# Capturing simultaneity: International students' connectedness and identity perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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# Abstract

Fostering meaningful intercultural connections between international and local students has been one of the key priorities in Australian strategy for international education, with the aim of improving students' experiences and strengthening the country's position as a leading global education provider. Despite these efforts, a number of studies in Australia have documented a lack of engagement between international and domestic students. This study aims to explore the underlying reasons for this absence of local friendships in international students' social networks. The investigation includes exploring international students' perspectives on their connections with host, home, and co-national contacts, as well as examining their agency in managing these relationships. Furthermore, the study seeks to uncover the interplay between international students' perceptions of identity and their social connections. The transnational social fields concept serves as the theoretical framework for the research design and data analysis, enabling this study to explore the complexities of social relationships and the multiple identities that students construct while studying abroad.

Through social network analysis and semi-structured interviews with nine Vietnamese students in Adelaide, this study identified five factors that influence the development and management of international students' relationships with others. These factors include four personal aspects: students' goals for studying abroad, affection for the host country, personality traits, and assessment of pre-existing relationships, as well as one external factor, which is the environment. International students' perceptions of identity were found to be closely associated with these personal factors and influence their evaluation of their social needs. The study also highlighted the students' agency in fostering, maintaining, or excluding contacts from their social networks to acquire essential resources, overcome challenges, and realise their aspirations. However, international students' ability to exercise their agency can be influenced by external factors beyond their control, which may present opportunities or

challenges for them to initiate or maintain social connections. These findings shed light on the reasons why international students may lack interest in cultivating friendships with local students, as well as factors that may hinder their efforts even when they have the desire to do so.

This study contributes to the understanding of international students' social experiences in the host country by examining the importance of self-perceptions and personal agency. Findings from this study suggests future research acknowledging the diversity of cultures and recognise the role of international students' unique characteristics and personal experiences in their identity projection and relationship management. Additionally, practical recommendations for educational institutions are provided to help them achieve their goal of fostering intercultural interactions between local and international students.

# Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Date: 26th March 2023

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

As the number of international students across the globe continues to rise, there has been a corresponding growth in research interest regarding their experiences. It has been observed that international students' experiences are associated with their academic performance and general well-being (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Sawir et al., 2008). Moreover, students' positive experiences can also enhance the host country's reputation as a desirable study destination, thereby improving its economic prospects in the region. Hence, there have been many attempts to study the experiences of international students, with the aim of identifying areas that require improvement for the host country and educational institutions. The majority of these studies have concentrated on the lack of interaction between international students and local students and communities, raising concerns regarding the students' ability to adapt to the host country. This indicates a need for further research to investigate the underlying causes of the lack of interactions and to recommend measures for countries and institutions to enhance their support for international students and improve their experiences in the host country.

The present study aims to contribute to the existing body of research by examining international students' perspectives on their social relationships with various contacts, with the intention of identifying the reasons behind the absence or prevalence of specific types of contacts within their networks. Additionally, this study seeks to explore the association between international students' connectedness and identity, as Tran and Gomes (2017) suggest that these two concepts are closely interrelated and central to international students' experiences. To the best of my knowledge, there has been limited prior investigation into international students' personal views on how their identity and social relationships influence each other (Gomes et al., 2014; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013), and thus, this study aims to address this gap in knowledge. Through these findings, this study wants to expand the

understanding of international students' experiences, with an emphasis on their social relationships and perceptions of identity. This study is also relevant in the context of Australia, which is a popular destination for international students, and South Australia, which is emerging as an increasingly popular study destination within Australia. Therefore, it is crucial to first comprehend the international education contexts in Australia and South Australia to determine how this study can contribute to their strategies in this sector.

## 1.1 International education contexts in Australia and South Australia

International education has long been recognised as a super-growth sector in Australia. By providing opportunities for the country to capitalise on the increasing global demand for education services, the sector contributes to Australia's transition from a resource-based economy to a modern services economy (Australian Government, n.d.). The country is among the most popular study destinations for international students, attracting 619,371 enrolments in 2022 (Department of Education, n.d.). In South Australia where my research took place, international education was the second largest export, contributing $1.8 billion to the economy in 2018 (South Australia Department for Trade, Tourism and Investment, 2019). According to Deloitte Access Economics (2018), one enrolment in higher education in South Australia contributes $51,000 value added and 0.33 full-time equivalent jobs. In other words, every three international students in South Australia provides the demand to create one local job. International education supplies a highly qualified pool of graduates, boosts population growth, and helps the state move towards a more diverse economy with a focus on knowledge-based services, research, healthcare, and food and wine production, instead of relying on mining and traditional manufacturing (South Australia Department for Trade, Tourism and Investment, 2019).

In light of international education's significant impact on the economies of Australia and South Australia, both the country and the state have set a goal to further expand this sector.

However, Australia's border closures due to Covid-19 from 1 February 2020 severely impacted the education industry, leading to a nine per cent decline in international student numbers in 2020 and a further seventeen per cent decline in 2021 across the whole country (Department of Education, 2022). South Australia was not an exception, with fifty-five per cent decline in student visas in 2020 (South Australian Centre for Economic Studies, 2021). In efforts to revive the international education sector, in November 2021 the Australian government introduced a plan called "roadmap to recovery" as part of the "Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030". At the end of 2022, there were indications of recovery when the number of international students increased by eight per cent compared to the same period of the previous year (Department of Education, 2022). South Australia also saw the return and enrolment of international students following the reopening of Australian borders in March 2022 (Spence, 2022). Despite these positive improvements, the number of international students in the year 2022 remained below those recorded pre-pandemic. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for a more sustainable growth strategy for the international education sector, both for the country and the state. The following section explores the approach taken by the Australian and South Australian governments for international education in the coming decade that is relevant to this research. The plans emphasise the promotion of intercultural interaction between international students and their Australian counterparts with the objective of enhancing the nation's and state's reputation as premier study destinations that offer exceptional experiences for both international students and domestic students.

### 1.1.1 Foster intercultural interactions and understanding

The "Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030" by the Department of Education outlines four priorities for the next ten years; one of which is enhancing the connections between international students and the Australian student and community populations. The aim is to improve the study experiences of both international and domestic

students and solidify Australia's position as a leading global education provider in the region and its connections with the global community. The strategy seeks to develop intercultural understanding and competence among students and prepare them for the demands of globalised workforce by fostering deep people-to-people links. The strategy also recognises the significance of making international students feel welcomed, valued, and included by local students and communities to support positive experiences and well-being. Thus, it outlines steps to promote international students and Australian students' connections beyond the bounds of campuses and into local communities, with the Australian Government collaborating with the international education sector to facilitate these linkages (Department of Education, 2021).

In the South Australian context, the State Government also acknowledges the importance of local and host connections, as demonstrated in their "International Education Strategy 2019-2029". The strategy aims to integrate international and intercultural engagement into every student's educational experience within a world-class education system (South Australian Department of Education, 2019). The establishment of meaningful international and local relationships offers multiple economic benefits for the state. In South Australia, where the population is aging and the working age population is declining, international students play a role in the labour market as part of overseas migrants (South Australian Centre for Economic Studies, 2021). Hence, their social interactions with local students and communities can provide them with the skills needed to succeed in the Australian workforce. According to South Australia Department of Education (2020), connections between international students and local students also hold great potential for improving the innovation, productivity, and global competitiveness of South Australia. Through promoting cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, international and local students can acquire valuable knowledge and abilities that are crucial in today's increasingly interconnected world. These abilities, such as efficient

communication and teamwork, are highly sought after by employers, making individuals more marketable on a global scale.

### 1.1.2 From multicultural to intercultural

From a social perspective, encouraging intercultural engagement between international and local students is rooted in the need for socially sustainable societies, where diverse individuals and groups can work together to achieve equitable outcomes for both local and global communities (South Australia Department of Education, 2020). This aligns with UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education initiatives that encourage educational institutions to foster positive interpersonal relationships among students, establish inclusive communities, and educate core competencies that enable students to actively engage with the world. Education for global citizenship assists students in developing a sense of belonging to a shared humanity and in forming social connections while promoting respect for diversity (UNESCO, n.d.).

According to South Australia Department of Education (2020), the implementation of intercultural understanding and global citizenship education reflects a shift from a multicultural approach to an intercultural perspective and beyond. The concept of multiculturalism emerged in 1970s as a means of managing migration and cultural diversity in Western societies, driven by the social and political movements of the time which aimed at promoting equality, liberty, and unity (Elias et al., 2021; Modood, 2013; Syed & Kramar, 2009). In Australia, multiculturalism has been the official government policy on race and ethnic relations since 1972 to promote equal recognition and opportunities to be involved in decision making and participate in Australian politics for all cultural and ethnic groups (Harding, 1995). Supporters of this strategy assert that multiculturalism is in line with national interests as it enriches a society's culture and economy, advances social justice, and fosters social cohesion (Ho, 1990). According to Modood (2013), multiculturalism views migrants as co-citizens within a pluralism in which all identities are valued, in contrast to the

assimilationist approach, which defends a historical national homogeneity. Thus, Kymlicka (2012, p. 6) describes multiculturalism as an integral "component of a greater human-rights movement involving ethnic and racial diversity."

Nevertheless, the concept of multiculturalism has been met with a significant scepticism among researchers. According to Cantle (2001, p.9), multiculturalism and its policies allow for cultural diversity and the coexistence of cultural groups, but do not necessarily lead to interactions between them. This can result in communities where people live "parallel lives" with little to no contact with one another, leaving little room to challenge stereotypes and prejudices. This argument is supported by Zapata-Barrero (2017) who contends that multiculturalism has resulted in the fragmentation of society into communities that are inward-looking in their identity and disconnected from the larger political community. Hence, the researcher suggests embracing interculturalism as an alternative approach which reduces the emphasis on cultural differences and promotes cultural diversity.

Interculturalism focuses on incorporating different cultural groups into society as a shared resource for the benefit of the whole community. The intercultural approach addresses an aspect that may have been neglected by multiculturalism, which is the importance of interaction, exchange, and dialogue between individuals from diverse backgrounds (Zapata-Barrero, 2017). In comparison to multicultural policies, interculturalism has not been as widely adopted in Australia as it has in Europe and Canada. The implementation of intercultural practices mainly takes place in specific sectors, especially in education (Elias et al., 2021). This is reflected in the "Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030" and the South Australian "International Education Strategy 2019-2029" which emphasise on the importance of not only learning about cultures, but also fostering of intercultural engagement among different cultural groups. The connections formed between international and local students are believed to have benefits that go beyond cultural

awareness and knowledge, as they also help students develop respect, communication skills, empathy, and critical thinking about cultural stereotypes and prejudices.

