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## Navigating the Pandemic: International Students in Transnational Spaces

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, international students used the resources embedded within the transnational spaces they occupied to secure the affective support they needed. Based on 33 interviews and 23 follow-up interviews with international master's degree students in Finland, this paper shows how digital connectivity became fundamental to the ways in which international students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic, how they made sense of their transnationality and how it acquired greater significance for them as they sought emotional support from their friends and family at home through the use of various communication technologies and social media. Their familial bonds were thus strengthened and led them to reimagine how they were positioned in the world. The major contribution of this analysis shows that it challenges the common understanding of how transnationalism is constituted by various empirical modalities. Instead, the paper shows how transnationalism involves dynamic processes of the ways in which human agents make sense of the shifting material conditions pertaining to cross-border connectivities.

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## Introduction

When the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic in mid-March 2020, universities around the world fell into a state of deep confusion. And when advice was given by national health authorities to stop holding classes on campus, their confusion intensified. Lacking any specific guidance, universities had to consider the ways in which teaching might continue online, train academic staff in the use of different technologies, and reassure their students. It was not, however, only the university administrators and faculty that found themselves in a state of bewilderment; international students felt a great sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Well-laid plans they might have had were disrupted, and they had to consider new ways of engaging with their studies. Numerous articles have been published on how international students' lives were affected by the

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pandemic (Pappa et al. 2020; Jokila and Filippou 2021; Filippou and Jokila 2024), showing that while governments sought to deal with the pandemic by implementing various mobility restrictions, international students had to consider returning to their countries of origin and continuing their studies online (Jokila et al. 2023). Lacking motivation and adequate support structures and resources, the inclination to return home, many students had no option but to stay in their study country, with the assumption that they could ride out the storm within a few months (Pappa et al. 2020; Jokila et al. 2023).

In addition to students' plans being interrupted, the mechanisms that supported their transnational ties, such as travel and visits 'back home' were also disrupted. As the pandemic persisted, many students felt unsupported by their universities and were forced to draw upon their mental reserves and personal networks to survive and to cope with isolation and distraction (Jokila and Filippou 2021). Fortunately, online communication technologies such as Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, Windows Teams and various social media platforms allowed international students to remain in touch with their families and friends at home. In this way, their transnational links arguably came to their rescue, potentially providing them with care and comfort, feelings of reassurance and encouragement, and advice on how best to negotiate these new conditions of extreme personal and social turbulence.

Based on data collected from international students in Finnish universities, we investigate how international students navigated the pandemic and the ways in which they utilised their transnational networks and resources to make sense of their struggles, forge and enact coping strategies, and sustain a sense of resilience and moral strength. We situate our analysis of the data within expansive literature on transnationalism to better understand how international students occupy and negotiate transnational space. We show how this space acquired a deeper significance for them, transforming their sense of belonging across national borders. We thus contribute to a theoretical understanding of transnationalism as referring to empirical manifestations of cross-border ties. Instead, we suggest that transnationalism involves various dynamic processes through which human agents negotiate the shifting material conditions such as those associated with unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a politics of affectivity. Our data thus underline the importance of examining the processes of transnationalisation as contingent, driven by human agency in ways both individual and collective.

The contribution of this study is, then, not limited to the pandemic context only. Our study shows the fragility of social relations that are built face-to-face in a comparatively short time and may not thrive in online contexts. Social relations, especially familial, where face-to-face meetings are not available due to transnational travel, can be supported and even strengthened by the virtual space.

## The Idea of Transnationalism

In recent decades, the idea of transnationalism has been widely used to describe how, under the conditions of globalisation, economic, social, and cultural ties between people, places and institutions across borders of nation-states have become ubiquitous (Vertovec 2009). In this way, transnationalism is a manifestation of the forces of globalisation. It suggests that while national and cultural borders remain important, increased mobilities across these borders have now generated unprecedented levels of cross-border

ties, exchanges and practices, not only through regular and spontaneous communication but also through study trajectories, travel and tourism, family remittances, and economic investment. It has given rise to sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange and affiliations and social formations across cultural and national borders. According to Vertovec (2009: 3), transnationalism

describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all laws, regulations, and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet spanning yet common—however virtual—arena of activity.

Accordingly, transnationalism involves the processes of formation and maintenance of ties, links and networks across the borders of nation-states. Some of these ties, links and networks have, of course, existed throughout the ages, but today, systems of interactions, exchange and mobility function more intensively and in real time, with new communication technologies connecting people and establishing networks with greater speed and efficiency than ever before.

