Students Crafting Their Way through a Pandemic: A Qualitative Study of International Students

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Abstract

This study captured the experience of 41 international students pursuing their studies in Berlin, Germany, during the pandemic. The students were interviewed in May 2021 and again in January 2022, and asked to recount their experience starting from the initial lockdown in March of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, up until the time of their interviews. A four-step thematic content analysis approach was used to analyze the data retrieved from transcribed interviews. The findings revealed that students crafted their way through the pandemic by engaging in several changes to adjust and adapt to the challenges and uncertainties associated with the pandemic. The result showed changes in two main categories (task and relational) which were further delineated into themes (physical and cognitive changes).

Keywords: international students, COVID-19 pandemic, job crafting

1. Introduction

Towards the end of December 2019, an unknown virus aggressively made its way from the epicenter in Wuhan, the capital city of the Hubei Province, the People's Republic of China to the rest of the world. In early January of 2020, the transmission of the virus had already affected a large number of people and was discovered in 34 countries (English, Yang, Marshall, & Nam, 2022). By February of 2020, the novel coronavirus had been identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the disease was henceforth known as COVID-19. As a result of the fast spread and lack of thorough comprehension of the health effects of COVID-19, WHO proclaimed a global pandemic in March of 2020. The pandemic led to lockdowns and a complete disruption of global order, business, health and wellness, and other multitudes of challenges.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the way we operate in our daily lives (Frolova, Rogach, Tyurikov, & Razov, 2021). However, we were all affected differently and to varying degrees for a multitude of reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented and dire changes for trans-migrants, and more specifically international students (Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2020). Following the lockdown in 2020, international students were faced with unique challenges and restrictions that interrupted the continuing of their often-presumed ability to cross international borders at leisure (Hari et al., 2020). The change of circumstances due to the pandemic for the entire world forced international students to revisit and readjust their citizenship, academic, and career strategies, rendering this group a distinctly special population to study and understand the effects of the pandemic on education and career growth.

An ongoing research study conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic reported preliminary results indicating that international students were more satisfied with their academic experience and the support they received from their universities (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). However, the same study reported that international students were very concerned with the pandemic's threat to their health, safety, and other issues surrounding immigration (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). Following health guidelines and recommendations, many of us decided to stay at home with our families. This decision was not very easy for the international student population. With borders closing rapidly and the uncertainty of how their immigration status may be affected, many international students struggled with how to proceed during the lockdown.

Before the pandemic, international students already faced a myriad of challenges associated with studying abroad. These challenges increased during the pandemic, as international students had to navigate travel bans, visa constraints, xenophobia, racism (Zhang-Wu, 2020; Alsulami, 2021), worry about their health, future, the well-being of family members, loneliness (Bilecen, 2020; Jeffrey, 2020), starvation, homelessness (Gallagher, Doherty, & Obonyo, 2020). To understand and learn from the resilience of the international students during this period, we conducted a qualitative study to capture their narratives about the influence of the pandemic on their individual experiences. The following research questions were used as a guide for the study:

1.1 Research Questions

1. How has the pandemic impacted the experience of international students?

2. How did international students' perceptions of their education and career change following the lockdown?

2. **Method**

2.1 Study Design

A qualitative interpretive lens was used to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perceptions of participants (Green & Thorogood, 2004). The reason why this approach was selected is that the interpretive approach centers around the participants' own interpretation of their experiences instead of an inaccurate attempt of measuring an objective reality. IRB approval was obtained before the interviews were conducted.

2.2 Participants

Students were recruited for participation in this project via international business student organizations located in Berlin, Germany. Invites for participation were also posted on the social media pages of international student groups in Berlin. Emails were sent out to the international students who showed interest asking them to participate in virtual interviews to discuss their experience during the pandemic. A total of 67 students were invited to participate. 45 students responded to the email and agreed to participate in the interviews. The final sample consisted of 41 undergraduate students, 19 men (46 percent) and 22 women (54 percent) from 8 different countries of origin including Argentina, Peru, Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, India, United States of America, and France. The age range of the students in the final sample was from 21-33. The students were majoring in the field of business.

After the students responded to the email indicating their interest in participating in the interviews, they were informed on how the interviews would be scheduled and that this process would include at least two interviews (an initial and a follow up that may last up to two hours each). Another email was sent prompting them to sign an informed consent and agreement for the interviews to be recorded for transcription purposes. All students signed the consent form except for three who were not included in the final sample. The first set of interviews were held in May 2021. 100% of the respondents from final sample of the initial interviews in May, participated in a second (follow up interview) in January 2022.

