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Wellness Practices of Minority International Students: A Grounded Theory Study

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ABSTRACT

As part of the fabric of college students, minority international students undergo specific and unique challenges to their health and wellness. Little is known about how and what constitutes wellness for minoritized international students and the impact of wellness on their university adjustment. Using a systematic grounded theory approach, this study interviewed 12 (8 men & 4 women) middle eastern international students (MEI). Following the constant comparison method and theoretical sensitivity, the study generated a wellness practices model for MEI students. Results showed that wellness had two levels: primary (physical, social, mental, and mindfulness) and secondary (religious, academic, and coping). Results also showed that engaging in wellness practices was key to university adjustment. Individual factors affect how salient a wellness domain is in the student's life, such as optimism, hope, knowledge of self-care habits, and attitudes toward self-care. Implications for helping minoritized international are suggested considering wellness practices model.

Keywords: international students, middle eastern, wellness, self-care, adjustment.

College students are among the most emotionally vulnerable populations (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). As emerging adults, the number of expectations and developmental growth issues make college students vulnerable to mental health problems (CCMH, 2021). The Center for Collegiate Mental Health details several issues facing college students, including depression, anxiety, isolation, substance abuse, academic problems, to name but a few (CCMH (2021). Research has overlooked wellness practices among minority students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Clabaugh, Duque, & Fields, 2021).

International students are among the most affected by the pandemic (Yang & Tian, 2023). An international student is anyone studying away from his

home country in which they were born and raised (IIE, 2018). During the academic year of 2021-2022, there were about 950,000 international students distributed across the US and originating from about 200 countries (IIE, 2022). Wellness research has mainly focused on domestic students in the US, leaving a gap in understanding how minority students experience wellness in their daily lives. Understanding what wellness is and how minority students experience wellness can be crucial in helping them maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Recently, Gao et al. (2022) surveyed 405 international students from 65 countries studying in a US public university to explore the impact of COVID-19 on student wellness. Gao and colleagues found that international students experienced high levels of anxiety related to student visas and fear of contracting the virus as well as issues related to being away from family. It becomes paramount that further understanding of international student wellness be explored so that professionals are better prepared to help minority international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students have long been part of the US higher education fabric since the Fulbright Act of 1948 (Banjong & Olson, 2016). They need to reach a high level of English language proficiency and develop resilience strategies to succeed. They also need to adapt to cultural, social, religious, psychological, economic, and academic differences (Abunab, Dator, Salvador, & Lacanaria, 2017). They have a big learning curve to pass so that they are set for success in college. One of the challenges to international students is wellness and mental health. McDaniel, Dionne, and Regan (2021) examined international students' holistic wellness compared to domestic students. Results showed that international students had better emotional, physical, and financial wellness profiles than domestic US students. Even though international students tend to score higher in some wellness domains (i.e., physical, financial, and emotional, they also struggled in their career wellness and intellectual wellness as compared to domestic US students (McDaniel, Dionne, & Regan, 2021). Domestic students reported better scores across several wellness domains, such as career, social, intellectual, and environmental wellness (McDaniel et al., 2021).

Interestingly, within group differences may exist, especially that international students come from across the globe (Hanassab, 2006; Meghani & Harvey, 2016). Such differences call for attention for minoritized international students by exploring the unique challenges and identifying their experiences of wellness while living in the US.

Wellness research with college students has long focused on mental health indicators, such as depression and anxiety. One of the leading projects is the research of Centre for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) with college students (CCMH, 2019). The CCMH (2019) indicates that anxiety, depression, school, alcohol, and social problems are among the most issues for which

international college students seek counseling. Research on the wellness of college students has also resulted in several wellness models that aim to develop understanding of preventative practices. Research within wellness counseling, for instance, has yielded several models such as the wheel of wellness (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000) and the indivisible self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

The term wellness refers to a multidimensional construct that includes diverse parts of the self. Myers and Sweeney (2004) believed wellness has five components: creative, coping, social, essential, and physical wellness. Each domain of wellness has several subdomains that further explain its meaning. Long before that, the WHO defined health as not merely the absence of illness but also the imbalance in other life domains such as social and emotional aspects (Wade & Halligan, 2017). Wellness, as popularized in the literature, has mainly been a western cultural concept (Wade & Halligan, 2017), and a culturally specific view is needed to gain more understanding of minority populations.