Considering the theorisation of transnationalism as a concept, Vertovec (2009) has identified several different approaches. Firstly, he outlined how some scholars have interpreted the meaning of transnationalism in terms of ‘social morphology’; a kind of social formation spanning borders that describes dense and highly active networks. These networks span vast distances, transforming many kinds of social, cultural, economic and political relationships. Secondly, transnationalism may be viewed as ‘a form of consciousness’, marked by dual or multiple affiliations. As Cohen (1996: 516) has noted, transnational bonds can, to a degree, ‘be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural practices and through shared imagination’. Transnationalism presents itself as shifting ‘subjectivities in the global arena’ (Ong and Nonini 1997). Linked to these notions is the contention that transnationalism is associated with processes of cultural interpenetration and blending, resulting in a fluidity of styles, social institutions and everyday practices. It describes a mode of cultural production through various practices of cultural synchronicity and hybridisation.

Beyond its cultural meaning, Vertovec (2009: 8) argues that transnationalism can also be interpreted for its links to the forces of economic globalisation, as an ‘avenue of capital’. It elaborates on the logic of global-spanning institutions, structures and networks, which connect systems of supply, production, marketing, investment and management, bringing into its path the ways in which we now share information, consume goods and services, and participate in economic exchange. Politically we have also seen the emergence of transnational frameworks within which many global and local questions are increasingly posed, debated and resolved. Our lives are now increasingly shaped by these frameworks, with multinational corporations, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations seemingly playing an essential role in disseminating information, providing avenues of political participation and the mobilisation of opinions, creating something like a transnational public sphere. And finally, and more importantly, transnationalism has transformed people’s relationships to place and space, reconstituting the nature of localities by connecting some actors in more than one country. Appadurai (1995: 213) has argued, for example, that transnationalism may be characterised by, among other things, ‘the growing disjuncture between

territory, subjectivity and collective social movement'. For many people, he notes the distinction between 'here' and 'there' collapses, and they inhabit spaces that can only be understood in the logic of the links and ties between them.

Faist et al. (2013) theorised the idea of transnational space, an idea that emerged within the context of research into the changing processes of migration. Traditionally, researchers viewed immigrants as people who, over time, break all their ties to their homelands, seeking to locate themselves solely within the sociocultural, economic and political institutions of the receiving society. The concept of assimilation illustrated this logic. More recently, however, immigrants do not feel the need to abandon, nor are they required to abandon, their social bonds, but can participate in networks, activities and patterns of life that encompass both societies. They attempt to build social fields that link their country of origin and their country of settlement, 'maintaining a wide range of affective and instrumental social practices spanning borders' (Faist et al. 2013: 12). These practices are not only influenced by 'transnationalism from above' through the work of powerful agents such as multinational corporations, but are also produced through everyday activities, demonstrating the agency of migrants in establishing the contours of 'transnationalism from below' (Smith 2003). In this way, the identities of contemporary migrants are fluid, revealing the strategic ways in which they engage with the global political and economic conditions in which they find themselves. As conditions change, so do their modes of belonging and their attempts to make use of their transnational networks.

This illustrates that migrants are not just passive objects of global capitalism but are active makers of their world. Of course, the extent to which they are active varies greatly; some are keen to sustain cross border ties, links and networks, while others prefer the traditional patterns of assimilation and integration. In the contexts of economic, social and political turbulence, however, they are inclined to become more reflexive about the transnational spaces they occupy. These spaces, according to Faist et al. (2013), consist of:

combinations of ties and their contents, positions in networks and organisations, and networks of organisations that can be found in at least two nation-states. Most of these formations are located between familial and personal practices, on the one hand, and the functional systems of differentiated spheres, such as social-cultural, economic, and political [spheres], on the other.

What this view of transnationalism suggests is that transnationality does not describe a state of existence as such but involves dynamic social processes, even if there is at times the appearance of relatively static and dense ties beyond and across the borders of sovereign states. Instead, transnational spaces contain systems of ties, relationships, events and activities that are performed across national borders, in dynamic ways, displaying the political agency of actors. In transnational spaces, the exercise of agency thus involves cross-border processes of 'transnationalisation' that are contingent upon conditions that change regularly.