2.3 Procedure

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author and a research assistant to enable participants to process their experience during the pandemic and purposefully verbalize their thoughts and feelings as the students recounted their stories. Interviews were conducted in English via zoom and had an average duration of 67 minutes. Participants chose pseudonyms to protect identities. After the interviews, students were

provided with a list of resources for support during the pandemic. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The participants' legal names, school affiliations, and any other identifying information were excluded from the transcripts.

After the first interview, participants were sent their respective interviews in the form of transcribed text for them to check whether the data was transcribed accurately and captured their true intentions. A second meeting (follow up interview) was then scheduled to ensure that the appropriate meaning was captured and if situations had changed or the students had more to add. The second interview was transcribed and emailed to the participants along with the transcript from the first meeting. All participants responded with no changes to the transcribed data. The result of the transcribed data was 938 pages which were used for further analysis in the study.

2.4 Analysis

A thematic content analysis approach was used by the first and second authors to analyze the data. Thematic content analysis is a qualitative method for analyzing data that involves searching the data to identity, analyze, and reveal recurrent patterns (themes) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The benefit of using this approach and the reason it was chosen is that it points out recurring themes through unremitting exploration and comparison. The main aim of the content analysis is the development of meaning derived from the intentions, thoughts, words, and most importantly the context of the data.

The first step of the analysis consisted of the authors and two research assistants taking the time to familiarize themselves with the data by reading the transcripts independently to get a general sense of the experiences described by the participants. Next, individually the authors and research assistants jotted an initial list of ideas they derived from the data regarding what it revealed to them. Thirdly, the authors and research assistants regrouped to discuss their findings, the major codes primarily identified, and to reach an agreement on the criteria that would be used to assign sentence fragments to their related code. Examples of codes considered at this stage include: Loneliness "Sometimes, I feel so alone and separated from the rest of the world". Education value "Completing my degree is more important to me now, more than ever". Disagreements on coding were debated over until consensus was achieved.

In the fourth step, each author and research assistant independently performed open coding to characterize and expound on the major themes. In the fifth and final stage, quotes from the data were coded into the identified themes. The authors and research assistants convened a total of seven times to establish a consensus on the final list of themes. The themes that reoccurred most frequently were selected and used for results (Green & Thorogood, 2004).

3. Results

The analysis revealed two main categories: task changes and relational changes. The themes in each category included physical changes and cognitive changes experienced during the pandemic. The students experienced changes that were directly related to their physical

environment and to their way of thinking. Table 1 outlines the categories, themes, definitions, and exemplars for each. The following descriptions of categories and themes are analyzed from the perspective of the student.

Table 1. The Descriptions of Categories and Themes are analyzed from the Perspective of the Student.

Categories	Themes	Exemplars
Task	Physical Task Changes	This is not fair. I just got here and now I have to work from a small studio instead of my beautiful university campus.
	Cognitive Task Changes	I have had a lot of time to think about what I really want, who I am, and who I want to be. If it had not been for the pandemic, I do not think I would ever spend such an extended period of time in self-thought.
Relational	Physical Relational Changes	International students like me have no family in their host country for studies...that means I was by myself during the pandemic with no one to talk to.
	Cognitive Relational Changes	I remember thinking to myself, if our relationship could survive this, not seeing each other for so long, that means we can survive anything

3.1 Task Changes

In the interviews, participants relayed task changes in their routine or school experience during the pandemic. These participants underwent changes in their physical tasks and their cognitive tasks. Participants described initiating changes related to the scope, number, or type of activities they performed for the school. Not only did the participants alter the type or number of school tasks they had, but they also revised their way of thinking regarding the class content and their education. The task changes category is further delineated into two themes (physical and cognitive) as described in the following sections.

3.1.1 Physical Task Changes

The most mentioned physical change that participants discussed was moving from a classroom and university campus to online classes. While many appreciated the convenience, the change was rather abrupt and posed a new set of challenges students were not prepared for.

> *"We woke up one morning and campus was closed, everything had been moved online, this was great because I did not want to get sick" (Student 33).*

> *"I had never heard of a lot of the virtual tools that I was now required to use in my classes. Not only did we use the regular online school teaching system, I also had to*

learn to use zoom" (Student 15).

"We had to find new ways to communicate with the professor and other students that did not involve meeting in a physical space…this was difficult because the professor was not always online when we were" (Student 31).

"Because I am not as fluent in the language, I prefer to be in class… it was hard to keep up in an online format" (Student 18).

