EXPLORING REMOTE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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DISSERTATION: EXPLORING REMOTE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has forced higher educational institutions to move their entire student body to remote learning and implement online platforms at an unprecedented pace. At the same time, Chinese international students also encountered unique challenges during this period of time. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Chinese international students’ remote learning experiences in U.S. higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic and also determine what supports are needed to yield a better experience. Twelve Chinese international students of varying years in college, majors and locations participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that participants simultaneously enjoyed and struggled in their remote learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting a mixed feeling overall. The findings also suggested that the participants’ experiences appeared to be influenced by whether they were studying in the U.S. versus in China and other factors such as their major, year in school, etc.

Participants also proposed several recommendations for services that would likely bolster their learning experiences during COVID-19. Suggestions included better course design, training in technology for both faculty and students, more culturally responsive leadership, and more effective communication channels. In addition, students residing in China during the pandemic suggested more partnerships between U.S. institutions and local Chinese universities, the availability of stable VPNs, and improved faculty office hours.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus in 2019 (COVID-19) swept around the world, causing a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). In January of 2020, COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO). On the 22nd of October 2020, 41 million COVID-19 cases were reported, and over one million deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). Shortly after the United States discovered COVID-19 infections were increasing dramatically in March of 2020, universities across the nation began to close their campuses and convert their face-to-face platforms to online learning (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). The first university to close its campus was the University of Washington on March 7th, 2020, wherein 50,000 students were asked to vacate the campus and take their final exams online. Harvard followed suit on March 10th, 2020, followed by several other universities (Hess, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) suggested that by June 10th of 2020, about 129 countries had implemented school closures, negatively affecting 90% of the world's population of learners (Psacharopoulos et al., 2021).

Primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions were forced to move their entire student body to remote learning and implement online platforms at an unprecedented pace (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020). Many of these institutions were not adequately suited for implementing online learning at this level and lacked the information technology (IT) infrastructure to implement this change (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020). In addition, faculty were not adequately trained on how to facilitate remote learning (Newton, 2020), implement a digital platform, or trained in an online teaching pedagogy (Tucker & Quintero-Ares, 2021). Many students were also not prepared to learn using an online platform since they had not been adequately familiarized (Tucker & Quintero-Ares, 2021).
The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a tremendous level of stress for Chinese international students (Zhao, 2020). Even though several institutions made exceptions for international students to maintain their residences on campus (Ayala, 2020), most Chinese international students could not maintain their residences on campus and were forced to find unfavorable living conditions while waiting to gain permission to return home to China (Gardner, 2020). During this time, travel restrictions between the U.S. and China were also imposed by the president of the U.S., Donald Trump, and several other countries, including the U.K., Germany, and other countries in Europe (Kiernan, 2020). As a result, Chinese international students found they could not fly home to China and were stuck within the U.S., scrambling to find a domicile. Border closures, entry or exit bans, visa restrictions, and flight suspensions were all imposed during this time, further exacerbating the challenges Chinese international students faced during the pandemic (Kiernan, 2020). Of interest to the current study, Chinese international students faced unique challenges due to the transition to online learning stemming from the unprecedented shift to online pedagogy as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A significant difference between online and face-to-face learning platforms is that online courses are predominantly asynchronous and require students to be more engaged, motivated, digitally literate, self-directed, and possess good time management and writing skills (Brown, 2019). As a result of the asynchronous platform, there is a significant reduction in face-to-face contact between students, reducing Chinese international students' opportunities for collaboration with their peers. This reduction in face-to-face collaboration is suggested to reduce Chinese international students' ability to improve their English proficiency and overall satisfaction with their college experiences (Webber et al., 2013). Prior research also suggested that Chinese international students have issues with acculturation in face-to-face courses (Zhang-Wu, 2018,
Unfortunately, most Chinese students segregate themselves from their American peers because of the stark contrast between Eastern ideals and Western practices (Yan, 2011). With fewer opportunities for social interaction, it can be implied that the conversion to an online platform would further exacerbate these challenges for Chinese international students. Additionally, prior research suggested that Chinese international students also struggle with the American pedagogy due to cultural differences and often have issues with class participation (Ching et al., 2017). Unfortunately, most studies on online education do not explicitly explore the learning experiences of Chinese international students (Heng, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018).

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Chinese international students’ experiences with remote learning during the pandemic and to determine what supports are needed, particularly from Chinese students’ perspective. If we can better understand these students’ experiences, we might better meet their needs and improve the remote education design to help various educational stakeholders prepare for similar cases in the future.

Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, this study explored the online learning experiences of 12 Chinese international students pursuing higher education in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. My goal was to better understand the impact of this unique global situation and provide solutions to improve the remote learning experiences of current and future Chinese international students.

Specifically, I planned to explore the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese international students in U.S. higher education experience online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What services do Chinese international students describe as needed for a better learning experience?
Summary of Research Findings

Overall, research findings suggest that Chinese international students have mixed feelings toward remote learning during the pandemic. Specific struggles identified by participants of the study included (a) exhaustion, (b) reduced interaction with faculty and classmates, (c) a lack of engagement, (d) issues with internet connectivity and VPN, (e) lack of campus life, (f) issues with overall readiness and (g) stress from national and school policy. On the other hand, participants also identified several positive experiences with remote learning during COVID-19. Specifically, students suggested that they found online learning: (a) convenient, (b) an effective learning environment, (c) more meaningful opportunities to interact with peers, (d) development of new skill sets, (e) found recorded lectures to be beneficial because it allowed them to listen to the lecture as many times as necessary, and for those students that went back home to China, they suggested (f) significant cost savings. The findings also suggest that the participants’ experiences appeared to be influenced by whether they were studying in the U.S. versus back home in China and other factors such as major, year in school, etc.

Participants also proposed several recommendations for services that would likely bolster their learning experiences during COVID-19. Overall, they offered higher institutions in the U.S the following suggestions: (a) implementation of a better course design, (b) ensuring training in technology for both faculty and students, (c) the implementation of better administrative support, and (d) the availability of more effective communication channels. For those students residing in China, they suggested: (a) increased partnerships with local universities, (b) offering students stable VPNs, (c) improving faculty office hours, and (d) local support groups. Several implications and recommendations for improvement are further discussed in Chapter 5.
In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the background information of Chinese international students in the U.S., with a focus on the reasoning behind increased enrollment in U.S higher education institutions. I then identify some unique challenges Chinese international students encountered during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic that cause the problem. The following section reviews the outline of the dissertation. I conclude with the significance of the study and my personal investment.

**Background of the Problem**

**Increased Enrollment of Chinese International Students**

U.S university campuses have witnessed a notable demographic change since the 2008 global recession, with a noteworthy increase in student enrollment from the nation’s largest trade partner, China. Recent trends in the enrollment of Chinese nationals at American universities indicate dramatic growth. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), Chinese international students constituted 18.5% of the overall international student population (n = 127,628), while Indian international students comprised a total of 15.2% (n = 104,897) of the total overall international student population in 2009-2010 (Institute of International Education, 2010). In 2020, Chinese international students comprised 34.6% (n = 372,532) of the overall international student population while Indian international students comprised only 18% (n = 193,124) (Institute of International Education, 2020). This dramatic growth over the past decade solidifies China as the largest population of international student enrollment in the United States, far outpace other international student populations, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Skinner, 2019).
The benefits associated with the large influx of Chinese international students are multifaceted, but the primary benefit to U.S. institutions is the financial benefit as funds from Chinese international students are “used to supplement operational budgets,” suggesting the importance of this student population (Skinner, 2019, p. 1). In general, Chinese international students have to pay full tuition prices substantially higher than the tuition charged to domestic students, sometimes triple the cost of those paid by domestic students (Loudenback, 2016). Therefore, it can be inferred that American universities place significant economic value on Chinese students’ enrollment in U.S. institutions of higher learning. The U.S. Department of
Commerce suggests they have contributed “$45 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018” (IIE, 2021, p. 1). Therefore, Chinese international students became a vital source of revenue for the universities, and many of which increased their recruitment efforts for Chinese students. Some of the recruiting strategies included former student testimonials, marketing the town or city that the university was in, brand-developing, recruitment fairs, and increasing the international recruitment budget (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018).

In conclusion, the Chinese international student population is extremely important to the viability of U.S. higher education institutions, as evidenced by the data and efforts these institutions are taking to bolster their recruitment. The continued growth of Chinese nationals in American universities poses challenges for both the students and the host institutions. Facilitating student success has a positive moral outcome and an economic one, making it merit further attention.

**Enrollment Is Slipping**

Despite that the number of Chinese international students has become more prominent over the past decade, year-over-year growth trends has shrunk considerably (Skinner, 2019, p. 1). Between 2009 and 2015, the growth rate of Chinese students was consistently over 20 percent; however, in recent years, it has shrunk to around five percent (Gu et al., 2019). The reduction of Chinese students pursuing higher education in the United States does not align with the percentage increase of Chinese nationals seeking to study abroad. Between 2016 and 2018, Chinese students attending universities abroad increased by 22%, while enrollment in U.S. universities only grew by about five percent (Gu et al., 2019).

As a result of the large financial contribution this student population makes to U.S. higher education institutions, surveys in 2018 and 2019 distributed and collected by the IIE suggested
that 80% of U.S. universities had concerns about the retention and recruitment of Chinese international students (Sanger & Baer, 2019; Skinner, 2019). According to Inside Higher Ed’s survey of 540 colleges, 48% of participating universities reported a declined enrollment of new Chinese students in the 2018-2019 academic year (Sanger & Baer, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has further significantly affected international student enrollment (Baer & Martel, 2020), resulting in some institutions going as far as to take out insurance policies to protect themselves financially from decreases in Chinese student enrollment (Bothwell, 2018; Skinner, 2019).

The reasons behind the decline of Chinese student enrollment are multifaceted. Some are causally related to U.S. policy, while others reflect the more complex shifting of the higher education environment. One of the more compelling reasons could be attributed to negative experiences of Chinese international students that were being widely shared through social media outlets during the pandemic (Hswen et al., 2020). The next section explores the challenges Chinese international students have faced with the onset of COVID-19 and switching to a remote learning format.

**Chinese International Students during COVID-19**

Chinese international students have been encountering contentious and stressful situations since the outbreak of COVID-19 and it has spread worldwide (Zhao, 2020). In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread on a large scale in the U.S., higher education institutions closed their campuses and held classes primarily online to enforce social distancing. Most university dorms were also shut down, with exemptions for a limited number of students to maintain their housing arrangement if they had difficulty going back home or finding a place to stay in the United States (Zhao, 2020). Meanwhile, many Chinese students struggled to go home
and failed to get a ticket due to the travel restrictions imposed by both countries (Zheng & Lee, 2020). After the U.S. suspended its major airlines from conducting regular passenger flights to China, China, in turn, implemented the “Five One” policy, limiting the number of weekly flights between the two countries to one per airline (Lei, 2020). Chinese international students were concerned that if US-China relations further deteriorated, all flights would be suspended, and they would not have a way to return to China (Zheng & Lee, 2020).

As a result of this shift in teaching platforms and imposed campus closures, many Chinese international students feared losing their F1 visa status (Gardner, 2020). Specifically, F1 visa holders are expected to maintain 12 credit units in face-to-face courses and live within the city limits of their host university (Gardner, 2020; University of Maryland, 2021). Furthermore, to further exacerbate the stresses of Chinese international students, before the pandemic, there had been growing tensions between the U.S. and China as President Trump engaged in trade wars with China beginning in 2017 (Feng, 2020). Specifically, President Trump imposed tariffs or quotas on imports that hindered trade between the two countries, increasing tensions (Bown, 2021). Furthermore, tensions continued to grow as President Trump began imposing student visa cancellations for Chinese international students suspected of having ties with the People’s Liberation Army (Wong & Barnes, 2020). Growing tensions among Americans regarding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a surge of anti-Asian racist acts across the nation, further straining Chinese international students’ experiences during the pandemic (Zheng, 2021).

To make it worse, the guidelines by Immigration and Customers Enforcement (ICE) regarding the eligibility of international students taking online classes in the U.S. were repeatedly changing in the early months of the pandemic, making Chinese international students feel more perplexed and insecure. On July 6, 2021, ICE announced that international students
could not remain in the U.S. if they were not taking classes in person (Svrluga & Anderson, 2020). Even though the policy was later rescinded, Chinese international students experienced immense stress. ICE’s unwelcoming attitude and the continued worsening of the COVID-19 situation in the U.S. pressured many Chinese international students to go back home to continue their studies. Newly admitted students who were not granted a student visa also had no choice but to attend classes remotely in China (Redden, 2020b).

Despite the extreme shortage of air flights, many Chinese students were pressured by universities closing their dorms and “chasing out” international students (Redden, 2020a). They either had to accept the absurdly high prices offered by illegal flight ticket scalpers or were lucky enough to secure tickets on official websites, which were still highly overpriced, and managed to go back to China after several connecting flights (Liang, 2020). Upon entering the Chinese border, they had to comply with a 14-day quarantine rule and stay in a local hotel for two weeks before going back home (China Airlines, 2021). Depending on their destination, some had to go through another round of 14-day self-quarantine when reaching their respective homes (Center for Disease Control, 2021). As the semester went on, they were also presented with the problem of the time difference. China is in a time zone that is 12 hours ahead of Eastern Time and 15 hours ahead of Pacific Time. This significant time difference meant that Chinese students that wanted to attend synchronous classes during customarily scheduled class hours in the U.S. or reach assignment deadlines had to modify their sleeping schedules and daytime activities (Lin & Gao, 2020).

In addition, anti-Asian racism and xenophobia also began after the first COVID-19 outbreak in China, with Asians and people of Asian descent accused of causing and spreading the virus. This vitriol was often justified by some U.S. political leaders. President Donald Trump
used the term “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu” to describe COVID-19, while international diplomats such as Mike Pompeo described the virus as the “Wuhan Virus” (Daley, 2021). In turn, this has led to significant micro-aggressions against Chinese people globally, but more prevalently in the United States (Gover et al., 2020). According to the online forum Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Hate, there have been 1,135 cases of coronavirus-related verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assault in the U.S., which targeted Asian Americans within two weeks of the launch of the forum (Kulkarni & Choi, 2020). Using search functions on social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook, hashtags associated with racial slurs and derogatory statements against Chinese people continue to trend (Hswen et al., 2020). This type of reaction by some people draws fear into potential Chinese international students, discouraging them from pursuing higher education in the United States due to xenophobia, anti-Chinese racism, and more feelings of discomfort.

