

The Impact of Social Distancing as a Response to COVID-19 among Foreign Students in Wuhan, China

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The measures to contain the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a myriad of challenges worldwide. The control measures included lockdown, social distancing and quarantine of infected people, among others. The aim of this study was to assess the impact of social distancing on international students at Central China Normal University (CCNU) in Wuhan, China, where COVID-19 first emerged in December 2019. The research design was exploratory, using a semi-structured interview guide to gather data from a sample of 20 international students at CCNU. Furthermore, secondary sources were used to validate the data. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings showed some impacts related to social distancing: psychological distress, mental problems, relationship breakdown, fear, health problems, poor diet, and boredom. However, some students cited that social distancing enabled them to save money, focus on their lives, and improve their grades. Many informants revealed that they were willing to return to their countries as soon as the situation normalized.

Key Words: COVID-19, International students, Social distancing, Wuhan, China, Central China Normal University (CCNU)

COVID-19 has been a large-scale public health issue not only in China, but also in the rest of the world. The pandemic presented psychological challenges in addition to the risk of potentially fatal infection. In Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic, it posed an extreme challenge to residents, including those of foreign origin. Against this backdrop, the study aimed at assessing the impact of social distancing on international students at Central China Normal University (CCNU). At the time, Galea, Merchant and Lurie (2020) had argued that COVID-19 offered an opportunity for researchers to study behavioral responses of international students to the imposed restrictions on movement and social interaction. Social distancing refers to decreasing close contact between individuals, usually in response to the rapid spread of an infectious disease. It includes closing buildings, canceling events, travel bans, and restrictions on gatherings to prevent disease transmission (Brooks et al., 2020).

China announced the lockdown of Hubei Province on 23 January 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students also observed social distancing from 23 January up to beginning of April 2020, when they were obliged to stay at home or in their dormitories. When a person is confined to social distancing, levels of social cohesion with family members and other social groups can decrease and a wide range of problems can surface. Many studies have been conducted on problems related to COVID-19, but none, to our knowledge, on the impact of social distancing on international students in Wuhan. This study makes a distinctive scientific contribution by filling this gap.

Once the danger had been understood, the Chinese government imposed strict measures to contain the spread of this deadly disease. The measures included delays in starting university semesters, temporary closing of colleges and schools, and social distancing. However, these measures militated against social cohesion, spiritual belief, and trust among people and in the government. Trust is usually maintained by interpersonal interactions, which implies that restrictions on social interactions can cripple trust and social cohesion (Nesterova, 2020). Economic recession was another obvious result as social distancing became a norm.

The directive of social distancing was issued to everyone, especially in Hubei Province in which Wuhan, the epicenter of COVID-19, is located. These measures were successful in reducing the spread of the virus, according to The Harvard Health Service Report (Services, 2020). However, scholars noted that social distancing was both a blessing and a curse. The World Bank East Asia Economic Update (2020) indicated that social distancing discouraged people from working together. Encounters in entertainment, sports, cinema, music, and restaurant were canceled. Fellowshiping and the regular sharing of beverages

in proximity to one another were denied (World Bank, 2020). Brooks et al. (2020) elaborated that social distancing has many negative psychological impacts including confusion, anger, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Reduced physical contact with friends and family might contribute to boredom among international students.

Social distancing as a response to COVID-19 was not the first time when public gatherings were banned and people advised to stay at home the world over. The closest historical precedent is the 1918 Spanish flu, which killed 50 million people globally. Almost 675,000 of these deaths were in the United States of America, where the pandemic had originated. It was the worst pandemic for centuries (Lopez, 2020). At the time, the US government advised people to practice social distancing. All public gatherings were canceled, and infected people were quarantined. In some places, social distancing lasted for months. Some studies show that social distancing in response to the 1918 Spanish flu was not successful in the US. People failed to respect officials and ignored control measures. However, Lopez (2020) maintained that social distancing measures delayed the spread of the 1918 flu and reduced the mortality rate.

In 2013 the Ebola outbreak in West Africa led to the closure of 10,000 schools and bans of public gatherings in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea for almost a year. However, most students had lost track of the education system when schools reopened. International students were supposed to stay in the residential hall until further notice (Aggrey-Darkoh, 2020).