Most of the research investigating college students' mental health focused on the symptoms (i.e., anxiety and depression) rather than daily practices that buffer stress (Yun & Greenwood, 2022). In a survey of the most offered on-campus services to international students across 200 US universities, international students were mostly offered logistical services such as registration, orientation, campus regulations, language and reading materials, and cultural events (Madden-Dent, Wood, & Roskina, 2019). Only 10% of the surveyed institutions provided psychological and emotional support to international students. During the Covid-19, some international students concerned were exacerbated by fear of infection and change of their visa status if they attended class virtually (Gao et al., 2022). International students were in higher need of psychosocial support during the Covid-19 pandemic because they felt more isolated than domestic students (Whatley & Fischer, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Models of Health and Wellness

This grounded theory study used several health and wellness models as theoretical frameworks. Wellness and health have been defined and understood from diverse backgrounds, such as medicine (Engel, 1979), psychology (Hettler, 1976) and counseling (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Engel defined health and wellness as a balance in physical, mental, social, and environmental factors. According to the biopsychosocial model of health and wellness, physical health is essential for social and mental wellbeing. When individuals are physically healthy, they are more likely to have less social and mental health problems (Engel, 1979).

Myers and Sweeney approached wellness from a more holistic lens as they believed wellness has five dimensions: social, physical, coping, essential, and creative wellness. This approach to wellness was formerly introduced by Hettler in 1976. Hettler (1976) believed that wellness had six dimensions: occupational, physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. In systematic grounded theory, such an understanding is important to keep in mind prior to

conducting interviews because it can allow for theoretical sensitivity and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Student Involvement

An important issue explored in this study was student involvement. Astin (1999) defined student involvement as physical and psychological engagement in school activities, including attending classes. Student involvement is key in determining students' motivation to succeed and might be reflective of student wellbeing (Zepke, 2015).

The Problem

While there exists a plethora of research on college student mental health and wellness, research investigating international students' wellness has yet to uncover several problems related to wellness and self-care practices (Avci, 2017). Most of the current research on college students' self-care and wellness was carried out with US domestic students (McDaniel et al., 2021). Previous research including minoritized middle eastern international students discussed issues such as adjustment (Gomez, Urzua, & Glass, 2014), acculturation experiences (Al-Krenawi, Alotaibi, & Elbedour, 2020; Rabia & Karkouti, 2017), and academic issues (Al Murshidi, 2014; Rabia & Karkouti, 2017). Research has yet to explore what wellness means and how it is lived daily by minority international students such as those coming from the middle east region. This study aims to fill that gap by in-depth analysis of students' stories and understanding of wellness and health.

METHODS

Grounded Theory

Systematic grounded theory approach was used as the main methodological approach to collect and analyze data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Systematic grounded theory dictates that researchers build a solid background about the topic and adopt at least one theoretical framework before formulating research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Systematic grounded theory also ensures that data coding and analysis start right at the beginning of data collection. Using theoretical sensitivity, I consistently asked questions, engaged in memo writing, reflected on the findings and process, and compared ongoing findings with previous research. I also triangulated with three other researchers who provided feedback and questions about my codes and coding process. This process led me to identify wellness practices among MEI and their relationship with university adjustment.

Sample

The sample of this grounded theory study included 12 full-time undergraduate international students from five middle eastern countries. Eight students identified as men and 4 women. Three students were from Oman, three from the United Arab Emirates, two from Kuwait, three from Saudi Arabia, and one student from

Egypt. Five students were seniors, four were juniors, and three were sophomores. The age of students ranged from 18 to 22 years old.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics (N=12)

No.	Pseudonym	Country of origin	Gender	Year at college
1	Salim	Oman	M	Senior
2	Laila	Oman	F	Senior
3	Ahmed	UAE	M	Sophomore
4	Saif	UAE	M	Junior
5	Saeed	UAE	M	Junior
6	Aysha	Oman	F	Senior
7	Ghanim	Kuwait	M	Senior
8	Tariq	Kuwait	M	Sophomore
9	Nora	KSA	F	Senior
10	Huda	KSA	F	Junior
11	Aziz	KSA	M	Junior
12	Mohammed	Egypt	M	Sophomore

NOTE. UAE= UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, KSA= KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA.