Many schools have attempted to solve these issues against Chinese students, but not without error. For example, at the University of California, the Campus Health Center passed a handout to students that listed xenophobia as a “normal reaction” to the ongoing crisis. Later, they redacted the statement and apologized while also sparking outrage from domestic and international students alike (Yam, 2020). Additionally, a University of Notre Dame Ph.D. student was terminated after writing racist Facebook posts blaming Chinese students for the spread of the coronavirus (Redden, 2020c). For these events to occur at two of the most prominent universities in the United States, one can logically infer that these events could result in the Chinese students’ enrollment rate dropping further in the coming years.

Thus, Chinese international students were among the many victims and reported the burgeoning situation in the U.S. as “stressful.” (Kulkarni & Choi, 2020). Some had doubts about
their future in the U.S. and had to give up taking public transportation or wearing masks to avoid attracting attention and being harassed (Gover et al., 2020). According to a report issued by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Chinese students ranked safety as the seventh most important factor when choosing which country to pursue their studies in 2019. By 2020, these students ranked safety as the second most important factor, exemplifying their deteriorating perception of their personal safety. The level of xenophobia was seventh in 2020, up from 13th place in 2019 (Bacon, 2021).

**Gaps in Technology Proficiency**

The U.S. started to explore remote learning at a relatively early stage. Statistics published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a part of the U.S. Department of Education, cited 6,932,074 students were enrolled in at least one distance learning course at accredited higher education institutions in the U.S. before the pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). Subsequently, the proportion of students enrolled in online learning has increased significantly from 15.6% of the entire student population in higher education systems in 2003 to 35.3% in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b). The U.S. government encourages investment in educational technologies and considers the use of technology in education as having the potential to accelerate and expand the impact of learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Various educational technologies are adopted in higher education institutions nationwide to support effective teaching and learning, including Learning Management Systems (LMS), MOOC, and multimedia learning (Alhazzani 2020, Washington 2019).

In contrast, online education in China is still at an elementary phase and lacks thorough development (Wang et al., 2018). School courses are conducted primarily in-person and in
classroom settings, because unlike in the U.S., where online education is deemed as essential as in-class education, distance learning is still not a mainstream pedagogical method in China (Yan & Yang, 2021). In 2011, the Chinese Ministry of Education established a Ten-Year Plan for Educational Informationization Development to incorporate information technologies and digital platforms into the traditional education model, and educators are required to develop more advanced information technology skills to teach online courses successfully (Wang et al., 2018). Despite an increase in funding in recent years by the Chinese national and local governments, schools in China generally do not have as much investment to support the adoption and advancement of educational technology and online education has yet to become a thoroughly developed pedagogical method in China (Bao, 2020).

Given the unequal development of online education in the two countries, it is reasonable to suspect that Chinese international students are less familiar with the design and adaptations necessary to succeed in online classes and would have been less adroit when switching to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is likely that when Chinese international students have to attend online classes during the pandemic, considerable effort is required to adapt to the different learning modes (Huang et al., 2020).

In conclusion, this section offered some background information about Chinese international students and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to lay a foundation for readers. I began by presenting the reasons behind the increased enrollment of Chinese international students in U.S. universities in recent years, helping readers understand the importance of the problem. Then I presented an overview of the Chinese international student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as well and concluded with a discussion of potential challenges of online learning for Chinese international students.
Significance of the Study

Understanding Chinese international students’ perceptions of their remote learning experiences, challenges, and need for support can significantly contribute to the field of education by leading to more effective pedagogical methods, enhancing academic recruitment and retention strategies (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Research results from this study are significant for multiple stakeholders within the field of education, such as educators, administrators, students, and higher learning institutions. Additionally, the results of this study advance education scholarship by exploring a salient gap in the literature. The benefit obtained by addressing the research problem is necessary knowledge that could improve the experiences of Chinese international students in U.S. higher education by identifying current shortcomings and potential solutions. By addressing students’ challenges, research findings could contribute to the effective education, recruitment, and retention of Chinese international students.

Research Study Organization

Chapter One helped to establish an understanding for the audience of the current situation of Chinese international students encounter with remote learning during the pandemic. I presented an overview of the general background knowledge about Chinese international students in U.S., their experiences during the COVID-19 and gaps in technology proficiency. This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore the online education experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Two presents the key patterns in recent research regarding common challenges Chinese international students face in U.S universities. In short, past research confirmed a stressful experience for Chinese international students, where they are engulfed with culture shock, language barriers, and social challenges. These struggles are heightened through other
acculturative stresses that are not exclusive, but related to academic performance, lack of social support, different learning styles, and more (Melnick, Kaur, & Yu, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Tung, 2011). Last but not least, the chapter introduces the student satisfaction theoretical frameworks employed in this study.

Chapter Three presents a detailed explanation of the rationale for selecting a phenomenological qualitative design for this study and the specific procedures. Interviews were used as instruments for data collection. The plan for data analysis, establishing trustworthiness, and the study's limitations were proposed along with this research design.

Chapter Four presents a detailed analysis of participants' interview responses and answers to the research questions. The chapter provides an overview of the themes identified for each interview question used to answer the research questions posited in this research study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a review of the conceptual framework concerning participants’ responses.

Finally, Chapter Five presents a discussion of the research findings. Namely, the chapter discusses the implications of the research findings, their contribution to the field of education, strengths and limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

**Personal Investment**

As a Chinese international student and an educator who works with this group of students every day, this research is personally impactful. Conducting research that may positively impact Chinese students and U.S. institutions of education during this unprecedented time will bring necessary attention to a growing problem in the academic community. In addition, the study’s findings reveal critical information and recommendations to improve Chinese students’ learning experiences and pedagogical methods used in the U.S. As a Chinese researcher, educator, and
advocate for Chinese students, I feel that it is vital that this issue be explored in depth so that future Chinese students have a more meaningful educational experience in the U.S.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students taking online courses in U.S. higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine what supports and resources were lacking to ensure their success. There is a salient gap in the literature stream that examines the Chinese international students’ experiences taking online classes in the United States (Kung, 2017), specifically examining the impact of COVID-19 on educational experiences. Chinese international students represent the most significant percentage of international students in the U.S. Since 2009-10 academic year, China officially outpaced India as the primary group of international students studying in the United States. Today, 34% of all international students in the U.S. are now Chinese nationals (Morris, 2018), who contribute at least $45 billion to the U.S. economy every year (Institute of International Education, 2019). Therefore, ensuring their retention is essential for the U.S. economy and the viability of many higher education institutions. This study contributes to the literature regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students, specifically Chinese international students’ online learning experiences.

The following chapter provides an empirical literature review exploring Chinese international students and online learning. Specifically, the common challenges of Chinese international students to attend U.S. universities are described. Then I give an overview of the emergency online learning, the current online learning environment and the important factors in creating a satisfactory online learning experience. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's conceptual framework.
Review of Empirical Literature

Common Challenges for Chinese International Students in U.S. Universities

A number of studies provide evidence that suggests that Chinese students face a multitude of difficulties while studying in the United States (Flor Cruz, 2013; Heng, 2018; Liu et al., 2014; Liu, 2013; Liu, 2016; Zhang-Wu, 2018; Bertram et al., 2014; Cao et al., 2021; Heng, 2020; Wang, 2016). Moreover, even students with outstanding academic records struggle in higher education institutions in the U.S. Findings suggest that Chinese students’ academic performance is not consonant with prior academic achievement (Liu et al., 2014). Liu et al. (2014) revealed that Chinese students were among the largest group of students to drop out of Ivy League universities, which admit only the most exceptional group of students. Luo (2013) asserts that a lack of systematic preparation for their academic transition into higher education in the United States is primarily the cause of Chinese students’ poor performance. Therefore, scholars often cite the differences in language, culture, and education systems between Chinese and U.S. societies as the root causes of Chinese students’ unpleasant academic experiences at higher education institutions in the U.S (Ching et al., 2017; Heng 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018).

Other scholars elucidate the psychological effects of the language barrier, stark contrasts in culture, acculturation issues, and the differences in the education system (Ching et al., 2017; Heng, 2018; Liu, 2016). Therefore, Chinese students often become withdrawn or engage in self-imposed isolation, socializing only with their Chinese classmates (Wang, 2016). Finally, Kung (2017) found a salient lack of support services for international students in U.S. institutions of higher learning.
Historically, researchers have cited language barriers as a significant challenge for Chinese international students and any student whose primary language is not English while taking U.S. courses (Heng, 2017; Liu, 2013; Wang, 2016; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Wang (2016) conducted a qualitative case study exploring the impact of cultural values on Chinese students in American higher education and found that language barriers significantly affected Chinese students’ willingness to participate in group discussions and engage in course materials with other English-speaking peers. For many, this lack of English proficiency resulted in decreased self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, further isolating participants of the study and increased feelings of anxiety (Wang, 2016).

Similarly, Heng (2017) conducted a qualitative case study exploring the experiences of Chinese international students studying in U.S. colleges to better understand their experiences as Chinese international students in a U.S. context. Participants reported their desire for their instructors to consider their backgrounds when teaching. Participants wanted instructors to consider the barriers they experienced as an English as a Second Language (ESL) student (Heng, 2017). Specifically, participants did not want instructors to grade them on their English proficiency. Instead, participants hoped instructors would assess them based on their displayed understanding of a course topic and wanted them to understand that they may not be as active in group discussions or online due to their language challenges. Therefore, Chinese international students in the study hoped instructors would not associate their “language inadequacies with cognitive deficiency” (Heng, 2017, p. 839).

Prior research also suggested that the language proficiency of Chinese international students was associated with their ability to communicate with the instructor and their peers
effectively (Wang, 2016). Further, Liu (2016) conducted a qualitative study exploring strategies to promote Chinese international students' performance in U.S. colleges and found that English proficiency was associated with students' academic performance. In addition, Liu’s (2016) study participants implied that their instructors did associate their lack of English proficiency in writing to be associated with their cognitive abilities. Specifically, one participant stated that their instructors told them that their writing was not college-level. Therefore, these research findings on Chinese international students in face-to-face courses suggest that Chinese international students may struggle with online lectures and discussions due to their challenges with language proficiency in face-to-face courses.

As a result of language proficiency issues, Chinese international students may have academic performance and social adjustment issues (Ching et al., 2017). Specifically, language proficiency issues may cause Chinese international students to (a) avoid academic group discussion and reduce participation in group events (Ching et al., 2017; Wang, 2016), (b) require more time to review and understand course curriculum and assignments (Ching et al., 2017), (c) result in social isolation (Wang, 2016), (d) make it challenging to acculturate (Bertram et al., 2014), and (e) increase the likelihood that the student will experience prejudicial behavior or discrimination (Ching et al., 2017). Therefore, language proficiency for Chinese international students is a significant challenge in many aspects. Another challenge partially associated with language barriers is acculturation issues (Wang, 2016).

**Acculturation Issues**

Berry (2003) defined acculturation as a process wherein individuals adapt to their new cultural environment psychologically, socially, and culturally. Acculturation leads to changes in an individual's behavior and perspective (Bertram et al., 2014). Ching et al. (2017) suggested that
the process of acculturation relies heavily on variables such as “language proficiency, age, social support, family support, cultural differences, and years of stay in the host country” (p. 474). Because of the vast differences between American and Chinese cultures, acculturation is a significant challenge for Chinese international students (Yao, 2018; Ching et al., 2017; Liu, 2016; Tang et al., 2018). Specifically, the Chinese culture values interdependence and secondary control, contrary to the American culture's emphasis on independence and primary control (Ching et al., 2017; Wang, 2016).

The extreme variation between what is expected and valued in the American versus Chinese culture is best emphasized by the differences in classroom structure and practices between these two countries. Specifically, American instructors use lectures and are interaction-oriented, wherein students are expected to ask questions and participate in group discussions and group work (Liu, 2016). These practices are contrary to Chinese instruction, wherein instructors are suggested to use textbook-guided lectures (Liu, 2016). Chinese students are not expected to actively participate in debates about a course topic (Liu, 2016). As a result, poor language proficiency resulting in isolation from English-speaking peers and issues acclimating to the new American pedagogy further challenge Chinese international students’ ability to adapt to their new surroundings (Liu, 2016; Wang, 2016). Research suggests that converting face-to-face platforms in higher education to an online platform further exacerbated these challenges for Chinese international students (Toquero, 2020). Specifically, online platforms require students to be more engaged in online discussion forums and include more requirements for writing than what is found in traditional face-to-face instruction.

As a result of Chinese international students’ challenges with English proficiency and differences in cultural values, most Chinese international students group with peers from their
home country, further hindering their ability to assimilate into the American culture (Liu, 2016). As a result, it may take longer for this student population to master the English language prolonging their challenge with English proficiency. Although very little research was found examining Chinese international students’ perceptions of online courses, it can be implied by research on Chinese international students’ perceptions of the pedagogical model of American universities that these challenges are further exacerbated in an online learning environment.

In addition to language barriers and issues with acculturation, prior research regarding the experiences of Chinese international suggested that emotional challenges often arise as a result of the challenges mentioned above (Ching et al., 2017; Liu, 2016). Emotional issues as a challenge are further discussed in the following section.

**Emotional Challenges**

Chinese international students face many challenges when entering the U.S. to attend college for the first time (Liu, 2016). Lack of familiar culture, missing family and friends, and challenges with English proficiency are a few of the stressors Chinese international students face when entering a new country (Liu, 2016). Therefore, naturally, this student population experiences elevated stress and anxiety associated with entering a foreign country and being introduced to a new culture (Liu, 2016; Zhao, 2020). As a result of challenges associated with English proficiency, ESL students often experience a certain level of isolation from their English-speaking peers (Liu, 2016; Wang, 2016; Zhao, 2020). In conjunction with the onset of COVID-19, this finding resulted in several additional challenges, further adding to Chinese international students' stressors (Zhao, 2020).