This understanding of transnationalism challenges its dominant characterisation, which invariably describes the modalities of cross-border experiences, ties and networks, but does not explain how human agents make sense of these connectivities, what significance they attach to them, develop affective ties with families and friends and curate their sense of identity and belonging. Much has been written over the years about how

processes of identity formation and belonging, but much less is said about the ways in which these processes are shaped by transnational experiences and struggles. What this paper seeks to do is examine the ways in which the politics of affectivity in identity formation is shaped by the processes of transnationalisation.

## International Students and Transnationalism

The idea of transnationalism does not only apply to migration processes but is also helpful in understanding the ways in which international students occupy transnational space, even if this space is transient. Gomes (2015) has used the idea of ‘transient mobility’ to understand how international students establish complex communication systems across national borders to keep their life options open. In this way, they are strategic actors for whom transnational networks represent a valuable resource that can be used to negotiate complex challenges of living abroad, and the development of flexible identities (Ong 1997). Their role as strategic agents and the utilisation of their transnational networks make international students an interesting case to study considering the additional complexity, changes and impact that the pandemic brought about in their lives.

Over 6.3 million students from all nationalities and regions travelled abroad to study in 2023 (UIS data 2024). These mobile students construct a diversified transnational space connecting spaces between sending and receiving destinations. The recognition that international students live in transnational spaces is not new, although a long-standing body of international student mobility literature focuses on international students’ experiences either when leaving their home country or upon arriving/being in their host country – and not on the ways in which they maintain transnational links. Literature also focuses on how international students continue to sense transnational life after returning home as their connections and identities have at least a bi-contextual sense of ‘home’ of both their country of origin and the country where they studied (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015), creating an in-between identity (Wang 2022).

Gargano (2009: 331) recognises international students’ transnational social fields as having ‘(a) simultaneity in localities and multiplicity in identities and refuting the generalisation or homogenisation of student experiences.’ Indeed, studies show how various developments in communication technology have enabled digital connectivity and the simultaneity of ‘here’ and ‘there’ among mobile students (Martin and Rizvi 2014; Dwyer et al. 2021). This has been evident for quite some time, as some students seeking international education strive to use transnational social networks to gain knowledge of the future study locality (Jayadeva 2023), while the major body of research focuses on their stay in their study destination (e.g. Martin and Rizvi 2014; Robertson 2018). However, these studies document this connectivity and practices in pre-pandemic contexts and conditions, leaving open questions about how international students make use of their transnational spaces and operate under disrupted mobility and global crisis.

In the same line, much of the earlier literature on transnational aspects in international students’ lives centred around possibilities and positive aspects that transnational mobility has produced for them. Transnationality allowed the development and maintenance of social relationships that ranged from business relationships to very private relationships all held at a distance. Private relationships with family and friends are maintained in transnational social spaces with the use of social media and other digital applications that enable

a simultaneity of presence even in very mundane activities, like cooking (Martin and Rizvi 2014). Robertson (2018) uses the concept of ‘translocal subjectivity’ (from Conradson and McKay 2007) to understand how friendships can facilitate translocal subjectivities in study destinations; for instance, through diverse multicultural friendship networks and materialities, facilitating transnational experiences. However, the role of these transnational social spaces and private relationships shifted during the pandemic. For example, the study of Hu et al. (2022) in the UK context, noted heightened emotional vulnerability in transnational families and found that Chinese parents became focal actors in mediating their children’s transnational education mobilities. Hu et al. (2022) stressed the need for investigating further these transnational spaces and private relationships in other contexts, a gap this study intends to remedy.

Social relationships that developed through transnational social activities, especially with other co-nationals, have been referred to as ‘diaspora’. While these diasporic communities may facilitate friendships and support in everyday living, they can also contribute economically and facilitate business (Rizvi 2021). Transnational social capital is also gained in study abroad networks among international students, with the potential of contributing to future transnational careers (Moon and Shin 2019). However, Moon and Shin (2019) recognise the limits of social capital transformation in getting to know local students in study destinations, which highlights the importance of exploring how university closing and loss of in-person activities reshaped transnational and local network building.