Literature Review

Many modern authors have emphasized that human beings are social animals, as stated by Aristotle already in the 4th century BC. Trivers (1971) described human beings' psychological, social, and biological systems as having evolved for cooperation with others. Baumeister (1995) reviews the overwhelming evidence for human beings' "need to belong", and Singer (2018) emphasizes the importance of social embeddedness for human health. Biordi et al. (2015) also noted that most people seek human relationships or companionship. On the same note, Sawir et al. (2008) also postulated that no person is an island, but needs other people to socialize. Loss of contact with social networks leads to feelings of loneliness (Lubkin & Larsen, 2012).

From the foregoing, we can conclude that international students already experienced a disruption of their support networks, by pursuing their studies in a foreign land away from family and friends. This can result in negative effects such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness. A study conducted in Malaysia on international students' needs revealed that international students required more

frequent social support and friendship, especially from national host students. Furthermore, they require a conducive environment (Chuah & Singh, 2016), even more so because psychological well-being and positive relations are required for multi-cultural progress and for understanding and tolerance of diversity. The friendship between host nationals and international students is the primary channel to social satisfaction.

Bhochhibhoya, Dong and Branscum (2017) suggested that even though international students have different ethnicities, religions, political backgrounds and nationalities, they share specific characteristics. These include a new academic setting characterized by many unfamiliar aspects, new communities, and new professors. Stressors include difficulty in establishing social networks attributed to the language barrier, financial constraints, and confusion in socio-cultural adaptation. Gomes et al. (2014) argued that the contact of international students with individuals from the host country contributes to socio-cultural adjustment.

Stonestreet and Rivera (2020) summarized findings indicating that the impact of loneliness on people is equivalent to the health risks associated with smoking 15 cigarettes per day. The health risks are more than a lack of exercise, excessive drinking, and dangers of obesity. According to a report from the National Academy of Science, social isolation contributed to a 50% increased risk of dementia and 29% more chance of heart disease (Stonestreet & Rivera, 2020). Sawir et al. (2008) argued that the strategy of social distancing might be best in the fight against COVID-19, yet at the same time it also exacerbates loneliness.

Galea, Merchant and Lurie (2020) revealed that the lockdowns imposed in efforts to contain COVID-19 represented a unique opportunity to study behavioral responses of international students to the imposed restrictions on movement and social interaction. Further, Venkatesh and Edirappuli (2020) suggested that anxiety and depression have been a result of isolation in past pandemics. These effects are common when people are confined and separated from their loved ones. Low mood, frustration, and depression are characteristic responses when people are deprived of their liberty. Anxiety might also result from a lack of clarity on social distancing guidelines. Most scholars also cited immoral behavior as the immediate impact of social distancing.

A survey conducted end of March 2020 in the US revealed that 75% of international students experienced depression and anxiety due to social distancing (IESALC & UNESCO, 2020). The level of panic was worse in the epicenter of the disease, Wuhan. Most participants were concerned about the safety of their families. International students with a shorter stay in China showed

fewer concerns when compared to students with a more extended stay (IESALC & UNESCO, 2020).

Some of the isolated international students resorted to the heavy use of social media due to social distancing. The majority of students possess a tablet, smartphone or computer, and extensive social media use has emerged as a social norm. Barnhart (2019) revealed that Google provided a positive search for every individual per person per day. Keles, Grealish & McCrae (2019) added that social media enabled people to express their feelings and thoughts and receive social support. However, Smith (2019) believed that even though tablets, laptops and smartphones are useful, teenagers are prone to abuse them. It was further noted that social media contributed to laziness and depression among students. For example, instead of visiting their friends, students simply send messages. Social media sometimes provided misleading information that created psychological trauma. Hence, fear of dying of COVID-19 was ignited among international students.

International students experience cultural stress. Spiritual and cultural life are affected when international students are separated from their cultural environment in which they grew up. Sawir et al. (2008) mentioned that international students experience what they called cultural loneliness. This was a result of absence of a desirable linguistic or cultural environment. Religion is part of this cultural environment. For example, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist students, among others, failed to attend their customary weekly gatherings. Z. Wang et al. (2016) realized that religious involvement reduces psychological distress. Spiritual wellbeing is a source of strength. The spiritual nexus includes individual goals in life, improved physical health, prayer, less risky behavior, and higher school achievement (Huitt & Robbins, 2018).