Zhao (2020) conducted a quantitative study exploring the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on Chinese international students in the United States. Zhao (2020)
explored the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and stress in 324 fourth-year undergraduate Chinese international students in the United States. Research findings suggested Chinese international students were suffering from significant psychological effects due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhao, 2020;). Although researchers did not collect data on the causes of the stressors experienced by their sampled population, they hypothesized that Chinese international students may be experiencing elevated levels of stress and anxiety due to uncertainty regarding their studies and visa status (Zhao, 2020). Also, because of the considerable variation in medical systems between China and the U.S., it can be hypothesized that Chinese international students were further stressed if having to navigate this system during the pandemic.

**Summary**

Chinese international students are suggested to experience several challenges associated with using the online platform. As discussed in this section language barriers are a significant challenge for this student population. Further acculturation issues, lack of academic and international student support services, and emotional challenges further exacerbate Chinese international students' stressors. Research exploring the challenges associated with Chinese international students' experiences with online learning is limited. Although research was found exploring Chinese student's perspectives in the United States, Chinese international students' research has been minimal. The following section discusses the research found exploring Chinese international students' experiences in online courses.

**Emergency Remote Learning**

Emergency Remote Teaching or *ERT* involves a sudden and often dramatic shift from a traditional learning environment using conventional pedagogical methods to a remote (online)
learning environment in response to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Affouneh et al., 2020). These shifts result in a drastically different online learning environment than the typical online learning environment because they are highly stressful. These educational responses to crises often yield anxiety, disorganization, a lack of teacher training, and confused students. Moreover, the resulting learning environment is conducted with a great deal of uncertainty, as educators and students do not know when the crisis will end (Schlesselman, 2020).

Often, emergency or crisis teaching pedagogy is a learned skill that most traditional classroom instructors do not have, as they are rarely trained in this area. Therefore, the dynamic global shift to crisis online learning led to breakdowns in communication and reduced educational quality, as educators struggled to adapt to an unknown environment (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021). Subsequently, students often felt lost, disenfranchised, and far less engaged than they would be in a traditional classroom or an organized and well-designed online learning environment absent from crises (Rapanta et al., 2020). Therefore, the inherent difficulties both educators and students face when shifting from a traditional learning environment to an online one are significantly exacerbated by ad hoc crisis learning environments (Hofer et al., 2021).

Crisis learning environments would have disproportionately affected international students who struggle with language barriers, depleted support services, and lack of necessary socialization with peers and educators (Shangguan et al., 2020). Moreover, Chinese students, the largest group of international students enrolled at U.S. universities, would have constituted the largest majority of the affected international student population. Therefore, Chinese international students’ perceptions of the crisis learning occurring throughout higher education institutions in the U.S. and their experiences are critical to understanding the most deleterious effects of crisis learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
The Online Learning Environment

The pandemic’s unprecedented impact on higher learning institutions across the globe necessitated an immediate response from the academic community, including higher education (Adnan & Anware, 2020). The pandemic resulted in shutdowns of college campuses worldwide, particularly salient in the United States, which became an epicenter of the viral outbreak (Toquero, 2020). Transitioning from a traditional education curriculum and conventional pedagogical methods to virtual learning created an incredible feat for faculty and students (Toquero, 2020). The speed at which the transformation occurred exacerbated existing obstacles and created additional challenges for universities, faculty, and students (Crawford et al., 2020). Time was a fleeting resource, so universities were compelled to utilize available technical resources to develop online learning materials for students in many academic fields (Kaur, 2020). Ultimately, the drastic shift to online learning became a test of the educational institution’s ability to exhibit agility and resourcefulness. However, particularly for the research presented here, the difficulties associated with online learning were disproportionately problematic for international students (Crawford et al., 2020).

Online learning is an integral part of the educational system today, as suggested by prior research reporting steady growth in online learning since 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Allen et al., 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Parker et al., 2011; Seaman et al., 2018). Online learning platforms allow universities to increase their productivity by “accelerating the rate of learning; reducing costs associated with instructional materials or program delivery; and better-utilizing teacher time” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 1). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020a), 16.6% of students attending a degree-granting postsecondary institution in 2018 were attending solely online. In addition, of the 19.5 million students
attending college in 2018, another 18.7% were attending at least one online or distance learning course. Therefore, a total of 35.3% of students in 2018 reported participating in online courses, thereby suggesting the prevalence of this learning platform before the pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b). Since the pandemic, the use of an online platform was essential in reducing the spread of COVID-19, thereby forcing all universities in the U.S. to adopt this platform hastily.

Unfortunately, historically online courses have suffered from high attrition rates as an asynchronous platform creates several challenges for students of all backgrounds (Goopio & Cheung, 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Therefore, these challenges are often exacerbated for international students because they already have additional challenges to deal with based on their international student status (Ching et al., 2017). Specifically, Chinese international students are suggested to experience several challenges associated with online learning in an academic and non-academic capacity to include (a) language barriers (Heng, 2017; Kung, 2017; Wang, 2016; Zhang-Wu, 2018), (b) Acculturation issues (Zhang-Wu, 2018) associated with adjusting to American culture and teaching pedagogy online (Heng, 2017; Heng, 2018), (c) a general lack of academic support (Heng, 2017), and (d) a lack of international student support services (Heng, 2017) further challenging their ability to socially network (Zhang-Wu, 2018). In addition, some of these challenges result in non-academic challenges associated with mental health, resulting in emotional issues (Liu, 2016; Wang, 2016; Zhao, 2020).

During the drastically shifting conditions caused by the pandemic, universities often focused on transitioning toward a digital learning platform rather than developing appropriate pedagogical methods for online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The situation created by the pandemic revealed an existing lack of resources in educational institutions and the social
marginalization of their students (Humiston et al., 2020). As discussed earlier, many international students, specifically Chinese students, experienced inadequate access and availability of the internet. In addition, the academic institutions’ lack of the latest technological advances reduced the efficacy of organizational responsiveness, thus decreasing students’ capacity to fully participate in the digital learning environment (Zhong, 2020).

The inherent problems associated with online learning included a lack of effective interaction between students and instructors (Alawamleh et al., 2020; Arias et al., 2018). Often, students would interact directly with faculty regarding course content and receive immediate responses, as these interactions were face-to-face. In addition, online learning environments impeded rapid communication between faculty and students because questions had to be addressed via email, delaying responses to students’ questions (Chung et al., 2020; Xiao & Li, 2020). As previously noted, there is a salient lack of communication between Chinese students and faculty in general. Therefore, a learning environment that further complicated communication would likely lead to a significant decrease in communication between Chinese students and faculty.

Additionally, the issue of social marginalization experienced by many Chinese students in American universities was exacerbated by a lack of physical proximity to American students. Thus, the conventional classroom socialization that may have catalyzed increased acculturation was no longer a piece of the American educational experiences for Chinese students (Britt, 2006; Irawan et al., 2020). As a result, the inherent learning process that accompanies peer interaction, considered an integral part of growth and learning, was effectively eliminated (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2016). McCarthy (2020) asserts that even a short-term closure of academic
institutions stemming from the pandemic causes educational instability, including alienation of students from peers, resulting in psychological distress at varying degrees.

Online learning, in general, is not conducive to students who are considered tactile learners or those requiring multiple methods of instruction to maximize their learning potential (Anwar & Adnan, 2020). In addition, studies indicate that a person’s cognitive ability, psychological state, motivation, and quality of interaction with instructors influence the learning process (Güven & Özbek, 2007; Keefe, 1987). Scholars emphasize the need for a diverse array of pedagogical methods to satisfy the multifaceted learning needs of students (Naimie et al., 2010; Özgen & Bindak, 2012). Learning necessitates individualized pedagogical approaches based on learning styles and level of cognitive ability (Curry, 1983). Individualized attention and the subsequent pedagogical operationalization are not only lacking but almost non-existent in online learning environments (Naimie et al., 2010).

Pedagogical approaches and the resulting learning environment during the pandemic can be characterized as crisis learning rather than typical digital learning, further reducing educators’ opportunities to address students’ individual needs (Pace et al., 2020). These learning needs should also be accurately reflected in curriculum design. Yet, most universities transfer existing curricula directly to online platforms without considering the pedagogical deficiencies that impact students (Toquero, 2020). Therefore, learning styles are primarily overlooked as educators transfer content from one environment to another, contributing to an environment of learning stagnation (Dhawan, 2020).

Facilitation of Student Engagement and Persistence in Online Courses

Student engagement is defined as the “extent of students’ active involvement in activities, wherein student motivation represents the driving force behind students’ involvement in
activities” (Subramanian & Budhrani, 2020, p. 304). Pazzaglia et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative research study exploring student outcomes in online courses based on levels of engagement as measured by the number of hours per week students were logged into their courses. Consistent with prior research (Sandlin, 2019), Pazzaglia et al. (2016) found that students who engaged in their online course materials for two or more hours per week were found to have better outcomes than those that did not.

Khan et al. (2017) conducted initial polling of online teachers and found that student engagement is of significant concern. Specifically, Khan et al. (2017) concluded that regardless of the number of years online teachers in their sample had been teaching, student engagement was of equal concern. These research findings suggest the importance of student engagement in online courses. Course design is suggested to be an antecedent of student engagement (Faloughi & Herman, 2020; Jafar, 2016; Subramanian & Budhrani, 2020). Specifically, Faloughi and Herman (2020) conducted a quantitative study to implement an intergroup dialogue (IGD) course for undergraduate students. While participating in the IGD course, participants were asked to fill out weekly surveys rating their “openness, connectedness, and level of participation in the course (Faloughi & Herman, 2020). According to the research findings, altering the course design by implementing the IGD course significantly increased students’ level of engagement. Similarly, Jafar (2016) conducted a case study wherein instructors collaborated with students to develop course content. Specifically, students were allowed to determine course readings and contributed to the development of course assignments. Participants of the study reported high levels of student engagement due to their participation in the development of course content (Jafar, 2016).

Consistent with these research findings, Subramanian and Budhrani (2020) conducted a quantitative study wherein they implemented a project-based learning design model “to an
object-oriented systems course” (p. 303). Participants of the study were asked to complete reflection surveys upon completion of each module in the course. Reflection surveys were created to engage students in their work and garner student feedback (Subramanian & Budhrani, 2020). Researchers concluded that the study participants felt empowered “when course projects promote choice, flexibility, creativity, experimentation, and extension to other applications” (Subramanian & Budhrani, 2020, p. 303). Further, students reported high levels of engagement as a result of the augmented course design. These research findings suggest an association between course design and student engagement. Student engagement is also suggested to be positively associate with student satisfaction, which is discussed in more detail in the following section (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2015).

**Student Satisfaction with Online Learning**

Several factors associated with an instructor's ability to facilitate learning are suggested to enhance students’ experience in online courses significantly (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Donnelli-Sallee & Autry, 2018; Gaytan, 2015). Specifically, Gaytan (2015) reported increased faculty instruction as the highest-rated important factor by online students, and the second highest-rated important factor was meaningful and prompt instructor feedback, which is consistent with the findings from other researches (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021; Donnelli-Sallee & Autry, 2018;)

Prior research also suggests an association between course design and student satisfaction (Sebastianelli at el., 2015; Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Kauffman, 2015; Lee, 2016). Specifically, Lee (2016) conducted a quantitative study exploring graduate students' satisfaction with online courses based on instructor and course design factors. A total of 81 master's students were included in the study. Researchers concluded that students’ satisfaction was attributed to course design elements such as “clear guidelines on assignments, rubrics, and constructive feedback”
Similarly, Ghaderizefreh and Hoover (2018) conducted a quantitative study exploring graduate students' satisfaction with a blended course that consists of online and face-to-face learning. Their study concluded that online course design significantly affects students' levels of satisfaction and emotion, and instructors should try to create online course designs that reduce students' negative emotions such as boredom, anxiety, and anger.

Course design consists of many elements and can be altered by instructors in many ways to promote student satisfaction (Choe et al., 2019; Rios et al., 2018). Specifically, Choe et al. (2019) conducted a research study exploring the effect of online instructor lecture videos on student satisfaction outcomes. Choe et al. (2019) implemented a course design wherein eight different video formats were used to present course materials to online students. Specifically, Choe et al. (2019) used a traditional classroom, pen tablet, weatherman, interview, demo, talking head, learning glass, and slides on/off designs. Participants of the study were significantly happier when the researcher implemented the demo and learning glass design video styles, thereby suggesting the importance of course design on student satisfaction.

Several factors associated with an instructor’s ability to facilitate learning are suggested to influence student satisfaction significantly. Specifically, Gaytan (2015) reported increased faculty instruction as the highest-rated retention factor by online students because it increased their levels of student satisfaction. Rios et al. (2018) conducted a literature review to discuss efficient instructional strategies to maximize online students’ satisfaction. Namely, Rios et al. (2018) suggested that instructors implement several course design changes that would increase online students' level of engagement, thereby increasing their level of satisfaction and retention. Course design recommendations included strategies such as (a) providing personalized discussion board feedback, (b) ensuring clear and concise directions for assignments and course
content, (c) making rubrics, grading practices, and policies readily available, and (d) ensuring students understand the participation requirement for each class and what is expected of them. Many of the course design strategies ensured optimal interaction between peers and the instructor.

