and performance on work placements. However, there is only one study that specifically addressed international students’ strengths when it comes to the employment process (Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, & Cavazos, 2011). In this study about international students’ experiences in a support group during the employment exploration and application process,

researchers found that international students identified their strengths as having unique cultural backgrounds as well as multilingual abilities (Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, & Cavazos, 2011).

In terms of strengths of Chinese international students specifically, there is only one study that focused on this topic (He & Hutson, 2018). He and Hutson (2018) conducted a study about Chinese international students' strengths. Through using mixed methods design, they identified several strengths such as a strong commitment and motivation of their academics, academic preparedness, familial support, cross-cultural competencies, as well as staying connected with other students (He & Hutson, 2018). There is limited research about Chinese international students' strengths as well as international students' strengths during the employment process. Therefore, the current dissertation used a qualitative lens to explore Chinese international students' strengths when they are seeking internships during the OPT period, which could fill the gap in this area.

The Barriers of Finding an OPT Experience for Chinese International Students

Many researchers have pointed out that international students face a lot of challenges during their transition to the work environment (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000; Hanassab, 2006; Härtung, 2005). First of all, compared with their domestic peers, international students have to acclimate to the U.S. culture, society, and job market (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Specifically, they need to adjust to different value systems (Hanassab, 2006), learn interviewing styles (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000), and access career and vocational guidance resources (Härtung, 2005). For Chinese international students, since they are from a collectivistic culture, they have to adjust to the individualistic culture in the U.S. Furthermore, interviewing styles might be different between China and the U.S. For example, in the U.S., assertiveness might be an important trait when searching for a job (Tavakoli et al., 2009). However, Chinese international students might

be taught to be humble when they grew up, which is not appreciated in U.S. culture (Tavakoli et al., 2009). Additionally, due to the different cultures, driving skills might be considered as normal and important for employment in the U.S. However, in a study about Chinese international students' difficulties, many of them have reported that a lack of public transportation and having to learn how to drive could be stressful (He & Huston, 2018).

Furthermore, unlike domestic students, international students seldom have family members or friends in the U.S., which means they have limited networks when seeking employment (Monahan, 2018). This also indicated that international students are unlikely to receive guidance from family members or friends about available employment options (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Additionally, for international students whose native language is not English, such as Chinese international students, they might face bigger challenges (Monahan, 2018). For example, they might have difficulties in fully expressing themselves when writing cover letters and resumes, as well as engaging in interviews (Monahan, 2018). Researchers also mentioned that even if international students are fluent in expressing themselves in English, employers might still have negative perceptions due to their accents (Carlson & McHenry, 2006). Additionally, most Chinese international students have limited job-related practical experience before they come to the U.S., which is related to the educational system's bias toward theory in China (Farrell & Grant, 2005). For example, in a research study about engineer graduates in Europe, North America, and China, researchers found that Chinese students get little practical experience in projects or teamwork (Farrell & Grant, 2005). Therefore, the limited practical experience of Chinese international students added more difficulties for them in this study-to-work transition.

Furthermore, international students also deal with discrimination when applying for internships (Lee, 2016). Specifically, researchers mentioned that xenophobia or neo-racism, which is a type of discrimination based on culture and nationality, might play a role when international students apply for internships and work in the U.S. (Lee, 2016). For example, researchers found that when domestic and international students have the same bachelors' degree from the same U.S. institution, international students might have more difficulties starting their career due to their international status (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Chakravarty, 2006; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Furthermore, previous studies also indicated that international students and postdoctoral researchers tend to be discriminated against in the U.S. due to their foreign culture (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Additionally, researchers pointed out that employers in developed countries, such as the U.S., value education and work experience received in other developed countries, such as U.K., more when compared with experience acquired in China (Fong, 2011).

Moreover, due to the complex policies related to the work visas, international students also have more challenges when seeking internships. Specifically, the OPT period is only up to 12 months for all international students (USCIS Practical Training, 2019). If employers are satisfied with international students in this period and want to keep them as long-time employees, employers have to sponsor international students for a H-1B work visa petition. This sponsorship requires employers to go through a complex application process as well as pay at least a \$1060 petition fee for each applicant. However, going through the sponsor process does not guarantee that international employees can legally stay for work. After the sponsorship, international candidates applying for a H1-B visa are required to go through the lottery system. In 2019 - 2020, 201,011 petitions were received while only 65,000 petitions were randomly

selected for H-1B visas (USCIS, 2019), which means the chance of selection was 32%. For those international students who are not selected, they have to go back to their own countries due to the expiration of their F-1 visas. Therefore, it is likely that employers hire international students for internships and also spend time and money to train them but receive nothing in the end. In summary, compared with hiring domestic employees, this is challenging for those employers who hold small businesses or who are not familiar with the petition process. Therefore, they are less likely to provide jobs and internships for international students.

Finally, besides all these challenges faced by international students when applying for internships, they are also vulnerable to exploitation from employers, such as lower pay, longer working hours (Matloff, 2002), broken promises for H-1B sponsorship, and limited negotiating power (Lowell, 2001). Due to the collectivistic culture, Chinese international students might be less likely to stand up and advocate for themselves if they are treated unfairly.

Mental Health of Chinese International Students on Campus

Due to the difficulties Chinese international students experience in their cultural transitions, many researchers have conducted studies about their mental health status. For example, it has been reported by several studies that the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms are high, such as 77.9% reported depression symptoms and 74.3% reported anxiety symptoms among 222 Chinese international students, and 45% reported depression symptoms and 29% reported anxiety symptoms among 130 Chinese international students (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013). In terms of the potential factors that might cause mental health problems among Chinese international students, a number of researchers have identified several possible factors causing mental health issues, such as not having a steady partner, lower rating of cultural humility of key university personnel, poor current health, poor relationships with advisors, social

isolation, language barriers, homesickness, etc. (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013; Liu, 2009).

Coping Strategies of Chinese International Students on Campus

Researchers have identified coping strategies as the strategies people use to adapt to stressful life events (Endler & Parker, 1994). Specifically, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have described two main coping strategies: problem-focused and emotional-focused coping. Yan and Berliner (2011) conducted a qualitative study and found that Chinese international students are more likely to employ emotion-focused coping strategies, when compared with Western coping styles which are more related to problem-focused. Instead of finding direct ways to solve problems, Chinese international students are more likely to change their perceptions and emotions toward them (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Additionally, several studies have identified forbearance coping as one of the main strategies that is specifically used by Chinese international students (Wei et al., 2012; Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2018). Forbearance coping is described as “minimization or concealment of stressors or concerns in order not to trouble or burden others, thus achieving social harmony”, which is preferable in Chinese cultural context (Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2018, p.2). For example, in Cao et al.’s (2018) study, they found that in terms of academic stress, Chinese international students are more likely to employ problem-coping strategies for competency-related challenges and forbearance coping for other types of academic stressors, such as learning style challenges. Specifically, regarding competency-related challenges (e.g., language barriers, academic writing, and self regulation), Chinese international students reported actively seeking resources or depending on themselves to solve these problems. However, when it comes to learning style

challenges (e.g., class participation and critical thinking), Chinese international students chose to use forbearance coping strategies, such as “accept it.” (Cao et al., 2018)

Furthermore, social support and leisure activities have been identified as another two coping strategies. For example, researchers have identified potential supports such as from family, co-national and host-national friends, church, professional counseling, university tutors. (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018). Example leisure activities included building social connections, getting involved in campus/ local groups and activities, participating in sports spectatorship, as well as doing quiet individual leisure activities (Zhou, Zhang & Stodolska, 2018).

Theoretical Conceptualization

Many studies have adopted a deficit lens while exploring international students’ experiences in the United States (Kuo, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). However, Waters et al. (2021) proposed that researchers should not only focus on the negative impacts of stressful events, but also address how people are sustained and strengthened during this process. In this aspect, critical theoretical implications could be elucidated from the framework of resilience theory and post-traumatic growth theory. According to Fonagy et al. (1994), resilience is described as a dynamic process of positive adaptation despite stressful life events, in which individuals actively utilize internal and external resources to achieve positive adaptations while handling adverse conditions. There are two main components in resilience: a) adversity and b) positive adaptations (Luthar & Lyman, 2014). According to Pan et al. (2007), there are physical adversity and psychosocial adversity. These adversity experiences could vary from one-time stressful event to on-going traumatic experiences (Pan & Chan, 2007). In terms of positive adaptations, researchers proposed that it is a balance between adversity and individuals’

protective factors (Grotberg, 2000). Protective factors included internal and external resources, such as inner strengths (Pan & Chan, 2007) and supportive family, friends, and community (Norman, 2000).

In terms of post-traumatic growth theory, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) proposed that people could not only survive highly challenging life events, but are also capable of developing profound, positive changes and thriving through stresses. Additionally, post-traumatic growth could occur in three general domains: a) changed self-perception of strengths and new possibilities, b) changes in the experience of relationship with others, and c) changes in one's general philosophy of life, including priorities, appreciation, and spirituality (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). These changes led to greater wisdom about the world and improved life satisfaction (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014).