The Global News reported that social distancing could last for about two years if a vaccine is not discovered early (Sullivan, 2020). Kissler et al. (2020) added that a single period of social distancing might not be enough. This could create a fertile ground for risky behavior among students due to stress.

Social distancing might also have longer-term benefits. Most obviously, the imposed precautions against COVID-19 transmission might contribute to better preparedness for future infections. This includes improved personal hygiene at school and work. Moving conferences online saves time and money and may establish a habit that is maintained well beyond the end of social distancing measures despite the reduced opportunities for social interaction and informal exchanges. Nguyen et al. (2020) noted that decreased aircraft and motor vehicle use reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions. McKinney (2020) showed that of all member countries of the United Nations Environmental Program, China

has the worst air quality. Consequently, the COVID-19 regulations led to a reduction of nitrogen dioxide emissions into the Chinese atmosphere.

Methodology

An exploratory study with a sample of 20 international students was conducted at Central China Normal University (CCNU) to scientifically assess the impact of social distancing on international students. This study was conducted in mid-March 2020. CCNU is located in Hongshan District in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province. CCNU is considered a first-class university highly recognized for producing top students. The campus covers a vast area of more than 330 acres. Geographically, it is nestled on Guizi Hill bordering with South Lake. The total number of students enrolled is 28,942. There are almost 3000 international Students at CCNU. The university was established in 1903. It is also referred to as Huazhong Normal University (Wikipedia, 2020).

The study was conducted during the complete lockdown period in China and students were required to spend the whole day in their room at the residential building at CCNU. The majority of Ph.D. international students have a single room, bathroom and a communal kitchen. Masters students and bachelor students share rooms on campus. Lessons were conducted online, and students were only allowed to leave their rooms during meal times to collect their meals from the first floor and return to their rooms. Students were not allowed to visit their peers or to leave the hostel.

An exploratory design was adopted. According to Bhat (2019), exploratory design refers to the study of a problem that is not clear, and for situations that are novel and for which no prior experience exists. It is applicable for answering what, why, and how questions. An exploratory design is carried out to better understand the problem and guide future research. However, conclusive results are not expected and are not usually provided.

The exploratory design is known for increasing understanding of the subject being studied because of its flexibility in the use of data sources. The decision to choose this design was based on the fact that we were dealing with a situation that has never been encountered before on this scale. The plan also enabled the researchers to save time. Finally, better conclusions could be reached because the exploratory design is less constrained by the researcher's hypotheses.

However, exploratory research has weaknesses. The information obtained might be biased because exploratory studies create qualitative information in need of interpretation. Biased results and flawed interpretations might result. Specifically, exploratory studies use small samples that might be unrepresentative of the target population. Therefore, the exploratory research

results are not always suitable for generalization to a broader community (UniversalTeacher, 2020).

A semi-structured interview guide was used to solicit conversation with a convenience sample of eleven male and nine female full-time international students at CCNU. Out of these, 9 were Ph.D. students, four master's students, and seven bachelor's students. The students came from the following countries: Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Malawi, Benin, Tanzania, and Mali. Thematic Content Analysis was employed to analyze data. The interview guide solicited information on the following: country of origin, duration of observing social distancing, whether social distancing was the appropriate response to COVID-19, impact of social distancing, the kind of support international students were receiving from the university and their countries of origin, and possible solutions to minimize the negative impact of social distancing.

The respondents in the study were given the opportunity to be anonymous. According to Christians (2000) the researcher has the obligation to keep the respondents' identity and their responses private. The researcher maintained that anonymity by not recording the names of the respondents. Instead codes were used to protect their privacy. The codes contained a letter and a number, the letter identifying academic levels: P = PhD student, M = Masters student and B = Bachelors student.

Results

On the question, "How long have you been observing social distancing?", all participants highlighted that social distancing started on 2 February 2020 at CCNU. The interviews were conducted 15-20 March 2020.