In addition to being forced to change the way they learned, some participants felt robbed of the full experience of studying in a different country because of confinement and strict regulation. School and other professional events participants would unfalteringly attend were either canceled, postponed indefinitely, or scheduled online. Opportunities for internships were scarce and mostly limited to the few that could be performed from home.

"This is not fair. I just got here and now I have to work from a small studio instead of my beautiful university campus" (Student 37).

"After months of planning, organizing, settling vendors and speakers, we had to cancel everything, what a waste" (Student 12).

"I need an internship to gain more experience, I looked online but nothing is available" (Student 18).

"I did not plan on taking certain classes, but I had to…for example some classes qualified for experiential learning and since the internship I was supposed to take in the summer got canceled, I ended up taking that course" (Student 5).

3.1.2 Cognitive Task Changes

Participants reflected on the meaning behind the changes to their education and experience brought about as a result of the pandemic.

"Moving (classes) online was a blessing in disguise...I worry less and no longer feel overwhelmed with school or little things like taking the tram. It is actually quite freeing mentally, like a huge burden has been removed from me" (Student 41).

"Because I am stuck to being by myself most of the time, I find myself challenging myself more, achieving more, and being more productive in school" (Student 12).

"I have had a lot of time to think about what I really want, who I am, and who I want to be. If it had not been for the pandemic, I do not think I would ever spend such an extended period of time in self-thought" (Student 38).

"This pandemic has forced me to challenge myself in so many new ways. I am signing up for new training online, I learned how to cook and I am very proud of how self-sufficient I have become" (Student 20).

Although many participants were anxious, worried, and uncertain about the future of their status, the participants began to value their education even more and became more focused on

achieving their goals.

"I think businesses are not hiring because they are unsure of the economic climate after this. It makes me wonder if I will get a job after I finish my degree" (Student 11).

"I am not sure what is going to happen tomorrow, in fact, no one knows. All I know is I have to live in the now, and right now I have to focus on school and making the best grades" (Student 29).

"I have become more aggressive with my studies, seeing as it is the only thing of which I can control the outcome right now. What you put in is what you will get out and I am taking advantage of this lockdown period to put in the most so that I can get out the most" (Student 41).

"It is worrisome not knowing what will happen, I think about it a lot and I am just grateful that we can at least continue our studies online" (Student 7).

3.2 Relational Changes

Participants described changes in their relationship in two ways: physical and cognitive. The physical changes in the relationship were in regards to space, and complying with the strict rules and regulations that limited physical human interaction. The cognitive aspect was related to changes in how participants viewed and thought about approaching relationships. The physical and cognitive themes of the category of relational change are expounded upon in the following sections.

3.2.1 Physical Relational Changes

Multiple participants mentioned their social lives taking a big hit as a result of the pandemic. Participants lost friendships because of their inability to meet in person. Participants had to come up with ingenious ways to stay connected to their classmates and the rest of the world. Most of the solutions to remain connected included virtual platforms such as zoom, face time, online forums, chat groups, etc.

"I used to have a lot of friends I made in class because after class we would chit chat on our way out. With classes being held online, there was no room to get to know others because everyone logged off as soon as class was over" (Student 40).

"It was very difficult to be alone, not meet friends at the bar, restaurants or even just go to the gym for a quick workout" (Student 5).

"International students like me have no family in their host country for studies...that means I was by myself during the pandemic with no one to talk to" (Student 36)

"I went online to make friends that could help me with the school. This was challenging because I did not want to give off stalker vibes on the internet. I tried to look for people who were in a similar situation like me, for example, international student groups on Facebook and became friends with them" (Student 29)

"I made a lot of new friends online and have learned a lot from them. We still keep in

touch till this day" (Student 24).

Some participants had to return to their home country due to school/work closings and the inability to afford rent. Others who were outside the country where they were pursuing their studies when the lockdown occurred could not get back in because of regulations at the borders and had to consider other options.

"Going back home because of the pandemic had pros and cons. It was nice to see my family again and bond with them at home but it was difficult to find a quiet place in the house to do school work" (Student 38).

"I started networking and looking for a job in my area because the borders were closed and I did not know when I would be able if ever return to school" (Student 22).

"I was happy to be in my country again, see my people, and spend time with my family. I missed them a lot while I was abroad" (Student 19).

3.2.2 Cognitive Relational Changes

Participants gained a deeper appreciation for their relationships with others. Participants developed feelings of security in the relationships they were able to maintain throughout the pandemic. They also became more open to relationships with others they may not have considered before the pandemic.