Gray and DiLoreto (2016) conducted a quantitative cross-sectional design study to explore the effects of student engagement, satisfaction, and perceived learning of graduate students in online courses. The researchers hypothesized that course structure/organization directly affected student satisfaction. Further, that learner interaction and instructor presence influenced student engagement, influencing students' perceived learning and satisfaction level. Research findings revealed statistically significant associations between learner interaction and instructor presence on student engagement. Further student engagement directly affected students' level of satisfaction (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). Consistent with these research findings, Muzammil et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study exploring the association between student interaction, engagement, and satisfaction in a sample of online students in Indonesia. A total of 4,305 surveys were completed and included in the study analysis. Research findings suggested that student interaction in the form of student-student, student-teacher, and student-content significantly influenced students' level of engagement and overall satisfaction with the course and instructor (Muzammil et al., 2020). The research study concluded with recommendations for future research exploring these variables using the qualitative methodology (Muzammil et al., 2020). In addition to student engagement being an antecedent of student satisfaction, retention is strongly associated with students’ level of satisfaction in online courses (Choi & Park, 2018; Lee & Choi, 2013; Shurden et al., 2016).
Research on Perspectives of Chinese International Students in Online Courses

Limited research was found exploring Chinese international students' perspectives of attending U.S. higher institutions online (Kung, 2017). Until the recent pandemic, Chinese international students were restricted from taking more than one online course a semester as part of the requirements for maintaining an F1 visa status (Redden, 2020 a). Therefore, the limited research exploring Chinese international students' perspectives on online courses may be due to this fact. Further, recruiting Chinese international students who reside in China while taking courses at U.S.-based higher education institutions is expected to be challenging, thereby reducing the likelihood that this population will be studied within the United States. As a result, I sought to explore the perceptions of this understudied population to gain their perspectives on their experiences in U.S. higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to the literature related to online learning and student experiences and analyze student experiences as a Chinese international student during COVID-19. The following section will provide an overview of the conceptual frameworks that guided this research study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework chosen for this study was the Online Learning Consortium (OLC). The OLC affirms that “any learner who engages in online education should have, at a minimum, an education that represents the quality of the provider’s overall institutional quality” (Online Learning Consortium, 2020, p. 1). The OLC consists of five interrelated pillars of quality. The five pillars of quality consist of learning and cost-effectiveness, access, and faculty and student satisfaction, as illustrated in Figure 2. The OLC posits that these five elements constitute successful online learning (Online Learning Consortium, 2020).
The current research study focuses on exploring Chinese international students’ lived experiences to determine what recommendations need to be made to improve their experiences with online learning. Therefore, I adopted the student satisfaction pillar as the conceptual framework to guide this study. Course rigor and fairness, instructor and peer interaction, and support services are suggested to be the three main factors that bolster student satisfaction (Online Learning Consortium, 2020). The Student Satisfaction Pillar (SSP) was of particular interest to the present study because it focuses on student satisfaction in online learning (Croxton, 2014; Harris & Martin, 2012; Kauffman, 2015; Moore et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2015; Ni, 2013; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Sinclaire, 2011). The SSP suggests that students satisfaction is achieved through “course rigor and fairness, professor and peer interaction, and support services”
(Online Learning Consortium, 2020, p. 1). The following section provides a discussion of these three variables.

**Course Rigor**

This is one of the most important factors in determining the experiences of Chinese international students with learning in the U.S. Because the quality of education remained an essential factor to Chinese students when deciding which country to study. With the abrupt switch to complete remote education, many Chinese students and families started to question whether study in U.S universities was still worth the cost. Since college degrees are not allowed to be completed online in China, acceptance and recognition of online education remains low for Chinese families (Peters et al., 2020). The typical attitude towards remote learning is that it is not as rigorous as face-to-face classes (Chao et al., 2017). Many are not sure if it is worth spending four times the money that they would need in Chinese universities for their American school online courses when even a certified degree program on Coursera, an established Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) platform, only costs between $15,000 to $25,000 (Eckstein, 2019).

The challenge of evaluating online course rigor is that there is no standard or underlying definition of what quality looks like in an online course. Stakeholders create the variation in opinions regarding the quality of online courses in higher education. Therefore, “defining quality in online learning is not an easy task because there is no real consensus on its true meaning” (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016, p. 146). The lack of standards of quality for online courses is evident by the mixed research findings regarding the effectiveness of online learning platforms (Bell & Federman, 2013; Bowen et al., 2014; Duncan et al., 2013;).

The quality of online learning platforms is often compared to face-to-face classroom formats. Therefore, face-to-face learning platforms are considered the standard for quality
implementation (Bell & Federman, 2013). Allen and Seaman (2013) conducted a 10-year survey in which they discovered that most academic leaders believed that online course quality was equal to, if not better, than face-to-face instruction. They also perceived that faculty did not hold the same beliefs regarding the quality of online courses. Specifically, only 30% of academic leaders surveyed stated that they believed faculty believed online courses were of high quality and effective (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Some research suggests no difference in the effectiveness between online versus face-to-face learning platforms (Bell & Federman, 2013; Magda & Aslanian, 2018). Magda and Aslanian (2018) conducted a quantitative study wherein they surveyed 1500 past, present, and future college students on their experiences with online courses. Their research findings suggested that 85% of those surveyed felt that their online course was as effective, if not more so, in helping them learn the course content. Further, participants suggested that they felt the value of their online course was equal to the cost (Magda & Aslanian, 2018).

The overall goal of education is learning, so it is thought that the quality of online education should be measured by how effectively students learn and feel that course prepared them well (Madani, 2019). Therefore, this study intended to focus on exploring the learning experiences from Chinese International students’ perspective.

Although prior research has suggested that online learning is just as effective as the face-to-face platform, there is still distrust regarding the value of online platforms versus face-to-face instruction (Björk et al., 2014). Educators are further skeptical of the reasons why students enroll in online courses. Prior research suggests that students choose the online platform for many reasons, including its convenience and flexibility (Roddy et al., 2017; Tareen & Haand, 2020), independence (Nonis & Fenner, 2012), and asynchronous design, enabling students to accommodate familial and job responsibilities (Levitz, 2017). Levitz (2017) conducted a
quantitative study wherein 683,000 students from 974 four-year, and two-year universities in the U.S. were surveyed. Research findings suggested that online educational platforms met students' expectations and exceeded them (Levitz, 2017). Further, the reports suggested that adults taking online courses reported consistently higher overall satisfaction (74%) than those attending traditional face-to-face instructional courses (53%). These students were also suggested to have a higher return rate compared to those in general face-to-face courses (Levitz, 2017).

Although students choose the online platform for its flexibility and convenience, students still expect the same high level of quality education as they would receive in a regular face-to-face course (Levitz, 2017). This is especially true for Chinese international students. According to Beine et al. (2013), the pursuit of higher education in the U.S. instead of China is considered to be a form of “consumption” for many Chinese families. Indeed, studying in the U.S. for most Chinese families is a huge investment. The average annual tuition fee for a local Chinese university is between 18,000 to 65,000 RMB, which equates to $2,600 to $9,300. In contrast, the average annual cost of international students in U.S. public universities is $26,290, and that for international students in private non-profit universities is $35,830 (Bridgestock, 2021). With one year’s educational expenditure in the U.S., one could finish his/her entire undergraduate program in China.

**Interaction with Peers and Instructors**

The second important factor from the framework is the student’s interaction with peers and instructors. Prior research has suggested that interaction with peers and the instructor significantly influences student satisfaction (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021; Croxton, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Harris & Martin, 2012; Kauffman, 2015; Nguyen, 2015; O’Neill & Sai, 2014; Parahoo et al., 2016; Shah & Cheng, 2019). Specifically, Shah and Cheng (2019) found that inadequate
feedback to students regarding learning was associated with high attrition rates in online student populations. In line with inadequate feedback contributing to attrition rates, O’Neill and Sai (2014) conducted a quantitative study exploring online students' perceptions of why they do not enroll in online courses. Research findings suggested that ineffective communication by the instructor was a predominant rationale as to why students did not enroll in online courses. The research findings suggested that ineffective communication by the instructor was a predominant rationale as to why students did not enroll in online courses. In addition, Gray and DiLoreto (2016) found a statistically significant association between learner interaction and instructor presence on student engagement. Further, student engagement within the study was found to have a statistically significant association with student satisfaction.

Quality improvement suggestions for online courses from past research suggest the best practices for facilitating student learning is to focus on student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions (Banna et al., 2015; Junus et al., 2017). The next variable suggested from SPP that affecting student experience is support services.

**Supporting Services**

The last important factor from the SSP framework is the supporting services available. Prior research showed that Chinese international students’ difficulties with American culture are exacerbated by a salient lack of academic and student support services available (Bertram et al., 2014; Cao et al., 2021; Kung, 2017).

Kung (2017) conducted a qualitative study exploring Chinese international students' perceptions of taking online courses in the United State and suggested that international students from China lack academic support and international student support services. Specifically, Kung (2017) interviewed six graduate students from Asia using a phenomenological design to identify
their perceptions regarding (a) participation and discussion in online courses, (b) differences in their expectations between the online platform and face-to-face courses, and (c) to garner recommendations about the type of support they perceive Chinese international students need for online learning. The study participants suggested they had challenges with student engagement, language barriers, and obtaining access to the instructor and academic and international support services while taking online courses. The perception of enhanced support for this specific group of students would likely aid Chinese international students in adjusting to American culture and the American education system (Kung, 2017).

As a result of the transition from face-to-face to remote learning, many universities have begun to adopt coaching and mentoring models to help students adjust to the new online platform (Michigan Virtual, 2021). However, other educational institutions have adopted other models for supporting students in their online journey. Namely, just-in-time learner support networks are being adopted (Smart Sparrow, 2021) and adaptive courseware solutions to enhance student engagement and success in online courses (O’Sullivan et al, 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutional support is essential in assisting Chinese international students in their transition to online learning and the entire student body. Therefore, understanding the needs of Chinese international students is critical if the universities want to address them appropriately.

Summary of the Chapter

Chinese international students experience several challenges associated with using online learning platforms. These challenges include lack of interaction between students and faculty, social marginalization, English language proficiency, lack of student-specific learning styles, and
inadequate pedagogical approaches. These challenges are exacerbated when the online learning environment is a direct response to a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

This section presented an overview of the significant and impactful challenges that emerged from the shift from a traditional learning environment to an online learning platform. The details presented in this section elucidate the difficulties associated with online learning platforms for all students while emphasizing those that disproportionately affect international students—specifically Chinese students. Current research suggests that this rapid shift further disrupted Chinese students’ learning experiences in higher education institutions in the United States. Additionally, online platforms resulting from a disorganized response to the global pandemic further exacerbated the challenges Chinese students typically face when studying in the United States.

The difficulty in acquiring the necessary English language skills to integrate with peers effectively was exacerbated by the shift toward online learning, exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S. universities’ change to online learning worsened the degree of isolation of Chinese students from their American peers. The lack of socialization symptomatic of an online learning environment coupled with insufficient pedagogical approaches resulted in increased isolation of all students, including Chinese students facing existing challenges with experiencing American culture.

The last section is a comprehensive review of the conceptual framework that serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) framework purports that learners who engage in online educational initiatives should receive an education that represents the quality of the host institution. However, the literature reviewed in this section demonstrates that the objective asserted by the OLC has not been achieved in most cases.
Furthermore, the global pandemic and subsequent disorganized shift to online learning platforms further decreased the efficacy of online learning for many students, having deleterious effects on the international student population—specifically on Chinese students.

Chinese students suffered various psychological challenges resulting from challenges associated with online learning in U.S. institutions. Although psychological stress was an existing obstacle for Chinese students studying in the United States, these issues were worsened by the isolation and lack of socialization resulting from the rapid shift to online learning. Furthermore, Chinese students had fewer resources to address these challenges because of the salient lack of academic and international student support services. Finally, the onset of the pandemic further reduced the services and support offerings that could benefit Chinese students, as offices closed and face-to-face interactions with service providers disappeared.

Unfortunately, research exploring the challenges associated with Chinese international students’ experiences with online learning is limited. The review of literature delineates the current literature on Chinese international students and online learning, coupled with the scant research on its specific impact on Chinese students. Additionally, the research presented on online learning environments is complemented by scholarship on crisis learning environments. The limited amount of research uncovered while developing this literature review provides further evidence that additional research is necessary for education scholars and practitioners.

Students’ perception of online learning served as the foundational precursor to the methodological design of this study, which is discussed in the next chapter. However, this study extends scholarship on students’ perception of online learning by introducing the added effects of the pandemic. Additionally, the study incorporates a specific group of students who constitute
the most significant international students at U.S. higher education institutions. These additional complexities guided the research design, data collection, and data analysis for this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a dramatic shift from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning, creating unique experiences for Chinese international students. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Chinese international students’ perception of online learning in U.S. higher education during the time of the pandemic and to determine what supports are needed to yield a more positive learning experience. Empirical findings of Chinese international students revealed that they face a unique set of challenges in the U.S. and introduced essential attributes to successful online education. This chapter aims to delineate the chosen methodology for this study and provide support for methodological choices. Also, this chapter includes information about population selection, data collection, data analysis, positionality, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

Selection of Methodology and Design

As this qualitative research study explored Chinese international students’ online learning experiences during COVID-19, I found it necessary to make sense of these experiences by utilizing a phenomenological approach. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology is an approach that describes the commonalities between participants as they “experience a phenomenon,” leading to a “description of the universal essence” or shared features of the phenomenon (p. 76). This approach aims to discover how the participants understand and interpret their experiences with the research phenomenon. This study’s focus on the effects of a specific phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic, coincides with the objective of a phenomenological research study. The philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological inquiry are descriptive and hermeneutical and draw heavily on the views of Husserl (1970), Heidegger
(1962), and Moustakas (1994), which include the concepts of the intentionality of consciousness and bracketing or epoché (Creswell, 2013). Descriptive and hermeneutic analyses differ based on the outcomes of their inquiries. While descriptive phenomenological analysis emphasizes the creation of textural and structural descriptions of a certain phenomenon, elucidating its fixed essence (Moustakas, 1994), a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis aims to develop a thematic interpretation of a phenomenon for future descriptions and analyses (van Manen, 1997). Contemporary phenomenology is predominantly hermeneutic aimed at interpreting experiences. The use of descriptive phenomenology has waned in recent scholarship (Creswell, 2013).

Therefore, this proposed study will employ a hermeneutic phenomenological approach since the goal is to discover the themes that underlie the Chinese international students’ experience with online learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as identified in the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, a possible feature of this phenomenon indicated that it includes various challenges, classroom engagement, and coping strategies, to name a few. Therefore, these experiences must be collected, examined, and analyzed to develop adept practices and plans for future programs.