Regarding the relationship with between resilience theory and post-traumatic growth theory, there are some similarities and differences (Poseck et al. 2006). Both of theories emphasized positive adaptations individuals can make when dealing with highly stressful situations, instead of simply experiencing the damaging effects of such stressful events (Poseck et al. 2006). However, resilience theory focuses on individual's ability to achieve and maintain a stable equilibrium when dealing with adversity protective factors (Poseck et al. 2006), whereas post-traumatic growth theory focuses on individuals both surviving and thriving as they can experience positive changes leading them to better situations when compared to their circumstances before the adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2000). Given the stigmatized perspective of research studies on the population in question, it is important to apply the lens of resilience theory and post-traumatic growth theory when investigating international students'

resources, coping strategies, and growth during the transition from school to working environments.

Rationale and Purpose of the Current Study

Despite the presence of research studies investigating Chinese international students' experiences in the United States, such as their mental health status (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013), strengths (Yakunina et al., 2013), as well as coping strategies (Wei et al., 2012; Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018), their specific experience during the uniquely challenging stage of OPT internship application are not well elaborated (Monahan, 2018). Furthermore, while researchers have indicated that international students generally face many barriers when they are in the school-to-work transition and established the likely link between such challenging life events and mental health concerns (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000; Monahan, 2008; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the existing research does not explore how these barriers have impacts on Chinese international students' mental and physical health in particular or their coping strategies during OPT.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students who have completed their education degree and are currently seeking internships during their OPT program in the United States. Specifically, this study examined participants' perceived obstacles in this internship-seeking process; the impacts on their mental and physical health; their strengths, resources, and coping strategies in this process. The following three research questions were utilized to guide the current study: (1) What barriers do Chinese international students face when they are seeking an internship during OPT? (2) What implications would these barriers impose on Chinese international students' mental and physical well-being? (3) What strengths and coping strategies have Chinese international students adopted to deal with such barriers?

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Unlike the quantitative research approach that places a greater emphasis on addressing the “why” questions, the qualitative research approach leans toward answering questions of “how” or “what” (Creswell, 1998). This approach aims to establish a more profound understanding of participants’ perceptions of their experiences for the researcher (Creswell, 1998). Furthermore, as suggested by Morrow (2005), the qualitative research approach will unveil opportunities for a closer and deeper exploration of participants’ experiences when the area is yet to be scrutinized, or upon constrained availability of present data and literature. Since there has been limited research about international students’ lived experiences seeking internships during OPT, the qualitative approach could be considered optimal to bridge the gap in understanding how participants experience the internship-seeking processes. Additionally, this approach will help better understand the impacts of these experiences, pertaining especially to the participants’ emotional and physical well-being, alongside their coping strategies.

To be more specific, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed in the study by virtue of its ability to promote the focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). In this study, the IPA approach could facilitate the understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese international students who are seeking internships during their OPT program.

Participants

Ten Chinese international students volunteered to participate in the study, and all interviews were included in the analysis. The ages of participants range between 18-35 years old.

All participants identify as Chinese citizens living in the US on an F-1 visa, have recently graduated with their masters' degree, and are currently undergoing the internship-seeking process during their OPT program. Additionally, all participants graduated from non-STEM programs, which has the added implication that their OPT program would only last for 12 months. Moreover, two participants reported completing their undergraduate programs in the U.S., and eight participants only engaged in a master's program in the U.S. For gender distribution, nine participants identified as female, and one participant identified as male. Duration-wise, six participants reported spending 4-6 months on the internship-seeking process, three participants spent 1-3 months, and one participant spent less than one month. Additionally, eight participants identified Mandarin as their primary language, while two participants indicated Mandarin and English as their primary languages.

Table 1. Major of Participants

Major	Participants
Social Work	N = 3
Education	N = 2
Counseling	N = 1
Psychology	N = 1
Public Policy	N = 1
Epidemiology	N = 1
International Political Economy	N = 1

Table 2. Years of residency in the U.S.

Major	Participants
1-2 years	N = 4
3-5 years	N = 5
More than 5 years	N = 1

Participants Recruitment and Selection Process

After receiving Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, the purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants from September to October 2020. The advertisement of this study was posted via the prominent Chinese social media platform, WeChat, including an outline of the

study, eligibility criteria, expected time commitment, compensation (a \$25 Amazon gift card upon completing the interview), and a Qualtrics link to provide their contact information. The recruitment process concluded after the data reached saturation with ten participants. In terms of the selection criteria, participants must identify as Chinese citizens staying in the U.S. on an F-1 visa. Additionally, participants must come from non-STEM programs. They also have to either be in the last year of or have recently completed their undergraduate/masters' program. Finally, participants must be actively seeking an internship during their OPT program.

Data Collection and Transcription

Participants first completed the Qualtrics link (attached in the advertisement) indicating their interest and eligibility for the study. For the participants who met the criteria, the principal investigator contacted them to ask them to review and complete the informed consent form as well as demographic questions via a second Qualtrics link. Upon scheduling the interview time via email with the participants, the principal investigator conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. A standard interview protocol was followed to guide all interviews. The said protocol had been finalized after undergoing review by the dissertation committee, alongside an expert who worked with international students and had been through the internship-seeking process during his OPT program. Furthermore, prior to data collection, the principal investigator conducted two pilot interviews with two Chinese international students who did not meet the selection criteria for having finished their internship-seeking processes one year prior. There were nine open-ended questions included in the interview protocol, along with follow-up questions aimed to further explore how participants make meaning of their experiences. Before interviews started, each participant was asked to choose whether to use English or Mandarin to conduct the interview. All participants chose to use Mandarin for the interview process. All

participants completed one interview only, and the average duration for each interview was 70 minutes. The range of the interview time was from 43 minutes to 90 minutes. Interviews took place and were recorded through Zoom (video conferencing platform). All participants were compensated as promised after the interviews.

The entire data collection process was completed within two months. After that, the principal investigator used *iflyrec*, an encrypted advanced speech recognition software for Mandarin, to transcribe interviews. In order to protect participants' confidentiality, all transcripts and electronic files were de-identified and protected by passwords. Additionally, participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms once the interviews were completed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze and interpret the data. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), the focus of the analysis and interpretation should be centered around the way participants make sense of their experiences. Furthermore, the analysis should follow an interactive and inductive cycle (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this process, it is also encouraged that the researcher takes a reflective engagement with the participant's account (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Specifically, the principal investigator followed the steps of data analysis and interpretation proposed by Smith and Osborn (2003). In the beginning, the principal investigator read the data across multiple repetitions in order to be fully familiar with the first written transcripts, noting initial reflections and thoughts that occurred from the transcripts and the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this process, the information drawn from observations and contextual information were also taken into careful consideration (Smith & Osborn, 2003). During the second stage, the principal investigator read each transcript again and identified

themes and patterns regarding how participants understood as well as talked and thought about their lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This was followed by the development of emergent themes. In this step, the principal investigator looked for the connections and patterns within the transcripts and initial notes. Extra care was given to maintaining the primary concepts while reducing the number of details from the transcripts and initial notes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). After that, the principal investigator searched for connections across emergent themes within each transcript and clustered themes sharing similar concepts into “superordinate” and “subordinate” themes, in the fashion recommended by Smith and Osborn (2003).

The final step was repeating the entire process for all remaining cases and creating a comprehensive master listing of all superordinate and subordinate themes for all the cases. By looking for connections and rearranging these themes from each transcript, a finalized comprehensive list of superordinate and subordinate themes was generated, serving as the main findings.

Quality Control

Several measures were implemented to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this study, evolving around metrics of “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability” (Morrow, 2005). Based on the recommendations from Morrow (2005), trustworthiness could be achieved through researcher reflexivity, the use of peer researchers, participant checks, “thick descriptions,” audit trail, among others. Specifically, the principal investigator conducted reflective journaling before and after each interview, and through the data analysis process, including reflecting on original presumptions, thoughts, and reactions during the interviews. Additionally, a participant check was performed in the study. The principal investigator sent a summary of results to each participant and asked for their feedback, especially

about whether their experience was well represented in the findings. Five participants responded, unanimously approving of the results. “Thick description” was achieved through the detailed standard and follow-up questions through the interviews, which not only captured participants’ experiences but also emphasized the context of their experiences. Additionally, audit trails were generated, including a detailed chronology of data collection and analysis, ensuring that the findings would maintain optimal repeatability (Morrow, 2005). Via the utilization of semi-structured interviews and audit trails, personal bias and subjectivity could be effectively reduced (Morrow, 2005).

Moreover, a team of three members was created to perform quality checks, including an auditor and two readers. Adopting a design similar to the preceding research study conducted by Morrissey, Wettersten, and Brionez (2018), the principal investigator for this study was responsible for interviews, coding, and initial description of themes, as well as responding to feedback from the team members. Additionally, the principal investigator sent three randomly selected transcripts to the readers, asking them to carefully review the transcripts and provide their honest feedback on the findings. Furthermore, the auditor provided feedback through the entire research process, including the methodological design, interview protocols and procedures, as well as finalized findings with direct quotes. All team members had previous research experiences related to the qualitative approach, and they were well acclimated to the IPA approach prior to the data analysis. Furthermore, all team members were encouraged to conduct self-reflections on their personal identities and past experiences, especially how these factors might impact the process of reviewing and offering feedback on the data.