Sampling Approach

The study adopted a mix of two sampling approaches: snowball (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017) and theoretical sampling (Aldiatat & Le Navenec, 2018). Snowball sampling was adopted to generate the first few participants as each participant led to the next. A sampling pool of participants was also collected using a simple Qualtrics survey that asked simple demographic questions, such as nationality, age, gender, student visa status, email address, and whether interested in participating in the study. The first eight participants were recruited through snowball sampling from which potential participants were selected. The last four interviews were conducted using theoretical sampling in which I purposefully sought participants with certain demographics to fill gaps in knowledge.

Research Questions

This grounded theory aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1- How do minority international students engage in self-care?
- 2- How does self-care relate to university adjustment through the lens of student involvement?

Data Coding

Interviews were conducted in English through zoom audio, transcribed through Otter.ai service, and then uploaded into MaxQDA2020 software. Open coding was used to code each interview transcript. As per grounded theory principles, interviews were conducted, transcribed, and open coded before conducting the next interview. The first eight interviews were open coded for words and phrases as this allowed enough data saturation. The remaining four interviews were coded for meaning (i.e. coding complete phrases or paragraphs). After all first 8 interviews were conducted and coded, the researcher triangulated with three other people not directly involved in data collection and analysis. After taking their feedback and through theoretical sensitivity, I raised further questions about what was happening in the text and how participants’ stories were related or not related. Those questions helped the researcher adjust follow up questions in later interviews and created a more insightful look into the data, such as recategorizing several codes into different categories.

Axial coding, later, helped me reduce the number of codes from about 147 codes to about 11 categories, under which codes were grouped. After consulting with another researcher, and based on feedback and previous literature, categories were reduced to 9 main themes, seven of which constituted wellness practices.

Process of Coding and Analysis of MEI Wellness Practices Model

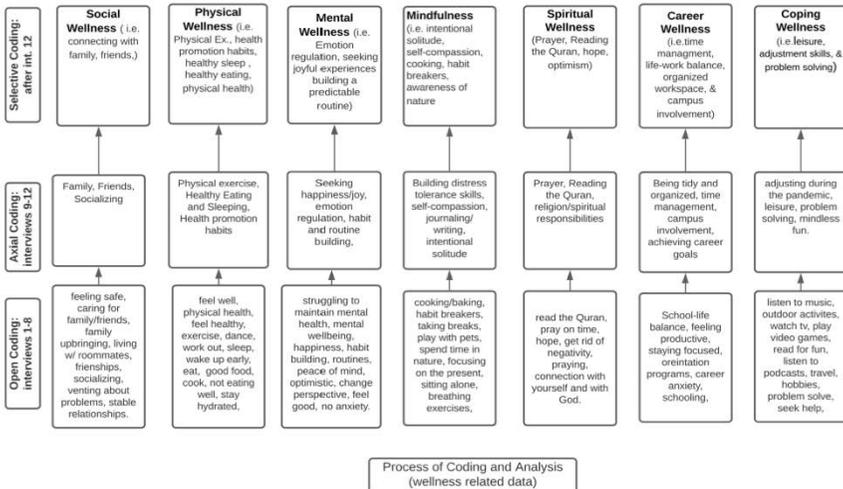


Figure 1. Qualitative Data Coding and Analysis Process in Grounded Theory.

RESULTS

Wellness Practices Model

Results of this systematic grounded theory revealed seven domains of wellness: four primary and three secondary domains. Using the MaxQDA2020 software to record and analyze data, data were constantly analyzed, and theoretical sensitivity was applied.

Primary Domains of Wellness Practices

Social Wellness. This theme was, perhaps, the most cited domain across all interviews (over 200 times). All 12 participants shared that staying connected with family, friends, and colleagues was key to their wellbeing. “Ever since I was young, family has been a very important factor in my life. When you grow up, you just realize how important it was and how important it is to have a family that you can go back to, like a home, because you always feel safe,” Saeed explained.

Family was an important part within wellness practices of MEI students. As Mohammed from Egypt stated, “Family is first and friends are second. Because of my culture and values, I still connect with my family overseas. It’s an important part of the culture.” Huda also added that “it’s good to talk with family frequently and ask them how they are doing.” Saeed further shared that being disconnected from family may also result in feeling disconnected from other people. “Our relationship with our family is important. If we don’t have a good relationship with our family, then we start to distance ourselves from other people. Family is an important factor when it comes to our wellbeing,” he further explained.