However, in reality, lack of social exchanges between international and local students in Australia have been documented in many existing studies (Gomes, 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011; McKenzie & Baldassar 2016; Tran et al., 2022), sparking concerns among researchers and educators regarding the possibility of reaching the objectives set out by the country and state's strategies. This has prompted this research project to look into the social networks of international students and their lack of interactions with local students and communities in an effort to explore why these interactions are scarce and provide recommendations to foster them.

## 1.2 Aims and research questions

The objective of this study is to make a valuable addition to the current literature and to address the disparity between educational policies' expectations of international students' social networks and the actual situation in which these networks are formed. More specifically, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. In what ways do international students cultivate and handle their relationships with multiple contacts, including those from local and cross-border domains, and how do they perceive these connections?
2. How does the interplay between international students' identity and social interactions unfold?

By finding answers to these questions, I identify factors that contribute to the lack of friendships between international and host students and to provide recommendations to

institutions on how to foster intercultural engagement, thus contributing towards achieving national and state international education objectives.

The research particularly focusses on Vietnamese international students. Vietnam has consistently ranked high among the major sources of international students in Australia, placing fifth after China, India, Nepal, and Colombia (Department of Education, 2022). The increase in the number of Vietnamese students in Australia over the last few decades can be attributed to three factors. Firstly, the Vietnamese government has implemented strategic policies since 2009 to encourage overseas study in developed countries as a means of enhancing human resource development (MOET, 2008). Secondly, the country's economic growth and increased purchasing power allow more Vietnamese parents to afford overseas study for their children (Dang & Tran, 2017). Thirdly, Vietnamese students are drawn to the quality of Australian education and the post-study work and migration prospects (Austrade, 2019). Despite the crucial role played by Vietnamese students in Australia's international education, there is a lack of research on this group of students. Therefore, this research project has opted to focus on Vietnamese students to enhance understanding of students from this country.

## 1.3 Thesis structure

Building on this introductory chapter, the remainder of this present thesis will be organised as follows. Chapter 2, 'International students in the context of transnationalism', provides an overview of relevant literature on migration theory and aims to conceptualise the experiences of international students within the framework of transnationalism. Moreover, the chapter introduces the theoretical framework of transnational social fields, which serves as the foundation for the research design and analysis. Chapter 3 'International students' connectedness and identity' provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the connectedness and identity of international students to identify research gaps that can be

addressed using a transnational approach. In chapter 4, I describe the methodology and methods used in this study. The chapter provides justifications for the use of mixed methods and explains the data collection process using social network analysis and interviews and their limitations. Furthermore, this chapter provides information about data analysis and a brief summary of research participants. Chapter 5, 'Findings', reports on the empirical findings of the study, drawing on data gathered from both social network analysis and interviews. Chapter 5 delves into the structures of the social networks of the student participants, examining the factors that contribute to their composition. Additionally, this chapter presents the analysis of the participants' views on identity and its relationship to their social connectedness. In chapter 6, I consolidate and analyse these findings in response to the two research questions that have been posed. The transnational social fields theory serves as a theoretical framework to contextualise the analysis. Additionally, the study's findings are connected to other pertinent literature in the domain of international student research to offer a more nuanced comprehension of the research findings. Finally, chapter 7 provides a summary of the research, and connects the two research questions to emphasise the thesis's central goal: contribute to existing literature and to narrow the gap between the expectations set by educational policies for international students and the reality of how these networks are established. This chapter also expands on the thesis' theoretical implications and makes recommendations for universities to improve their support for international students.

## 1.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter introduced the thesis and its focus on exploring international students' connectedness and identity, with a particular emphasis on Vietnamese international students. The rationale for this project was also presented, as this study aims to explore the reasons behind the absence of international-host relationships that may impede institutions' efforts to achieve Australian and South Australian international education international education objectives of promoting intercultural engagement.

# Chapter 2: International students in the context of transnationalism

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the existing literature on transnationalism in order to establish its relevance to the study of international students' connectedness and identity. Carling et al. (2021) and Tran and Gomes (2017) assert that it is crucial to depart from the conventional depiction of migration as an uprooted process which simplifies international students' lived encounters into a binary framework of home and host. Rather, it is necessary to adopt a transnational perspective to enhance understanding of the students' social interactions and identity formation across national boundaries. The concept of transnationalism provides a useful framework for analysing the multiple cross-border connections and affiliations international students can develop during their study abroad and manifold identities they construct during this experience. In order to establish a solid foundation for the forthcoming detailed investigation of international students' transnational experiences, this chapter will provide a review of the literature on transnationalism theories and research that contextualises international students within the transnational paradigm as the primary theoretical basis for this research project.

## 2.2 International students as transmigrants

With student migration becoming a global phenomenon, scholars have increasingly paid attention to international students as a special category of migrants. There are two distinctions that set them apart from other types of migrants which include (1) conditional mobility yet highly individualised migration trajectories and (2) hyper transnational practices. According to Carling et al., (2021, p. 3), international students' mobility is "conditioned by institutionalised temporal units (semesters and degrees), typically all within a 'student' phase of the life cycle". Student visas in most countries are restricted by the length of the degrees,

and students are usually expected to depart the host country within a few months after completing their courses. That being said, international students' migration journeys do not simply end after graduation. Although some return home, many remain temporarily in the host country to work, seek permanent residency, or move to a different country (Hari et al., 2021). International students' migration trajectories, thus, are highly individualised, complex, and multidimensional, involving both global mobility and local emplacement (Collins, 2012).

This leads to their second distinction: hyper transnational practices. Carling et al. (2021) finds that international students constantly engage in transnational living, both physically and virtually. Due to academic terms, international students have the flexibility to visit family and friends or take on vacation jobs and internships back home during school holidays. When not physically present, the students still engage with lives and practices in other places through communication technologies, such as mobile devices or social media, which play a vital part in the lives of these young and tech-savvy students who have a strong need to keep in touch with people back home or elsewhere (Liu-Farrer, 2011; Robertson, 2013; Tran & Pham, 2015). In addition, even when they are abroad, international students are still required to uphold their civic responsibilities, such as voting, or religious practices tied to their home country and culture, while fulfilling their educational responsibilities within host academic institutions to meet visa requirements, performing many other social roles such as workers, entrepreneurs (Nielsen & Gartner, 2016), transnational traders (Zhao, 2021), or political actors in both their home and host countries (Hari et al., 2021). Hence, the term 'transmigrants' coined by Glick Schiller et al. (1992) accurately captures the realities of international students which involve a wide range of cross-border familial, social, cultural, political, and economic ties that they maintain throughout their study abroad journey. Hari et al. (2021) also describe international students as quintessential transnational actors who in addition to continually dividing their attachments, interactions, and presence over several geographical zones, also adopt many identities as a result. Therefore, in order comprehend the

complexities of these connections and international students' agency and ability in orchestrating their personal networks and constructring their multiple identies rooted in relationships with others, this study will employ the concept of transnationalism and transnational social fields as the theoretical framework to guide its research structure and methods.

## 2.3 Defining transnationalism

According to Glick Schiller et al. (1992), conventional views of migration frequently evoke the visions of permanent disruption, uprooting, the abandonment of old patterns, and the acquisition of a new language and culture. With the evolution of communication technologies that have made cross-border contact simpler than ever before, the researchers posit that this perspective is no longer adequate (Glick Schiller et al, 1992). The Internet, personal digital devices, and social media have resulted in a new type of migrant population consisting of individuals whose social networks, activities, and lives transcend nation-state borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). This phenomenon is referred to as transnationalism, which Levitt (2001, p. 202) defines as "the cultural, economic, and political linking of people and institutions [that] de-emphasizes the role of geography in the formation of identity and collectivity and creates new possibilities for membership across boundaries". Transnationalism, in other words, is characterised by the preservation of multiple linkages across different nations between individuals, communities, and organisations, involving economic operations, cultural practices, political affiliations, and social networks. During this process, individuals establish cultural and social identities that are anchored in both their home country and the country of settlement.

The emergence of studies on migrant transnationalism also challenges the approach of methodological nationalism which is defined by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, p. 302) as the "assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the

modern world". According to this assumption, individuals are viewed as representatives of a nation, culture, or ethnicity as though they are the natural unit of analysis and the fundamental source of identity. Hence, the assumptions of methodological nationalism have been criticised for their limited grasp of the complexity and diversity of contemporary reality in a globalised world by ignoring the transnational flows and interconnections that exist between individuals, communities, and countries (Dervin, 2013; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). However, it is important to note that the concept of transnationalism does not negate the importance of geographical space. National boundaries and sociocultural spaces are still significant in shaping the experiences and activities of migrants. Pries (2005) recognises that material and symbolic geographies of different countries can have an effect on the economic activities or social and cultural practices of migrants in their home and host countries. Thus, migrants' lived experiences should be contextualised within a multidimensional societal space that takes into consideration the contributions of diverse geographic scales and social structures in shaping their lives. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) hold a similar viewpoint in that the concept of society is still very important within transnationalism, enabling for research into power relations and privilege exercised by social actors. As a result, they developed the concept of the transnational social field as a method to reassess and reframe the concept of society so that it is no longer inherently linked with the confines of a single nation-state, as well as to investigate migrants' transnational social practices.

## 2.4 Transnational social field and international students

According to Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001, p. 544), a transnational social field is defined as "an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations". The concept of transnational social fields focuses on how transmigrants participate in their lives and activities in the home country, while also engaging in academic and occupational endeavours, participating in community

activities, and involving themselves in the political milieu of their new place of residence (Basch et al., 2005; Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001). The core principle of this concept is that human interactions serve as a focal point for cross-border interchange and contestation of ideas, behaviours, and resources, calling into question the previously neat categorisation of social ties into local, national, transnational, and global. Individuals may now access information tying them to other nation-states while remaining in their home country, thanks to the growth of communication technologies and the connections established by migrants within their transnational fields. Conversely, transmigrants also engage in local activities while still preserving transnational relationships (Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001). As a result, a focus on transnational social fields steers research away from methodological nationalism and resultant restrictive perspectives on migrants' connections, affiliations, attachments, and activities.

The reason for using the concept of transnational social fields as the theoretical framework for this study stems from the concept's ability to shed light on international students' sense-making and agency in constructing their social ties and identity that has received little attention in the existing literature. Additionally, Gargano (2009) recommends using an alternative way to studying international students' connectedness and identity that diverges from the common approach which normally prioritises the perspectives and objectives of the host country. The common approach entails capturing the state of international students' social networks and identities then investigating on how these aspects influence their adaptation to the host society. According to Gargano (2009), an alternate method like transnational social fields would allow academics to offer international students opportunities to voice their perspectives and involve in the construction of scholarly narratives about their lived experiences. Gargano (2009) provides two benefits for how transnational social fields contribute to better understanding of international students:

rejecting generalisation and homogenisation of international students and respecting simultaneity of locations and plurality in their identities.