In terms of transferability, Morrow (2005) suggested that it is critical to provide sufficient information about the researcher, research context, process, participants, and participant-

researcher relationship. Listed below is the detailed information regarding research team members' identity, alongside a statement of positionality, both serving to help readers decide how the findings may transfer.

Research Team

For this study, research team members included the primary investigator who identifies as an international student from mainland China studying in a non-STEM major. The auditor is the primary investigator's academic advisor and dissertation committee chair, Dr. Rachel Navarro, who identifies as a Latina Woman. In terms of the two research team members, one is Xueyang Wang, an international student from mainland China. She graduated from a STEM major and went through the internship-seeking process three years ago. Another reader is Chia-lin Chang, who identifies as an international student from Taiwan. She is currently studying in a non-STEM major and has not been through this internship-seeking process. The two team members were selected based on their previous experience with qualitative study, fluency with Mandarin given that all interviews and transcripts were in Mandarin, as well as a shared interest in this research topic.

Statement of Positionality

The primary investigator is a Chinese international student currently studying in the U.S. She engaged in the internship-seeking process during the Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) program and has not yet started seeking an internship during her OPT program. Her initial interest in international students' internship-seeking process research emerged after her own experience dealing with struggles as an international student when seeking practicum in the U.S. The primary investigator elected to undertake this research study after witnessing other Chinese international students' struggles, reviewing the literature, and noticing a lack of awareness in

academia on this particular population's experience during the OPT program. The primary investigator originally believed that Chinese international students' internship-seeking process is mostly impacted by systemic barriers in the U.S.'s labor policy, as well as xenophobic ideology in certain parts of the U.S.'s political spectrum; the Chinese international students experienced mental and physical ordeals due to the systemic lack of support during these processes. However, through reviewing relevant literature and engaging in the current study, these assumptions were challenged in varying cases. The primary investigator now believes that there are multiple factors impacting Chinese international students' internship-seeking processes. Even though they experience hardship, they still managed to identify a limited collection of internal and external resources that could facilitate positive changes and growth through this stressful experience. These changes happened during and after the analysis, especially when the primary investigator noticed the themes related to the various resources and coping strategies, and growth in this process.

Results

Table 5. Summary of superordinate and sub themes related to experiences seeking internship during OPT program

Superordinate Themes	Sub Themes
Perceived Obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The impact of the pandemic b. The impact of U.S. politics on immigration laws during the pandemic c. Barriers from Language, Culture, and Specific Internship Requirements d. Lack of support e. Learned helplessness
Emotional and Physical Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Emotional well-being b. Physical well-being
Resources and Coping strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Emotional support from family and friends b. Professional support c. Strengths d. Self-care strategies

Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Elevated self-awareness b. Enhanced abilities to cope with future adversities c. Changes to perspectives of life d. Professional development e. The act of passing on experiences to others
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Note. $N = 10$

Perceived Obstacles

This theme captures participants' perceived external and internal obstacles while seeking internship in the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. In terms of external barriers, most participants' internship-seeking experiences were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S. politics on immigration laws. In addition, the differences in language and culture between China and the U.S., and specific internship-related requirement made it more challenging for some participants to seek for internship. A lack of support from their universities and peers led to repeated experiences of rejection for most participants, resulting in learned helplessness. The five subthemes discussed here are 1) the impact of the pandemic, 2) the impact of U.S. politics on immigration laws during the pandemic, 3) barriers from language, culture, internship-related requirement, 4) lack of support, 5) learned helplessness.

The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most participants described the challenges of seeking an internship during the pandemic. Specifically, they indicated that there had been a steep decline in internship positions posted, from years prior. Participants attributed this to reduced funding in specific organizations, as well as the hiring freeze in the professional sector. Participants also reported that the processing time for critical, internship-related procedures—i.e., applying for a social security number and receiving responses from internship applications—has been prolonged substantially. Nevertheless, several other participants described arising opportunities in the social work sector

induced by the pandemic. It is noteworthy that many participants reported an inability to sustain their previous coping strategies following the enforcement of social isolation. This resulted in an elevated sense of exhaustion when navigating the internship-seeking process during the pandemic.

The following excerpts illustrate the impact of the pandemic on the participants' internship-seeking experiences. One participant shared that "There was one time that the staff in the human resources department contacted me about my reference list. She told me that they would send me an official offer after this weekend...However, she told me the next day that because they lost their funding for this position, they couldn't hire me anymore." In contrast, a participant in the social work sector reported different experiences, such as "Because of the pandemic, there have been a lot of COVID-related internship positions for the government of volunteer work for [Non-Government Organizations (NGO)]. In social services area, basically, it is hard to see the hiring freeze because employers are still recruiting."

In terms of the slow processing speed, a participant shared that, "After I received the official offer, I didn't expect that my application for the social security number was delayed. Since many offices were closed during the pandemic, I had to call them at 8 am every day and ask about the progress. After I burst into tears in my phone call with them, they gave me an emergency appointment. I finally got my social security number." When describing losing their previous coping strategies, another participant shared that "I used to enjoy outdoor activities, such as cycling with my friends. However, due to the pandemic, I couldn't do this stuff."

Experiences such as those described above point towards the impacts of the pandemic on participants' experiences when seeking internships. There has been an increase of internship positions posted for specific areas due to pandemic-induced demand in certain sectors. However,

this could not hide the fact that fewer internships have been available in other areas, with hiring freezes for entire professional sectors. Compounding these are the excessively long processing times, alongside the loss of previous coping strategies, which made it increasingly challenging for participants during this pandemic. In summary, these external factors have imposed extra layers of difficulties for participants seeking internships during their OPT program.

The impact of U.S. politics on Immigration laws during the pandemic

During the interviews, participants unanimously talked about the negative impacts from their identities as Chinese international students on their internship-seeking experience. These negative impacts mainly arose from specific immigration regulations related to the OPT program and the H1b work visa. It is also notable that most participants voiced potential reasons contributing toward employers' hesitation when hiring international students. The political climate in the U.S. during the pandemic added obstacles in this internship-seeking process as well.

A participant shared that "As international students, we can only stay unemployed for 90 days after receiving the EAD (employment authorization document) card, otherwise, we will lose legal status in the U.S. And after working for one year, we must decide whether to stay here or go back to the home country. In other countries like UK or Australia, they don't have such a one-year rule for international students." She later added that "Another restriction is you have to find the internship that is directly connected with your current major." Due to the policy about 90-day unemployment, several participants explained that they had to take the less ideal internship offers because they couldn't wait for other internship opportunities. One participant said that "I had to make compromise given the 90-day unemployment policy.... I had a friend [a domestic student] recently received the offer from his satisfying internship...I felt very happy for him...if I could

have more time waiting for the internships that I'm more satisfied with, I probably didn't need to make compromises and committed to the current internship."

When sharing their experiences of interactions with potential employers, many participants described the need to invest additional and arduous efforts to try and educate employers about the procedure of hiring an international student. One participant said, "Many employers don't understand OPT...my friends and I had to educate them about 'what is opt, what is H1b, and what difficulties you are facing as an employer.'" In terms of why employers would not want to hire international students, one participant stated, "Given your OPT situation, you can't work for a longer time...Even if you want to work longer, they must sponsor your H1b [work visa], which means they probably need to hire a lawyer who specifically work for your case...And there is still large chance that you could not be selected in the lottery system for it [work visa] and they [employers] waste all their money and time to train you and sponsor you." These examples showcase the difficulties from OPT and H-1B work visa policy for both employers and international students. The examples also described the helpless feeling of these participants—despite their knowledge about these challenges, there was nothing they could do about this system.

When asked to recall their experiences applying for an internship, most participants shared that they were rejected after disclosing their legal status as international students. One participant shared that, "...Employers responded to me very quickly...After I told them that I'm an international student when they asked about my status, then there was no response anymore." Furthermore, several participants expressed concerns over disclosing their international status in the online application system. One participant shared that "I'm worried that I couldn't pass the initial screening due to this answer [non-citizen and need sponsorship]. I remember when I

directly submitted my resumes to HR, I received interviews in most situations. But if that was through an online application system, I usually couldn't hear anything back from the employers.”

The political climate in the U.S. during the pandemic further added to the difficulties in this already challenging process, as characterized by the following participant. She shared that “...like the attitudes of Trump towards China and Chinese people, as well as the attitudes of media. These all absolutely have impacts on employers who are hiring people for internships. For example, if the HR staff shares similar opinions like Trump, then they probably won't be interested in hiring international students.”

These examples capture the impacts of the immigration laws and the political environment on participants' experiences seeking an internship within the United States. Specifically, due to their non-citizenship status, they were forced to deal with many barriers that arose from the policies themselves. In the application process, they had to further cope with the lack of knowledge on the employers' end. Given the political climate and the immigration laws in the U.S., it had become increasingly difficult for participants to secure an internship position during the OPT program.

Barriers from Language, Culture, and Specific Internship Requirements

Besides the aforementioned external obstacles involving the pandemic, labor policy, and impacts of the political climate, some participants also reported experiencing challenges that are of linguistic and cultural natures. Moreover, a few participants described specific internship-related requirements that made the internship-seeking process more arduous. For other internships, there were fewer available positions for specific majors, making the process highly competitive.