Participants

I recruited 12 participants for my study. According to Subramanian and Peslak (2010), there are general guidelines for selecting the sample size for interviews. Determining sample size depends on the methodology used (Mason, 2010). For phenomenology methodology, Creswell (2013) suggested five to 25 participants. Also, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and Morse (1994) indicated at least six. Dukes (1984) recommended three to ten participants. Also, Patton (1990) suggested that the sample size in qualitative inquiry varies based on several factors such as “what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have
credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 243). I set the number at 12 as phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, data were collected from a smaller sample population to obtain and examine rich information. Furthermore, this research study’s design was based on expected results from a particular group of students selected for their relevant experiences related to the phenomenon, strengthening a qualitative study’s transferability (Daly & Lumley, 2002).

Before the interview process began, a careful selection of participants took place. Kwadzo (2014) presented the importance of purposeful sampling, criterion sampling, and snowball sampling when seeking information-rich participants. For this study, I employed a purposive sampling method to select my participants. Purposive sampling was utilized because participants possessed a better understanding, through direct experience, of the central phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2014). Purposive sampling is the careful selection of participants based on a needed population with specific characteristics to answer research questions developed for the study (van Hoeven et al., 2015). This sampling approach is also known as selective and judgmental sampling (Gentles et al., 2015).

It is essential to have inclusion criteria that reflect necessary characteristics for participants. As a Chinese international student myself who experienced remote learning myself, I understood the purpose of the study and those affected by the phenomenon, so I could easily classify qualified participants. The potential participant had to be a Chinese international student who had experienced remote learning during the pandemic. I recruited participants from students I tutored in the past. Through my experience, since I had a personal connection with them, a more collaborative and productive relationship was formed between myself and the participants.
Participants of the study were either located in the United States or China during the pandemic. As illustrated in Table 1, seven of the twelve participants of the study were located in China, while the remaining five participants were living in the United States. Participants were also assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity, and the demographic information of each student is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Current Academic Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hao</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Food Science &amp; Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunning</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jing</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Cello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caiyu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Education Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Physical Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Applied Linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Business Analytics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinmei</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of six of the participants were female, and six were male. A total of eight participants were undergraduate students, while four reported attending graduate school and doctoral studies. Participants' majors also varied significantly, as described in Table 1. Since the participants shared different backgrounds, a better-constructed sculpture of their experiences was collected.

**Data Collection**

Patton (2015) explained that interviews are used when researchers study things that cannot be directly observed. In this situation, interviewing participants is essential in the phenomenological process (Paton et al., 2004; Vagle, 2009). A phenomenological approach
accepts the reality that life experiences are diverse and ‘messy,’ an unscripted way to collect the core of the lived experiences. Similarly, semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their recollections and emotional attachments to the phenomenon in question without the constraints of thoroughly scripted text (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with my participants.

Before data collection, IRB approval was obtained (see Appendix A). Once the sample size was determined, I sent out a recruiting message to potential participants through email (see Appendix B). All the email addresses were extracted from the student database that I stored. I had their email address because I tutored them before. Potential participants invited to participate in the study were asked to reply to the message by a specific date if interested in participating. Interested participants were then asked to review and complete the consent forms (see Appendix C). Finally, the purpose of the research and the interview process was discussed. Once participants committed to the research study, the interviews began. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes in compliance with recommendations for phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were conducted one-on-one through Zoom. This interview method was chosen over face-to-face interviews because of recommended social distancing that persisted throughout the data collection phase of the study. In addition, this decision was made to ensure the safety of each participant.

The interview protocol contained 14 interview questions (see Appendix D). Interview questions were grouped under three themes included in the student satisfaction pillar: course rigor, interaction, and support services. These factors formed the basis of the interview guide and served as a structure to interpret the participants’ experiences from the data collected. Given the language barrier that may prevent Chinese international students from fully expressing
themselves, all the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese in this study. Mandarin Chinese is Chinese international students’ conversational language in this sample. I conducted each interview and am a native Mandarin speaker. The interviews were transcribed and digitally audio-recorded and stored in a password-protected hard drive.

**Data Analysis Process**

Seidman (2013) delineated the necessary data analysis procedures required of a phenomenological study: (1) study the transcriptions, coding data of interest in the text, (2) identifying patterns and common themes, then (3) interpreting the data within the context of the phenomenon. For this research study, I implemented a similar two-stage coding model employed by Miles et al. (2014) and Saldaña (2009, 2015). The first cycle of coding was initially assigned to the data, followed by the second cycle codes in which the initial codes were grouped into meaningful categories, themes, or constructs. Categories, themes, and constructs were deemed meaningful by the researcher if they accurately depicted a narrative reflective of the participants’ experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The qualitative analytical process is cyclical in nature, requiring several reviews of the data in the context of the interviews and research questions to develop a narrative that represents the phenomenon studied (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In the first cycle of coding, I coded each interview transcript individually. Next, I compared the data and codes, creating sub-codes to determine if codes should be separated into autonomous categories or combined with existing codes based on their similarity to sentiments exhibited by participants (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The second cycle consisted of a reorganization and additional analysis of the data coded in the first coding cycle. The primary aim of the second-cycle coding was to capture meaningful categorical, thematic, conceptual, and theoretical structures from initial codes.
identified in the first cycle (Saldaña, 2009). During this process, I employed the Student Satisfaction Pillar framework to see if my preliminary findings related to the theory. I changed codes, added additional codes, and eliminated a few codes to yield themes that constituted the research findings. Codes that were ultimately eliminated went through a rigorous review process by comparing them to interview transcripts several times and existing codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Finally, I developed summative synthesis assumptions and logical declarative claims based on the totality of the findings. I analyzed the transcripts in Mandarin and only offered translations as part of the final write-up of results. The assertions were based on my insights from analyzing the qualitative data.

**Positionality**

Positionality is essential in data analysis to develop the credibility of the study. The identities of the researcher and participants could have influenced the research process (Bourke, 2014). My experiences as a Chinese international student during the pandemic and a tutor for this group of students shaped my understanding of the participants’ experiences in ways that I believed are unparalleled by other means. As a Chinese researcher and educator who works with Chinese international students daily, it was important for me to acknowledge that I have the responsibility to connect with these students on a deeper level and make their voices heard by U.S higher education institutions. I believe it is challenging for western researchers to capture Chinese students' whole experiences because of the cultural distance between them. During the interview, I perceived that student expressed more of their thoughts and feelings in Chinese. Therefore, I felt that it was my responsibility to give these students a voice.
Trustworthiness

It is recommended that one should reflect on biases and acknowledge that it is almost impossible to remain completely objective despite removing your opinions, perspectives, and lived experiences from the study at any point along the path. Mullings (1999) confirmed: “no individual can consistently remain an insider and few ever remain complete outsiders” (p. 340). Therefore, findings and conclusions need to be based on the data to understand that personal bias has been addressed and positionality outlined. Thus, I employed member checks and bracketing to increase the trustworthiness of my study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Member checking is a validation technique that explores the credibility of the data collected and is also integral to establish trust with participants (Birt et al., 2016). Bracketing ensures that a researcher’s own experiences do not influence the participants’ perception of the phenomenon (Chan et al., 2013).

Interviewees were contacted to review the translated quotations to capture what they intended to express accurately. They were able to add comments for additional clarification, and such statements were incorporated in the analysis of the results. The purpose of using member checking was to make sure that my interpretation of the interviews was accurate and complete. Bracketing was also performed to improve trustworthiness. Bracketing was achieved by questioning my assumptions about the phenomenon under study and reflecting on those assumptions throughout the study’s interviewing, coding, and interpretive phases (Friesen et al., 2012; van Manen, 1997). By incorporating bracketing, I did not let my own experiences and previous knowledge about the research topic influence my understanding of the participants’ experiences. I controlled the impact that my perceptions could have had on the data collection and analysis process and remained as objective as possible.
Ethical Considerations

Given that the current study involved human participants, I obtained the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Cal Poly Pomona before beginning the data collection process. After receiving approval, participants were informed about the study through an informed consent that explained their rights while participating in the study, specifically that they had autonomy related to the degree of participation in the research study and were voluntarily participating. In addition, the informed consent indicated that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Participants’ rights as research participants were announced before each interview, and participants were asked to sign the informed consent form before conducting the interview. The informed consent forms were securely stored in a password-protected file on my computer. Therefore, I am the only one who has access to the participants’ informed consent.

Orb et al. (2001) recommended using pseudonyms because “overseeing the potential consequences of revealing participants’ identities is a moral obligation” (p. 95). To ensure privacy and protect participants’ identities, a pseudonym was used for each participant in this study. Also, participants’ names were not attached to any file or email. All information will be destroyed upon the completion of the research study.

Summary

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students’ remote learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 Chinese international students. All interviews were transcribed, scrubbed, and analyzed using a two-stage coding model to identify patterns and key themes. In addition, member checking and bracketing were incorporated to enhance the trustworthiness of the research
study. Finally, consent forms and pseudonyms were used for ethical considerations. The primary limitation of the current study was the small sample size. Still, this research offers many insights better to incorporate similar programs in the future in a pandemic. Chapter Four will present the research findings.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, I aimed to explore the online learning experiences of Chinese international students pursuing higher education online in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. My goal was to understand the impact of this unique global situation on this population and develop solutions to improve the remote studying experiences for current and future Chinese international student bodies. The OLC served as my conceptual framework, guiding the study. My primary focus among the pillars presented in the OLC framework is the student satisfaction pillar. The three main factors in the Student Satisfaction Pillar under the OLC framework consist of course rigor and fairness, instructor and peer interaction, and support services (Moore, 2011; OLC, 2016). This pillar of the OLC framework was determined to be the most appropriate for the study because it encompasses all the critical components to evaluate student satisfaction with online learning (Moore, 2011, Croxton, 2014; Harris & Martin, 2012; Kauffman, 2015; Ni, 2013; Nguyen, 2015; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Sinclaire, 2011). The data collected in this study were used to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Chinese international students in U.S. higher education experience online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2. What services do Chinese international students describe as needed for a better learning experience?

Overall, research findings suggest that Chinese international students have mixed feelings toward remote learning during the pandemic. Specific struggles identified by participants of the study included (a) exhaustion, (b) reduced interaction with faculty and classmates, (c) a lack of
engagement, (d) issues with internet connectivity and VPN, (e) lack of campus life, (f) issues with overall readiness and (g) stress from national and school policy. On the other hand, participants also identified several positive experiences with remote learning during COVID-19. Specifically, students suggested that they found online learning: (a) convenient, (b) an effective learning environment, (c) more meaningful opportunities to interact with peers, (d) development of new skill sets, (e) found recorded lectures to be beneficial because it allowed them to listen to the lecture as many times as necessary, and for those students that went back home to China, they suggested (f) significant cost savings. The findings also suggest that the participants’ experiences appeared to be influenced by whether they were studying in the U.S. versus in China and other factors such as their major, year in school, etc.

Participants also proposed several recommendations for services that would likely bolster their learning experiences during COVID-19. Overall, they offered higher institutions in the U.S the following suggestions: (a) implementation of a better course design, (b) ensuring training in technology for both faculty and students, (c) the implementation of better administrative support, and (d) the availability of more effective communication channels. For those students residing in China, they suggested: (a) increased partnerships with local universities, (b) offering students stable VPNs, (c) improving faculty office hours, and (d) local support groups.

The following chapter will provide a review of the major themes identified during the data analysis. These themes were used to answer the research questions. Table 2 illustrates which themes were used to answer each research question.
Table 2: Research Questions and Themes Identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Identified Theme and Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do Chinese international students in U.S. higher education experience online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?</td>
<td>Negative experiences: (a) exhaustion, (b) reduced interaction with faculty and classmates, (c) a lack of engagement, (d) issues with internet connectivity and VPN, (e) lack of campus life, (f) issues with overall readiness and (g) stress from national and school policy. Positive experiences: (a) convenient, (b) an effective learning environment, (c) more meaningful opportunities to interact with peers, (d) development of new skill sets, (e) recorded lectures (f) cost savings (a) better online course design, (b) more professional development for professors and more training on technology literacy for students, (c) more culturally responsive administrative support (d) more effective communication channels. (e) partnerships with local universities in China, (f) stable internet, (g) office hours in different time zones, (h) local supporting groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What services do Chinese international students describe as needed for a better learning experience?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question One: Identified Themes

RQ1: How do Chinese international students in U.S. higher education experience online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The participants simultaneously enjoyed and struggled toward their remote learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting a mixed feeling overall. The data analysis showed that Chinese international students were generally excused from taking online classes; some participants reported reduced interaction and engagement. In addition, the lack of campus life was another primary concern for Chinese international students. Unfavorable policies from the government and higher education institutions exacerbated stress and negatively influenced their online learning experience. On the other hand, the participants perceived remote learning during the pandemic as convenient. They enjoyed the recorded lectures and the online learning structure. The remote learning experiences also allowed them to develop new skills. For those participants staying in China, cost-saving was another benefit associated with it. The following section provides an overview of the major themes identified, subthemes, and participant responses that support those themes.

**Negative Experiences**

Exhaustion. Both participants in the U.S. and China stated they felt their online courses were exhausting because of the excessive screen time. For example, Tian said:

I think if I got to use one word, it might be exhausting because I had to look at a computer screen for hours. My classes were usually three hours long, so each class was like a commitment to screen for three hours; sometimes I had classes back-to-back, so that was like six hours in a row; and sometimes there were meetings for the group project
and extracurricular activities, which meant that I would be on zoom all day. Then there was no escaping from the screen.

Similarly, Li used the term “lethargic” to describe her online course experience. She also shared that:

My earliest class started at 9 pm Beijing time, and the latest class ended at 3:50 am. I was pretty tired already when my first class started, so when I got to my last class, I felt like my brain couldn’t function anymore, and it was obviously not so productive.

Participants also mentioned that they were exhausted from staying on top of schoolwork because it is more difficult to remain physically energetic. For example, Kai stated: “It is harder to keep on track with everything from all the classes due to the different arrangements each professor adopts. For example, some professors use Blackboard, some use emails, and some use their websites.”