While countries and institutions hold a variety of expectations for international students (Ziguras and McBurnie 2015), many international students have expectations about migrating to their destination countries, but do not find these expectations easy to realise (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014; Arkoudis et al. 2019). Sometimes their needs may not vary so drastically from those of local students, and, for instance, student services may benefit from providing support similar to that provided to local students. This was particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hari et al. (2023) have pointed out that international students’ experiences during the pandemic suggest the need to analyse social worlds using a transnational lens, where the world of international students cannot be reduced merely to a focus on the ‘national’. Similarly, Jokila and Filippou (2023) have observed how different scales, such as international and national scales, are experienced differently in the everyday practices and decision-making processes of international students. Their analysis of the pandemic situation did not only show the need for a transnational lens, but also the vulnerabilities of international students’ lives and the heterogeneity of their experiences (Jokila et al. 2023; Filippou and Jokila 2024). So, despite all the possibilities digital spaces and eased mobility provide to international students, studies recognise the inherent inequalities that apply to international students from different geographies and social contexts (Brooks and Waters 2011). Schartner and Shields (2023) challenge the often-expressed assumption that international students are a privileged group, and find that, in fact, their socioeconomic status varies. Similarly, Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) show the precarity and uncertainties related to the lives of international students who strive to convert their student status to permanent residence or migration.

Responding to the aforementioned research gaps, the main research question of this article is how international students navigated the pandemic using their transnational

ties and networks when the local and institutional systems of support became largely absent. The study explores how their understanding of the transnational space they occupied was transformed under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this led to shifts in their sense of belonging. We ask how, under the conditions of the pandemic, international students interpreted and enacted the processes of transnationalisation, and how this transformed their experiences of international education through a complex politics of transnational relationality and affectivity.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data used in this paper are part of a larger research project initiated by the first two authors, which analysed international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. An online survey elicited 192 responses, and those who expressed an interest in participating in interviews in the survey were contacted. In the first contact email, a privacy notice was included, which informed participants about the study's processes for data management and processing and gave them detailed information about a commitment to research ethics, based on the ethical principles of research in Finland (TENK 2019). More specifically, the notice included information related to the aims of the research, reassuring participants of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and how their privacy would be protected in research publications.

The interviews were conducted in spring 2020 ( $n = 33$ ) and follow-up interviews were conducted in winter 2020/2021 ( $n = 23$ ) with master's degree students from universities in Finland. The authors developed the interview protocol, which adhered to the following structure: (1) introduction and background questions; (2) current situation regarding daily life, studies, work, family life, social life, finances, wellbeing and feelings about being abroad; (3) future thoughts about studies, work, staying in Finland and post-graduation plans; and (4) university support. To ensure the reliability of the interviews, the authors conducted two pilot interviews and revised the interview guide based on the feedback they received (Neuman 2012).

Master's degree students were chosen for this paper as master's programmes have been the core recruitment channel of international students in Finland. The general characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. Due to the government's recommendation to distance from each other and isolate to restrict the spread of the SARS-

**Table 1.** General characteristics of participants.

| Characteristics |                 | Spring 2020 | Winter 2020/2021 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Gender          | Female          | 21          | 15               |
|                 | Male            | 11          | 8                |
| Discipline      | Humanities      | 11          | 6                |
|                 | Social Sciences | 10          | 8                |
|                 | Medicine        | 5           | 4                |
|                 | Technology      | 5           | 3                |
|                 | Life sciences   | 2           | 2                |
| Citizenship     | EU              | 7           | 4                |
|                 | Non-EU          | 25          | 19               |
|                 | Dual            | 2           | 0                |
| Total           |                 | 33          | 23               |

CoV-2 virus, the interviews were primarily conducted online via Zoom. Interviews were recorded using an external physical recorder. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over 2 hours. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, anonymising the data and assigning pseudonyms to each participant.

For the data analysis, an abductive content analysis was conducted (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), which allowed a combination of theory- and data-based analysis as well as the development of theorisation. The process followed during data analysis included several readings of the transcripts with a critical eye on students' quotes pertaining to transnational relationalities, processes and practices, and how the participants used their transnational links to navigate through the pandemic and confront obstacles that arise. In this way, much of the focus of data analysis was to focus on how the participants' understanding of the transnational space changed under the conditions of the pandemic and how this transformed their sense of belonging across national borders. More specifically, (1) we sought to understand how participants viewed the significance of their transnationality before the pandemic; (2) how they made sense of the pandemic; (3) how the pandemic experience transformed their affective links with their family and friends transnationally; and (4) how this transformed their identity and sense of belonging and their future possibilities. In what follows we consider each of these questions.