Specifically, some participants had to navigate the different cultural expectations during interviews. One participant said that “we are encouraged to be humble [in Chinese culture]. You are supposed to wait for other people to find your strengths. However...I had to sell myself like Americans during interviews. [For example] I used to be a listener during conversations. I had to be a speaker instead of a listener [during the interviews]. I need to impress interviewers with the feeling that I have everything under control. This adjustment has been very challenging for me.” Another participant reported feeling less acclimated to the internship-seeking process in the U.S. since it is very different from that in China. She mentioned that “It was my first time starting to look for internship in the U.S.... when you apply for internships in China, you don’t need to write a cover letter. But here, each cover letter was like a mini-personal statement, and it was quite a lot of work.” Furthermore, several participants expressed concerns over engaging in an internship that relies completely on their English, which is their second language.

In terms of specific requirements for internships, one participant shared that “For my major, most of the employers prefer candidates who already have several years of experience. Additionally, they [employers] prefer people who can speak Spanish instead of Mandarin. Compared with domestic students who can speak Spanish, I don’t have any advantages.” Another participant expressed concerns about available internship positions in her major, saying that, “Most of the time, there was only one available position in one school. Many people who have graduated for 7-8 years might still be waiting for such a position.” In terms of the competitiveness, one participant described it as “hundreds of people applying for one position.”

Conjointly, participants had to cope with the many communication styles expected during interviews while navigating the brand-new process of seeking internships in the U.S. Certain tall orders regarding language skills and past work experiences further complicated the struggle for

some participants. Because OPT policy also mandates a direct link between participants' internship and their major, some of them had to engage in competitions with slim odds, due to fewer available internships in certain areas. These internal and external factors were intertwined together, making the internship-seeking process increasingly arduous for participants to handle.

Lack of Support

When undergoing these hardships from a combination of external and internal obstacles, most participants described the lack of guidance, or a scarcity of resources targeting the specific needs of international students on an institutional level—e.g., how to apply for internships in the U.S. and navigate potential barriers as international students. Furthermore, some participants reported feeling a lack of social support from their peers, cohorts, or family members.

A lack of support from the institutional level is evidenced by the following example. One participant shared that “For the whole process, I feel that most of the [career] resources from the university are not for international students. They don't know what you need, or they probably just don't care about it. Even if they are aware of your needs, they probably couldn't relate to how struggled you are in this process [seeking OPT internship].” Other participants also expressed interest in seeking support from university career services, but often found themselves stuck and disappointed after confronted with the fact that such resources were mostly reserved for domestic students.

There was also evidence of participants experiencing a lack of social support from their domestic peers and their family members. For example, one participant talked about her experience sharing her anxious feelings with her domestic friend when she could not find an internship. She mentioned that her domestic friend comforted her, saying, “well, maybe you can just take a rest after graduation.” When she explained the 90-day unemployment policy to her

friend, she described that “I still remember how shocked my friend was when I told them that if I could not find an internship before this certain date, I will lose my legal status in the U.S.” These examples highlight the isolated feelings participants experienced when their unique challenges could not be comprehended by their citizen peers, necessitating further education and explanation on the topic. A lack of support from family members was captured in the following example. One participant mentioned that her parents asked her to return to China after graduation. She described that “I couldn’t talk to them [my parents] when I felt so sad and helpless. I know they will ask me to go back home again.” Therefore, while seeking internships as international students, during a pandemic, has been challenging already, it is made even harder for them when they are deprived of adequate support from institutions, friends, or family.

Learned helplessness

This theme is reflective of participants’ internal experiences upon being rejected or receiving no responses after undertaking internship application tasks. Indeed, most participants reported that after sending out numerous applications, there was still zero good news for them. They reported feeling frustrated and even started to question their professional competency.

One participant shared that “I submitted a lot of applications, but there was no positive result at all. It made me feel very disappointed. I started to question myself about whether I could find an internship, or whether I should even try to stay in the U.S.” Another participant said that “After I submitted sixty applications, I got fewer than ten interviews. It was a big challenge for me, because I don’t have a lot of internships that I can apply for in my major-related area. This made me feel completely exhausted.” Furthermore, a participant discussed her suspicion of being rejected based on her status as a Chinese international student. She shared that “After I submitted 20 applications, there was no response. After that, I submitted another 40 applications... I started

to question whether this [no response] was because of my identity as a Chinese international student, and employers just took a look at my resumes and decided not to hire me.”

These examples exemplify the learned helplessness for participants who kept experiencing failures after submitting their internship applications, contributing to their self-doubt about their competency and career choices. Based on the previous obstacles, it was exhausting for participants to constantly cope with these struggles while having few supports available for them. Considering the total lack of positive outcomes after all these efforts, self-doubt would be a normal reaction in this extremely harsh process. Such learned helplessness is a reflection of the combined results from the external and internal barriers, resulting in the belief that no matter how hard they try, they would still be destined to fail.

Emotional and Physical Well-being

This theme reflects participants’ experiences of emotional and physical well-being when seeking internships during their OPT program. This section highlights the adverse impacts of the individual and contextual barriers on participants’ mental and physical health, including lasting negative emotions and disturbed eating and sleeping patterns. Participants’ stories reveal their struggles during the internship-seeking process. The two subthemes that emerged were 1) emotional well-being and 2) physical well-being.

Emotional Well-being

All participants reported experiencing negative emotions due to the stressful process of seeking internships. Specifically, some participants reported feeling disappointed and depressed due to the repeated failures and pronounced helplessness in this process. Additionally, several participants reported feeling anxious and baffled about how they should move forward in their

future. Self-blame and self-doubt were also discussed in the interviews. Furthermore, several participants reported feeling marginalized due to their non-citizen status.

When mentioning certain employers' behavior of voiding promised offers, one participant described her disappointment as, "The feeling was like you finally see the light, and you believed that you could make it this time. However, someone came and extinguished the light immediately." Several participants also expressed feeling depressed when they were stuck in the process and felt hopeless. One participant shared that "I felt very exhausted and isolated. I felt overwhelmed, nobody could understand these feelings. People told me that there is always hope. But I couldn't see hope. At this moment, everything was very broken, very chaotic."

Besides feeling disappointed and depressed, participants also identified anxiety and self-blame as two other emotional reactions. For example, one participant described her anxious and perplexed feeling about her future as "I felt very stuck. I don't know what I should do with my future." Another participant blamed herself when she felt the urge to take a pause, stating that "I submitted [internship] applications almost every day. However, if I didn't review a certain internship-posted website on a single day, I started to blame myself for not trying hard enough."

Several participants also expressed self-doubt about their professional competency and their career choice of staying in the U.S. instead of going back to China. One participant stated, "[after all these rejections] I felt very disappointed and started to question whether I can even find an internship. Or maybe staying in the U.S. is not a good choice." Another participant shared that "I know I am competent, but all my efforts were not paid off. This made me doubt whether I'm just not good enough [to find an internship]." Furthermore, several participants also shared their marginalized experiences as international students since very few people actually care about their challenges. One participant stated, "As an international student, you are not protected by

Constitution as other citizens...If something unfair happens to you, very few people will fight for you since it is such a marginalized group...”

Overall, this internship-seeking process has been mentally and emotionally grueling for participants given the external and internal obstacles. Without sufficient support from their peers and universities, they experienced various negative emotions facing these challenges, with feeling disappointed and depressed as two prime examples. When they could not cope with these difficulties successfully, they started to doubt themselves for their career choices and their competency, often blaming themselves for not trying hard enough. Many of them also reported feeling anxious when dealing with major uncertainties whenever they try to think about and plan for their future.

Physical Well-being

Based on the close connections between mental health and physical health, when participants were drenched in various forms of negative emotions, their physical well-being was also undermined by the hardship. Most of the participants reported experiencing anxiety-induced insomnia—having issues falling asleep or waking up repeatedly at night—when they applied for internships. For instance, one participant shared, “I couldn’t fall asleep every night. I usually stayed awake in bed until 5-7 am in the morning then I can sleep. Yes, 5-7 am. I tried a lot of things to help with sleep, but they were not helpful. Even with the melatonin, it was not effective for me.” Another participant described suffering from panic attacks when sleeping, saying that “when I was sleeping, I had bad dreams about something went wrong with my internship application. Then I woke up immediately and started to work on my internship applications again in the middle of the night.”

Participants also described negative impacts on their eating habits due to the overwhelming experience. For example, one participant shared that “When I feel anxious, I keep eating junk food. Sometimes I even binge eating because I feel very sad or stressed out.” Another participant stated, “Generally I don’t like sweet food, but at that time I ate a lot of junk food and sweet food to cope with this stress, which made me gain a lot of weight.” These examples illustrate the connections between participants’ mental health and physical health when confronted with the hardships from the internship-seeking process.

Overall, it could be concluded that the stressful nature of the internship-seeking experience has strongly impacted participants as they hold a myriad of long-lasting and intensive adverse emotions towards themselves, atop feeling perplexed about their future. The process also negatively impacts their eating and sleeping patterns, further contributing to their generalized negative emotions during this application process. Given that some participants reported that they were not able to use their previous coping strategies due to the quarantine policy, it is possible that the pandemic and the related isolation has negative impacts on participants’ well-being. Another possible factor is related to the anti-China speech from the president Trump and related social media, which might also worsen the participants’ well-being. Besides identifying resources and support for overcoming the obstacles, participants must also figure out how to handle these negative emotions and look after their physical health, while trying to make headway in the demanding internship-seeking process.