In explaining the first benefit, Gargano (2009) contends that it is common practice across literature and institutions to homogenise international students based on the assumption that their experiences are uniform. This has contributed to the proliferation of generalisations, overlooking the vast diversity that exists within and between cultures. Machart (2018, p. 125) shares a similar view when stating that international students are frequently classified as "deficient Others" whose cultures and experiences as foreigners contribute to their own alienation from the local community. Such a deficit model of discourse on international students is indicative of the proclivity to establish a us/them opposition, which perpetuates the assimilation bias that portrays international students as similar to each other but different from the host community. This bias further fosters discriminatory practices that engender the notion of host societies and cultures as being superior to those of international students (Marchart, 2018). This issue will be discussed in further depth in Chapter 3, which analyses literature on international students' adaptation and connectedness. Gargano (2009) contends that the concept of transnational social fields can assist studies move away from generalising international students as a "homogenized enclave of otherness" (Cohen, 2004, p. 125). Instead, researchers can investigate unique students' self-defined perspectives and identity negotiations, as well as the various paths they take in navigating their study abroad experiences and incorporating their cultures, practices, changes, and encounters with various learning and social environments.

In using a framework of transnational social fields, this study is able to situate international students' experiences within a large network of social relations, such as relationships with family, friends back home and abroad, teachers, and community members, and how these relationships may influence their experiences as well as how these students see themselves.

Overall, the concept of transnational social fields is an appropriate and useful paradigm for directing this study to investigate the complexity and multidimensional identities and experiences of international students, including the larger social and cultural contexts within which these experiences occur.

The concept of transnational social fields also emphasises the simultaneity of transnationalism and integration, therefore challenging the premise that these processes are a zero-sum game (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). In the context of research on transnationalism and the transnational social field, integration is frequently viewed as a process of migrant adaptation, situated between assimilation and separation (Berry, 1997), which will be expanded in the next chapter in connection with literature on international students. Erdal and Oeppen (2013) explains that historically, studies on integration are based on the need of governments to demonstrate their competence in regulating migration and fostering social cohesion in the face of rising global mobility. Such intepretation considers integration as a unidirectional process in which the state's demands for migrants to integrate into the host society are viewed as fixed and prioritised, resulting in negligence of migrants' will and agency. According to Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003), this perspective also frequently focuses on differences between groups, particularly between ethnic minority migrant groups and the majority population. Therefore, it has been criticised for methodological nationalism as a result of its inclination to essentialise 'the national' in connection to the majority population and minority groups, neither of which are monolithic entities. There has been a shift towards a more recent approach that considers integration as a negotiation process between groups and individuals in which differences are appraised based on their perceived acceptability (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, p. 1003) state that integration and transnationalism are parallel processes that "are neither incompatible nor binary opposites. Instead, we suggest thinking of the transnational migration experience as a kind of gauge which, while anchored, pivots between host land and transnational connections".

Thus, employing a framework of transnational social fields enables this study to analyse the simultaneity of location and diversity of identities in the examination of the identity construction of international students (Gargano, 2009). The acknowledgement of various identities of students is essential to addressing a gap in the research on international students, as it acknowledges their ability to balance their identity and social commitment to both their home country and their new life abroad. According to Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), transnational social fields also illuminate the relationship between involvement in transnational social fields and a person's identities via ways of being and belonging. Ways of being are social interactions and activities that an individual engages in, whereas ways of belonging are behaviours that proclaim affiliation with a certain group (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). While the behaviours of one may lead to the other, according to Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), they are not always contiguous. While egocentric networks are the infrastructures of transnational social fields, the cultural, social, political, and legal frameworks within or between which the fields are located remain highly relevant and play a role in generating categories of identities ascribed to or selected by individuals. There are several means by which one might traverse between these distinct identities. One may, for instance, opt to engage in particular cultural or group activities yet not identify with them. In contrast, it is possible to demonstrate a connection to a group without physically being in that nation (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Utilising transnational social fields enables this study to get nuanced understandings of how international students blend transnational ways of being and belonging differently depending on their situation as the students develop a sense of self while studying abroad. The concept of transnational social fields also emphasises the multiple nature of identities, such as macro-level (e.g., sociological, political, and economic settings), meso-level (e.g., organisations, communities), and micro-level (e.g. individuals, families). Simultaneously, it allows for the examination of identities through behavioural processes as

ways of being and cognitive and emotional processes as ways of belonging (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Gargano, 2009).

In addition to the two reasons Gargano (2009) provides to emphasise the need for incorporating the concept of transnational social fields in studying international students' connectedness and identity, I propose a third reason why this concept might assist in understanding the transnational experiences of foreign students. In particular, transnational social fields concept enables the investigation of the roles of communication technologies in enabling international students to maintain transnational ties and sense of co-presence within their transnational social fields, which contributes to their identity (trans)formation.

### 2.4.1 Communication technology, emotions, and identity in transnational social fields

As previously discussed, communication technology plays a central role in the transnational social field by promoting connectivity between individuals and groups across geographical borders and within localities. It helps migrants maintain a sense of presence in many regions and networks, access information about their home and host cultures, and participate in various of forms of online social and cultural activities (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Thus, Glick Schiller et al.'s (1992) concept of transmigrants who inhabit transnational social fields is comparable to the notion of the "connected migrant" introduced by Diminescu (2008, p. 568). This concept refers to migrants who possess digitalised devices that facilitate their transition between distinct lifestyles, and access to connected digitalised environments that allow them to interact with contacts in their home country, host country, or other regions. The lived experiences of the connected migrant are characterised by the co-presence of social and cultural aspects, as well as relationships and attachments, that relate to both the country of origin and the country of destination. These aspects constantly exist in the migrant's everyday life and may also linger in their mind and heart even after the act of communication has

ended. As Diminescu (2019) posits, contact may be momentary, but presence is everlasting. Despite the fact that migrants may engage in short communication with family and friends back home via mobile devices, those individuals continue to have a substantial impact on migrants' everyday lives throughout their migration journeys, alongside their physical experiences and connections in the host country. According to Leurs (2019), such co-presence has the potential to elicit a variety of affective responses and emotional experiences, which can be transmitted and shared among migrant families and social circles via digital communication networks.

The idea of affect is important for the understanding of the relationship between emotions and the body, as it refers to the body's capacity to affect and be affected by the world around it (Anderson, 2014). Massumi (1995) defines affect as an automatic bodily response that is not necessarily connected to conscious thoughts, whereas emotion is influenced by social and cultural factors that shape the interpretation of an individual's experience. This understanding of affect leads to the conceptualisation of emotions as 'social' because the expression of emotions is a way individuals communicate their internal experiences to others (Hochschild, 2008). For example, an individual's happiness or anger sometimes function as communicative acts in response to other subjects. These emotional displays can have social consequences. Emotions can create a sense of connection through shared empathy or disconnection between individuals due to a sense of alienation. Thus, emotions are not just internal states but are deeply intertwined with social dynamics and can influence and be influenced by social interactions and relationships (Wise & Velayutham, 2017). In studies on transmigrants, this perspective has been translated into scholarship on the impacts digital communication practices have on one's emotions. For instance, in their discussion of transnational families, Madianou and Miller (2012) note that online emotional contacts and acts of care enabled by mobile technology allow Filipina mothers to feel like mothers again. For these mothers, mobile phones become more than just a tool for communications as they are the place for

emotional connections and expressions. These devices become part of the emotional ritual, helping the mothers feel close to their children when they are physically apart. When it comes to transnational friendships, Sinanan and Gomes's (2020) research demonstrates that emotions and intimacy lie at the heart of these friendships. They find that students often keep in touch with their friends back home or abroad as a strategy to maintain emotional connections and help them feel present in each other's life. However, not all emotions cultivated from digital transnational communication are positive. Diminescu (2019) describes communication technology as pharmacological, understood as both medicine and poison. Communication technology allows transmigrants to keep in touch with loved ones which helps them cope with negative emotions such as loneliness and stress, as well as develop new connections in the host country. However, Diminescu (2019) posits that it can also pose new challenges and limitations, including new digitalised enclaves, or a sense of emotional duty that place additional burdens on migrants who may already be dealing with a range of emotional and practical challenges.

In the literature on the interconnectedness and identity of international students, the area of transnational communication and emotions has not been sufficiently explored. This constitutes a significant area of potential research, given the contention by Sinanan and Gomes (2019) that the examination of the intersection of relationships, communication, and emotions is essential to comprehending the self-identification of international students and their experiences in cross-cultural contexts. Therefore, incorporating communication technologies into the research of international students' transnational social fields not only illuminate their interactions with contacts within these fields, but also provides important insights into the lasting emotional ties and sentiments that result from such communication. Understanding such affect and emotion is crucial to comprehending international students' way of belonging because it concerns their feelings of attachment and familiarity to certain

groups and spaces, which in turn influence their understanding of their own identities (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

## 2.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has provided an overview of the theoretical framework of transnationalism and transnational social fields in relation to the study of the connectedness and identity of international students. The concept of transnational social fields acknowledges that a person's social relationships cannot be analysed in isolation, but must be contextualised within their familial and broader social contexts. This framework has the potential to move away from the practise of homogenising the experiences of international students and instead celebrate the simultaneity of their localities and identities. In addition, the chapter unpacked key literature exploring how communication technologies can be used to maintain transnational connections and cultivate emotions that are vital to the self-identification of international students.

Finally, the significance of incorporating a transnational perspective into the study of the connectedness and identity of international students was unpacked. By situating students' experiences within a transnational social field, researchers can better comprehend the complexities of social relationships and the multiple identities students construct while studying abroad. The following chapter will review existing literature on international students. Through an analysis of the existing literature, I will demonstrate how incorporating a transnational perspective can bridge knowledge gaps in the study of the connectedness and identity of international students, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

# Chapter 3: International students' connectedness and identity

## 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a critical review of the existing literature on the connectedness and identity of international students in order to identify gaps that can be filled through the transnational approach. In this chapter, a critical evaluation of different perspectives on this subject will be presented, including identifying the areas of disagreement and convergence to provide a nuanced understanding of the topic at hand. The review then paves the way for new ways of framing the experiences of international students, which can facilitate a more comprehensive exploration of the process of connectedness and identity formation in international students' transnational social fields.

## 3.2 International students' connectedness

International students' connectedness, as defined by Tran and Gomes (2017), encompasses an individual's physical and virtual relationships with people, communities, organisations, and places. This study employs the terminology developed by Bochner, McLeod, and Lin (1977) which categorises these relationships into three distinct network classifications: co-national, multi-national, and host-national contacts. The term 'co-national contacts' will be used to refer to individuals from the same national background as the student, 'host contacts' as people from the host country, and 'multi-national contacts' as those from countries other than the student's own. The term 'home contacts' will also be used to refer to individuals residing in a student's home country.