## Perceptions of Transnationalism Before the Pandemic

Almost all of the participants we interviewed maintained that they had moved to Finland for a wide variety of reasons, including career development and the possibility of immigration, but also to develop networks with local students and students from other parts of the world. Before the pandemic, participants had recognised that they were embedded in transnational contexts with their global connections to their families and friends, but considered it more important to establish local connections in their host university and country. The socialisation and development of close bonds with their classmates primarily took place in the university environment and played a central part in the formation of local connections:

We used to hang out with my classmates, have lunch, have dinner together, every day [we were] together ... I consider my friends, my classmates to be family ... (Steffi)

Most interviewees were convinced that they had adapted to the university environment, established daily and study routines, and had developed effective relationships with their teachers and classmates. In this way, they expressed optimism and contentment:

Honestly, I enjoy being in Finland a lot. Of course, I miss my family moderately, but I'm used to not seeing them so often ... especially now when there is spring in Finland, I really didn't want to miss that ... You have to be here for April, May, and June. It's just the best time of the year here. (John)

Several interviewees noted that when they encountered problems, they relied upon face-to-face meetings with university staff members and their newly developed friendship networks. So, despite the relevance of the transnational spaces for international students, their social and emotional support often came from people in close proximity:

... [before the pandemic] if I was in emotional distress or had an emotional problem, I knew that I was going to sit with someone and speak to them face to face, and have them hear me ... (Mike)

Over time, before the pandemic, the need to remain in contact with friends and family at home online had become secondary. So, even though the transnational connections were ever present, they were overlooked and not utilised as often, as any necessary support was now available through recently forged local connections.

### Making Sense of the Pandemic

When the pandemic led to social distancing policies, it was followed by the closure of universities and the absence of social life that most international students had become used to. With these restrictions, the relationships with other students – both local and international – came to a halt. While they continued to meet some of these friends online, local networks became decidedly weaker. Simultaneously, the excitement that was previously associated with living and learning in another country suddenly diminished. Some students began to compare the bonds with their classmates before and during the pandemic, noting feelings of frustration. The importance of physical connection was highlighted, as was how digital communication created a diminished sense of personal connection:

It's kind of weird, [you talk to] someone [that] you used to see every day and you communicated, you chatted every day and you shared information together and all of a sudden you speak together via phone or via social media platforms ... you might not get to see their faces and then you are wondering who you are talking to ... (Anik)

Although digital platforms bridged both social distancing and geographical divides, the interviewees still commented on emotional distancing and elements of impersonality. The technological tools could not replace physical presence. Hence, social relationships were strongly tied to spatial arrangements (Massey 2005). Moreover, the local networks that were strong before the pandemic started to erode during the pandemic:

... during the outbreak we just [had a] random chat via WhatsApp ... [which is] not enough to be normal friends as we used to. I feel a little bit upset ... I felt disconnected to everyone apart from having a WhatsApp group chat ... It's really unhealthy mentally. (Steffi)

Many students we interviewed required assistance in making sense of their emotional life under the lockdown and faced academic, social, work-related, and financial changes (see Filippou and Jokila 2024). They had to rely on online communication and support from their transnational family and friends, as the help provided by the local networks began to diminish. Increasingly, they began to recognise the greater importance of familiar patronage over the local system of support. At the same time, many of the international students were concerned about the safety and wellbeing of their relatives and friends at home. They compared the situations between countries and exchanged information in an effort to develop mechanisms of coping, both practical and affective:

We spoke more frequently; if we spoke once per week or once every two weeks with my mother, for one hour or something, now this became every week ... they were updating me on the situation here and there ... I spoke to my siblings, I spoke to my grandma. (Hanna)

International students tried to negotiate and process the initial stages of the lockdown and explored what kind of support was provided by the state and the universities. Institutional and local resources provided a variety of forms of support which the interviewees regarded as insufficient:

[There were] emails and messages from the [university] ... But I mean—they're basically emails. They don't change anything. They might give me some sense of relief but basically ... it's like when you're having an injury, like you broke your leg, instead of going to the doctor you're just taking, I don't know, a pain killer. It might have some effects for a short while, but nothing happens. (Joakim)

Perceptions of inadequate support by institutions and the lack of information available in English left students in a state where they had to deal with the situation almost entirely on their own or within their own communities, which increasingly turned out to be transnational communities. While a few students were content with the online meetings with classmates and real-time virtual presence, many were not. These students mentioned a diminished sense of personal connection and highlighted the need for physical contact and presence, which had previously been provided by local networks:

There were some Zoom hang outs arranged by some of the students, but I really did not like them. I tried to join once but ... It was just too depressing in a way. It didn't really feel comfortable ... I'd rather not to meet at all than just staying behind the screen and not being able to see the person ... (Robert)