Specifically, students returning to China during the pandemic referenced the time difference and lack of sleep as the major cause of exhaustion. For example, Hao stated, “The online classes with 13 hours of time difference are indeed very challenging. Getting up at 2:45 am in the middle of the night with sleepy eyes is very difficult. Every time I stay up, I lose dozens of hairs.” Similarly, Suning stated:

My classes usually start at 3 am, or 4 am in China. I have to get up to wash and eat one hour before class. Once my first class is over, I will have 1 to 2 hours to rest, but I usually can’t sleep. I’m worried that I will not get up once I fall asleep, so I usually wait for my family to wake up around 7 o’clock, then we have breakfast together and wait until 8 or 9 am to continue class. I was tired all day.

Finally, Tan commented:
Some professors set deadlines for quizzes and assignments when it is in the middle of the night, which means I often have to either work way ahead of the deadline or stay up late to submit the work in time. In addition, if I miss any announcements regarding the changes in the syllabus or due dates, it is likely to jeopardize my grades.

Some students even moved across China to fit the new schedule better. For example, Budan said:

The winter in northeast China was too cold, and it’s tough to get up in the middle of the night. So, I decided to go to Hainan with my grandparents to continue the live classes instead of watching the recording.

Another theme identified with negative experiences reported by some participants was reduced interaction with faculty, classmates, or both. As discussed in the literature review, Chinese students already struggle with having meaningful interactions and socializing with their American counterparts. Therefore, the results of the data analysis provided further evidence of the issues raised by other scholars’ research presented in the literature review. The following section provides a discussion related to the theme of reduced interaction.

Reduced Interactions and Socialization. Many participants reported a lack of interaction with professors and peers. For example, Budan stated:

I rarely interact with my professor. The professor always asks us to ask questions, but just the atmosphere, like everybody, turns off their cameras, and I feel like, maybe just the vibe with an online class, no one wants to say anything.

Similarly, Hao stated:
I think it’s very challenging to communicate with professors and classmates through zoom because most classes I take have large class sizes. There were about fifty to sixty students in each class, and nobody talked in that class except the professor.

Finally, Jing commented:

I think what was missing is direct interactivity. For example, if the class is live, I feel more comfortable interacting with the professor and asking questions, whereas sometimes, the professor needs to listen repeatedly to understand my questions because of network lag.

Some participants also stated they felt the interaction with their classmates was also significantly reduced once they switched to remote learning. They do not have an opportunity to interact with peers other than class time and frequently maintained communication with known classmates but did not establish relationships with new ones. Specifically, Tian stated, “I just got on different Zoom classes and then got off, and I didn’t have a chance to ask questions and interact with other classmates.” Sunning also stated:

I didn’t get to know any new friends from my classes last semester. It was just so easy to make a friend when you can talk to them face to face or ask them to grab a cup of coffee with you. But now everyone just disappeared in one sec, which made it very hard for me.

Participants in China suggested that interaction was more challenging for them than their counterparts in the United States. Specifically, participants of the study cited issues with the time difference between the U.S. and China, resulting in issues with (a) collaboration during group projects, (b) office hours, and (c) communication with faculty and classmates. Specifically, Li stated,
It’s hard to choose group members because I did not know many of the students in advance, nor did we know each other’s working styles and work habits. Due to the different time zones of the students, there were also many restrictions on the agreed-upon time for group discussions. Someone either had to get up early or stay up late.

Similarly, Caiyu stated:

My professor’s office hour is 5 am Wednesday in Beijing Time, and my last class on Wednesday finished at 2 am. I was so tired when I finished my class and didn’t have the energy to stay up for another 3 hours to attend the office hour.

Lack of interaction sometimes leads to other issues. For example, several participants stated they experienced an overall lack of engagement due to switching to online courses. Therefore, the following section highlights participants’ responses that support this theme.

**Lack of Engagement.** As previously noted in the literature review and purported by the conceptual framework, students should receive the same quality education online as the home institutions traditionally provide on campus. Yet, many participants in this study reported not feeling engaged either by the class format or their professors. Specifically, Tian stated, “Everyone turns their cameras off, and I just look at a bunch of black screens, and my professor just sits there and talks by himself.” Similarly, Kai stated:

I don’t feel engaged at all. For example, for group presentations, I could not see or feel the momentum when a group does a presentation on stage that I felt at face-to-face class before, but now everyone is just a rotating presentation on Zoom.

Some students feel less engaged because their class requires more practical hands-on learning, and the remote learning during the pandemic did not provide that. For example, Bao
said: “We were supposed to perform in front of audiences for our cello performance class, now we just take turns to perform in front of the camera. It felt so strange and not so engaging.”

Some students related the lack of engagement with the professor’s teaching style. As previously indicated, faculty were often unprepared for the dramatic shift to an online platform, which necessitated different pedagogical approaches to achieve the same levels of student success (Wuensch et al., 2006). For example, participant Budan said: “There were not many activities in class. My professor usually just talked about what’s on the PowerPoint slides.”

Hao also mentioned that he didn’t feel engaged because of his poor internet connection, “I couldn’t join the live session because my internet was just very unstable. Since there is not much engagement in that class anyway, I just watched the recorded sessions.” Thus, challenges associated with internet connectivity were repeatedly mentioned by the study participants living in China while taking online courses during COVID-19. The following section describes the internet challenges this group of participants faced in attending online U.S. courses.

**Issues with Internet Connectivity.** Chinese international students who went home to China were advised to face technological barriers that impeded their ability to perform well. The Chinese government imposes strict censorship on many websites (Hyland, 2020). Google, the world’s largest and most commonly used search engine, and its products such as Gmail and Google Drive are inaccessible to I.P. addresses in mainland China. Various social networking services are banned by the Great Firewall (Clayton et al., 2006). For example, participant Hao stated: “When I first got back to China, I couldn’t get on any of the sites I used for my studies, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Google drive, and stuff. I didn’t know what to do.” In addition, internet censorship often hindered Chinese students’ ability to access course materials uploaded by professors to inaccessible platforms in China. Budan commented: “It was very challenging to
upload my project on Blackboard. It often stops unexpectedly, and I have to do it again, which is very time-consuming.”

A common practice to bypass the restrictions reported by the participants is to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to redirect data away from one’s actual geographical location. However, workable VPN services are often expensive. Regardless, the connection is still highly unstable. Tan mentioned: “Often, the VPN service stops working after a while, and you have to keep purchasing a new one. It also requires separate installation fees for a phone and a P.C.”

Furthermore, a VPN is not available in certain districts in China, making the situation more complicated for those whose homes are located near areas such as military compounds. Specifically, Caiyu stated: “I can’t use the VPN service at my house because my family lives in a military compound. I have to go to a library to have online classes every day.”

Therefore, the internet censorship in China is likely to restrict the access of academic information that Chinese international students need for their courses, possibly affecting their learning results and grades. For example, Hao mentioned he almost failed his midterm because his poor internet connection. He said:

I was having my stats midterm in my hotel during the 14-day quarantine when I first got back to China. The internet connection in that hotel was very weak. I couldn’t open the online calculator for my test. I remember my page just kept getting frozen every time I clicked next.

In conclusion, the unsatisfactory internet access and connectivity posed a significant challenge for those Chinese international students trying to attend U.S. institutions remotely from China. As a result, Chinese students would have difficulty engaging with the class fully (Lau,
2020). The next theme identified with negative experiences was the lack of campus life. The following section describes participant responses that support this theme.

**Lack of a Campus Life.** Another challenge suggested by participants was a general lack of campus life due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Specifically, Sunning and Li made comments regarding their disappointment with not attending classes on campus. Sunning suggested that the lack of campus activities was a major disappointment because she specifically imagined her life in the U.S to be more social than her life in China and sought the opportunity to get to know other students from different backgrounds. Sunning stated:

I have thought about it many times in my heart, thinking of visiting the third-largest city in the United States and seeing the famous art museum. I know my school is on the shore of Lake Michigan and is particularly beautiful. I often imagined that after school starts, I would have a picnic with my new classmates from different continents, with different skin colors and cultures, and we could talk to each other. I also bought the items to decorate the new dormitory early and arranged a meeting with two other friends. Then everyone would buy the same flight ticket and go together. But one of them is happening now.

She also fantasized about her athletic life countless times. She stated:

One of the biggest reasons for me to choose this school is their women’s soccer team. But unfortunately, although I pictured my practice with teammates many times, last season was canceled, and I could only stay in China now.

Another freshmen Li also commented:
Our school has a tradition. Every year in September, there is a week dedicated to welcoming first-year students to campus with different themed events. I have been looking forward to this week. I even mentioned this in my application essay. But later, it became remote learning at home, and these expectations never come to fruition.

**Lack of Overall Preparedness.** Participants also suggested that they did not feel their instructors were ready for online classes. Specifically, participants suggested professors’ approaches to teaching with an online format, course design, and professors’ overall tech-savviness. For example, Hao commented:

> The professors need to understand there is a change in the situation. I feel like only a few professors were able to adapt to this whole online shift smoothly. Most of them didn’t make any change. They just hoped the situation would go back to normal.

Other participants also stated that professors were not familiar with technology such as controlling different online platform functions, which slowed the pace of the class. For example, San stated:

> I remember at the beginning of the semester. One professor muted herself and everyone in the class. Nobody could talk, and students tried to call the professors, but the professor’s phone was muted. The Zoom class had no sound for about 5 minutes before she realized something went wrong.

**Stress from Government and School Policies.** Chinese international students’ experiences with online courses were also significantly affected by government and school policies. Specifically, at the national level, immigration policies were put in place during the pandemic that heavily restricted the mobility of Chinese internationals. In addition, the
governments’ flight restrictions made many Chinese international students feel panicked at the prospect of not getting home and being stuck in the United States, which caused additional stress for their remote learning. For example, Hao stated:

I had about a week to find a place to live or book a ticket to China when my school announced the dorm would be closed. The ticket back to China was about $8,000 one way at the time, and it was just too expensive for me. So, I had to crash at my friend’s sofa while taking online classes for a week.

At the university level, the disregard for Chinese international students’ challenges with time zone differences was also considered a form of discrimination. Specifically, Budan mentioned:

90% of the students in my program are from China, and most of them were in China now, but all of our classes were scheduled at midnight. School also did not provide the option of a recorded session, and I just felt that school didn’t care about us.

These factors significantly affected Chinese international students’ psychological stress levels and online learning experiences during the pandemic. However, despite the negative experiences associated with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese international students also enjoyed the learning experience. The following section describes the themes identified regarding Chinese international students perceived positive experiences while taking online courses during the pandemic.

Positive Experiences

Convenience. All participants suggested that they felt online courses were more convenient than the traditional face-to-face platform. In addition, they reported experiencing a sense of control over their lives and more autonomy overall. For example, Jing stated:
I used to get up very early for my 8 am class. With commuting and everything, I needed about two hours to get ready for the class. Now, I can get up ten minutes before the class and have time for some breakfast.

Similarly, Tan stated:

I don’t have to carry everything, so that’s very convenient, yeah, and like when I go to the campus before the pandemic, I needed 30 to 40 minutes to find parking and take everything to a classroom, and not have to prepare my cook, my food, so that part is fine. I feel like it’s very convenient in that way.

Further, some female participants stated that part of the convenience of online courses was that they did not have to wear makeup that often. Therefore, they found they had extra time since they did not have to dress up or do their makeup. Specifically, Sinmei commented, “Everyone turned off their camera anyway, so I don’t need to wear makeup now. That saved me at least one an hour everyday. So, I guess it’s easy to go to class now.”

Finally, Chinese international students in China during the pandemic found it convenient that they do not have to worry about domestic chores or basic needs because their family members would take care of them. Like Caiyu stated, “All the meals are prepared for me, and thank God, I don’t need to do laundry anymore. I felt I had more time to study, and I can focus on my academics now.”

**Structure of Online Learning.** Participants also reported that the remote learning model provided more autonomy and control over their own time. For example, Sunning suggested, “I can do many things at the same time when I’m home, like taking care of my pets, go to yoga class, and making music while taking my full-time class.”
In addition, Chinese international students who returned to China could use their free time to seek out internships in China. Internships were not possible for students who remained in the United States. A lot of the recruiting programs in the U.S. paused because of the pandemic, so many Chinese students in the U.S. could not do an internship. In China, face-to-face internships were still possible, giving Chinese international students who returned home an advantage. Specifically, Tan stated:

Not only did I save money on rent, but I also took internships in Tencent after I went back to China. So, every day feels very fulfilling. My goal of studying in the U.S. is to return to China to get better job opportunities anyway. So, this internship opportunity is significant to me, and I wouldn’t get it if I were still in the U.S.

In addition to remote learning being convenient, some participants also felt that the current remote learning model allowed them to have better interactions with their professors and peers. These statements describe a completely different experience reported by participants earlier, showing that everyone’s learning experiences are different, and their experiences of better interaction will be further discussed in the following section.

**Improved Interactions.** Despite some students mentioning a lack of interaction with remote learning during Covid-19, some participants stated that they felt their interaction improved during this period. More specially, participants mentioned their discomfort in speaking directly with their professors. With the current learning model, they had more opportunities to communicate online, which allowed them to ensure they used the proper English language when sending emails or communicating on discussion boards. In other words, these email and chat messages allowed them to communicate better than they perceived they would have done in person. For example, Sunning stated:
I am a freshman who just started my first year, and I feel my English still needs much improvement. So, I guess it is beneficial that I can use translation software during the class to help me better understand the professor’s questions and requirements so I can engage more.

Similarly, Hao stated:

My English is not good, and I’m shy. So, when the professor asks if anyone has more questions in class, I usually won’t raise my hand because I don’t want to slow the pace of the class. But Zoom allows me to ask the professor my questions privately by typing in the chat function, and my professor would see it and answer the question. Now I don’t need to ask in front of the class and feel embarrassed or worry what other people would think of me.

Further, participants felt that their professors were taking additional steps to make themselves more available, thereby creating more opportunities for students to communicate. For example, Caiyu stated:

I felt like my professors are trying to create more interactive opportunities and make it more convenient for international students. For example, I had a course on biomedical engineering with 30 students, half of whom are international students from China. The professor took the initiative to add an hour to answer questions during the China time-friendly period.

Finally, some participants suggested that digital platforms for communication were more convenient than traditional face-to-face meetings. Participants made several statements that support this theme. For example, Jing stated, “I feel it’s easier to schedule a Zoom meeting
nowadays. I think my professors and peers are more used to this format of communication now, and I think it’s more efficient and convenient than before.” Similarly, Kai stated:

Despite not being able to talk to my peers in person, my relationship with peers didn’t get impacted by remote learning too much. I enjoy the break-out rooms on Zoom. My professor offered a substantial amount of peer interaction opportunities in each class when we solve a question together or discuss a topic with my classmates.