Resources and Coping Strategies

This theme reflects participants’ resources and strategies to cope with challenges in seeking internships during the OPT program. Despite being subjected to substantial adversity dealing with psychosocial risk factors, participants still unearthed internal and external resources

that could facilitate positive adaptations. These resources range from the emotional support offered by family members and friends that aided in coping with the assorted difficulties, to professional support through which participants were able to acquire valuable career guidance when seeking internships. Participants were also found to be capable of utilizing their internal resources, such as strengths and self-care strategies, to pave the path toward positive changes. The four subthemes that emerged were: 1) emotional support from family and friends; 2) professional support; 3) strengths; and 4) self-care strategies.

Emotional Support from Family and Friends

Because of the challenging nature of the internship-seeking process, emotional support from participants' friends and family was crucial. Some participants cited that the emotional support from family shed light on their experiences with different, refreshing perspectives. One participant who experienced anxiety-induced insomnia stated that, "my mom told me that 'it is okay that you couldn't fall asleep. If you feel stressed about not being able to sleep, then it will be another layer of stress.' After that, I became less worried when I couldn't fall asleep." Another form of emotional support was the increase of participants' confidence via encouragement. One participant shared that "...my parents kept telling me that I'm the best... This kind of family support made me feel like even if I couldn't find internships, I still have confidence in myself."

Participants also reported garnering support from their peers and friends. By sharing their struggles, participants noted reduced sensations of stress because they could let out their negative emotions. One participant shared that, "It feels much better after talking to friends about your stress. After pouring out your overwhelming emotions, you feel much more relaxed." Learning about their friends' current difficulties also helped participants feel that they were not alone in coping with the challenging circumstances, which could be neatly summarized via the words of

one of the participants— “When I talked to my friends in China, they also complained about stressors in their life...It made me feel that everyone has their own difficulties. There was no perfect life.”

As most participants’ family and friends reside in China, their support from their roommates who were physically closest to them remains essential. One participant stated that, “My roommates have been very supportive. We often got together and checked in with each other to see how everyone was doing. If there is any progress regarding anything that we are waiting for, we usually celebrate this progress together.” These examples illustrate the social support participants received while dealing with adverse circumstances. Such support served as critical protective factors and enhanced the participants’ resilience in the face of difficulties.

Professional Support

Access to professional support is another critical resource for many participants. Some participants illustrated that receiving career support from their supervisors and professors has been extremely helpful. One participant described the professional support she received from her supervisor as, “Honestly, it would be much harder to secure an internship if I haven’t reached out and received support from my supervisor. When I had difficulties finding the internship, I reached out to my faculty, program directors, etc. ... My supervisor suggested I should apply for a part-time teaching position...It was the internship that I’m going to start very soon.”

Participants also identified that connecting with peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds and seeking their advice has also been beneficial. One participant stated that, “My previous roommate has been very helpful since she has been working in the U.S. for almost two years. She had a lot of experience applying for internships in the U.S. [as a Chinese international student]. So, most of the time she not only understood my feelings in this process but also

provided me with concrete suggestions about what I should do in the current situation.” Other participants also talked about their experiences overcoming the “stuck point” in the internship-seeking process through the advice from their peers. The insights regarding the key points of attention during the application and interview process also proved invaluable.

Several participants further shared that the use of professional resources from online platforms proved providential. One participant stated that, “There are many resources on YouTube and Indeed about how to find internships. People shared their professional experience on these platforms, which was very helpful for me.” Through their active search for supportive social connections and resources, participants were able to effectively collect information and identify key strategies to resolve the problems, which are reflective of their greater resilience.

Strengths

This subtheme captures participants’ resilience in actively employing their internal resources, utilizing the identified strengths in their fight against the internship-seeking difficulties. Specifically, the majority of participants described their strengths as their cultural identity and bilingual skills. When they consciously utilized these strengths and applied for internship positions that required specific skill sets, they managed to close the gap when competing with domestic students. One participant said, “When comparing myself with Americans, I didn’t feel that I could be competitive at all. However, when thinking about my strengths, one thing that came to my head was my Chinese identity. For example, I can speak Mandarin, and I have cultural sensitivity in this cross-cultural context. So, most of the internships I applied for are related to social workers positions requiring Mandarin-speaking skills.” Besides Mandarin-speaking skills, past experience residing in China could also prove advantageous, as illustrated by this participant, “Because I have applied for internships in the

public policy area that was specifically targeting China study, my Mandarin speaking competency and my past experiences in China have been very helpful.”

Participants also described their past work experiences and professional knowledge as additional requisites when applying for internships. One participant shared that her outstanding professional knowledge helped her secure internship offers, stating that, “...my major is data analysis... This is one strength for me because I love working with data, and I am very good at it.” Furthermore, one participant talked about how her past work experience helped her stay calm and composed while waiting for interviews, saying that, “I had work experience back in China... I am familiar with the internship-seeking process.... For example, it won’t bother me too much if they [employers] decided not to give me interviews.” Participants also shared how their past work experience in specific areas helped them become more competitive when seeking internships. One participant who applied for teaching positions in a school shared that, “I have been working in a school when I was in China. In the U.S., employers really value your practical experience [in this area]. So, I think this working experience has been pretty helpful.”

Persistence is another strength that was positively pinpointed by most participants. Instead of giving up in this excruciating process, participants kept reaching out for resources, adjusting their strategies, and applying for a more diverse set of positions upon repeated rejections. One participant shared that, “The most important lesson for me in this process was never giving up... Trying to learn something from your failures could help you grow better.” In terms of the specific endeavors that they made after receiving rejection letters, one participant specifically named that, “Every day, I applied for 15 internship positions.” She later added that, “I remembered after two months, I’ve submitted applications to all the social worker positions that were posted in the locations that I was looking for internships.”

Several participants also described their strengths as being able to regulate their negative emotions in this process— from becoming more patient and compassionate towards themselves, to setting up realistic goals, and even taking care of themselves with mental health-related knowledge. One participant shared that, “I won’t blame myself. Even though I could not secure the position until August, I was pretty alright most of the time...I never harshly criticize myself.” Another participant shared experience using her mental health knowledge to take care of herself and her friends. She shared that, “Because I’m in the mental health area, I can notice the time when I need to pay attention to my mental health during this stressful situation. I also reached out to my friends when they were not doing very well...which in turn made me feel better about myself.” Despite the challenging process, it remains invaluable that participants could identify their strengths as internal resources and allow them to stand up to the current challenges, helping them bounce back from the failures they experienced.

Self-Care Strategies

This subtheme is reflective of the participants’ self-care and stress-management strategies when dealing with difficulties that arose from seeking internships during the OPT program. Some common self-care strategies include investing time toward their hobbies, hanging out with friends, working out, connecting with nature, picking up new skills, etc. Specifically, dietetic, and culinary self-care are amongst the most common strategies. One participant talked about how relaxed she felt after cooking as, “...when I felt very exhausted, I usually baked cakes. The smell of the cakes made me feel very relaxed.” Learning to cook new dishes helped participants refresh their minds, as illustrated by another participant saying, “I bought a lot of sauces that I haven’t tried before and learned to cook many new dishes. It made me feel that there are still fun

things to do in life.” Furthermore, participants also shared that cooking Chinese food made them feel connected with their culture.

Besides food and cooking, multiple participants reported feeling relaxed when spending time in nature. One participant shared that, “Taking a walk in the park is very helpful. I think there is strong healing power in nature. I remembered when I walked along under the trees; I watched those ducks swimming around aimlessly...Anyway, when you soak in the fresh air and the sunshine, you know that you will be okay. Nothing is a big deal.” Some participants also identified their self-care strategy as spending time doing their hobbies, which helped participants take a break from their overwhelming thoughts about finding internships. One participant reported that, “Playing puzzles provided me with some hope. For example, if you make efforts in this puzzle, you will certainly find the correct piece. It’s like if you sit there and keep trying, you will definitely see some progress... Even if it’s only a small step, it can still make a difference.”

Hanging out with friends, working out, seeking help from psychotherapy, journaling, and mindfulness were also among the self-care strategies identified. Utilizing a combination of these self-care strategies, participants were able to regain energy while dealing with the many challenges and negative emotions in the internship-seeking process. These strategies helped them secure a break from the stress related to finding the internship, stay connected with their friends for social support, and ground themselves through the healing power of nature. These behaviors, in turn, added to participants’ resilience while coping with adversity.

In summary, this theme illustrates the internal and external resources that participants were trying to locate and utilize when they applied for internships in the U.S. and signifies the level of resiliency and perseverance of the participants. Despite the total absence of preceding internship-seeking experience in this country, participants remained highly active in garnering

resources, identifying internal strengths, and establishing coping strategies, rather than faltering and plainly giving up in the face of harsh difficulties.