Literature on international students' connectedness often investigate the structures of international students' social networks and their ties with people, groups, organisations in both home and host countries. An evaluation of previous research indicates that the

predominance of co-national and multi-national relationships in international students' social networks is a common theme, as is the absence of host friendships. According to Gomes (2015, p.515), international students often create a separate community among themselves, referred to as a "parallel society", that is distinct from the host population. This parallel society offers a sense of belonging, but not necessarily to the host society. When studying abroad, international students face numerous obstacles, such as loneliness and homesickness; thus, they recognise the significance of forming new friendships in order to adapt to being away from home. Gomes (2015) finds that one way these students achieve this is by seeking out individuals in Australia who share similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds, as they feel more at ease and can relate to each other's experiences. These cultural identity-based social networks provide international students with a sense of belonging, connecting them to their home and reminding them of their cultural roots. In another word, they allow international students to feel at home while being away from home. Page (2019, p.420) proposed "ethnic enclaves" as a similar concept to parallel society by Gomes (2015). According to Page (2019), ethnic enclaves describe the tendency of international students to form relationships not only with other international students from the same country, but also with larger local co-national communities. This is especially prevalent where there is a concentration of migrant populations from specific countries. In these ethnic enclaves, connections to home cultures exist in physical forms, manifesting in urban areas where co-national migrants reside, operate businesses, and follow their own traditions and religions; one example is the development of a 'Chinatown' in many large cities around the world. Page (2019) discovered that these physical cultural communities in the host country meet many of the needs of international students, such as providing companionship, employment opportunities, and places to practise their home cultures, and thereby reducing their need to interact with the dominant culture.

The lack of communication between international students and the host population can be attributed to other factors beyond the development of parallel societies or ethnic enclaves,

including language barriers. According to Randall et al. (2020), despite the fact that international students enrolling in universities in foreign countries are mandated to show proficiency in the local language, many students have the difficulties of adapting to local styles of speech and the speed at which the local language is spoken. This affects international students' confidence in communicating in the host language and contributes to negative assumptions about their language abilities among local populations. Many studies find that international students in English-speaking countries often experience discomfort when speaking English with native English speakers due to their fear of being judged for mistakes or difficulty in understanding slang or expressions (Gomes, 2015; Lim & Pham, 2016; Randall et al., 2020). In order to alleviate this discomfort, international students prefer to speak English with other international students who face similar language difficulties, or to speak in their native language with students of the same nationality (Gomes, 2015; Randall et al., 2020).

Another factor that contributes to the lack of international - local connection and international students' sense of distance towards the host culture and society, is rooted in their experience with negative stereotypes, hostility, unfriendly encounters, and discriminatory treatments from professors, domestic students or locals (Lim & Pham, 2016). According to Lim and Pham (2016), international students are frequently viewed as outsiders who lack English language proficiency and familiarity with the host education system, or as a threat to the employment and social benefits of host-country students. Additionally, negative media portrayals exacerbate the problem by portraying international students as victims of racism or immoral profiteers exploiting the host country's legal system to obtain permanent citizenship (Baas, 2014). As a result of such mistreatment, students tend to maintain a strong commitment to their co-national or multi-national groups while avoiding engagement with the host culture as a self-protection mechanism.

These experiences of finding solace with co-nationals are not unique to international students, as similar occurrences can be observed among other types of transient and transnational migrants. Jennissen et al. (2022) have documented limited social interactions between migrants and local residents in the Netherlands and other European countries. This phenomenon can be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, transient migrants often do not feel the need to develop close relationships with locals as they plan to leave eventually. Secondly, local stigmas and prejudices towards certain ethnic and cultural groups discourage connections between them. Thirdly, physical segregation in neighbourhoods, as when different groups reside and operate their daily lives in separate areas, results in limited opportunities for interactions. As a result, migrants frequently lead what Cantle (2001) calls parallel lives apart from the locals, which is a very similar concept to Gomes's (2015) parallel society observed among international students.

## 3.3 International students' connectedness with home contacts

Home contacts often receive less attention in the literature on international students compared to local co-national, multi-national, and host contacts. Due to their importance in the lives and mobility of international students, the majority of research on home connectedness focuses on family relationships and highlights various ways family-making can be facilitated across borders in transnational migration contexts (Hari et al., 2021; Zhao, 2019). Goulbourne (2010, p.3) uses the term "transnational family" to refer to types of families whose members are separated by physical distance and yet still maintain close connections across borders. Any discussion related to transnational families is incomplete without acknowledging the significance of communication technologies. While the phenomenon of the transnational family is not new, the swift advancement of digital technologies such as the Internet, mobile devices and social media platforms have revolutionised the way distant family care is practiced. Nedelcu and Wyss (2016, p. 202) argue that the ubiquitous connectedness made possible by communication technologies creates what they call "ordinary co-presence", which

provides family members a sense of togetherness and ongoing belonging despite geographical distances. According to Nedelcu and Wyss (2016), for some young migrants, using communication technologies to stay in touch with their families is merely a formality to fulfil their filial duties. On the other hand, some others make the most of these technologies to engage in more frequent and spontaneous communication with their families. Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) also find that communication technologies compensate, at least partially, for migrants' physical absence during difficult situations at home such as parental illnesses, giving both the migrants and their families a sense of security and contentment that they have fulfilled their familial responsibilities.

Researchers paid closer attention to transnational families during Covid-19 when social restrictions and lockdowns were enacted in a number of nations, restricting international students' home visits (Hari et al., 2021). According to Hari et al. (2021), family support became more crucial for international students who were prone to financial, social, and emotional hardships due to loss of jobs, changes in study courses, and lack of social interaction. Therefore, they had to rely more on family back home who unconditionally and readily provide the support they needed. This is in line with Ahlin's (2018) observation that shows parents do not 'abandon' their migrant children despite being geographically separated but collaborate in producing mediated care to sustain the family.

According to Zhao (2019), in cultures that particularly value family closeness, the maintenance of connections between family members is not only expected but also obligated. As parents of international students are often required to make a substantial financial investment in order for their children to study abroad, the students are expected to maintain close contact with their families and provide regular updates on their academic progress and daily lives in the host country. Zhao (2019) finds that these expectations can sometimes be overwhelming for international students who feel pressured to share everything and are self-

conscious about their presentation on social media. Thus, the students tend to selectively disconnect from their family by separating their communication from family and friends using different social media platforms. They also engage in the practice of restricting family members from viewing content or images that can be viewed sensitive or problematic by adjusting the visibility settings; this is done out of concern that they may unnecessarily worry their family members, leading to quarrels and conflicts (Zhao, 2019). Lim and Pham (2016) suggest that the demands placed on international students to maintain continual communication with their families at home can monopolise their time and reduce the number of possibilities they have to interact with local communities (Lim & Pham, 2016). This is also a concern shared by many researchers studying international students with regard to their co-national and multi-national interactions.

## 3.4 Concerns over international students' connectedness

The predominance of co-national contacts in the social networks of international students causes considerable concerns among researchers. Schartner (2015) asserts that co-national ties, despite providing international students a comfort space where they can freely express themselves in their mother-tongue language and practice their own cultures, may end up hindering language development and inhibiting the students from forming friendships with people from the host country. According to Kim's (2001) theory of adaptation, while co-national contacts can provide short-term support, they can impede long-term adaptation. In contrast, increased communication within the host nation can facilitate intercultural transformation. Similar perceptions can be found in the Australian and South Australian international education strategies as mentioned previously which emphasise the need for international students to have close connections with local students and communities as a quick way of developing intercultural understanding and competence (Department of Education, 2021; South Australian Department of Education, 2019). These connections offer international students' opportunities for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and skills, which

are believed to be essential for their preparation to become global citizens. Thus, Kim's (2001) theory asserts that forming friendships with individuals from the host country is advantageous, and essential for successful adaptation. Host connections foster language development and provide insights into the new cultures that can help broaden students' horizons and challenge their existing beliefs and values, thereby assisting personal growth and enriching their international experience.

In addition, host friendships have been argued to have positive effects on the mental health and well-being of international students. According to Sawir et al. (2008), loneliness among international students is caused by the feeling of exclusion from the local community and lack of an engaging social network with peers. Thus, having local friendships is significantly beneficial for international students as they help minimise the feeling of being rejected and excluded which can lead to negative emotions. At the same time, the sense of belonging and inclusion international students receive from host friendships can result in positive emotional states such as happiness and elation that help them navigate their lives in the new environment more successfully. These findings are supported by Hendrickson et al. (2011) who assert that there are correlations between host friendships and the students' satisfaction, contentment and connectedness. In the researchers' study, international students with a greater proportion of host nationals in their friendship networks reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction and contentment, as well as lower levels of homesickness, while those who had a greater proportion of co-nationals in their friendship networks reported lower levels of happiness and social connectedness (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

To sum up, researchers who raise issues about international students' absence of local friendships are mainly concerned about the impacts that has on international students' cross-cultural adaptation and social support, which will be expanded in the two following sections.

## 3.5 Acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation

This section examines two prominent theories on acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation by Berry (1997) and Kim (2001, 2015); these theories are often cited in literature concerning international students' social practices and experiences. The two theories serve as a foundation for the discussion of the functions various social groups play in the process of international students adjusting to their host country. A review of these theories will be followed by an exploration of current criticisms of the adoption of these perspectives and a discussion of alternative approaches to embrace the transnational realities of international students.

Berry (1997) proposes the concept of acculturation which is defined as a process that occurs when individual members of different cultural groups come into contact. When relocating to a new country, individuals adopt various strategies to help them cope with new changes in environment and cultural practices that may conflict with their existing perceptions rooted in their home cultures. Berry (1997) proposed four regularly adopted strategies during acculturation:

- Assimilation: absorbing the host culture but abandoning the home culture.
- Separation: keeping the home culture but not imbibing the host culture.
- Marginalisation: rejecting both home and host cultures.
- Integration: keeping home culture while successfully adapting to the host country's culture.

Acculturation comes hand in hand with adaptation which can be classified into psychological adaptation that concerns one's well-being and socio-cultural adaptation that refers to how well an individual is able to navigate in the new cultural context (Ward, 1996, as cited in Berry, 1997).

Of these four strategies, integration is considered the most positive outcome for both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of migrants because it shows their ability to reconcile competing tenets from the different cultures with which they are associated. Those who adopt the marginalisation strategy appear to be least well adapted and experience acculturative stress which may interact with their overall stress and lead to mental and physical health issues (Berry, 1997). The assimilation and separation strategies show intermediate results of the adaptation process. The study by Berry et al. (2006) also indicates that social support and connection play a significant part in the acculturation and adaption processes of an individual. Those who demonstrate a strong inclination for their home cultures and engage in frequent communication with home connections demonstrate a moderate level of psychological adaptation but a lesser level of sociocultural adaptation. Those with a strong orientation towards the host society and who engage in frequent social contacts with members of the host communities have poorer adaptation in both forms, but are still more successful than those who marginalise themselves in both their home and host cultures. Those that seek integrative techniques with an orientation towards both cultures as well as maintaining regular social connections with members of both their own group and the host society are argued to adapt the best.