Level of Trust in social distancing

On the question of level of trust in social distancing as a strategy to combat the negative effects of COVID-19, the majority of the foreign students said that they trusted social distancing. It was known at the time that the disease was spread through contact, so the students recognized that it was worthwhile to observe social distancing. For example, respondents P2 and B4 lamented that this is a highly infectious virus, and it was good to reduce contamination. Respondents P4 and P5 said that it was suitable for our safety, and respondent P6 commented that it was the best solution to avoid the transmission of the virus. Many undergraduate students revealed that they trusted social distancing because they realized that it effectively controlled the disease. Respondent B1 admitted that he was afraid of the virus, and social distancing prevented him from being infected. However, Respondent P1 argued that "I doesn't trust social

distancing because we mix during meal times.” Respondents P7 and P9 added that trusting their peers was a challenge because of the nature of the virus. To summarize, these students acknowledged the necessity of social distancing, although some doubted its effectiveness because they still encountered people during meal times.

Impact of social distancing

On the question, “What is the impact of social distancing on you as a foreign student?”, many respondents indicated that restrictions on free movement were a source of stress and worry for them. Respondents P1 and P2 believed that they were safe at CCNU, but they were worried about their relatives in Kenya. This was because COVID-19 cases were being reported by media outside China and specifically in Africa. Kenya had started recording COVID-19 cases. Respondent P3 said he was not used to spending so much time in his room. Respondents P4 and P8 maintained that a chance to go out and take some mental relief was denied. Respondent B2 felt bored and stressed.

Respondent P5 lamented that he was sick and tired. Further, he mentioned that he would be dead by then if he did not have access to the internet. Respondents P6 and P7 claimed that social distancing did not have any impact on them. Many master’s students complained about psychological stress. Respondent M2 specified that “I am a little nervous.” Respondent M3 added that “I feel lonely and psychologically derailed.” Respondent M4 perceived that her school grades dropped due to stress and fear. However, Respondent P5 argued that “social distancing enabled me to spend more time on myself. This is a rare chance in today’s busy life.” Respondent P9 said that her writing skills improved during the lockdown period.

Other respondents mentioned stress from restrictions in social contact. Most international students indicated that they could not visit their peers. Respondent P4 complained that he could not physically interact with his friends who live in the other hall of residence. Respondents P5 and M4 mentioned that it was challenging for them not to be in physical contact with their lecturers. Respondent P7 found the imposed social distancing stressful. Respondent P9 was worried about the possibility of the graduation period being extended. Respondent M1 said, “Seriously, I hate social distancing, I am sick and tired of it.” Respondent M2 added that he had a “lack of focus and difficulties in comprehending my studies as usual.” Respondent M3 emphasized mental and health challenges. Further, he cannot access basic things at his convenience. Respondents B2 and B4 said that they felt bored.

Impact of social distancing on the family

On the question, "How does social distancing affect your family?", the following answers were provided. Respondents P1 and P7 affirmed that their families were worried about their current welfare in China. Respondents P2 and P3 said that the gap between them and their families had widened. Respondent P6 mentioned that he could not send remittances back home because his small business was profoundly affected by the pandemic. Most of the undergraduate students revealed that the internet enabled them to communicate with their parents. Respondents P8 and M3 established that social distancing does not have any impact on their family. Respondent P9 affirmed that his family was supporting him emotionally.

Level of preference for online learning

On the question, "Do you like online learning?", participants revealed mixed feelings. Some students said that they preferred online learning, while others did not. Respondent B2 maintained that "I think there are advantages and disadvantages of online learning, but I am used to online learning." Nonetheless, respondent P5 posited that "online courses are not effective due to technical issues." Respondent B4 reported that he does not like to study online. Respondent P8 revealed that "online cases are difficult, and the internet connection always makes my eyes tired." Respondent P9 noted that some students were having internet challenges, and the department deferred the semester courses. Respondent M4 suggested that the quality of education decreased due to online learning.