In some cases, the university and student-led support was helpful, but it was considered insufficient (and in some cases inaccessible as shown in Jokila and Filippou 2021). The international students therefore started looking for other sources that would provide them with advice and more importantly emotional support. That is when the students' attention turned to their transnational networks, to their families and friends who consoled them. These transnational relationships became a safety net and a refuge, and they used them for emotional support and to find companionship:

Sometimes I get super bored, I can talk to a couple of friends back home in [home country] or my family to hear their voice. I have been feeling that I am talking to somebody, when talking to them I feel a lot better. (Gary)

What is evident is that before the pandemic, socialisation and face-to-face emotional support were easily found in local networks, and hence global networks were secondary. With the incapacity of local networks to meet their affective needs, such as those associated with boredom, anxiety, and loneliness, international students understandably turned to their global networks and re-activated many of their transnational networks. Almost all of the participants in this study thus navigated the pandemic by increasingly relying on the visceral, moral, and cultural resources embedded within their transnational connections. They believed the support provided by the university was well-meaning but insufficient, and therefore they had no choice but to rely on their families and friends at home. Viscerally, their regular online conversations fortified their resilience, allowing them to find the courage to meet the challenges of loneliness and isolation. Morally, the advice and comfort provided by family members and friends at home helped them to be reassured and to remain hopeful. Similar technological tools existed to keep up the social interaction, but their significance differed, highlighting the importance of

face-to-face communication needed at the early stages of the social relationships when the relations are still fragile.

### Consolidating Transnational Ties

Over time, students' transnational networks became stronger. Their emotional and affective bonds embedded within the transnational space were thus consolidated through virtual sociality (Ray 2007). Their attention switched from local networks to transnational networks as most international students we interviewed reported becoming more self-reflexive about the importance of their familial relationships:

I grew closer to my granddad, who turned 99 ... I've been in touch with him regularly and I think that regularity is something that we need more. Because we are always busy, we're giving each other excuses but regularity is something that we can all hang on to. (Alexia)

... my grandparents are very old ... and I was not sure if they were going to make it, so I thought, maybe I should call them a bit more [often]. (John)

Some of these reflections included mental health issues, fear of loss and dealing with their family's and their own emotions, but also broader philosophical issues of life and death, and of responsibility and love:

Not being able to go and visit my family, attend birthdays, or even funerals. You know, I had a cousin ... who died from COVID. And I was not able to go to his funeral ... this situation is robbing us from being with our loved ones in times of need and in times of happiness. Whereas before, I was like, oh, who cares? But now that the situation is growing longer ... I feel cut out completely. (Mike)

The core of the international students' reflections was a lack of physical proximity and the inability to be close to their families. Admittedly, international students had to negotiate these conditions before the pandemic, but they were not as prevalent, nor as serious. The pandemic conditions, the instability of local networks and the accompanying thoughts about family and friends at home created fears of loss and grief:

... I thought oh my God, my mum could die, and I am away from her! So, it was so stressful, and just calling them and telling them that oh you are all there and I am somewhere different outside ... I was over-thinking what is going to happen and what will your situation be, and you are away, and there is no flight ... it was really stressful ... I wasn't scared about myself, but it was just, okay, I want to go home. (Antonia)

These reflections highlight not only the pandemic's impact on students' well-being but also their re-evaluation of family values and relationships. Paradoxically, although new patterns of communication emerged, the sense of loneliness was intensified. Furthermore, these reflections also illustrate how virtual sociality is helpful but also, how under certain conditions, transnational spaces can generate harmful, worrying and fearful affects, hence revealing their ambivalent nature (Rouhvand 2015).

### Identity Shifts and Future Possibilities

As transnational relationships consolidated under COVID-19 conditions, international students became more self-reflective and aware of their transnational identity. Many of them became aware of gradual shifts in their identity and sense of belonging. Many

other began to re-evaluate their future plans. In their perceptions of transnational identity, the importance of family was recognised and emphasised:

I understood the importance of family ... maybe you can have better education or better work even, but you are alone. So, if something bad happens like the coronavirus, then I don't have any way to be with my family or to share my feelings with my family. (May)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the students were happy, even excited, about being away from their families as long as the option of travelling and visiting each other existed. Clearly, when the option of being mobile and travelling between one's home country and one's country of study was removed, the position of being an international student was no longer perceived as a 'blessing' or a 'privilege'; but turned into a 'curse' and a 'nightmare':

I don't have any family here ... when the outbreak happened, everybody felt the need to stay close to their family, and people were all together ... So, being abroad meant being alone and this time is giving me this homesickness ... I just wish I was at home, where I could stay with my family ... (Gary)