Cross-cultural adaptation is frequently regarded as a desired outcome in the literature concerning international students' connectedness and experiences (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Russell et al., 2010). It is defined by Kim (2001, p.31) "as the phenomenon in which individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar cultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationship with the environment". The concept revolves around the objective of achieving a harmonious balance between the individual's internal state and the external environmental conditions they are confronted with on a daily basis. In order to be able to accomplish such harmony and adapt to the host culture,

the individual's host communication competence and their active participation in the interpersonal and mass communication activities of the host society are considered as fundamental. Kim (2001) posits that host communication competence refers to an individual's ability to interpret and convey information in accordance with the communication practices of the host culture. Participation in host interpersonal and mass communication can facilitate and be facilitated by this competence. As Kim (2001) asserts, migrants' knowledge of the host culture can lead to interactions with host individuals and societies, which in return provide opportunities for exchanges of information and insights into the host cultures and its communication system. This enables migrants to not only enhance their host communication skills, but also initiate the process of building networks of beneficial and supportive host relationships. Host communication competence also leads an individual to their participation in host mass communication activities, such as news, television shows, music, art, or literature, which help them expand the reach of new cultural learning beyond their local social environment. As a result, cross-cultural adaptation theory places an emphasis on host communication as a means by which individuals can enhance their functional fitness in the new environment, boost their psychological health, and forge an intercultural identity that is not limited to or defined by their home or host cultures' identities.

According to Kim (2015), what lies at the core of cross-cultural adaptation is acculturation, a process in which individuals adopt new cultural features and practises and become fluent in the host language. When individuals are exposed to a new culture, acculturation does not occur automatically; instead, the individual is in control of the degree to which they wish to absorb new cultural information. Acculturation and deculturation are intertwined in a sense that acculturation requires an individual to adopt new cultural elements, whereas deculturation requires them to give up on some of their old habits linked to their home culture, at least temporarily. This reflects the philosophy that there can be "no construction without destruction" (Burke, 1974, as cited in Kim, 2015). During the process of acculturation leading

to adaptation to the host environment, host interpersonal and mass communication are regarded as the best resources for migrants or non-natives to acquire exposure to the host communication system and practice the new knowledge they learn. Local co-national communities, on the other hand, while advantageous for newcomers who lack host communication competence and access to host interpersonal resources, may have a negligible impact on, or even hinder, the long-term adaptation process with regard to the host society as a whole.

Drawing on Berry's (1997) or Kim's (2001, 2015) theories on acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation, many previous studies argue that international students need to engage more actively in social exchanges with host students in order to adapt and establish their new lives more successfully in the host country (Lim & Pham, 2016; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Sawir et al., 2008). However, some researchers have raised concerns about these perceptions, as discussed next.

### 3.5.1 Criticism of adaptation

One common criticism argues that the conventional perceptions of international student' acculturation and adaptation in the existing literature treats cross-cultural adaptation as a desired and definitive outcome rather than an ongoing social process (Dervin, 2011; Marchart, 2018; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). By focusing on adaptation as the endpoint, the emphasis is placed on transforming international students into fully integrated individuals who conform to the values, norms, and practices of the host system (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). According to Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013), the majority of research on international students adopt an institutionalist approach, which entails using the dominant culture of the educational institution and host society as the benchmark for evaluating international students' social experiences. While it has been demonstrated that international students can gain considerable benefits from communicating with individuals

outside of their host society, such interactions are frequently viewed as less valuable than the social support provided by local people. It is commonly believed that international students are socially disadvantaged and have a lower likelihood of succeeding in the host society if they do not engage in frequent social interactions with members of the dominant culture (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Marchart (2018) argues that while it is completely normal to face difficulties when changing living environments, even for those who only move between cities within a country, international students' struggle is always labelled as culture shock as if they and their cultures are part of the problem. For a successful adjustment, international students are expected to accept and enjoy the new culture, make friends with local people, and leave part of their old selves behind. This perception suffers from what Erdal (2020, p.1) posit as "integration bias" in which only engagement with local communities is considered valuable to international students' experience, while transnational, co-national, and multinational communication practices are less beneficial. Such bias is problematic because it can lead to discrimination and assumptions of one group's superiority.

This links to the second criticism of acculturation and adaptation theory which focuses on the negative and stereotyping discourses in existing literature towards international students. According to Montgomery and McDowell (2009), claims that international students self-segregate, flock together, or struggle to adjust are examples of a deficit model used to explain the social and academic interactions of international students. This model assumes that international students arrive at their study location with the intention of learning its culture and assimilating into the host society, while compensating for any deficits associated with being from a foreign country. Another study by Machart (2018) reaches a similar conclusion, finding that a variety of studies induce a sense of deficiency in international students, especially when it concerns Asian students in Western societies. Rather than analysing the actual interaction between two individuals with different cultural backgrounds, international students are frequently ascribed a cultural identity that serves as a blueprint for interpreting

their conduct. While numerous variables may contribute to the absence of international-host friendships, the majority of researchers cite solely cultural and linguistic barriers as the cause. In contrast, it is believed that Asian foreign students in another Asian context or Western or native English-speaking students in Western settings are less susceptible to cultural shocks and can adapt more rapidly (McKenzie & Baldassar 2016; Rienties et al. 2014). Montgomery and McDowell (2009) explain such views may have a historical basis, as the remains of cultural and linguistic imperialism continue to exert an influence that presumes the inherent superiority of Western education. While it cannot be denied that the national and cultural contexts in which students grow up play a role in shaping their identities, values, and behaviours, Dervin (2013) and Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) emphasise the need to avoid viewing the world through a solid cultural lens because doing so overstates the internal homogeneity of communities and disregards the diversity and internal divisions within a country or culture.

To overcome the limitations of the existing literature, some researchers have proposed new approaches for examining the adaptation and connectedness of international students. One such suggestion entails adopting a global/ transnational perspective, while also recognising the personal agency of international students. According to Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013), an effective strategy should recognise the contributions of both host and non-host connections in providing international students social support needed for their adjustment to the host country while expanding the geographic scope of their social networks. In an era in which global interconnectedness holds tremendous significance for political, economic, and social life, the transition from the microcosm of the university campus and host society to the macrocosm of the world can increase the relevance of this research. Similarly, Montgomery and McDowell (2009) argue that it is important to appreciate non-host relationships that facilitate the formation of international students' identities as members of the global community, which is more aligned with the objective of global citizen education.

In addition, recognising students' personal agency in building and negotiating relationships with multiple individuals and groups, both locally and internationally, as opposed to examining their experiences through a deficit model, can provide valuable insights into their connectedness and identity beyond preconceived notions and stereotypes (Machart, 2018). Personal agency has been frequently discussed in the literature on transnationalism and transnational social fields because it enables researchers to disentangle the complexities of migrants' experiences (Diminescu, 2008; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). For international students, however, little research has been conducted thus far. These few studies on the personal agency of international students will be examined in more details in section 3.8, as they provide a guide for this study to explore international students' transnational connectedness.

## 3.6 Social support and companionship

As previously discussed, the perceptions of social support provided by various groups to international students contribute to the preference for host relationships among existing studies. Consequently, in this section I present studies on social support to explain why this is seen as important and what alternative perspectives are present in the literature.

Social support refers to the "perception or experience that one is loved and cared for, valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations" (Wills, 1991, as cited in Shu et al., 2020, p. 238). Social support is then further categorised into instrumental support, emotional support, and social companionship. Instrumental support refers to the provision of information and material aid in the form of goods or services. Emotional support entails giving guidance and discussing personal issues, while social companionship is defined as the sharing of social activities (Rook & Ituarte, 1999). Numerous studies of international students have focused on social support due to its documented linkages with students' well-being

academic achievement, and cross-cultural adaptations (Lashari et al., 2018; Sawir et al., 2008; Shu et al., 2020). Social support is often studied in relation to the qualities and characteristics of individuals' social relationships. Multiple sources of social support, including institution and faculty staff, student support services, friends, and family, have been identified (Lashari et al., 2018). When international students relocate to the host country, it is commonly considered that they run the risk of losing important social support associated with the contacts left behind in their home country. Therefore, in order to regain lost social support, international students must cultivate relationships with people from the same locality, which is claimed to be an effective coping mechanism for international students dealing with academic and psychological stress (Shu et al., 2020).

In their discussion of the roles different social groups play in international students' social networks, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) posit that host contacts are often treated as major sources of social support. Hendrickson et al. (2011) contend that even weak ties with local students play a significant role in providing international students with important instrumental support in the form of practical and locally specific information that is essential for their cross-cultural adaptation and settlement in the host country. Concerning emotional support from host individuals, Hendrickson et al.'s (2011) study also found that international students with a greater ratio of host national friends reported significantly lower levels of homesickness, were more satisfied with their study experience, and felt more connected socially. Similarly, Sawir et al. (2008) assert that local friendships are essential for alleviating loneliness. In their study, non-lonely students report facing fewer difficulties than lonely students in creating cross-cultural relationships with local students. These findings have been used by many studies as reasons for encouraging host friendships among international students.

However, several studies have also demonstrated that non-host contacts also offer international students crucial social support. According to Bittencourt et al. (2019). international students' sense of distance towards host society is largely due to the insufficient instrumental and emotional support from educational institutions. Despite the fact that many universities have developed international student services and implemented programmes to aid in the transition process, they are frequently considered by students as insufficient and not helpful. International students thus have to seek another source of support which usually happens to be co-national communities, where they are provided with more practical information and assistance. The positive influence of co-national groups on the emotional health of international students has been highlighted in addition to their instrumental help. Bittencourt et al. (2019) assert that co-national networks are an important source of social support that offer international students an emotional, cultural, and linguistic safe space to relax and freely express themselves. In a high-pressured and occasionally inhospitable academic environment where they have to constantly be vigilant, being able to authentically express themselves with people from the same linguistic and cultural background provides students much emotional relief that aids their overall well- being (Bittencourt et al., 2019). Similarly, Montgomery and McDowell (2009) discovered that the community of practice made up with diverse groups of international students who gather and bond for a brief period of time provide its members instrumental, social, and to a certain extent, emotional support. The social and intellectual interactions occurring within this community promote international students' academic success and provide them with intercultural knowledge and competence important to the preparation of becoming global citizens.

In contrast to the common assumption that social support can only be offered by people and communities who share the same place, it has been discovered that home contacts provide international students with important instrumental and emotional assistance. According to Ong and Ward (2005), international students often seek emotional support from family

members and friends living abroad, whereas the support they seek from locals is tied to everyday events such as leisure activities and physical assistance. Chavajay's (2013) study also yielded a similar result which revealed that international students in the US are more likely to reach out to family and friends living overseas for support and advice than getting help from domestic students, professors, or advisors who they feel less identified with.