Friends were also crucial to MEI students’ wellness. Most participants shared how friends and friendships helped them overcome hardships. “Mentally and emotionally, I would surround myself with people I believe are good for me and I feel well with them,” Huda shared. Tariq from Kuwait explained how crucial it is to have friends as part of wellness. “A friend is someone who I would wake up at 3 am and drive to the hospital or someone with whom I share an extreme connection,” he explained.

Physical Wellness. In this study, physical wellness means feeling physically healthy, and can include practices that promote physical wellness, such as healthy sleep habits, healthy eating habits, and exercise. Within this domain of wellness, several subdomains were found: health promotion habits (i.e., hygiene), physical exercise, healthy sleep habits, and healthy eating habits. These domains of behavior promote physical wellness among participants. “The physical aspect is nothing too major,” Saif from UAE shared. “[habits like] brushing your teeth, going for a walk in the morning, making sure you maintain general hygiene, and walking to class” are all health promotion habits that helped Saif stay physically well. Ghanim from Kuwait added that habits such as checking body temperature

in terms of “hot or cold and [avoiding] traumatizing experiences' ' could also be considered health promotion habits.

The second important subdomain of physical wellness includes physical activity. All participants described the importance of being physically active, such as going to the gym, taking walks across campus, playing sports (i.e., soccer, biking), and doing house chores. “I would say going to the gym more often...really helps with mental health,” Nora from KSA Said. Ghanim from Kuwait also added “I would consider it a good day if I worked out, along with the other things I previously mentioned.” Participants believed that exercise helped them relax and manage their stress. “Although when people exercise, they get tired, it eventually leads the body to be relaxed,” Salim from Oman explained. Therefore, it was clear that exercising was key to helping students manage stress and feel productive about their day.

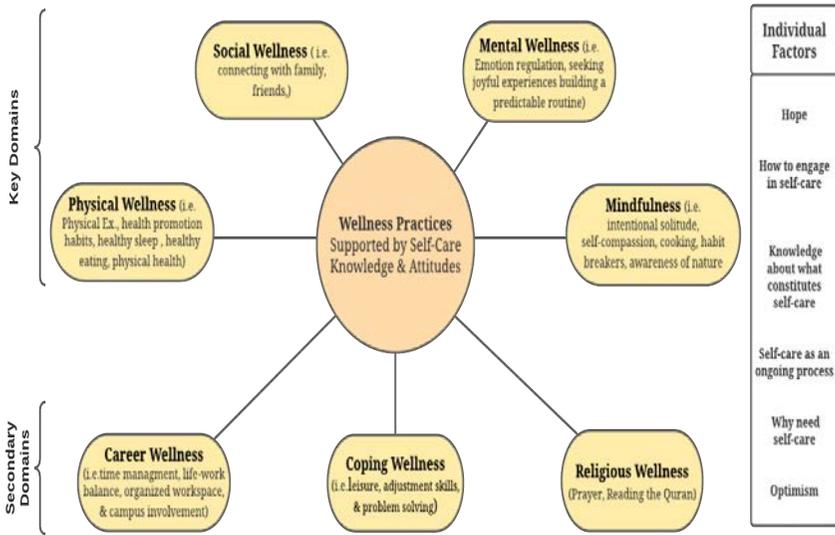


Figure 2. Components of Wellness Practices for Minority Middle Eastern International Students.

Note. Key domains indicated that all 12 participants emphasized while secondary were endorsed by about 10 participants.

Healthy sleep habits were important for the wellness of MEI students. “Sleeping well affects your education, your physical wellbeing, and your social life,” Mohammed from Egypt explained. Most participants shared that good sleep

habits helped them become successful as college students because lack of sleep negatively affected their ability to attend classes, socialize, and do well at school. “I feel like sleep is number one because having enough sleep affects your mental health... I didn’t sleep well, and I couldn’t focus” Laila from Oman confessed. Ghanim from Kuwait also explained that students need to know how much sleep they need because “different people need different amounts of sleep... [and] some people do extremely fine with six hours and some others would not function if they don’t sleep for at least eight hours.” Sleep habits were key habits as part of MEI wellness practices.

Most participants (10 out of 12) believed that healthy eating was important for their wellness, especially if they prepare food with friends. “Being able to cook good food not only is it good for your body but your mental health,” Huda from KSA said. Laila from Oman shared that food was related to mental health. “If I am not getting enough food, I am not getting enough energy to focus and do tasks... That’s why I feel food has a big impact on my mental health and sleep,” she explained. Minoritized middle eastern students place a high value for healthy eating within their wellness habits because eating is also a good way to socialize with family and friends.