Due to the pandemic's reflections, the students began to wonder why they should continue studying abroad when there are possibilities of online studies and work:

I kind of want to leave, I don't want to die over here. I mean if this is the end of the world then everyone wants to be with their family and that's what I feel ... if online working and studying will last until the end of this year then why I can't go back to [home country] and work from [home country] ... (Steffi)

For some students, these considerations raised the question about how international mobility for education might be affected in the post-pandemic era. With the developments in online learning, more options have become available. Yet, from our interviewees' perspective, they still prefer campus-based international education, so long as mobility across borders is an option and as long as there are no threats towards one's personal and familial wellbeing. What has become evident, however, is that international students consider their future options in a much more complex and nuanced manner. As one of the interviewees noted with respect to his career goals:

... I haven't decided yet if I want to continue with the PhD application because I feel this time of the pandemic is very difficult. I look into the future, and I see four more years in Finland away from my home with this pandemic and I don't know what can happen. (Andy)

This shows how students viewed their future possibilities through the prism of the pandemic and a transformed sense of their transnational ties, relationships and networks. Before the pandemic, the participants initially felt they were in control of their destiny, and viewed transnationalism to be full of opportunities and optimism, but when conditions changed, they began to feel powerless and unable to help their relatives, despite attempts:

I think that the most horrible part is that I am not able to do anything because I am very far [away] and none of us are able to do anything because we are in different countries. I think that was making all of us feel really bad ... there is absolutely nothing that I can do from where I am ... other than trying to offer support and talk ... (Robert)

These interviews reveal how the experiences of COVID-19 invariably transformed the identity of international students. No longer did they view themselves as agentic cosmopolitans confident of their future, but as individuals who were highly dependent on the shifting material conditions of their lives. Their experiences of navigating the pandemic gave them a different sense of identity and belongingness across national borders, uncertain and tentative, reflective and pensive.

## Discussion

In this paper, we have examined how international students in Finland navigated the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the concept of transnationalism. Our investigation has shown that before the pandemic international students were perfectly aware that they were located within a transnational space, though their understanding of its meaning was at best limited; they seldom thought about its significance. They took their transnationality for granted, and whenever the need arose, their access to digital tools and social media enabled them to participate in a robust form of virtual sociality with their family and friends at home. Yet, in Finland, they preferred to develop face-to-face relations with local students and also students from around the world. This reflected their cosmopolitan aspirations, consisting of an interest in developing transnational networks. The development of such networks has become a core promise in the contemporary narrative of international education, and it is embraced seamlessly by most students, both local and international. COVID-19 disrupted this narrative, forcing international students to acquire a greater sense of reflexivity about the importance of home, making them more aware of the possibilities and limitations of their transnational connectivity.

International students cultivate a new sense of the transnational space, demonstrating how the idea of transnationality is spatially and temporally specific, and how under shifting conditions, its meaning and significance changes. During the pandemic, the transnational space became reconstituted by new forms of sociality as the international students had no choice but to revive and consolidate their social relationships with their family and friends at home, rendering secondary their newly developed relationships in Finland. They began to regard their transnational relations as more important in providing them with the emotional support and the comfort they needed to navigate the pandemic. Yet, few regarded this virtual sociality available in the transnational space as sufficient, because it lacked the capacity to provide them with forms of intimacy that can only be found in physical, bodily, and material conditions. Yet, while the transnational space became a source of comfort to them, it also generated feelings of guilt and loneliness.

The attempts the students made to make sense of their transnationality invariably involved contradictory emotions, as a complex politics of affect. On the one hand, they needed sources of support and comfort that were not available within their immediate community in Finland and therefore sought our transnational connection to which they might have paid little attention before the pandemic. On the other hand, their distance from home challenged their efforts to build a reliable community. While they remained in Finland, their prior attempts to build cross-cultural relations were thwarted. Indeed, as they could not predict how long the isolation might be enforced, their sense of

guilt towards their family and friends at home and loneliness in Finland expanded. They found themselves in a situation in which they could not imagine how the future might unfold.

The data collected for this research project shows that at the heart of the transitional space is a politics of affect. It involves different ways of being, feeling and acting –and prioritising values. International students sought to perform this politics in a range of complex ways, with contrasting understandings of its materiality, and the conditions that constituted its forms and possibilities. The transnational space provided them resources for coping with the multitudinous and uncertain meanings of belonging in ways that were inherently political, as a response to precarity that confined them physically. This required them to reflect on the meaning of their identity, sense of belonging, national affiliations and the values of global mobility associated with international education. In this way, the attempts that international students made to meet the difficulties of COVID-19 were marked by ambiguity, confusion and anxiety. These attempts evoked not only feelings of fear, uncertainty and insecurity for self but also a sense of responsibility to family members at home, together with a feeling of guilt about the inability to support those who were most at risk, especially the elderly.