In addition to the better interaction, participants also suggested they developed new skill sets from their online learning experiences during the pandemic.

**Development of New Skill Sets.** Participants reported that the sudden shift to online learning forced them to develop their technology literacy and adapt to online learning. In addition, they had to get familiar with different online tools to help with their learning. For example, Hao stated, “I just realized how much information was out there on the internet, and I’m more confident with my self-learning ability now.” Similarly, Tian commented:

I think I developed my communication and group work skills through this remote learning. It was very fast-paced and allowed me to learn how to be more organized and work with a team.

Another benefit frequently mentioned by participants was one associated with the recorded lectures. Participants’ perceived benefits of recorded online courses are further discussed below in the next section.

**Benefits of Recorded Lectures.** Recorded lectures were something that participants repeatedly praised throughout the interview process. Participants were pleased with recorded lectures that allowed them to control their own pace of study. For example, Hao stated: “I like
the social justice class I took this semester since it has recorded sessions, so I don’t need to go to
every live session at 3:30 am. I can just watch the lectures when I’m free.”

For participants with language barriers, recorded lectures allowed them to employ
translation software and listen to the lecture as many times as needed for comprehension.
Specifically, Sunning stated:

I am a freshman who just started my first year, and my English still needs to be
improved, so it is beneficial that I can pause the lecture whenever I want to and use some
translation software to help me understand the content better.

Further, Tan stated:

I like that online lessons can be recorded and replayed, which means I can adjust my
learning pace and rewatch the places I don’t understand. For prior face-to-face classes,
everything was over when I didn’t catch certain points in class, and I had to ask the
professor afterward.

Both participants in both the U.S. and China suggested they had a positive experience
with recorded lectures. However, the next theme was specific only to those international students
who returned home to China during the pandemic, which is cost savings.

Cost Savings. Participants who stayed in China suggested that one aspect they enjoyed
with remote learning was the cost-savings. Specifically, those students who stayed home in
China while taking U.S. courses only had to pay the tuition fee and not worry about other living
expenses. The following are participants’ responses that support this theme. For example, Bao stated:
The cost of living has been greatly reduced since I moved back to China. I save on rent, food, and other expenses because I live with my family now. That’s about $3,000 a month. That significantly reduces the financial burden placed on my family.

Similarly, Budan stated:

I’m so glad that I can get my master’s degree while still keeping my job in China. Plus, it would be only half of the cost I initially planned because I saved housing and stuff. So I don’t think there is much of a difference for me to study online, and this saved me lots of money and time.

The above themes offer a summary of Chinese international students’ remote learning experiences during the pandemic. The finding indicates that several factors were posited to influence students’ experiences in the study sample. Specifically, unique challenges were found dependent upon the participants’ study location. Other factors influencing students’ experiences included their major, year in school, class size, professor. Each of these influential factors will be discussed in the following section.

Factors Influencing Student Experiences

Location. The data analysis indicated that the location of the participants significantly influences their remote learning experiences during the pandemic. Those participants who were able to return to China during the pandemic experienced unique experiences from their U.S. counterparts. Specifically, because of the time zone differences between the U.S. and China, this group of Chinese international students struggled to attend live lectures, faculty office hours, and meet assignment deadlines. These participants in China repeatedly recounted attending courses in the middle of the night and often feeling too exhausted to be active participants in their online learning experiences. These challenges were unique to participants residing in China at the time.
of this study. This issue seriously affected the routine of their life. In addition, the internet connection issue was also only applied to this group of participants as well. At the same time, they enjoyed the benefit of saving costs and spending more quality time with family.

**Major.** Another critical factor thought to influence Chinese international students’ remote learning experiences was their pursued major. Namely, students in specific majors, such as biology, physical therapy, music, and other subjects that require practical hands-on learning experiences, seem to have a less pleasant experience than those in majors such as economics and computer science. Specifically, because school campuses were closed, students could not come to campus and meet the requirements for courses with a lab or instrument component. Furthermore, even though interactive online lab modules were introduced during the pandemic, participants reported it is still impossible to attain the same level of knowledge acquired in a hands-on lab environment through an online platform. Therefore, these students may have experienced an elevated level of stress due to their inability to attain the knowledge needed to be successful in subsequent courses.

**Year in School.** Participants’ years in school also influenced their remote learning experiences during the pandemic. As previously mentioned in literature reviews, Chinese international students came to study in the U.S not only for a good education but also to experience a different culture and maybe better job opportunities. Since most graduate programs only last one year, many Chinese graduate students will not even have a chance to come to the U.S campus. Instead, they will have their whole “study abroad” experience online, which is a massive regret for many of them. Similarly, the findings also revealed that freshmen participants expressed more disappointment with their experiences than their classmates further along in their studies. First-year students’ dissatisfaction with campus life was evident by their complaints
about the disjunction between what they perceived their campus life experiences would be versus what they had experienced.

Conversely, since China has resumed regular activity during the second half of 2021 after the pandemic was under control, senior participants reported having the opportunity to participate in internship programs in China, which is very helpful to their future careers. These students had a significantly different experiences than their stateside counterparts, who were forced to stay at home due to restrictions due to the pandemic.

**Class Size.** Class size was suggested to also significantly influence Chinese international students’ online learning experiences during the pandemic. Namely, participants of the study that stated they were in small classes suggested they had a higher frequency of interaction with their peers. For example, Kai, who attended a doctoral program with only ten students in his cohorts, commented: “I felt our interaction increased because we just had more time for group discussion and professors would join the break-out room to give us feedback.” Conversely, those participants who stated they had a large class size complained about the difficulties of communicating through the online zoom platform. Specifically, Suning stated, “There were too many students in my class. Professors never assigned us to have an effective discussion about course topics.” Also, many of these students in larger classes suggested that most of their peers turned their zoom cameras off, further inhibiting communication. Large class sizes appeared to be predominantly found in undergraduate courses.

**Professor.** The data analysis also indicated that each student’s experience was directly related to their professor. As a result, participants might have the total opposite experiences even if they shared similar characteristics (major, year in school, location). For example, some
professors would not offer students timely feedback while others went the extra mile to offer additional office hours to Chinese international students.

**Research Question Two: Identified Themes**

**RQ2:** What services do Chinese international students describe as needed for a better learning experience?

A review of the themes identified from participants’ responses revealed what Chinese international students suggested to improve their remote learning experiences. Overall, participants’ responses indicated that schools need: (a) better online course design, (b) more professional development for professors, (c) more training on technology literacy for students, (d) better administrative support, and (e) more effective communication channels. Specifically, participant responses suggested that Chinese international students in China need: (a) partnerships with local universities in China, (b) stable internet, (c) office hours in different time zones, and (d) local supporting groups. Participants’ responses that support these themes are described in the following section.

**Overall Recommendation**

**Better Course Design.** As suggested by participants’ responses, most faculty were unprepared to implement a teaching pedagogy adequate for online courses. Participants made several comments suggesting the need for better course design. For example, Li stated:

The professor just assigned tons of readings each week, asked us to write a reflection, and leave comments on other student’s work for participation points. But he never offered any feedback on them, and many comments were just pointless. Students just leave them on the discussion board to get the participation points. I don’t see the value of doing this kind of activity, and it is not a good learning experience for me.
Similarly, Tian stated:

I think my professor needs to come up with something to get us engaged. The class is so boring, and there are just fewer and fewer people attending the lectures now. So, I think maybe start with requiring all students to turn on their cameras. I mean, I don’t even know what my classmates look like after one semester.

Further, Caiyu suggested including more group activities to improve interaction in class. For example, she commented, “I think professors should have more break-out room discussions to get us more involved and get to know each other.”

Therefore, ensuring faculty have received the proper professional development on how to implement online pedagogy to significantly improve the learning experience of Chinese international students is recommended.

**Training in Technology for Faculty and Students.** Participants recommended technology training for faculty and staff to mitigate issues arising during online course lectures. Specifically, Tian commented:

I guess my school can provide some training to everyone to facilitate our learning experiences. We need to know how to learn more efficiently, and professors need to learn how to teach more efficiently in an online format.

In addition, Li mentioned the technical difficulty his professors had in conducting a Zoom meeting with the class, suggested using a moderator in the interim to help faculty with the basic operation of technology in the classroom. He commented, “If a moderator had been present, the session would have gone more smoothly, and it would have reduced a great deal of frustration for the students.”
However, participants also suggest that such training and professional development opportunities require support from university’s leadership. It would need great amount of resources and effort to make it happen. The following section will discuss administrative support in detail.

**More Administrative Support.** Based on the research findings, educational leaders must offer more dedicated administrative support for Chinese international students pertaining to the processing of students’ visa paperwork and services focused on addressing the effects of anti-Asian discrimination during the pandemic. For example, Bao suggested a more dedicated international student office for processing Chinese international students’ student visas and I-20 forms. For example, Bao stated:

> The Visa policy changed last year dramatically every week, which influenced my study. I couldn’t focus because I have to worry about my visa issue. I wish my school’s international student office would provide more guidance during that time or maybe offer some kind of webinar session as other schools did.

Therefore, ensuring a dedicated administrative workforce makes it more likely that students’ Visa issues will be processed timelier and more limited their stress, allowing them to focus on their online learning.

Regarding support for Chinese international students relating to anti-Asian discrimination during the pandemic, participants recommended that faculty and educational leaders provide support groups and culturally responsive counseling professionals to help them deal with any additional stresses associated with discriminatory practices. Specifically, Sinmei stated:

> I was lonely and didn’t have many friends to talk to during the pandemic. I didn’t want to talk to the counselor at my school because I had to explain the whole situation to her in
English, and I’m not sure she would get me. I want a counselor who would know my situation and speak Chinese.

However, some participants don’t even know what support their schools offered during the pandemic, suggesting that steps must be taken to establish a more effective communication channel.

**More Effective Communication Channels.** Participants recommended more effective communication channels to ensure Chinese international students can have access to the resources available to facilitate their learning experiences. As previously described, currently, U.S. universities predominantly use online services such as Google and Zoom, which were all restricted in China. Therefore, providing Chinese international students with additional communication channels would only bolster their interaction and improve their overall learning experiences.

In addition, the data analysis revealed that there seems to be a disconnection between the school’s announcement and Chinese international students. For example, Budan mentioned, “I don’t know if there is a counseling service at my school.” Similarly, Bao commented, “I rarely check my school’s email.” The finding also showed that Chinese international student shared their own communication channel between each other. For example, Hao suggested, “I got all my school information from WeChat [a Chinese social media app], I’m in this WeChat group with all my Chinese classmates, and we share information there.” Therefore, increasing the number of channels used to communicate with this student population will likely bolster Chinese international students’ learning experiences.
**Students in China**

**Partnerships with Local Universities in China.** Many U.S. universities worked with top universities in China, allowing their Chinese international students to attend in-person classes in China. For example, Li went to Tsinghua University in Beijing last semester while taking classes from her U.S university online. She had a great experience doing the hybrid learning, she stated, “Even though it’s a little tiring, I still really enjoy this experience because it offered me the opportunity to interact with peers and professors and have the feeling of going to school. I prefer to have face-to-face communication when it’s possible.” Similarly, Bao mentioned:

One of my classmates went to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and attended classes there. He told me the class felt pretty much the same, but with better instruments and a live audience. I was tempered to go, but my school only allowed us to take one course per semester. I wish they would allow us to take more credits there because it’s not very cost-effective for me to move to Shanghai for one class.

However, not all schools have the resources to collaborate with universities in China to provide such an immersion experience for their students. Therefore, U.S universities must ensure their students in China have a stable internet for the pleasant remote learning experiences. The following section provides students’ statements supporting this theme.

**Stable VPN.** Since the Chinese government imposes several restrictions on the internet, including blocking Gmail, Google services, and zoom, which make the situation unique for Chinese international students who returned to China during the pandemic. As a result, this group of participants reported experiencing difficulties with connectivity and accessing the online resources necessary to participate in online courses. Many participants expressed concerns with their internet and the VPN services school provided. For example, Tan stated: “No, no, no.
It was a nightmare to use the school’s VPN for online classes. Even though it’s completely free, the network was very unstable, and it took a long time to load videos and stuff. I wish they provided a better VPN.”

**Improved Faculty Office Hours.** Participants also suggested a need for faculty to post office hours that accommodate time zones in China because many of the instructor’s office hours were often inconvenient because of the considerable time difference between China and the United States. Therefore, using office hours was suggested to be difficult and often the very last resort. For example, Tan stated, “My professor asked me to come to his office hours if I have questions, but it’s 3-5 am in China, so it’s pretty hard for me to go. It would be better if we can have a weekly Q.A. session that fits everyone’s schedule.”

In conclusion, based on participants’ responses, several recommendations could be made for Chinese international students in the U.S. and China. Specifically, all Chinese international students attending U.S. universities online need improvements in course design and rigor, more professional development for professors, training and technology literacy for students, better administrative support dedicated to Chinese students’ needs, and more effective communication channels outside of group emails.

For Chinese international students in China, they need several services to improve their learning experiences. Namely, an increased partnership between the U.S. and local universities in China, the availability and offering of stable VPNs by U.S. universities to Chinese international students located in China, and improved faculty hours or more accommodating hours due to the vast difference in time zones are needed.
Chapter Summary

The preceding chapter provided a review of the themes identified in this research study. Specifically, several themes were identified specific to Chinese international students’ remote learning experiences during the pandemic, followed by a discussion of the factors thought to influence student experiences. Finally, the participants made recommendations to facilitate their remote learning experiences. Research findings also suggest several implications pertaining to the education of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, Chapter Five will discuss the implications of these research findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students as it relates to online learning in U.S. higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine what supports students need to enhance their learning experience. Most studies about online learning did not explicitly explore this group of students (Heng, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to the literature related to online learning and student experiences by analyzing Chinese international students’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and offer recommendations for higher learning institutions in the U.S.