"I missed all my friends from school. I realize I had been taking them for granted and could not wait until we were reunited" (Student 8).

"I remember thinking to myself, if our relationship could survive this, not seeing each other for so long, that means we can survive anything" (Student 4).

"I was more open in my approach towards relationships. It was no longer I only talk to people I know, it was I will talk to whoever is online and available at the moment" (Student 30).

"Seeing the news and watching the death toll rise does something to you. It made me grateful for the friends and family I have" (Student 17).

The fact that the whole world seemed to be affected by the pandemic brought comfort through solidarity with others. Participants mentioned becoming more recluse yet growing in independence. Furthermore, participants had to search for resources on their own as many offices that would offer those services were temporarily closed or operating with limited staff.

"My faith in humanity was restored seeing people reach out and try to help others affected by the pandemic" (Student 26).

"I was alone in my room but I was not alone in my feelings of being alone if that makes sense. The whole world was alone and in a way it made us closer" (Student 11).

"I could not access many offices and had to get by without help. It made me more

independent and now I know I don't always have to wait for others. I can take initiative and figure things out on my own" (Student 34).

"I learned it is ok to be alone, it is ok to be by oneself. Every now and then I purposefully take some time away just to be alone with my thoughts" (Student 15).

4. Discussion

4.1 Implications for Research and Theory

The present study aimed to understand the experience of international students in the field of business during the pandemic. Data collection was completed in January of 2022, nearly two years after the initial lockdown. Analysis of the transcribed interviews resulted in two main categories: task changes and relational changes. Both categories were further delineated into the following themes: physical changes and cognitive changes (See table 1).

This categorization leads to the conclusion that international students engage in some form of crafting as they navigate their way through the pandemic. This conclusion is derived from the comparison of our findings to the job crafting literature that defines job crafting as changes made by individuals related to the task and/or relational boundaries of their job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) (A review of the job crafting literature is provided in the next section *4.2*). Furthermore, the changes could either be physical or cognitive; physical changes deal with changes concerning tasks or the relationships at work, while cognitive changes encompass how one views their job (Lazazzara, Tims, & de Gennaro, 2020). There were two main theoretical contributions from the findings of this study, discussed in the paragraphs to follow.

The first theoretical contribution of this study is that it broadens the context of crafting as originally described by Wrzeniewski and Dutton (2001) by not only limiting its effects to the job and discovering its applicability in academics and everyday life. Interestingly, the findings of the qualitative analysis revealed that during the pandemic, international students made changes that fit into the categories of task and relational changes. Furthermore, we also found that for each category (task and relational), students made physical and cognitive changes. Although school is different from work, it is often advised for students to treat their academics like a job. It is not surprising that students would employ similar techniques to achieve their goals in academics as one would in a job setting. The pandemic posed a huge threat to success in many aspects of life. This period was particularly challenging for international students (Alsulami, 2021). Crafting can be used as a coping mechanism (Singh & Singh, 2018) and has been associated with many positive outcomes for individuals (Lazazzara et al., 2020). Hence, international students chose to engage in crafting and make changes that would help them cope and continue to strive for success.

The second theoretical contribution is the empowerment of students to be proactive and make changes to their course of study. Although students were reactive to a situation (i.e. the pandemic), they had to take initiative on how to proceed and thrive during the pandemic.

Students learned to embrace the uncertainty and necessary change that came with the pandemic. Professors, university officials, and even government officials dealt with a lot of uncertainty as to what would be or what is to come as a result of the pandemic. The development of new variants of the COVID-19 virus kept everyone on alert for an abrupt change in rules and regulations. During this period, international students could not get much guidance from school officials because even they (the university administration and staff) were not sure of what to expect.

In addition, no two student experiences are the same, hence, the challenges faced by students and how they reacted to the pandemic were different. Crafting allowed students to have some control over how to handle their own personal   challenges/threats presented as a result of the pandemic. Students shaped their school experience in a way that better fits them while abiding by regulations set in place by the professor and university. Furthermore, students applied cognitive changes to reframe the purpose of their education resulting in an experience that was more satisfying and meaningful.