Through this review of the literature, I have demonstrated that host, co-national, multi-national, and home contacts all contribute to international students' social support. According to Chavajay (2013), international students rely on both host and non-host networks for support. Despite the fact that the types and levels of assistance supplied vary between organisations, they should not be compared to determine which is more beneficial and superior. Based on this analysis of prior research, my study opts to move beyond the presumption of support and adopt a transnational lens to examine sources of social supports by allowing students to express their own perspectives on the assistance they receive from multiple contacts. This will be further discussed in the methodology chapter.

## 3.7 Social networks

The topic of social networks has been highlighted a number of times in this literature review, as it is central to studies on international students' connectedness. By examining individuals' social networks, we can unpack information about their social relationships with others, the strength of their ties, the sending and receiving of social support, and implications for students' cross-cultural adaptations (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020; Zhu et al., 2013). This study also aims to explore international students' connectedness and identity by analysing their social networks, more specifically in a smaller scale in the form of personal communities. However, prior to beginning the research, it is essential to review the theories on the subject, which serve as a foundation for this investigation into personal communities of international students.

### 3.7.1 Theories of social networks

According to Brabási (2011), lying underneath every network is a fundamental architecture consisting of *nodes* and *links*, or often referred to as *actors* and *ties* in social network analysis. Understanding the nature of these two components is important for advancing our understanding of how social networks function. How do actors decide to tie together? How are these ties distributed among actors in a network? Brabási (2011) finds that actors do not tie together randomly. Besides the structural relations of kinship, ties are formed through autonomous selection and choice. Actors often connect with those who resemble themselves, also known as homophily, based on various attributes such as professions, interests, or identities. However, they may also leave their comfort zones in a quest for innovative knowledge or competing viewpoints (Brabási, 2011). When multiple actors unite, they form communities that can be seen as isolated groups of actors operating independently. When these multiple groups connect with one another, social networks are formed.

However, not all connections are the same. Granovetter (1973) divides connections between individuals and communities into strong and weak ties. Strong and weak links distinguish the density and the degree of interconnection of communities, with highly interconnected communities exhibiting strong ties and less dense communities displaying weak ties. Between communities, it is common to see weak connecting ties. It is crucial to understand the characteristics of ties since they play an important role in nurturing social capital and distributing information (Brabási, 2011; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). According to Putnam's (2000) definition, social capital refers to the benefits derived from the linkages between actors' social networks. The formation of bonding social capital, which gives social and material support to individual actors, is linked to tightly knit communities or networks, such as families or close friendships. In contrast, bridging social capital is developed through weaker ties and allows access to a greater array of knowledge (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). These conceptions of bonding and bridging social capital are intertwined with the

previously described notions of social companionship, instrumental and emotional support. Bonding social capital with close relationships can result in greater emotional and social support, whereas bridging social capital provides instrumental help.

### 3.7.2 From networked societies to networked individualism

According to Wellman (2002), the historical trajectory of social network formation consisted of three archetypes, which reflected changes in human mobility and technological advancement. The first form, little boxes, was prevalent before the invention of the telephone, when communicating with others required walking door-to-door. In the second category, glocalization, the telephone, automobile, and aeroplane relieved some of this geographical constraint (Wellman, 2002). However, a feature of the telephone is that the person on the other end of the line may not be the intended recipient. Thus, these encounters, whether mediated by telephone, automobile, or aeroplane, were 'place-to-place'. With the broad adoption of digital technology, the third type of community building has proliferated in recent decades. Wellman et al. (2003) argues that the growing personalisation, wireless portability, and pervasive connectedness of the Internet and mobile phones have made networked individualism the foundation of community. People can now communicate immediately regardless of their location. Thus, community ties have evolved from connecting people-in-places to connecting people at any place, facilitating the formation of personal communities (Wellman et al., 2003).

### 3.7.3 Personal communities

Personal communities are based on the notion that each individual functions as a switchboard between ties and networks (Wellman et al., 2003). Each individual operates a distinct personal community network and rapidly switches among multiple sub-networks. While it is important to note that personal communities have always existed (Bender, 1978), their form has changed significantly with time. In the past, personal communities were predominantly

spatially linked, tightly bonded, and organised around identifiable social units like taverns and neighbourhoods (Keller, 1968). In the present day, many personal communities are geographically dispersed, loosely bonded, and specialised (Wellman, 2002). This change is due to the proliferation of communication technologies that facilitate personal communication, such as mobile phones, the Internet, and social media, giving individuals flexibility in customising their own community. Hence, Wellman (2002) argues that the traditional portrayal of community as a separate set of local ties has now been replaced by a focus on personal communities administered by autonomous individuals at their respective locations.

According to Chua et al. (2014), personal communities possess five distinct traits. Firstly, personal communities are geographically dispersed, with egos (focal individual) and alters (people surrounding ego) often separated by distances ranging from a few hours' travel to several continents (Wellman, 2002; Chua et al., 2014). Secondly, personal communities are also loosely connected, hence the majority of network users are not directly linked (Chua et al., 2014). The third characteristic of personal communities is specialisation, with different community members providing distinct forms of social support. For instance, close kinship is a source of emotional and long-term support, while friends are appreciated as social companions and neighbours are ideally situated to provide unexpected emergency aid. Intimacy is the fourth attribute of personal communities. According to Chua et al. (2014), the number and quality of ties distinguishes between personal communities and personal networks. Personal networks are comprised of hundreds of weak relationships, whereas personal communities focus on a small proportion of active and more intimate ties. Finally, egos and alters frequently exhibit similar characteristics, such as race, class, and interests, so forming homogeneous networks (Chua et al., 2014, Marsden, 1998). However, in an effort to diversify group members and prevent insularity of homogeneous groups, egos of personal

communities sometimes may strive to reach out to individuals of other groups that possess different characteristics (Chua et al., 2014; Granovetter, 1973).

This study utilises the concept of personal communities to investigate the connectedness and identity of international students for five main reasons. First, personal communities complement the conceptualisation of transnational migration which defines migration as a continuous movement between two or more places in different nation-states (Glick Schiller and Levitt, 2008; Pries, 2010). Hence, exploring personal communities enables this study to explore international students' social experiences across geographical boundaries and represent the transnational aspects of their lives more accurately by including connections in both their home and host countries or elsewhere. The second reason is that investigating personal communities enables this study to contribute to the understanding of international students' social support and its implications for their cross-cultural adaptation, which are two common research areas on international students. Thirdly, learning the reasons behind international students' acts of including or excluding contacts in their own communities can provide us insights into their perceptions of their identities. The fourth reason is that this concept acknowledges the contribution of communication technologies in international students' lives, letting me incorporate these important tools into the research. Lastly, focusing on personal communities allows me to examine students' personal agency in crafting their own social experiences in the host country, which has not been explored in prior studies. According to my knowledge, several studies on migrants have examined the notion of personal communities, but this has not yet been done in the field of international students. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in the literature by adopting the concept of personal communities to provide a transnational picture of international students' connectedness and identity.

### 3.7.4 Moving forward in research on international students' personal communities

International students' social networks are significantly shaped by the past, the present, and the aspirational future. What led the students to where they are now, how their life unfolds in the present, and where they want themselves to be in the future are reflected in their identities and networks of relationships (Collins 2012; Hari et al. 2021). That is why international students' social networks, or personal communities in a smaller scale, are so complex, ever-changing, and highly individualised that they cannot be studied in a fixed sense (Collins, 2012).

Studying abroad is not just a relocation; it is a venture international students and their families take on as an investment for the future. They come to the host country with certain purposes in mind that are painted by themselves and/or their parents - whether it is to study, find a job, migrate, or use one country as a stepping stone to move somewhere else (Liao & Asis, 2020; Yoon et al., 2013). International students can lead very different lives and build different connections depending on their motivations. For example, international students who want to return home and treat studying abroad as leverage in careers continue to maintain contacts back home for future job opportunities (Tu & Nehring, 2020). On the other hand, students who chose study destinations based on their interest in the host cultures put more effort into interacting and seeking friendships with locals (Peng & Wu, 2019).

However, not all international students have concrete plans when studying abroad or follow it through even when they have one. Risks and uncertainty always feature in the students' lives (Li, 2015). These could range from the gap between pre-departure imaginations and post-arrival reality that leads to disappointment and stress (Major, 2005), increasing career opportunities back home that inspires successful returns (Liao & Asis, 2020; Tu & Nehring, 2020), to adjustments in migration policies that facilitate or pose a threat to their post-study

migration (Soong, 2016). Every encounter, opportunity and obstacle that presents itself to international students when studying abroad could potentially lead to alterations of their plans, rearrangements of life, and changes in their relationships with others.

Therefore, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of international students' personal communities, it is essential to take into consideration the unique circumstances of each individual, regardless of whether they belong to the same cultural group. This approach enables the exploration of the diverse experiences of international students and provides valuable insights into their lives.

## 3.8 International students' identities and agency

Alongside the recommendations that emphasise the need to move towards a more transnational approach to studying international students' social experiences, some existing studies also call for a shift in approach regarding international students' identity formation. Dervin (2011) contends that, so far, many evaluations of the identity and connectedness of international students have relied on a solid/culturalist approach that characterise individuals according to essentialist qualities associated with their cultures. For example, a common explanation given by many studies for why Asian students tend to be friends with one another is because they come from collectivist societies, as opposed to the individualist Western cultures. This aligns with the methodological nationalism that transnationalist researchers and scholars have attempted to combat. According to Dervin (2011), there is a need to shift from solidifying culture, community, and identity to a more fluid approach that views international students' identities as processes and creations. This perspective views ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity as "the image they [individuals] desire to present at a given time, rather than as proof of an essentialist [national] culture" (Holliday et al. 2004, p. 12, as cited in Dervin, 2011). In the application for studies on international students, Dervin (2012) advises

moving the emphasis from examining what the students' identities are to how they build their identities.

This study defines identity using Norton's (2013, p.45) concept in a study on language learning students, which defines identity as "how a person views his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is organised through time and space, and how that person understands future possibilities". This definition is useful because it emphasises the role of social interactions in the creation and evolution of the self, which is one of the research focuses of this study. Moreover, it takes a flexible stance on the spatial dimensions of identity and considers it to be the synthesis of the past, present, and future. This implies that an international students' identity reflects not only their being and belonging (Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001) but also the becoming of their imagined selves in the future, which influences how they construct their connections with others and the course of actions they take in the present. Norton (2013) also mentions the notion of investment as a means to comprehend the motivation of international students to engage in social interactions and communication practices. The researcher identifies meaningful connections between students' aspirations to acquire intangible resources such as knowledge, relationships and material resources such as money, and their investment in social exchanges with others.