Growth

Upon coping with the arduous and taxing process of seeking internships, participants learned diverse lessons from the experience. They described their growth as understanding themselves in better ways, becoming more resilient, developing different perspectives of life, improving their professional competency, and being able to pass on their experience to others. This theme also reflects participants' healing process despite all the challenges they encountered. In summary, the five subthemes that emerged are 1) elevated self-awareness, 2) enhanced abilities to cope with future adversities, 3) changes to perspectives of life, 4) professional development, and 5) the act of passing on their experience to others.

Elevated Self-Awareness

Participants described elevated levels of self-awareness that arose from the process of coping with challenges while seeking internships. The growth in self-awareness encompassed better understanding of their values, needs, and priorities regarding working environments and their future life. Some participants gained insights regarding the future lifestyle they desire, as evidenced by the following, "This process helped me think about what kind of life that I want to live, such as what specific challenges and benefits I might encounter in terms of living in China or the U.S. Even though I do not have an answer yet, having to think about it is a good start."

Participants also reported improved understanding of their priorities regarding the work environment and their career path. Several participants reported having a better sense of their career path after the internship-seeking process. One participant further shared her experience about figuring out which work environment she feels the most comfortable with and described it

as “I need to find a place where I can be myself, and other people are willing to respect my cultural diversity.” She later added that “In this process of looking for internships, you will have a clear understanding about the things that you value and the things that you feel comfortable doing.”

The establishment of a better understanding of who they are is also illustrated in the interviews. One participant stated that, “I used to be a person who usually stepped back when there was any difficulty. At this moment, when I looked back, I was impressed about how resilient and strong I have been.” Another participant identified a hidden layer of maturity in her personalities, as evidenced by her saying, “...When I look at my future, I have more confidence about arranging life in the way that I want. Even though I am still not sure about the next steps of my career, but I feel more like an adult [now].” Aligning with the theory of post-traumatic growth, participants experienced enhanced perceptions of themselves, including their strengths, and their priorities in life.

Enhanced abilities to cope with future adversities

Many participants reported that the experience of overcoming challenges helped them realize the level of resiliency they could reach and the array of coping strategies at their disposal. Therefore, they emerge more confident in coping with future hardship. Some participants described growth in their improved abilities to regulate negative emotions. For example, one participant described the changes in her attitudes towards anxiety and said, “I have a better tolerance towards my anxiety. I know it is not totally out of control. I can talk to my anxiety and let it [anxiety] know that ‘You can take a rest. Do you remember that last time you were even more anxious about a certain issue? It was still solved in the end.’”

Participants also illustrated that becoming more mature and independent will help them better cope with future difficulties. One participant shared that, “It [this experience] helped me

become more mature. For example, if I could not find a job, I would not do something against myself. I am sure seeking this internship is not the worst thing, and having this experience made me feel that I can deal with whatever challenges I face in the future.” Another participant expressed her gain in independence as, “When I have problems in the future, I will not go back to my parents [and seek support]. This process really has sharpened my will and made me more resilient [than I was].” Participants’ growth in their resilience improved their confidence levels when coping with future adversities, congruent with the improved self-perception of strengths in the theory of post-traumatic growth. By virtue of improved coping strategies and the gaining of valuable traits such as independence, participants emerge stronger after navigating through these tough roadblocks.

Changes to Perspectives of Life

This theme continues on the scrutiny of participants’ growth after overcoming difficulties while seeking internships. Participants reported substantial changes regarding their perspectives of life. One participant stated that “The biggest growth I got [in this process] is there are always ups and downs...I will take whatever life gives me...From this sense, I don’t quite care about what I am losing or what I am gaining when doing stuff...” Moreover, an increased openness towards new possibilities is also highlighted in the interviews. One participant shared her experience about wanting to stay in New York or Philadelphia, but ended up having to relocate to San Francisco, stating that, “...You don’t always get what you want, but eventually you will find a way making peace with it and probably you will like it...Even though I can’t stay in the eastern coast, I learned much more knowledge of my professional work after moving to the western coast.” These examples illustrated participants’ positive changes by reconciling with the ups and downs in life and becoming more acceptive and explorative towards new possibilities.

The development of a more flexible perspective is another major change that was unearthed during the interviews. For example, one participant mentioned that “I used to judge everything as either one way or the other. However, I gradually learned that not everything is either right or wrong, or either 1 or 0. Everything is on a spectrum as 0.5, 0.4 or 0.6. You need to see more sides of the story before you can figure out what the truth is.” Multiple participants reported changes in perspectives in the way they view certain things. When sharing her perspectives toward anxiety, one participant remarked that, “My dad told me that because of my anxiety, I was able to finish these things step by step... Maybe what I need is not getting rid of anxiety, but how to make peace with anxiety.” Another participant mentioned changes in terms of how she felt about being rejected as “I don’t take it too personal now. I no longer feel that such rejection means that people are against me.” These examples illustrate participants’ ability to adjust their cognitive responses after stressful events posing threats to their assumptive world. Such changes promoted their cognitive flexibility and nourished greater acceptance towards life events.

Professional Development

Participants described intensive growth in their professional competencies throughout the process of seeking internships. The following participant shared his growth in furthering professional connections, stating that “I have gained more understanding of different areas through this period [seeking internships] ... Through networking, I have been talking to different people. Probably I won’t have this opportunity to talk to so many people if I have already secured a job.” Other participants also indicated gaining more experience in job applications and the interview process, leading an increased confidence in securing ideal job offers in the future.

Participants shared that the process helped them develop greater insights about their professional areas as well. For example, one participant described her experience getting to know

the social work systems in different states while searching for internship positions. She shared that, “Because I looked for information of various organizations [when seeking internships], I knew more about how these social service organizations worked in different cities. For example, I was familiar with the social service system in Philadelphia, and it’s nothing like in San Francisco. The social service system in San Francisco is much more advanced.” Even though the process of seeking internships was riddled with obstacles, participants were able to identify their growth in terms of professional development, such as building up connections and increasing knowledge in professional areas, leading toward improved competitiveness in the job market.

The act of passing on their experience to others

Many participants found it profoundly meaningful for them to connect with other Chinese international students who are also undergoing the internships-seeking process. Through sharing their experience, participants empowered other Chinese international students, helping them effectively resolve the problems they confront, resulting in a greater sense of connection. One participant shared that, “...I started to write journals online. I hope more people can see this, and it can empower them. I want to help more people who are similar to my situations [of seeking internships] and get through their hardest times.” Another participant also described her experience empowering other Chinese international students to advocate for themselves against the systemic and procedural barriers in acquiring an SSN. She states that, “I remembered after I figured out the issue with my SSN, several of my friends called me because they had the same struggles...Sometimes I felt that my struggle was unique, but actually it was not. After dealing with this terrible issue, I can still use my experience to help other people. It made me feel that my pains were not totally useless from this perspective.”

These examples illustrate an increased level of compassion for other people who are also experiencing hardship, connecting strongly to the underlying theme of growth. Participants were not only learning from their own experiences, but also finding meaning in passing their experiences onward and empowering other people who shared similar struggles. Such growth enhanced their sense of closeness and fostered positive relationships with others.

Discussion

The qualitative method of interpretive phenomenological analysis, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth theory were applied to explore the following three research questions: (1) What barriers have Chinese international students faced while seeking internships during OPT? (2) What implications would these barriers impose on the emotional and physical well-being of Chinese international students? (3) What strengths and coping strategies have Chinese international students developed in dealing with such barriers? Findings related to the perceived obstacles; emotional and physical well-being; and strengths, resources, and coping strategies will be outlined in this section. Furthermore, research and clinical implications will be delineated.

Outcome of Research Inquiries

Research Outcome, Question 1

Research Question 1 has been centered around exploring the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the internship-seeking process. Extra attention was paid to the barriers they perceived in this journey. These obstacles included contextual factors, systemic issues, and their cultural adjustment process.

Consistent with existing studies, Chinese international students in the current study reported experiencing various forms of obstacles during their school-to-work transitions (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000; Hanassab, 2006; Härtung, 2005), including having to navigate

linguistic and cultural differences during the internship-seeking process. Similar to findings in the previous research (Hanassab, 2006; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000; Tavakoli et al., 2009), these same student participants found it challenging to shift their culturally grounded humbleness to assertiveness during interviews and start negotiating offers with U.S. employers. Several participants also reported feeling less confident when applying for jobs that are fully reliant on English—a second language for them. Furthermore, most participants indicated a lack of support during the internship-seeking process, which is also congruent with the previous findings (Monahan, 2018; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). For example, three out of ten Chinese international student participants specifically pointed out that the career services from their universities or programs often fail to address their needs as international students. Compounded by having few family members or friends within the U.S., they often find themselves deprived of all but the most basic access to career-related resources or local networks commonly enjoyed by domestic students. Additionally, the challenges Chinese international students reported in the current study were often too unique to be effectively comprehended by their domestic cohort leading to feelings of alienation during the internship-seeking process.

All Chinese international student participants identified the U.S. immigration laws as one significant obstacle during this internship-seeking process. Previous research confirms that for international workers with temporary visas in the U.S., career success could be heavily restricted by immigration regulations—most notably, H-1B related policies (Jiang & Kim, 2019). Adding to the previous research, results from this study show that Chinese international students seeking internships during OPT programs were also impacted by the immigration regulations including, but not limited to, the 90-day unemployment cap, the one-year work authorization, and requirements related to the direct link between the major and internship. Additionally, the

complexity of such regulations along with the monetary and time costs of the OPT and H-1B work visa immigration regulations reportedly imposed extra burdens on the employers when considering hiring Chinese international students in this study.