Mental Wellness. The third significant domain of wellness practices for middle eastern international students was mental wellness. Most participants described mental wellness in terms of emotion regulation, seeking joyful experiences, and building predictable routines. Aziz from KSA described as “being mentally stable and not suffering from mental illness or anxiety that overwhelms you.” Huda from KSA framed it in the context of being an international student. “Being outside of your home for the first time is out of your comfort zone. So, taking care of your mental health is the number one priority for me... it’s feeling happy.” Analysis of students’ stories around self-care showed that students struggled to define mental wellness, each trying to describe it in their own ways. One example of habits that promote mental wellness was seeking joyful experiences such as gifting oneself, meeting personal needs, and changing routine without prior planning. As Saif from UAE shared, “[taking] walks around campus, and order a pizza or something or just sit and watch a show. I would try to do many of the things I enjoyed from high school and bring it here.”

Other participants described mental wellness in terms of emotion regulation skills. “I just remind myself that everything is going to be okay,” Laila from Oman shared. Saif added that mental wellness “does not have to be something special. It’s those things that you must ensure you counteract all the negatives.”

A third component of mental wellness was expressed through habit and routine building. “Being well is, for me, is to have a fulfilling routine that is equally predictable and equally enjoyable,” Tariq from Kuwait explained. The same idea was shared by Huda from KSA, “it would be a routine day with some exercise. I think it helps a little bit. I would [also] surround myself with people who are good for me.” Mental wellness, while unique for each participant,

revolved around peace of mind, predictability, and optimism. Mental wellness was more about sustaining a positive mindset that buffers daily challenges and frames them from a positive perspective. “When I realized I didn’t have to [be the good student], I felt much happier. I was not stressed,” Saeed from UAE commented.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness was reported as a primary theme, meaning that all participants discussed it in their own ways. Mindfulness or mindful wellness refers to any kind of habit that participants used to slow down and focus on the here and now, such as intentional solitude, self-compassion, cooking, habit breakers, and awareness of nature. Salim from Oman shared that each night, he would sit alone and “grade myself to see how I have done during the day...and what things I want to accomplish on the next day.” Laila from Oman adopted mindfulness techniques to help her deal with stress during the school day. “I would do a lot of mindfulness in between, like classes, like, I would do a breathing exercise,” she explained.

Other participants practiced mindfulness in various ways, one of which was awareness of nature. “I kind of interact with the trees or any wildlife...And these, I feel, take me out of the intensity of the real world,” Tariq from Kuwait explained. Aziz further explained that awareness of and engagement with nature can be done during walks across campus. He shared the following:

“When you walk in between classes, or you take the bus to campus, and you walk to your class and the next class, and you go throughout campus, you see people, right, you see people walking to and from their classes, you see greenery, you see plants and you see trees. You see the squirrels, sometimes you walk by the little creatures. And there's life there. And you smell the air, it's fresh, it's just, it's nice.”

Self-compassion was also a key mindful habit among participants. Almost all participants shared that being kind to oneself is important to buffer the impacts of stress and depression while studying abroad. “I took the pressure from overachieving and stressing myself all the time. Accepting that you’re being comfortable and having a stable health and mental health is more important,” Aysha from Oman stressed. Other participants resorted to intentional solitude in which they sought space for peace, grounding oneself, and problem-solving. During stressful times, Huda from KSA would “want to be by myself. I just want to think about everything. And I don’t want to be surrounded by others. I just need time to relax and think about everything.” Mindfulness was clear in participants’ stories, albeit each one of them practiced it differently.

Secondary Domains of Wellness Practices

Coping Wellness. The ability to cope with change and stress was one of the secondary domains of wellness practices shared by most participants. In the

current study, coping wellness includes habits like leisure, mindless (unplanned) fun activities (watching tv, listening to music, playing video games, reading for fun, listening to podcasts), hobbies, travel, and problem-solving skills.

“I like to read about a lot of things online, listen to podcasts, read books about self-improvement, learn the basics of design. It’s like mindless fun... There is nothing that triggers them. I like to do them for fun. It’s a huge thing for me even when I am busy. I still prioritize both sleep and leisure,” Ahmed shared.