Norton's perspective on the identity of international students is highly congruent with Marginson's (2014) self-formation concept, which urges a shift from understanding international education as a process of adaptation to local requirements dominated by international student research, to understanding international education as self-formation. Marginson (2014) questions the deficit model that implies the purpose of foreign education is to have students adapt to the culture of the host country, and that home country identity might be an obstacle to adaptation that needs to be eliminated. The researcher emphasises the need of recognising international students' capability to decide what is good for them and what

they want to do based on how they perceive themselves and what they wish to become. This capability has been demonstrated in a number of studies on international students. In Randall et al. (2012), nursing students revealed that despite some language barriers, they put effort into interacting with Caucasian classmates and find ways to make it work. For example, they took advantages of small group settings where they felt more comfortable or by writing their thoughts down, because they are aware of the significance of peer learning in their field and want to make the most of it to become a competent nurse and someone with confidence in communicating in English. In addition, Gomes et al. (2015) found that the social networks of foreign students in their host countries are based on their many identities, which may include culture, language, interests, housing, or employment. Taking these studies' recommendations into account, the purpose of this study is to analyse, through a transnational lens, how international students exert agency in social exchanges with others in order to realise their anticipated future selves.

According to Biesta and Tedder (2007, p. 125), agency is "the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life". It is not something that people are born with, but rather something they strive to learn and attain in order to live their lives on their own terms. In the case of students, Duff (2013) explains that agency is intertwined with identity and used to demonstrated students' capability of making rational decisions, exercising power, resisting or complying, despite the fact that social circumstances sometimes can restrict their decisions. Thus, it provides a tool for interpreting international students' motivations, choices, and behaviours when engaging in identity creation and personal community development while studying abroad. It is also vital to stress that agency should not be viewed simply as individuals' free choice, but instead should be studied in relation to many historical, economic, and social circumstances that may affect their access to agentive resources or ability to exercise their agency. Biesta and Tedder (2007, p. 137) states that agency consists of

"achievements" that "result from the interplay between individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors".

Tran and Vu (2017) identified four distinct forms of agency demonstrated by international students during their study abroad, comprising needs-response agency, agency as resistance and struggle, collective agency for contestation, and agency for becoming. Needs-response agency refers to the ways in which international students fulfill their own academic, social, or well-being needs as well as those of others in transnational social fields. The second category, agency as struggle and resistance, encompasses students' ability to manage conflicts and confrontational situations encountered during their academic pursuits in the host country. Collective agency of contestation refers to international students' collaboration with communities they identify with to respond to undesirable and complex situations. According to Tran and Vu (2017), aside from fostering interpersonal bonds for the purpose of obtaining learning assistance or social support within the parallel society consisting of other international student fellows, the students also tactically exercise their collective agency to safeguard their communities against adversity and maintain their distinctiveness within the host society. Lastly, agency for becoming refers to international students' active engagement in designing their life-course and self-transformation. The extent to which a student designs their future and nurtures aspirations for their identity and career path will influence their inclination to participate in activities within the institution or in the host society, as well as the relationships they create with their surroundings.

The categories of agency outlined by Tran and Vu (2017) provide a valuable conceptual framework for analysing international students' active roles in the co-construction of their knowledges and experiences during their study abroad, as well as in the formation or transformation of their identities and interpersonal relationships across borders. Despite a considerable volume of scholarship on this topic, the issue of personal agency in the field of

international students has not been sufficiently explored. Hence, by adopting Tran and Vu's (2017) categorisation, my analysis will address a gap in the literature regarding international students' agency in relation to their identity and personal communities, while also scrutinising the individual and social factors that influence international students' access to their agentive resources.

## 3.9 Concluding remarks

The chapter provided an overview of the existing literature on the subject of international students' connectedness and identity. The review covers in detail the conventional approach towards adaptation and acculturation, which often views adaptation as the ultimate goal and places most emphasis on host social support. The literature review also highlights the drawbacks of such approaches with supporting evidence from other studies in the field.

Through a literature review, this chapter illustrates the prevalence of the use of a deficit model in the literature, which regards international students as lacking in social and cultural capital and places the burden of integration on their shoulders alone. This approach tends to disregard the significance of international students' ability and agency in developing their own support networks and multiple identities. To address this gap, the chapter proposes the concept of personal communities, which refers to the informal social networks individuals build and maintain to satisfy their social and emotional needs. The chapter also emphasises the significance of personal agency, which is the capacity of an individual to act independently and change their social environment.

This chapter provides the foundation for the forthcoming social network analysis and interview findings by unpacking key literature, complimenting the transnational social field theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter. The ultimate objective of the study is to give a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the social experiences and identities of

international students, as well as to draw conclusions that can shape policies and practises that better promote their well-being and success.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used for this study to investigate the complexities of international students' personal communities and their active engagement in the formation of the community structure and their identities. Specifically, social network analysis and in-depth interviews are employed to elicit comprehensive and in-depth data as part of a methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. This chapter explains the underlying rationale for using this mixed-method approach and a detailed description of the research design. Additionally, participant recruitment and selection processes, including eligibility requirements and ethical considerations will be covered. I conclude with a discussion of the significance of the study's methodological approach in strengthening the validity and reliability of the research findings, which can contribute to the existing body of literature on the topic of international students' connectedness and identity.

## 4.1 Mixed-method approach for transnational social fields

As defined in Chapter 2, a transnational social field is "an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations" (Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001, p. 544). Therefore, a commonly used method to investigate migrants' transnational social fields is social network analysis because it is considered "especially well-suited to describe patterns of interactions in open social fields" (Wimmer, 2004, p. 5). This approach enables the systematic collection, analysis, and visualisation of data regarding the interpersonal connections of migrants and their consolidation into social networks. Additionally, it enables researchers to delve into relational dynamics and generate comprehensive insights into network characteristics that would otherwise remain unknown (Lubbers et al., 2018).

The majority of research in transmigrant studies that employs social network analysis focuses on egocentric networks which are the set of social ties surrounding a focal actor (ego) that are embedded in both formal and informal contexts (Lubbers et al., 2018). Theoretically, this form of network can consist of everyone with whom an individual of interest has connections, including both strong and weak ties. In order to explore migrants' egocentric networks, researchers often use name generators to ask research participants to list out contacts that satisfy one or more criteria such as types of relationships (close friends, family members, colleagues, etc.), resources (instrumental support, emotional support, or social companionship), frequency of contact, or the degree of emotional closeness (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021). Name interpreters frequently follow name generators to elicit specific information about alters (gender, nationality, country of residence, socioeconomic background, and communication channels) and the nature of the ego-alter relationship (such as father, classmates, online in-group members) and alter-alter relationships in some cases (Marsden, 2005).

While social network analysis has been widely used to examine the structure of transnational social fields, some researchers argue that this approach alone might be insufficient to fully explain the meanings attached to relationships within a network and shed light on the topic of identity in migration studies (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Ryan & D'Angelo, 2017). In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between migrants and their contacts across borders, Ryan and D'Angelo (2017) posit that it is necessary to incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews for a more in-depth investigation of the social relationships formed by migrants. Interviews can allow exploration of the extent to which social relationships affect and are influenced by individuals' perceptions, practices, expectations, and social support exchanged within the networks. Crossley and Edwards (2016) share a similar view as they propose that the incorporation of interviews with social network analysis can add significant value to understanding migrants' social networks. These

networks are the outcome of continuous social processes and are shaped by the perceptions and behaviours of the social actors involved, which researchers may not otherwise be aware of. Thus, in-depth interviews enable researchers to probe into and analyse the narratives individuals use to describe their local and cross-border ties, which are significantly valuable for a comprehensive evaluation of the migrants' social experiences. Crossley and Edwards (2016, p. 3) assert, "social worlds outstrip the sociological gaze", implying that the complex and multidimensional nature of social reality provides considerable hurdles to scholars attempting to comprehend it in its entirety. Thus, the researchers argue that a single approach may be insufficient to capture the complexities of social reality. Combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches and including data triangulation are essential to attain a more thorough and robust perspective of migrants' social networks. By doing so, researchers can enrich analysis even when different methods produce conflicting results, because the process of reconciling such inconsistencies provides opportunities to develop a more insightful interpretation of the intricacies of migrants' social lives (Crossley & Edwards, 2016).

Drawing upon previous research recommendations, this study utilised a mixed-method approach involving both social network analysis and in-depth interviews to explore international students' personal communities within the framework of transnational social fields. The fundamental objective of this strategy is to acquire a holistic understanding of the investigated topic, which covers not only the composition of the students' networks but also the underlying drivers for students as they build their social networks and implications on their identities. Participants therefore undertook a name generation activity, followed by an in-depth interview to allow exploration and analysis of social networks within transnational social fields.

## 4.2 Data collection

### 4.2.1 Social network analysis

Data collection ran from February to May 2022, using a sample of nine participants whose information will be discussed in a later portion of this chapter. The participants were individually invited to partake in interviews that included name generation activities, specifically completing the name generator, name interpreter, and sociogram to elicit data about their social networks. Due to safety precaution amidst Covid-19, all interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform. This situation presented certain challenges for the name generation activities, which are preferably conducted in person with pen, paper, and sticky notes for better user-friendliness, easy visualisation, and reduced risk of technical glitches (Hogan et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2014). Additionally, using sticky notes allows participants to easily modify and reorganise the contacts (nodes) and permits researchers to readily assist participants. However, given the online nature of the interviews, the name generation activities had to be adapted to digital format, via editable PDF and Word files. I was connected with the participants on Zoom as the completed the name generation task to answer any questions they might had about the process or activity, but did not comment on their progress unless prompted.