4.2 Job Crafting Literature Review

Job crafting represents proactive behavior that employees undertake to change the physical, social, and/or cognitive aspects of their job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014). It is a self-initiated, informal process used to align jobs with individuals' personal preferences, passions, and motives (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). Because employees initiate job crafting, it is regarded as a bottom-up, individualized, proactive approach to job redesign (Rudolph, Katz, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). Hence, job crafting is distinct from the "one-size-fits-all" and top-down approaches of job redesign initiated by the organization (Rudolph et al., 2017). Furthermore, researchers have considered job crafting a promising alternative to the traditional approach of job redesign, where all changes to work tasks came from management (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Prior research in job design discussed the concept of job crafting as a suggestion for how employees could take the initiative to redesign their jobs with or without managerial involvement (Kulik, Oldham, & Hackman, 1987). Kulik et al. mentioned the participative change process, wherein employees took charge of matching their jobs with their own needs and skills. Years later, the term job crafting was coined by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) to describe similar change processes. Wrzesniewski and Dutton defined job crafting as "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (2001, p. 179).

Three forms of job crafting were identified by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001): changing the job's (1) task, (2) relational, and (3) cognitive boundaries. Task crafting deals with the initiation of a change concerning the scope, number, or type of activities one does on the job. Not only do employees alter the number of tasks they wish to do, but also they may decide to change the content (Tims et al., 2012). Relational crafting involves deciding with whom one wishes to interact, as well as the intensity of one's interaction with others. Relational crafting entails altering the quantity and quality of employee relationships with others at work (Rudolph et al., 2017). Cognitive crafting involves the fundamental changes in how one

views and decides to approach and shape, their jobs. This form of job crafting involves individuals' work identity (i.e., how employees define themselves at work), the type of meaning ascribed to their work, and the claims of what is and is not considered to be work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Although Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) are credited with the conceptualization of the job crafting construct, most of the research in this area resulted after the Tims and Bakker (2010) publication. Tims and Bakker used the job demands-resources (JD-R) model as the theoretical framework for understanding elements of job crafting that were linked to the work environment and various outcomes. In later research, Tims et al. (2012) suggested that job crafting was made up of the following four dimensions: (1) Increasing challenging job demands, which involve behaviors such as volunteer efforts and asking for increased responsibilities; (2) Decreasing hindering job demands, which entails performing or avoiding work behaviors with the aim of minimizing physical, cognitive, and emotional demands; (3) Increasing structural job resources, which includes engaging in behaviors that result in the increase of skill variety, autonomy, and other motivational job characteristics; and (4) Increasing social job resources, which is involvement with colleagues and supervisors who can provide support, as well as useful feedback and advice.

Most recently, Bruning and Campion (2018) developed a role-resource approach and avoidance perspective of job crafting. Approach role crafting consists of work-role and social expansion. Avoidance role crafting includes work-role reduction. Other dimensions of job crafting identified by Bruning and Campion (2018) are work organization, adoption, meta-cognition, and withdrawal.

4.3 Practical Contributions

The findings revealed that the physical changes undertaken by students were essential but not necessarily pleasant changes. For example, *"I went online to make friends that could help me with school. This was challenging because I did not want to give off stalker vibes on the internet. I tried to look for people who were in a similar situation like me, for example, international student groups on Facebook and became friends with them"* (Student 29). However, the cognitive changes made by the students seemed to leave them in a more positive state of mind. For example, *"Because I am stuck to being by myself most of the time, I find myself challenging myself more, achieving more and being more productive in school"* (Student 12). These positive attributes seen in the cognitive changes restore hope for a bright future and outlook for the experience of international students.

Some universities offer an academic advisor or an office of international student services that help guide international students through the physical college-related tasks (enrollment, class registration, tutors, internships, etc.). However, in accord with the findings of this study, universities should also consider creating safe spaces with mentors to guide international students process their thoughts and making cognitive changes that would improve their student experience. Because there is a lot of diversity in the international student experience due to the different backgrounds, cultures, etc., each student needs to be allowed the individual space to think through what would work best for them.

4.4 Future Research and Limitations

Future researchers should consider a longitudinal study with additional lengthy follow ups (a few years apart) that could reveal how crafting, changing task, and relational aspects of one's life may change over time, be it physical or cognitive changes. There could be changes in how participants engage in job crafting as they matriculate from school and start their first job post-graduation. Another area worth exploring is a comparison between the experience of international students and domestic students when navigating a situation that affected the entire student body albeit certainly to varying degrees.

5. Conclusion

International students are a valued population in our universities. The diversity and richness of the academic experience for all (domestic and international students) are increased by the presence of international students at the university. The COVID-19 pandemic posed a huge threat to the overall wellbeing and success of international students. This qualitative study encapsulated the experience of international students as they navigated the pandemic by making physical and cognitive changes to the task and relational boundaries of their life.

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