Coping wellness also included daily habits that helped reduce stress and anxiety such as taking walks in nature, hiking, traveling, taking photos of nature, cooking, and baking. According to participants, individuals can cope with stress by engaging in meaningful activities, especially those that do not entail careful planning. They also believed that reinvigorating hobbies as well as exploring new hobbies could be an effective way to reduce stress and cope with school.

Career Wellness. Time management, work-life balance, and campus involvement were the main wellness practices that constituted career wellness. Most participants described their career wellness in terms of success at any activities related to their schooling. “When school is going well and I am getting good grades and achieving my career goals, I feel productive,” Salim explained. Ghanim, on the other hand, explained that students needed to take careful steps and be open to learning from their school mistakes to not to feel bad when they get low grades. As he explained,

“Achieving progress sometimes means going back a little bit. In a project, for example, I might undo the last two steps I’ve done because I now realize that they were not the best steps. I would take, say, a left turn at the fork at which I took a right turn earlier. That’s useful and important [for my wellness]”.

Other students shared that their career wellness declined the most during test times or due to role confusion in terms of life-work balance. “I would ignore the [feelings] because I felt school and study was the big focus. I didn’t think I had the right to have the thinking space for my feelings,” Laila shared. Ayesha advised that students be aware of the toll that schooling can take on the student’s life.

“I have a lot of hobbies and interests that I scheduled each day... My major requires a lot of reading. So, having extracurricular activities such as karate classes, hiking, painting, volunteering ... helped a lot because they changed my idea of self-care,” Ayesha shared.

Religious Wellness. Religion was a secondary but important domain of wellness. Eight out of 12 participants talked about the impact of prayer in their lives. Several participants narrated that religion, specifically daily prayers, were key habits in their wellness. Nora from KSA explained that prayer helped her get rid of negativity. “This is a place where I get rid of all the negative energy. You feel a spiritual connection. It makes me comfortable,” she narrated. The same feeling

was echoed by Saeed from UAE. “[when we] pray, it helps us feel at ease, to feel safe, which can help us move forward,” he explained. One participant, Laila, shared that the further away she was from her spiritual duties, the more distress she felt. “I really didn’t get to be spiritual, and I neglected a lot of my spiritual duty. I feel that intensified the problem,” she narrated.

Other participants discussed the impact of reading the Quran on their wellness. Salim believed that reading the Quran helped him clear his mind from negative thoughts. “One important thing we benefit from reading the Quran is to clear up our minds...and it gives the person some kind of hope,” he narrated. Ghanim stressed the importance of reading the Quran in his wellness. “[reading the Quran makes me feel] there is purpose behind things and there is a plan in place I cannot see perhaps, yet.” Ghanim shared. Clearly, religion seemed an important theme within the narratives of most MEI students, which indicates a strong impact of religion on their wellness.

Role of Wellness Practices in University Adjustment

As a second goal of this grounded theory study, I asked participants about the role and impact of wellness habits in university adjustment. In discussing adjustment struggles, Laila shared the following:

“I ignored my mental health and well-being. I didn't really think moving to a new country would really have that much of an impact on me. I brushed all these things aside. I felt like I was just ignoring everything and just bottling everything in. I just went by through the first few years, but then at the end, I couldn't ignore them for so long. I needed to deal with them. I needed to sort out my feelings and validate them so I can really move on from that... I feel [practicing] self-compassion helped me through. I would write post it notes and stick it in my laptop. So, whenever I open it I read it, I have one right now. I feel like self-compassion is an important one.”

Laila discussed how her academic struggles were caused by ignoring self-care and trying brush problems aside. These struggles were also shared by other participants. Ghanim shared that being a college student was stressful and required him to tailor a set of wellness activities that helped him adjust. “Life as a college student was very demanding. To adjust, I first had to deal with a lot more pressure than back in high school. It of forced me to beef up my self-care systems and deal with that pressure,” he explained.

MEI students used a variety of strategies to help them adjust. All participants explained that without self-care they would have not been successful in college because they had to learn a lot of skills to adjust to life abroad, especially daily self-care habits. Self-care was also helpful for students in terms of overcoming depression and anxiety. “I was very young, and it was my first time living alone in a different country and speaking a different language. Curling up to myself and isolating was a good decision. I needed a break to adjust to school,” Aysha narrated. Aysha shared that she struggled during freshmen year and felt

quite depressed. She decided to take a break from many activities and look after herself, which seemed useful in motivating her to continue school.