The results indicated that Chinese international students have mixed feelings about their online learning experiences through U.S. institutions of higher learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants cited common obstacles prevalent across the online learning literature stream, such as reduced interaction with peers, a marked lack of engagement, poor faculty preparation, and a lack of a fulfilling campus experience. However, participants also expressed obstacles particular to the population, including exhaustion from the significant time difference, unstable internet connections, and national and school policies that caused additional stress. Finally, many participants expressed positive sentiments about their online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These positive experiences included convenience, the structure of the online learning environment, increased interaction, new skills development, the benefits of recorded lectures, and significant cost savings.

The participants offered several recommendations to enhance their remote learning experience during the pandemic. In general, Chinese international students suggested an improved and more effective course design, additional training for faculty and students,
culturally sensitive administrative support, and more effective communication channels. In addition, students residing in China during the pandemic suggested more partnerships between U.S. institutions and local Chinese universities, the availability of stable VPNs, and improved faculty office hours. Finally, Chinese international students residing in the United States need additional emotional support and counseling services to help them better manage the unique challenges they currently experience in the United States.

Understanding Chinese international students’ perceptions of their experiences, challenges, and need for support can significantly contribute to education by leading to more effective educational practices and enhancing educational recruitment and retention strategies (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Research results from this study are significant for various stakeholders within education, such as students, administrators, and educators. Additionally, the research presented here has policy implications for U.S. institutions of higher learning. Finally, this study contributes to the education, online learning, and crisis learning literature streams by expanding the scope and depth of existing research. The benefits of addressing the research problem are practical knowledge that could improve Chinese international students’ experience in U.S. higher education by improving online learning platforms, pedagogical methods employed by faculty, and the recruitment and retention of the most extensive group of international students studying in the United States.

The following chapter provides a discussion of the contributions of this study to the field of education by illustrating how the research findings challenge, extend, and support existing research and theory discussed in Chapter 2. Next, the strengths and limitations of this study are described, and relevant implications for practice are delineated. Finally, areas of future research
are presented to serve as impetuses to explore further the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on specific groups of international students.

**Contributions**

Chinese international students are an integral group of students at American universities. They are essential in bolstering the diversity of universities while also ensuring they are economically sustainable. However, this student group experiences a unique set of challenges that require educational stakeholders’ attention. This unique attention has always been necessary but has become more salient because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current learning environment could be a turning point for Chinese international students coming to the U.S. For the last two years, many are doubting if attending U.S higher institutions is their best option. As a result, research findings from this study allows administrators and other educational stakeholders to understand the needs and challenges of this group of students during a critical time and develop strategies to respond to those challenges effectively.

consistent with prior research, the current study found that collaboration with peers and instructors was an essential factor in students’ level of satisfaction in evaluating their experience at U.S. higher education (International Society for Technology in Education, 2020; Seaberry, 2008). Furthermore, student satisfaction is the most critical factor in determining international student attraction and retention (Seaberry, 2008). In addition, a lack of prompt feedback from instructors as described by participants suggested that these research findings were also consistent with prior literature (Seaberry, 2008). Other findings from the study consistent with previous research included the anti-Asian discrimination experienced by Chinese international students, which creates a great deal of stress and psychological issues for Chinese international students (Zhao, 2020).
Limited research was found exploring Chinese international students’ perceptions and experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, research findings provide new insights into online learning, the Chinese international student population, crisis learning, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Chinese international students. Furthermore, given the salient gap in the literature stream, this research could have broad implications for scholarship and practice.

**Study Strengths and Limitations**

There are several strengths inherent to the research design, which include: (a) the collection of a rich and thick description of the research phenomenon under study, thereby enhancing transferability, (b) the research design allowed me to take a more flexible approach with participants thereby allowing me to probe more for data, (c) the research design allowed me to garner a better understanding of participants beliefs and values regarding the research phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2011).

There are also several limitations associated with this study. First of all, although qualitative research does not have a priori methods for determining adequate sample size, it is not unimportant (Boddy, 2016). For example, selecting a small group of students within a specific demographic helped the researcher achieve an analytical goal, but the small sample size in this study could have limited the results’ generalizability.

In addition, the sampling methodology used was purposive sampling, which is non probabilistic. Because I am a Chinese international student and have personal relationships with other Chinese international students, I had access to a pool of qualified participants. However, non-probabilistic sampling limits the generalizability of results to other populations. The
responses may reflect the population’s unique characteristics (Ilker et al., 2016), which may not be generalizable to other international students.

Another anticipated limitation of the study was the bias that may surface. For example, one bias may include responses from participants that are based on Intermediate Unit expectations. Another may have responses that are filtered and not based on personal, educational practices related to inclusion. Potential biases in responses could reduce transferability and applicability because it depletes the researcher’s confidence in the truth of the findings (Krefting, 1991).

Due to time limitations, this research study had a small sample size of 12 participants, limiting the transferability of the research findings. However, the sample size was within the recommended range of participants for a hermeneutic phenomenological study (Smith et al., 2019). In addition, having a smaller group of participants from one demographic may offer findings that will be important to that specific group of students, who are immensely important to U.S. institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, this research study’s design was based on expected results from a particular setting selected for relevance to the phenomenon, strengthening a qualitative study’s transferability (Daly & Lumley, 2002).

While this study cannot be considered representative of all Chinese international students’ online learning experience during COVID-19, it does provide a deeper understanding of the experience of this group of students, which may enhance its degree of transferability. Furthermore, this study is critical to improving the learning experience for Chinese international students should a similar situation occur. It is unknown how long remote learning stemming from the pandemic will continue or what kind of other problems Chinese students may face in
the future, so educational institutions and students alike must be better prepared for any such event.

**Implications**

There are several scholarly and practical implications of the research findings. First, this study suggests that Chinese international students encounter unique challenges with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to domestic students and other international students. Therefore, U.S higher education institutions need to be more cognizant of the issues facing Chinese international students. Second, U.S. higher education institutions should develop effective and specific policies for this group of students. Policies meant to serve as a panacea for all international students will not be effective. These policies should be culturally sensitive and specific to this group of international students, as they face unique challenges. Additionally, individualized attention is necessary for this student population to succeed academically. For instance, many participants reported receiving group emails that were not explicitly directed at Chinese or other groups of international students. Therefore, they often disregarded these emails, feeling as though they did not pertain to them.

It was worth noting that many participants from graduate school revealed that Chinese international students made up more than 90% of their cohort. Therefore U.S higher institutions’ leadership should focus on culturally appropriate and specific interventions for these students. A culturally responsive leader would ensure that the instructors and course designs are sensitive to the needs of this student population and understand how to communicate with Chinese international students effectively. For example, instead of sending emails, schools can connect with these students through alternative communication channels common to the population, such as WeChat, a Chinese app that most Chinese students use daily. U.S higher education institutions
could create an official school account on WeChat for Chinese international students to stay informed on university announcements pertinent to this cohort. In addition, schools could assign a Chinese counselor or liaison who is already knowledgeable about Chinese culture to advocate for Chinese international students. This would help Chinese students express their concerns more openly, given the language barrier that often inhibits Chinese international students from seeking support services, including counseling services.

Furthermore, educational leaders could implement policies and procedures supporting Chinese international students’ learning and overall experiences studying at U.S. higher education institutions. Examples of policies and procedures that could facilitate this type of intervention should include an additional class section for the students in Chinese time zones, more information sessions dedicated to answering Chinese international students’ questions and creating more opportunities for immersion with U.S culture and their peers. U.S higher education institutions could exhibit cultural sensitivity by mitigating the challenges described in this study through improved and culturally specific policies and increased access to appropriate resources. By doing so, U.S. higher education institutions would significantly enhance their recruitment efforts of Chinese students and improve their retention rates.

Research findings also suggested that Chinese international students had negative experiences with online learning due to their instructors’ lack of training. As previously mentioned, the transition to online courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic has forced faculty to adopt completely different teaching pedagogies that they have had little or no training on. As a result of teachers’ varying levels of technology adoption, it is more difficult for some faculty members to effectively implement the necessary technology in the classroom to bolster students’ educational and learning experiences. Therefore, it is recommended that U.S higher institutions
provide professional development opportunities for faculty. Given the complexities of
developing an effective online learning environment and requisite pedagogy, it would also be
beneficial for school administrators to implement incentives, such as a bonus or educational
stipend for online learning instructors.

Research findings also suggested that Chinese international students felt disconnected
from their U.S. higher education universities because of limited interaction with faculty and
classmates, lack of campus life, and communication issues. Therefore, it is recommended that
higher education institutions in U.S. should consider implementing more campus wide online
social activities or events for Chinese international students to interact with their peers.
Specifically, the implementation of social media groups specifically created for each
major/program to facilitate communication among faculty and classmates could be implemented.
For example, creating a WeChat group for the course could unite students while offering them a
venue to post questions to the entire class.

The findings also suggested that instructors must be well educated on using technology to
provide a positive learning experience, but it is also vital for students to know how to navigate
their online courses effectively using this technology. Many Chinese international students never
experienced online learning before and had very limited knowledge in how to learn efficiently
online. Therefore, research findings imply the need for both faculty and student training
regarding technology in the classroom. In addition, U.S higher education institutions should
consider spending more funding on establishing the technology infrastructure necessary to
provide a more stable connection for live lectures and hopefully be capable of providing as many
recorded lectures as possible.
**Recommendations for Future Research**

For those researchers interested in replicating the current study, there are several provisions to consider. First, incorporating peer debriefing or employing another researcher to help in data collection and analysis would further reduce the likelihood of researcher bias as it relates to data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2011). Another recommendation for future researchers is the use of randomized sampling as opposed to non-random sampling. If future researchers could randomly sample Chinese international students for a qualitative research study, they would increase the likelihood that research findings would be generalizable to the target population.

Future research building from the current research study should consider conducting a mixed methods research design to employ triangulation, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the research findings. Specifically, researchers should collect quantitative data regarding the existing support services and technology used within the classroom in conjunction with participants' interviews to support or debunk research findings. The use of a mixed-methods design would ensure a broader look at the phenomenon under study. Future researchers should also consider employing a mixed methods design to explore the mental health and student satisfaction levels in conjunction with collecting interview data. Prior research suggests that anti-Asian discrimination behaviors have significantly affected students' overall psychological health (Zhao, 2020). Research aimed at quantifying Chinese international students' mental health and satisfaction levels during the COVID-19 pandemic could be used to inform educational leaders on what resources are needed to help students mitigate these challenges while bolstering satisfaction. Currently, there is limited research regarding the perspectives and experiences of
Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, research is needed in all areas relating to this target population.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students as it relates to online learning in U.S. higher education and to determine what support was needed. Most studies about online education did not explicitly explore the learning experiences of Chinese international students (Heng, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Therefore, I sought to contribute to the literature relating to online learning and student experiences and analyze Chinese international students’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to overcome challenges. The key findings of this study suggest that Chinese international students had mixed experiences with their U.S. remote learning during the pandemic. Participants made several suggestions to mitigate several of these challenges, which were further emphasized in the implications section of this chapter. Understanding Chinese international students’ perceptions as it relates to their experiences, challenges, and need for support can significantly contribute to the field of education by leading to more effective educational practices, enhancing educational recruitment and retention strategies (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Research results from this study are significant to various stakeholders within the field of education and contribute to the literature. The benefits of addressing the research problem are that knowledge was garnered that could improve the experience of Chinese international students in U.S. higher education by identifying current shortcoming and potential solutions. By addressing students’ challenges, research findings could contribute to the effective education, recruitment, and retention of Chinese international students.
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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

IRB #: IRB-20-206
Title: Exploring Chinese International Student Remote Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Creation Date: 11-23-2020
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Chenyue Lin
Review Board: CPP IRB members
Sponsor:

Study History

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Key Study Contacts

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chenyue Lin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taylor Allbright</td>
<td>Co-Principal Investigator</td>
<td><a href="mailto:tnallbright@cpp.edu">tnallbright@cpp.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Greetings,

My name is Chenyue Lin. I am a doctoral student at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. I am asking you to participate in a study about your experience with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Estimated time to complete an interview is 60 minutes. If you agree to be interviewed, I will audio record your responses. Audio recordings will be transcribed and sent to you for verification and to check for accuracy afterwards.

The information will be used to study the remote learning experiences of Chinese international students during COVID-19 pandemic. Remember, this is voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not.

Sincerely,

Chenyue Lin
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Consent:

I consent to participate in one, 45-60-minute interview, as well as a possible brief follow-up interview for the study of an exploration of Chinese international students Stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. (See signature line below.)

I also consent to audio recording the interviews to assist with data analysis.

(Participant initial here) _____

Your participation in the interview and follow-up interviews is completely voluntary. At any point, you can choose not to answer the questions or to leave the interview. You have the right to request that specific responses are removed from notes and transcripts from the interview.

I have received a copy of the study information and this form for my records.

Print Participant Name ____________________________________________

Participant Signature _________________________________ Date _______

Pseudonym Name ___________________________________

I hereby certify that I have given an explanation to the above individual of the study and its risks and protections.

Researcher’s Name: ________________________________________
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Which school are you currently go to? What year are you in? What is your major?

2. Describe your overall experience with your online course during COVID-19
   
   a. What words best describe your overall experiences? Why?
   
   b. What are some of things you really like about the experience?
   
   c. What are some of things you do not like about the experience?

Interactions with Teacher & Classmates

3. Describe the opportunities you interact with your professors? Do you communicate with them often?

4. Describe the opportunities you interact with your classmates? How would you describe your relationship with them?

5. Do you feel engaged overall?

6. What are some suggestions you would give to improve the interactions or collaboration with remote learning?

Course Rigor and Fairness

7. What did you think about the rigorous level of the remote learning during Covid-19? In terms of assignment? Test? Group project?

8. Do you think what you have learned during this period is useful for career, professional and academic development?

9. Would you say actual learning experiences match your expectations for U.S study experiences?
10. What are some suggestions you would give to improve the overall rigor of remote learning?

**Support Services**

11. Describe the challenges you encountered during COVID-19 with remote learning?

12. How did you cope with these challenges?

13. What are some of the resources available to you with remote learning during COVID-19?

14. If you never had any supporting services, explain why and describe the resources you wish to have?