Support from the university and Chinese government

On the question, "What kind of support did you receive from CCNU during the pandemic?", respondents P2 and P5 revealed that the university provided them with a scholarship allowance at the end of every month. Further, CCNU gave all international students 100 RMB (\$14) for electricity and data bundles in March 2020. The university also provided free meals: breakfast, lunch, and supper. Free books and pens were presented to international students. Many respondents were thankful because the free meals saved them money. However, some students complained when the university canceled the provision of free meals after relaxing the lockdown on 24 April 2020, when the students could go out and buy food at the university restaurant and shop.

Assistance from home country

Almost all international students received some assistance from their respective governments. Respondents P1 and P2 confided that they were given

some foodstuffs from the Kenyan embassy in China. According to respondent P5, Sri Lanka sent some relief packages and foods to their students locked in Wuhan. Respondent P6 reported that he received 25 yuan (\$3) from the government of Tanzania for sanitizers, some masks, and gloves. Respondents P7 and P8 revealed that they received money and food items from the government of Benin. Respondent P9 received 690 RMB (\$100) from the government of Zimbabwe. Respondent M2 posited that he received some food items and material support. Respondent M3 said she received some financial aid from her government. However, Respondent M4 emphasized that he did not receive any assistance from his government.

Opinion on social distancing

On the question, "What is your opinion on social distancing concerning foreign students in Wuhan?", respondent P5 suggested that social distancing has good and bad effects on people. Further, it is not something to continue unless it is a critical situation such as this. Respondent M2 opined that social distancing is not desirable, as humans are created to interact socially. Respondents B4 and P6 thought that "it is a good measure to flatten the curve of a new infection." Respondent M3 argued that "it is useful, but I cannot work independently." Respondent P8 underscored that the canceling of all activities that involve more than ten people is crucial in controlling the disease. Besides, respondent P8 was convinced that "everyone must adhere to strict social distancing rules," and respondent P9 encouraged other students to embrace social distancing.

Strategies

On the question "What can be done to minimize the negative impacts of social distancing?", respondent P3 noted that the social distancing period should be made relatively short. Respondent P5 suggested that international students should engage in indoor activities. Respondent P6 felt that "following precautions is crucial to combat the disease." Respondent P7 underscored that "dialogue exchange between people in the same situation is important." Respondent P9 alluded that students must view social distancing from the right side. Respondent M2 realized that "all humans should play their role to fight the spread of the COVID-19. I believe it will end, and we resume normalcy." Respondent M3 revealed that "attending to social needs of vulnerable people such as children and elderly is important." Respondent M4's prescription was "stay healthy, eat well, exercise, and improve your resistance." Respondents B2 and B4 suggested that international students should have a conversation with their friends online to reduce the impact of social distancing.

Discussion

This study revealed that the overwhelming majority of the research participants were convinced that social distancing is a good strategy of curbing the COVID-19 epidemic. This concurs with expert opinion. Prem et al. (2020) argued that physical distancing is an effective way of controlling an outbreak. They noted that premature lifting of interventions in Wuhan might contribute to a secondary peak of the epidemic, and that restrictions must continue. In a study in Singapore, Herman (2020) concluded that the COVID-19 infection rate decreased after increased social distancing measures such as school closures and workplace distancing.

The respondents in this study affirmed the conclusion of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control Report that the implementation of social distancing was justified, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was rapidly spreading (ECDC, 2020). Further, Nania (2020) noted that scientists were still learning about COVID-19. Social distancing worked for our respondents. None of them got infected by the virus. Some students reported positive effects of the lockdown, including freedom from academic routines. Some students mentioned that they positively utilized the internet to the fullest, either for learning or otherwise. Some respondents revealed that they focused more on themselves and enhanced their studies.

However, boredom was more commonly reported than positive effects. The question, "Were boredom and stress more common, less frequent, or about equally common compared to positive results?" was asked. It emerged that educational, economic, and social factors added to boredom and stress as a result of social distancing. In fact, social distancing brought confusion and stress to international students. Most students hated having to spend too much time in their rooms alone. All participants noted that the nature of the disease stressed them. Almost all of them were afraid of getting infected. Academics was another source of distress. Most of the international students mentioned that they hated online study. They lamented that they were not used to it. One respondent suggested that it made his eyes tired. Only a few respondents embraced online lessons, and the rest were stressed. These differences seem to reflect differences in personality types or learning styles.