Some personal traits were important to keep in mind with regards to self-care habits. Some of the participants explained that attitudes toward self-care and knowledge of self-care habits were crucial for wellness and adjustment. Aysha shares that “being aware and sensitive to your mental health, managing it, knowing if there's something wrong, addressing it, and acknowledging what's happening” is key to adjustment. On the contrary, Laila confessed that she was poorly adjusted to college because she feared sharing struggles and get labeled as weak among her colleagues. “I feared rejection. I would fear that I would open up to someone and they wouldn't accept me for who I am,” she explained.

Many students misunderstood wellness and thought that it was an added job to their lifestyle. However, Saif explained that “it's all the little things that build up towards maintaining a healthy body and a healthy mind” that constitutes wellness. Mohammed from Egypt had a well-rounded knowledge of wellness. “Being well means having a balanced life such as having a good social life, a good spiritual life, a good educational life, and a good physical and mental wellness, including sports and any types of physical activities,” he narrated.

DISCUSSION

This grounded theory study explored how and what middle eastern international students believe to be wellness. The study also explored how several factors affect self-care practices and how those practices related university adjustment. Previous research with international students did not account for lifestyle habits that constituted how they lived in the host country. Most of the previous research i.e. (Abunab et al., 2017; Cena, Burns, & Wilson, 2021; Gao, Eissenstat, Wachamontes, & Wang, 2022; Glazer & Güzel, 2019; McInerney & King, 2012; Mori, 2000) did not account for how international students live on a daily basis and how such behaviors were important for adjustment. Previous research focused on issues related to acculturation stress (Asfahani, 2018; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), adjustment challenges (Abunab et al., 2017; Lefdahl-davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Lyken-Segosebe, 2017; Quan, He, & Sloan, 2016), academic achievement challenges (Al Murshidi, 2014; Banjong, 2015; McDermott-Levy, 2011), and mental health (Chai, Krägeloh, Shepherd, & Billington, 2012; Kanekar, Sharma, & Atri, 2010; Lu, Dear, Johnston, Wootton, & Titov, 2014; Marangell & Baik, 2022; Mori, 2000).

The findings of this grounded theory study shed a new light into the ways minoritized international students live by highlighting lifestyle habits. Such a new understanding of how and what self-care habits is key in helping students adjust to life abroad. Self-care habits had two levels of importance: primary and secondary. Primary self-care habits revolved around physical wellness, social wellness, mental wellness, and mindfulness habits. This finding is in line with previous models of wellness i.e., (Hettler, 1976; Myers, Luecht, & Sweeney, 2004; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), particularly in the inclusion of physical, social, and

mental health domains as key to wellness. MEI students seemed to be aware of the need for social support, maintenance of good physical health (through healthy diets, sleep, and exercise), and pursuit of habits that resulted in mental health such as routine building.

Previous research (Ayala, Winseman, Johnsen, & Mason, 2018; Kanekar et al., 2010) suggested that mindfulness resulted in lower stress and increased lifestyle fulfillment. Most of the participants learned this the hard way as they struggled in their first two years before realizing that self-care was key in healthy living. Only after feeling isolated and stressed out did they realize that they needed to build a new life abroad such as making new friendships, keeping touch with family, look after their physical needs, build life routines, and practice self-compassion (Clarke, 2023).

Secondary domains of wellness were career, religious, and coping wellness. Although middle eastern college students (Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2007, 2012) were reportedly religious, this study showed that, while still important, not all students believed in the centrality of religious practices. Previous research suggested that domestic college students needed some form of religious or spiritual connection in order to overcome hardships and rekindle hopeful thinking (Anderson, 2020; Weber & Pargament, 2014). Most of the participants sought religion as a refuge during pivotal times by reevoking hope and optimism. While not central, it appeared that religion is engrained in the psyche of MEI students, despite lack of awareness during transition years.

Despite the importance of academic success (Astin, 1999; Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012), international students reconstruct new lives in the host country and only consider academic success a part of the story. MEI students consider academic wellness a secondary domain of wellness, indicating that professional helpers need to let go of the idea that main goal of international students is to obtain a degree and leave. College life include many aspects, including academic success (Aladegbaiye, De Jong, & Beldad, 2022), and universities can better help international students through improvement of learning experience and sense of belonging (Marangell & Baik, 2022).