Furthermore, because the current study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants identified the impacts of the pandemic as another major obstacle. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen scarce coverage in the existing literature. Not surprisingly, most Chinese international students in the current study listed negative impacts from the pandemic ranging from steep declines in internship positions posted to hiring freezes across entire professional sectors to unexpected delays in the processing of critical, internship-related procedures. Moreover, several participants were unable to sustain their previous coping strategies following the enforcement of social isolation, adding an extra layer of stress to their daily lives resulting in mental health struggles.

It should be noted that a few Chinese international student participants shared their concerns related to discrimination during their internship-seeking process, and most of their concerns were distinctively related to Xenophobic sentiments during the pandemic. The observation partially aligns with previous research, where international students were found having to deal with various types of discrimination when applying for internships (Lee, 2016; Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Chakravartty, 2006; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). For example, in the previous studies, researchers noted that international students were discriminated against due to their accents when speaking English, their foreign culture background, their international status, and their previous work experience in less developed countries, particularly in STEM fields (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007, Fong, 2011). It is nonetheless noteworthy that not all the current study's participants mentioned such experiences.

Possible reasons for the discrepancy might include the fact that current participants were from non-STEM majors—e.g., social work, counseling, education, etc.—where employers may be more culturally sensitive and value diversity. Therefore, participants might be less likely to be directly exposed to verbal or physical discrimination. Another reason could be that participants experienced other indirect or invisible forms of discrimination, such as being filtered out due to their non-citizen status during the online job application process or being sidelined by employers after disclosing their international status. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated the impacts of anti-China or anti-Asian discrimination (Nam, Marshall, Tian & Jiang, 2021; Zhanga, Bowb, & Bowc, 2020), making it hard for participants to be aware of other types of discrimination that may have been at play in their internship-seeking processes.

Therefore, Chinese international students had to simultaneously deal with external and internal barriers when seeking internships during the OPT program. External barriers included the negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded with and U.S. politics on immigration laws. Moreover, they also had to bridge the linguistic and cultural chasms between China and the U.S., coupled with specific internship-related challenges. Furthermore, major deficiencies in the support mechanism from their universities and peers led to repeated experiences of rejection for almost all but the most acclimated and fortunate participants, resulting in overwhelming odds of learned helplessness. Aligning with resilience theory, such adversity could elevate the possibility of undesirable outcomes, such as psychopathology (Boyden & Mann, 2005).

Research Outcome, Question 2

Research Question 2 focused on discovering the impacts of the abovementioned barriers on participants' psychological and physical well-being. Results of this research revealed negative

impacts on participants' mental and physical health. Previous studies showed that due to the cultural adjustment process, the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms is high among on-campus Chinese international students (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013). However, there were limited previous studies specifically exploring Chinese international students' mental health during the school-to-work transition, specifically the internship-seeking process.

Therefore, this study attempts to bridge that gap by focusing on Chinese International student participants' emotional and physical well-being during this internship-seeking process after they graduated from their programs.

Consistent with the previous research concerning the mental health of on-campus Chinese international students (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013), findings from this study show that participants experienced depression and anxiety symptoms during the internship-seeking process. Given the perceived obstacles and repeated failures, most participants experienced self-blame, self-doubt, and depressed mood. Additionally, many participants felt anxious given the myriad of uncertainties related to their internship-seeking outcomes, U.S. immigration laws, and the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in anxiety-induced insomnia. Learned helplessness could be one important factor that is related to these depression and anxiety symptoms. Specifically, the phenomenon of learned helplessness was first introduced by Seligman in his pioneering work of experimental psychology, where animal behaviors were studied under laboratory conditions (Seligman, 1972). He noted that upon repeated exposure to uncontrollable events, animals learned passivity—displaying signs of emotional stress and demonstrating the inability to recognize that their responses could be effective (Seligman, 1972). After that, researchers have generalized the concept and applied it toward human beings, exploring the underlying mechanisms behind depression, anxiety, victimization, unemployment, health problems, amongst

others. (Peterson, 1985; Peterson & Bosio, 1989). When people expect that they have no control over the outcomes, the researchers observed that they tend to exhibit learned helplessness—characterized by behaviors like believing the outcomes to be independent of their efforts, and displaying emotional distress (Miller, Seligman & Kurlander, 1975). In the current study, all Chinese international student participants reported experiencing repeated rejections or no responses despite having submitted a large volume of internships applications. Given the external and internal barriers that they confronted, many of them reported feeling disheartened and hopeless because no matter how hard they had tried, there was precious little they could control over these barriers or the application results. As such, they started to blame themselves for these failures, attributing the trails of failures and rejections to unsubstantiated lack of professional competency. Many of them also reported thinking about giving up the internship-seeking process via OPT and simply heading back to China, since they no longer believe that they could secure decent, or any internship positions in the U.S., given these repeated failures. Such thoughts further exacerbated their learned helplessness, contributed to their depressed and anxious mood, given that the outcomes were indifferent to their efforts, and they were also dealing with mounting uncertainties concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the immigration laws.

Besides anxiety-induced insomnia, emotional eating behavior—described by several participants when they had to deal with substantial stress—represented another form of negative impact from this internship-seeking process. Adding to the preceding research, findings from this study reveal that Chinese international student participants experience isolation and marginalization due to their non-citizen status and the unique challenges they face—the latter, in particular, was often wildly underrecognized by their domestic peers, and even, seasoned career service professionals in their universities. The findings are also congruent with the previous

research wherein social isolation, lower rating of cultural humility of key university personnel, among other factors were listed as possible factors contributing to mental health issues plaguing Chinese international students (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013; Liu, 2009).

Research Outcome, Question 3

Research Question 3 focused on exploring the strengths, resources, and coping strategies Chinese international students adopted in dealing with the barriers. Findings from this study showed that participants were able to identify certain internal resources, such as their strengths and taking self-care strategies. External support from their family, friends, and professional connections were also utilized to cope with the substantial challenges throughout the internship-seeking process. From the standpoint of the resilience theory, these resources and coping strategies serve as protective factors that help balance the negative impacts from the adversity (Pan & Chan, 2007).

Consistent with the findings from previous studies where social support was identified as an important coping strategy among Chinese international students (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018), participants in this study also described the emotional support they received from their family, friends, and roommates, alongside the career support from their supervisors, professors, and peers who have been through the internship-seeking process. Similar to the findings in the previous research that Chinese international students are more likely to employ emotion-focused coping strategies (Yan & Berliner, 2011), participants found it helpful to adjust their perceptions of the problems after gaining different perspectives from their family and friends. Additionally, within resilience theory, social support— including family support, close relationships with friends, good role models, etc.—has been identified as a critical environmental protective factor (Pan & Chan, 2007). Such support could increase individuals' self-confidence,

foster more effective coping strategies, and reduce the likelihood of maladaptive adjustment and risky behaviors when dealing with challenging situations (Holahan et al. 1995; Rozanski et al. 1999).

Most Chinese international student participants were also able to identify strengths that they utilized when coping with obstacles during their internship-seeking process. These strengths included, but were not limited to, cross-cultural competency, bilingual skills, and persistence, -- of which aligned closely with preceding studies (Kim, 2017; Sinicrope et al., 2007; Jones, O'Connor & Boag-Hodgson, 2018; Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, & Cavazos, 2011; He & Hutson, 2018; Yakunina et al., 2013). According to Grotberg (2003), when coping with challenging situations, utilizing inner strengths could help people develop resilience and overcome adversity. Furthermore, similar to the previous research (Zhou, Zhang & Stodolska, 2018), participants identified self-care activities as their coping strategies during this stressful process—notably, spending time on their hobbies, hanging out with friends, walking in nature, working out, journaling, and mindfulness. According to Iwasaki, MacTavish, and MacKay (2005), spending time on such leisure activities could foster resilience as it not only provides a positive diversion from stressful situations but also helps people feel rejuvenated and regain life balance.

Even though participants' growth was not originally included in the research questions, an interview question about personal gains was asked in an attempt to elicit information about strengths and coping. In response to this question, all Chinese international student participants indicated experiencing growth a result of different aspects after this stressful internship-seeking process. For example, several participants described elevated levels of self-awareness that arose from the process of coping with challenges while seeking internships, such as a better understanding of their priorities. This aligns with the changed philosophy of life from post-

traumatic growth theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) since after the overwhelming experience, participants were able to figure out what is the most important thing in their career development and their life. Similar to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996)'s description of a changed perception of self within the post-traumatic growth theory, findings in this study demonstrate that participants' confidence in their ability to cope with future challenges increased after going through all the hardship. Moreover, several participants also became more open-minded towards ups and downs in life, which helped them become more accepting and explorative towards new possibilities. This is congruent with increased new possibilities within the post-traumatic growth theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Furthermore, according to the post-traumatic growth theory, after traumatic events, individuals would be able to improve their compassion towards others and relate to others in a better way, resulting in increased closeness and reduced isolation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). After this process, participants were able to not only learn from their own experiences, but also find meaning in passing their experiences onward and empowering other people who shared similar struggles.