Insights into the ways in which international students used their transnational ties, relationships, networks, spaces and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic in this paper invite further reflections on transnationalism and international education. It emphasises the problematic narrative of perceiving international students as a homogeneous and privileged group of students (Jones 2017; Schartner and Shields 2023). It demonstrates how the experiences of transnationality are dynamic and depend on the shifting material and immaterial conditions. It highlights the vulnerability inherent in the temporal and spatial dimensions of transnationalism for international students. It challenges some of the celebratory tropes of international education, which are often taken for granted by students and institutions of higher education alike. The rhetoric of higher education institutions and systems used to recruit international students invariably presents the possibilities of positive intercultural experiences as a major outcome of international education. Yet, what this paper shows is that the realisation of these cosmopolitan aspirations is contingent upon specific conditions. These aspirations are realised under certain conditions and when these conditions change, as they did with COVID-19, these aspirations become illusory.

While this study is conducted in a pandemic condition, it has significance in post-pandemic understanding of transnationalism. In the recent literature on transnationalism (Pries 2022; Telve et al. 2022), two approaches to the relationship between technologically mediated communication and social life have been put forward. One emphasises the transformative capacity of online communication to radically change the nature of everyday life, both for the better and for the worse. The other emphasises the continuing importance of proximity and face-to-face social relationships as the bedrock in the development of virtual sociality. This analysis presented in this paper suggests that this distinction should not be viewed as absolute. Online communicative practices do indeed have the potential to overcome social isolation, but they can also unsettle traditional modes of belonging in a community. In this way, technology use adapts to the patterns of its users as they negotiate the shifting conditions of their lives. This highlights the importance of acknowledging, and indeed supporting, the agency of each international student. While

our data revealed some general patterns in the ways in which international students negotiated the conditions pertaining to the pandemic, it also pointed to considerable heterogeneity in the ways in which they interpreted the meaning and significance of transnationality since virtual sociality was constituted by different forms and outcomes for different students.

## Conclusion

This analysis presented in this paper suggests that the idea of transnational space is not static but that its various forms are dynamic and change under shifting conditions such as those resulting from the pandemic. The paper demonstrates how the conditions relating to COVID-19 pandemic transformed the ways in which international students thought about their perspectives on international education and reconsidered the possibilities and limitations of their cosmopolitan aspirations. The paper also shows that while international students have always occupied a transnational space, under the pandemic condition this spatiality acquires a different meaning, demonstrating the complex and contingent character of the processes of transnationalism.

Our analysis highlights that under COVID-19, the relationship of international students to the transnational spaces they occupy became ambivalent, both a source of comfort and emotional support, but also emotional turmoil and anxiety. In this way, the paper challenges the overall sense of optimism and positivity about intercultural and transnational experiences that is often promoted by international educators. Such experiences, however, vary greatly and are contingent upon the shifting material and immaterial conditions. This recognition thus allows us to better understand the contingencies and complexities associated with the ways in which international students negotiated the transnational space, challenging the positive rhetoric that valorises global mobility of students.

Four years have now passed since the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is essentially reflective of the experiences of international students. However, it points to several insights that are generalisable, helpful for future crises, but especially in understanding the nature and scope of transnationalism as it relates to international education. The paper underscores the fact that international students occupy a space that exists at the intersection of the local and the transnational, and that for them both physical proximity and online communicative practices are important in forging their sense of identity and social relationships. It demonstrates the importance of transnational networks in meeting the challenges that international students face under shifting and often unforeseen conditions. Even as COVID-19 no longer poses the challenges it once did, international students have learned how to rely on their transnational networks as a resource with which to negotiate the changes and contingencies of their lives as active agents who operate in transnational social spaces.

In this way, the contribution of the paper is not only empirical but also theoretical in that it challenges the common understanding of transnationalism as referring to empirical manifestations of cross-border ties. Instead, the paper suggests transnationalism involves various dynamic processes through which human agents negotiate the shifting material conditions such as those associated with unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a politics of affectivity. Our data thus underline the importance of

examining the processes of transnationalisation as contingent, driven by human agency in ways both individual and collective, subjective and relational.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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