

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Psychological well-being on international students in Canada amidst COVID-19: The role of mattering and belongingness

By Susan Chang Su, PhD, & Gordon L. Flett, PhD



Why this research is important

This quantitative research was in response to growing concerns that an epidemic of mental health problems was exacerbated by the stress, disruption, and safety concerns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This research focused on studying the unique protective roles of mattering and belongingness in enhancing international students' mental health and psychological well-being at Canadian universities and colleges. To our knowledge, this research was the first to consider the relevance of feelings of not mattering among international students in general, trying to cope with and adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential for international students to establish feelings of mattering and belongingness to go through these stressful transitions. They will increase their learning abilities and academic performance and help them be successful.

What you need to know

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a prolonged stress sequence involving unprecedented global health and mental health challenges. These included prolonged stress and increased loneliness, which negatively impacted well-being and life satisfaction. This current project explores the challenges experienced by international university students in Canada during COVID-19, including safety concerns, travel restrictions, academic stress, separation from their families, financial pressures, and social disconnection. These factors may have led to mental health issues and harmed psychological well-being. Mattering and belongingness uniquely protect mental health and psychological well-being, serving as vital psychological resources amid COVID-19's challenges. It is essential to foster these feelings of mattering and belongingness and diminish feelings of marginality, helping students stay socially connected and engaged at their university or colleges and preventing withdrawal.

How the research was conducted

The recruitment flyer and the project link were shared on the Brandon University faculty research webpages, emails, WeChat, social networks, or other apps. An online survey was completed by 186 international university students (98 men, 84 women) attending university in Canada amidst

COVID-19. We assessed mattering, anti-mattering, and belonging in terms of their links with indices of mental health, loneliness, adaptation, social support, self-efficacy and life satisfaction, but also measures of acculturation stress, discrimination, and stigma. Several factors, including self-efficacy, social support, and adaptability, were also identified as mediators of the link between these psychosocial factors and mental health.

What the researchers found

Correlational analyses confirmed that both mattering and belonging were significantly correlated with each other and were positively correlated with well-being, social support, adaptation, and life satisfaction and negatively associated with loneliness. In addition, anti-mattering and low belongingness were associated with loneliness, acculturation stress, and experienced stigma. Social support, adaptation, and loneliness mediated effects of mattering and psychological well-being. Acculturation stress mediated the links that mattering and belongingness had with well-being. The results attest to the protective role of feelings of mattering and belonging among international students but also the destructiveness when anti-mattering experiences underscore acculturation stress, stigma, and discrimination.

How this research can be used

This research provides educators, policymakers, and international students with practical guides and workshops. It will also highlight the need to consider the impact of the international students' sociocultural context on their learning processes in a new country. It is very important for universities and community services to enhance mattering, belongingness, and reduce loneliness in order to promote the psychological well-being caused by the pandemic. Our research findings will be disseminated to various groups, stakeholders, universities and local communities in Manitoba and other provinces, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association and Canadian Psychological Association.

About the researchers

Dr. Susan Chang Su is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Brandon University.

Sus@brandonu.ca

Dr. Gordon Flett is a professor in the Department of Psychology and LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research. Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health. Gflett@yorku.ca

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Mattering, belonging, loneliness, psychological well-being

Publication based on this research

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