Implications

Clinical Implications

There are a few counseling implications from this study in terms of offering support for Chinese international students during the internship-seeking process of their OPT programs. First, this study shed light on the significance of educating career counselors and program advisors about the systemic, policy-related barriers that Chinese international students must face after they graduate and enter the school-to-work transition. Reinforcing career-related resources that specifically target international students' needs could offer much-needed resources and relief. The fields of improvements could range from providing tailored support about where to

find internships and navigating different expectations of interview styles, to connecting Chinese international students to internships with established experience in dealing with OPT-related challenges. Furthermore, it would be essential to better connect Chinese international students with available mental health services to reach those in times of desperate needs; however, to do so, address cultural stigma surrounding mental health services is also essential (Han et al. 2013; Lian, Wallace & Fullilove, 2020; Maeshima & Parent, 2020).

In terms of mental health support, one practical implication lies in ensuring that mental health providers working with this population to be educated about the internship-seeking process and the particular barriers Chinese international students might face. This could greatly facilitate the acceptance and formulation of rapport, as Chinese international students could feel understood, without needing to exert themselves further in explaining the intricate policy barriers and the reasons for their profound struggles. Furthermore, according to Anandavalli (2021), it is critical for counselors to focus on a strengths-based approach when working with international students of color—e.g., appreciating how they are able to remain resilient and resourceful while dealing with stress—and utilize these resources in therapy. It would be highly beneficial for mental health providers to structure a strength-based framework while working with this population during this internship-seeking process taking into consideration Chinese international students' resilience, strengths, support system, among other aspects, rather than solely paying attention to their negative experiences. Connecting them with their community resources would also work wonders. For example, according to the findings of this study, Chinese international students specifically demonstrated strengths related to their bilingual skills and cross-cultural competency. Including these strengths in mental health work could improve students' confidence when seeking internships compared with domestic students. Additionally, helping them focus on

how to utilize their past work experience and professional knowledge during this school-to-work transition will also reduce their self-doubt about their competency. Discussing persistence as well as helping them generate toolbox to regulate their negative emotions will improve their coping skills when dealing with failures.

Policy-related Implications

From this study, certain implications could be drawn for amending future OPT-related policies—particularly toward strengthening the support offered to international students during the internship-seeking process. Of course—as Monahan (2018) noted—the argument regarding providing a pathway for non-citizens—especially aspiring international students—to stay in the U.S. is another topic still open to discussion. It is important to remember that the results of the current study are derived primarily from the standpoint of international students—focusing on exploring the impacts of the immigration laws on this specific population and potential ways to promote a more amicable experience—instead of trying to identify what might be in the best interest of the nation.

In this study, Chinese international student participants almost unanimously reported experiencing negative impacts that arose from the very design of certain terms and clauses of the OPT program and the H1b work visa. Firstly, many participants reported substantial anxiety having to secure internship positions within a narrow window of just 90 days after receiving their EAD (employment authorization document), causing them to fall into a desperate rush and had to make steep compromises when accepting internship offers due to the 90-day unemployment policy. Such mismatch could hardly be beneficial, as it not only denied better career options for the applications, but also an abundance of qualified candidates from an already distressed labor market. A major extension, or the total abolition of the incredibly harsh and often oppressive 90-

day unemployment restraints could greatly empower international students with the freedom to seek internships that could allow them to fulfill their full potentials, instead of having to settle down for a lesser offer with their brighter alternatives deprived by the policy mandates. Contrary to these regulatory red tapes, immediate examples of success could be witnessed in the northern neighbor, Canada, where a progressive, immigrant-friendly system has been in place for decades—with policies ensuring the granting of open work permits void of any unemployment restrictions.

In addition, most international students shared their concerns about only being granted to work for up to one year after their graduation, due to their non-STEM majors. This one-year policy greatly undermined their freedom of career choices, given that most employers would feel highly reluctant to invest in the comprehensive and costly training necessary for almost any essential functions, knowing that an employee will almost certainly depart from the position after just 12 months or less. Should international students in non-STEM majors receive the same opportunity as international students in the STEM majors—including being able to work in the U.S. for up to 36 months after their graduation—in alignment with the maximum duration granted by the Canadian Post Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) policy which does not discriminate against majors or fields of study—such policy changes would almost certainly bring major benefits and applause for employers seeking to grow their business through onboarding qualified international students from non-STEM majors.

Furthermore, many participants in the current study mentioned that the expensive application fees for applying for H-1b work visas, in conjunction with the lottery system for H-1b work visas, added almost insurmountable burdens that essentially excluded employers from the option to benefit from qualified international students, stifling healthy competition and

innovation. Slashing application fees—both on the employee and employer’s ends—alongside the abolishment of the lottery system would reignite the passion for employers to tap into the potentials from the underrepresented workforce of international students and graduates. Lastly, if the government could equip potential employers and employees with the adequate resources and support that they deserve—ranging from financial support, legal support, to the advice and educational support for negotiating the requirements and streamlining the procedures, it would take out major burdens from small businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs when it comes to hiring international students.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Previous research has called for a more positive lens when conducting studies about international students, rather than fixating on their negative experiences (Pendse & Inman, 2017; Anandavalli, 2021). The current study took a positive approach toward the examination of Chinese international students’ lived experience while undergoing the internship-seeking process during their OPT programs. The study’s interpretations were grounded in resilience theory and post-traumatic growth theory allowing for the exploration of the participants’ inner strengths, resources, coping strategies, as well as their growth after coping with challenges through this process.

Another strength of this study lies in its being among the pioneering efforts to explore the experience of Chinese international students from non-STEM majors. This is important because previous studies (Monahan, 2018; Grimm, 2021) tend to divert more focus toward international students from STEM majors. The underrepresentation of non-STEM international students could have major implications, as they would only be eligible to work for 12 months during their OPT program—a colossal drop compared to those from STEM majors, where international students

are still allowed for up to 36 months during OPT programs to establish their professional experience and better their chances against the immensely demanding process of applying for H1-B work visas, amongst other hurdles in immigration and professional development (Amuedo-Dorantes, Furtado & Xu, 2019). Additionally, international students from STEM majors would usually apply for internships among larger, well-established technical companies that tend to exhibit far more experience and willingness in dealing with the systemic barriers when employing international students. Therefore, it is high time that we bridge the gap for the understudied, underrepresented international students that graduate from non-STEM majors.

Furthermore, this study is also among the first to explore the mental health aspects of Chinese international students during the critical phase of the school-to-work transition. For the previous studies (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Han et al., 2013), the main focus has been broadly directed toward the mental health status of on-campus international students in general. However, given the barriers that international students have to go through when seeking internships for OPT programs, their mental health status during this transition would be worthy of additional scrutiny. Additionally, during the current study, several participants mentioned that they were not eligible for on-campus mental health services after having graduated from their programs, making it ever harder for them to seek mental health support during the stressful period of school-to-work transition.

This study also suffers from certain constraints and limitations that could be considered in future research. It should be noted that nine out of ten participants in the current study identify as female, which may limit the study's relevance and representativeness for Chinese international students who identify as male or other non-binary gender identities. Additionally, all participants in the current study graduated from masters' programs. Their experience of seeking internships

during OPT programs could differ substantially from Chinese international students who graduate from undergraduate programs or doctoral programs, given the gaps in age, experience, relationship with advisors, and developmental stages. Additionally, it should be noted that the current study draws its conclusions primarily from participants' self-report, whereas a more diverse combination of data—quantitative results or behavioral observations, for example—may further bolster the study's thoroughness. Lastly, a larger sample size could be beneficial, since more in-depth voices could be included, helping to enrich the data, and promoting the richness and representativeness of the results.

Therefore, it would be advisable for future studies to recruit a larger pool of participants and dive deeper into the impacts of their intersecting identities on the internship-seeking process during their OPT programs. Additionally, it would be of great benefit for future studies to involve participants from programs on different academic levels, comparing their diverse experiences during the internship-seeking process. Further comparison between internship-seeking experiences of participants who graduated from STEM and non-STEM programs could also be beneficial, given the different lengths of OPT programs. Moreover, it would be helpful if future researchers could expand their research beyond the mental health of Chinese international students that are on-campus only. Employing mental health instruments (e.g., depression and anxiety inventory) to measure Chinese international students' mental health status and their mental health support-seeking behaviors during this school-to-work transition, for example, would be a promising direction. Finally, all participants involved in the current study were sufficiently fortunate and resilient to not relinquish their hope during this internship-seeking process. However, it would be beneficial for future studies to take a deeper look at the experience

of Chinese international students who were unable to persist in this process and had to return to their home country.

In conclusion, this is first study explored Chinese international students' lived experiences during school-to-work transitions. Findings have highlighted their perceived internal and external obstacles, the impacts on their emotional and physical well-being, and their coping strategies and external resources throughout this internship-seeking process. In order to better support international students during OPT programs, it is significant to provide institutional support, such as educating career advisors and mental health providers in universities. Utilizing a strength-based approach will help international students better connect with their internal and external resources. Further changes from policy level are also important to provide international students with an amicable experience seeking internships during OPT programs.

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