Many respondents revealed that they received the Chinese Government scholarship as usual. Further, they received financial and moral support from their respective governments. Wang et al. (2020) alluded that the quick response of universities on the provision of social services was crucial in the face of this new type of coronavirus. One participant said that he saved some money because of the free meals provided by CCNU. However, some respondents complained that

they were not on scholarship. Some of them used to survive by buying and selling goods in China. However, social distancing had disrupted their small businesses. One informant mentioned that the number of remittances she used to send to her home country had decreased.

Most respondents mentioned psychological effects. Almost all informants revealed that their social lives were affected by social distancing. Some of these international students lost communication with their friends and families. Wang *et al.* (2020) maintained that social distancing might have a destructive impact on students. When people are isolated and stressed, immoral behavior can result. Fakoya, McCorry and Donnelly (2020) explained that social distancing had been linked with fewer infections, but also with impaired cognition, dementia, and mental health conditions. One of our respondents put it curtly that as soon as the epidemic is over, he will travel back to his country.

Level of trust, networking, and communication among international students have decreased in the wake of social distancing. Further, social cohesion between respondents and their families was found to be low. Reina, Reina and Hudnut (2017) argued that social distancing resulted in the separation of family and friends and reduced trust. This was confirmed in our study, which also uncovered a high level of mistrust, especially among friends. Some respondents revealed that they could not trust their friends even when they meet during meal times. Wang *et al.* (2020) added that people start to play it safe and talk about instead of with one another.

Reina, Reina and Hudnut (2017) described trust as an essential asset. Trust deepens teamwork, fosters collaboration, breaks down silos, and manages processes of positive change. Trust enables people to step forward, communicate honestly and openly, and work together efficiently. Some respondents felt that they still trust their friends since they can communicate with them online. Serra and Serrat (2017) claimed that trust accelerates personal growth. It increases effortless communication and adaptability.

Most respondents complained that their regular cultural and religious meetings were disturbed by social distancing. Abdulla (2018) suggested that religion is the profound meaning that people carry, their purpose on earth, and their origins. It is manifested naturally by the creation of culture and the use of symbolism, place of worship, and sermons. Religious literature is prominent among African local knowledge systems. Sava, Badulescu and Oradia (2018) noted that culture includes symbolic material things and leisure. Casey, Right and Good (2008) argued that religion is usually viewed with suspicion as a socially divisive force. Still, the practice of religion by a large number of people positively affects the whole society. Kate, Koster and Waal (2017) revealed that Catholics

experience greater life satisfaction than non-religious individuals. One respondent felt that because of social distancing it is impossible to perform spiritual rituals with his peers. Thus, cultural and religious activities were negatively affected by social distancing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study revealed that social distancing was accepted by international students in Wuhan as an efficient strategy of curbing the spread of COVID-19. At the same time, the study proved that social distancing also had many negative effects on international students. Social distancing did indeed reduce the spread of the virus in Wuhan, thereby flattening the curve of new infections. However, it affected the mental health of international students, coupled with the fear of the illness and disruption of the academic calendar that has changed the students' academic progress. The observations also suggest that virtual learning introduced or expanded by the university has promoted a new way of individualism in problem-solving, which is inimical to cooperation and social cohesion. This latter possibility raises questions about instructional methods more generally, beyond the exceptional situation of the COVID-19 lockdown.

This study demonstrated the importance of effective and truthful communication by government authorities about the need for social distancing, as the students accepted its necessity in the given situation. Further, regular exercise, proper diet, online classes, online communication, and online religious meetings should be observed. The Chinese government is also encouraged to make the period of social distancing relatively short. This limits the burden of loneliness on international students. CCNU should also increase online awareness campaigns on the benefits of social distancing. The media should provide truthful and transparent information to avoid igniting irrational fear in students. International students are encouraged to make use of social distancing for their personal development. More so, they should change their negative attitude towards social distancing. Social distancing can be for good rather than harm — unless it becomes a life-long habit.

Acknowledgement

Leonard Chitongo wishes to acknowledge the NRF–SARChI in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods for its support to his contribution to this study.

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