Implications

The findings of this grounded theory study have several implications for practice. The study has revealed a unique way of experiencing wellness through self-care practices of minoritized Middle Eastern international students in a public university in the US. Minority international students are often misunderstood or that they are lumped together as one group. However, international students come from across the world, each with a unique cultural, social, religious, and economic background.

University professionals may better understand how wellness looks like for MEI students. Higher education professionals, for instance, can direct students to adopt a balanced lifestyle that includes a variety of daily activities, such as the importance of extracurricular activities in building social support networks. Other

university professionals, such as counselors and social workers, can tap on personal strengths that international students already possess, such as coping skills, socializing, culture, and religion.

Many international students lack the skills or the positive attitudes towards self-care and its role in their success and wellbeing. Teaching wellness to college students should be a basic need for success during college (Johnson, Bauman, & Pociask, 2019). This study suggested that hope, knowledge of self-care, optimism, and attitudes towards self-care can be important factors in helping minority MEI students succeed. Students involved in self-care had higher perceived wellbeing scores (Bowden, 2022). University professionals may tap on daily activities that could maximize students' success, thus increasing student resilience through self-care (Yang & Tian, 2023).

For Mental Health Professionals

Lack of understanding international student needs (i.e., building purposeful support networks) may hinder helping international students (Perry et al., 2016; Tran et al., 2022). Results of this study provide crucial insights into the lifestyles of minority international students that constitute self-care. Mental health professionals should encourage daily habits that give structure and help students function effectively (Yee & Smith, 2022). Findings of this study can help in designing interventions for minority students by asking students about daily habits and designing interventions considering self-care habits (Volkova, & Kolesov, 2022).

For International Student Sponsors

International students' sponsoring organizations and governments can find the results of this study useful. One of the skills that MEI students specifically lacked was self-care skills. Sponsors are encouraged to train first year international students in building and working on their self-care habits. Most undergraduate international students are emerging adults. Arnett (2010) suggested that adult pressure to meet expectations of can exacerbate college students' problems. College students, particularly minorities likely suffer from poor self-efficacy beliefs and need constant mentorship (Baier, Markman, & Pernice-Duca, 2016). International student sponsors are encouraged to institute mentoring programs in which senior or former students help first-year students by providing logistical, social, and emotional support. Student sponsored organizations or clubs should also design onboarding programs for new international students to minimize the impact of transition on student wellbeing.

For Universities

Research suggests that universities must teach wellness to college students as part of the curriculum (Clarke, 2023; Johnson et al., 2019; Tobin, Powietrzynska, & Alexakos, 2015). Johnson and colleagues suggested that teaching self-care, just like teaching math, was important in improving quality of life for college students. As emerging adults, Arnett (2010) suggested that college students are pressured to meet parental expectations and grow up. This added dimension of pressure can

easily derail college students from taking care of their basic wellness needs, resulting in increased cases of anxiety, depression, and isolation (Center for Collegiate Mental Health: CCMH, 2022). As such, universities are urged to teach wellness and self-care to all students as it may lower costs for mental health support services as well as increase students' chances for success. Universities can also foster sense belonging because it reportedly protected against distress and increase wellbeing (Marangell & Baik, 2022).

Strengths and Limits

The current study has several strengths. It investigated a unique topic that was never explored with international students using a systematic grounded theory approach. This study tried to understand the *what* and *how* of self-care for international students, particularly middle eastern students. The second strength is that the study investigated how self-care enhanced university adjustment, adding support to calls for teaching students wellbeing and self-care as a university requirement. More importantly, the findings provide practical knowledge about life domains that are important to international students without assuming that academic success is the main piece of the international student experience.

Despite these strengths, the study acknowledges several limits. The first limit was the imbalance in gender distribution in the sample. While grounded theory research does not require equal gender representation, it may have yielded slightly different results if the study had 50% men and 50% women. The second limit to the study was timeframe. The author intended to conduct follow up interviews, but several students graduated by the time data was fully coded and analyzed. Access to those participants was not allowed as per Institutional Review Board guidelines as they were not students affiliated to the university. In addition, the study could have collected more data to ensure saturation. Although saturation tends to happen after 8 interviews in grounded theory (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018), more interviews could have resulted in deeper understanding of the topic with more diverse participants.

Study Ethical Approval: The study was approved by the institutional review board prior to conducting interviews.

Conflict of Interest: The author confirms that there was no conflict of interest during the study and none of the participants had any prior or shared interests that affected participation decision.

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