Upon joining the Zoom interview, the participants were provided with the name generation activity template in both PDF and Word formats and instructed to choose the format that suited them best – see Appendix 1 for these documents. Participants were then given guidelines to identify and list contacts that met predetermined criteria, based on the types of social support and companionship they offered. The selection of social support and companionship as the criterion for the name generator was considered relevant to its purpose, which is to permit international students to express their views on the support they receive from different contacts and how they arrange their personal communities accordingly. This

methodology has been widely utilised in studies on transnational social fields (Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2021; Herz, 2015; Cachia & Maya Jariego, 2018), since it coincides with the core premise that such fields are based on the cross-border interchange of ideas, resources, and information. In contrast, other types of name elicitors, such as contacts (i.e., individuals with whom the respondent has contact in certain period of time) or titles (i.e., asking partcipants to list out their friends, family members, or close associates), may overlook individuals or groups with whom students may not interact frequently, or those who do not hold important titles like friends or family despite playing important roles in assisting students with their transnational lives (Herz, 2015). As a result, the name generator utilised in this study comprised nine questions, which are as follows:

1. Who do you contact when seeking academic advice/ facing academic issues? - Instrumental support
2. Who do you contact when seeking living advice/ facing living issues in Australia (e.g., employment)? - Instrumental support
3. Who do you contact when seeking accommodation advice/ facing accommodation issues in Australia? - Instrumental support
4. Who do you contact when seeking migration-related advice/ facing migration issues? – Instrumental support
5. Who do you contact when seeking general information about Australia? – Instrumental support
6. Who do you contact when seeking companions to hang out? – Social companionship
7. Who do you contact to share about your daily life? – Social companionship
8. Who do you contact for gossiping? – Social companionship
9. Who do you contact when feeling lonely? – Emotional support
10. Who do you contact when feeling stressed? – Emotional support

This study's research questions were influenced by the research design proposed by Rook and Ituarte (1999) for their study of social support and companionship, as well as by Herz's (2015) examination into the relational composition of social support in migrants' transnational personal communities. However, the present study adapted the questions to better reflect the experiences of international students, as noted in earlier research on this demographic. For example, instrumental support items were inspired by Dang and Tran's (2017) investigation of academic-related support, Lim and Pham's (2016) exploration of living- and accommodation-related assistance, and Liu-Farrer's (2011) inquiry into migration-related support. Sawir et al. (2008) explored issues of loneliness, stress, and well-being among international students influenced the questions directing to emotional support, while Sinanan and Gomes' (2020) study on friendships contributed to the development of the social companionship items. Although the name generator was initially designed with ten questions, in response to the participants' feedback that question 2 and question 5 were repetitive, participants' answers to these questions were aggregated in the data analysis.

In the majority of previous studies, participants were asked to list only individuals as alters; however, I found from the first few interviews that participants may also frequently reached out to or stayed connected with groups or organisations for certain needs, even when they were not personally close to any in-group member. For instance, a university student body, an online faculty group chat, and international student associations all were referenced during the name generator activity participants. Hence, participants were able to include groups and organisations in their name generation, and I counted each of them as a single contact in the data analysis after confirming with participants that they were referring to the group or organisation as a whole and not to its individual members.

Upon completing the name generation exercises, the participants were asked to provide further information about the listed alters. This information includes their relationship with

each other, their country of residence, and methods of communication. After conducting the initial interviews, it became apparent that it was necessary to inquire about the nationalities of the contacts, as some participants have contacts from multiple nations in their personal networks, necessitating identification of their countries of origin. Since the name generator could not be adjusted in the middle of the data collection process, the participants asked about alters nationalities during the interviews, and this data was incorporated into the analysis at a later stage.

The final step in the name generation activity involved requesting participants to place their listed alters on a 'participant-aided network diagram' (or sociogram) and identify of those who know each other together by drawing ties between them (Hogan et al., 2007). This tool facilitates more in-depth investigation by presenting "questioning cues to the interviewer that would not have been made available without visual assistance, and also acts as a reliability check with participants visually assessing their connections" (Cheong et al., 2013, p. 5). In this study, sociograms were drawn using a circular layout. According to Huang et al. (2006), this is a common technique in egocentric network analysis, as it emphasises the interactions and relationships surrounding the focal actor. In addition, as suggested by Chua et al. (2011) for study on personal communities, concentric circles were added to represent the degree of proximity and distance within networks. The number of concentric circles varies across studies based on the topic and scope of the investigation. This study used three concentric circles to represent three degrees of closeness: very close, close, and somewhat close. This approach was taken because the research aimed to examine the personal communities of international students which consist of ties that are meaningful to egos and serve specific purposes in their lives (Hogan, 2008). According to Hogan (2008), personal communities are different from personal networks which might encompass hundreds or thousands of weak ties, including everyone they know in life, regardless of contact frequency and closeness. Thus, I found that three degrees of closeness were adequate to examine relationships between

international students and contacts in personal communities, while simultaneously minimising confusion and burden on participants as well as saving time, which are crucial design considerations for social network analysis noted by Hogan et al. (2007).

### 4.2.2 Interview

If social network analysis provides information about international students' connectedness through their personal community's structures, then in-depth interviews provided comprehensive and holistic insights into their relationships and offer context for the data (Hollstein, 2014). Levitt and Schiller (2004) also assert that interviews are an appropriate tool for analysing the development and persistence of international social fields. Therefore, in-depth interviews were used to expand on the information gathered in name generation and to delve deeper into the topic of international students' ability and agency in establishing their own support networks and complex identities. Participants are requested to review and investigate their social networks with me in order to answer questions about the reasons for the existence or absence of particular contacts and the perceived impact of these interactions on their sense of self. This approach is called co-participatory interviewing which has recently attracted the attention of researchers in migration studies, including Georgiou (2021) and Leurs (2019). Its objective is to encourage participants to narrate their own stories and contribute to the production of scholarly knowledge and representation of themselves. Hence, while there are some forms of standardised questions to ensure data comparability, the interviews are open-ended and tailored to each participant's previous responses.

The participants provided an overview of their personal history and their experiences studying abroad in Australia to begin the interview. These initial conversations functioned as icebreakers and as an opportunity to obtain a rough understanding of the aspects that are fundamental to the participants' perspective of their identities. The interviews next investigated the participants' personal communities based on their name generation activities

to elicit information regarding their personal connections, the nature of these ties, and the underlying causes for their presence or absence. The primary objective was to uncover the participants' narratives regarding their social experiences and to obtain knowledge about the variables that led to the formation and development of their personal communities. In addition, questions on participants' perceptions of their identities were asked in order to gain a better understanding of their sense of self and the key forces that shape it. The interviews finished with questions regarding the participants' perspectives on the universities' support for international student, including attempts to facilitate intercultural exchanges, as well as their strengths and areas for improvement.

Participants were offered the option of conversing in either English or Vietnamese. As I am fluent in both languages, I could accommodate their language preference. Nonetheless, all participants chose to speak in Vietnamese because they felt more at ease expressing their feelings and opinions in this language. Consequently, the interview recordings were transcribed and analysed in Vietnamese, with select responses translated into English for inclusion in the Findings chapter. It is worth noting that during the interviews, participants occasionally did code-mixing between Vietnamese and English when they were unable to articulate their thoughts or find suitable words or expressions in Vietnamese adequately. To account for this, any English words or phrases used by the participants have been italicised in the English translation included in the Findings chapter. While the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese at the request of the participants, the name generation activity sheets were prepared in English as they could be understood by the participants, who were university students with demonstrated proficiency in the English language.

## 4.3 Participant recruitment process and participants' profiles

As stated previously, the objective of this study was to recruit Vietnamese international students enrolled in universities located in South Australia. The initial plan was to compare

the experiences of Vietnamese international students living and studying in Adelaide during Covid-19 with those of students who were unable to enter Australia due to border restrictions measures during the pandemic, and relying on online study instead. The reopening of Australia's border in early 2022, however, delayed the recruitment process and posed challenges in recruiting the latter group as planned. Many of those students previously offshore swiftly travelled to Adelaide in early 2022. Hence, the plan was revised to accommodate a focus on onshore students. Despite this change, the study was able to recruit three participants who enrolled in their programmes either just before or during the Covid-19 pandemic and were unable to travel to Australia, requiring them to undertake remote online learning in Vietnam. As soon as the borders reopened, these individuals relocated to Australia to continue their studies.

The participant recruitment process was undertaken via three methods on Facebook. The research recruitment flyer was initially emailed to The Vietnamese international student associations of The University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia with a request to circulate the material on their Facebook feeds and groups. Second, the flyer was posted on a Facebook group made for Vietnamese international student and migrant communities in South Australia, which are distinct from those operated by the two Vietnamese international student associations and restricted to committee members of these organisations only. In the first two methods, members of these groups were not approached or targeted individually unless they gave me explicit permission to do so. Lastly, I also shared the research recruitment flyer on my personal Facebook and Twitter accounts where my own network includes a number of those who meet, or know others who meet the recruitment criteria. In order to maintain transparency, a strict screening procedure was performed to select research participants recruited using this approach. To reduce the risk of biased sample, and to maintain boundaries between my private information and research responsibilities, volunteers with close personal relationships with me were excluded from the sample, in line

with the ethical approvals for the project. Prior to conducting the research, ethics approval had been obtained from The University of Adelaide's Human Research Ethics Committee under number H-2022-008.

The recruitment flyer specified that volunteers must meet four criteria. The first criteria was that participants must be aged between 18 and 29. According to the Department of Education and Training (2015), the majority of Vietnamese overseas students enrolling in Australian higher education institutions were between the ages of 18 and 29. Moreover, because an individual's life experiences, social networks, and adaptability to new environments can vary substantially with age, this age range is appropriate for studying a variety of experience. At the same time, in order to maximise the generalisability of data acquired from a small sample, it is essential that the age range be restricted. The age range of 18 to 29 is selected because this is where the majority of Vietnamese international tertiary students in Australia are from. Secondly, participants were tertiary students enrolled full-time at universities in South Australia. Thirdly, they were residing in Adelaide, or were/had been residing in Vietnam due to the border closure and were having/had had experiences of remote learning while in Vietnam during this period. Finally, participants must use social media on a regular basis because the study is interested in investigating the roles these communication technologies perform in the social lives of international students.

Only those who met these criteria were chosen to participate in this study. After the recruitment process, a total of nine international Vietnamese students were chosen, ranging from first-year Bachelor's students through PhD candidates in their final year, as follows:

**Table 1. Information on the participants**

| Participant (pseudonym) | Gender | Education pursuit | Year of study | Length of stay in Australia at the time of interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Duong | Female | Bachelor's degree | First year | 5 months |
| Thao | Female | Bachelor's degree | Second year | 4 years |
| Trang | Female | Bachelor's degree | Third year | 5 years |
| Nam | Male | Bachelor's degree | Third year | 10 years |
| Hung | Male | Master's degree | First year | 2 months |
| My | Female | Master's degree | First year | 4 months |
| Tung | Male | Doctoral degree | First year | 6 months |
| Tuan | Male | Doctoral degree | First year | 3 years |
| Quang | Male | Doctoral degree | Third year | 5 years |

The study was successful in recruiting a diverse set of participants with different educational pursuits, year of study, and lengths of stay in Australia. The inclusion of a variety of participants offered a rich source of information and valuable findings, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

## 4.4 Data analysis

Upon completion of all interviews, the data obtained from the nine participants' name generation tasks was imported into Excel for analysis. The objective was to determine the percentage of contacts, grouped by nationality, that participants had in Vietnam, Australia, or overseas, as well as the forms of support these contacts provided. Chapter 5 of this dissertation visualises in three concentric circles for each participant, illustrating the types of people or groups in each participant's personal community, as well as the location and nationality of these contacts according to their degree of closeness. While it is also crucial to investigate alter-alter bonds, the focus of this study concentrates on the ways in which the participants organise their relationships with others. Therefore, the graphs shown in the following chapter do not include information on alter-alter relationships in order to reduce complexity. However, some alter-alter ties will still be discussed when they are relevant to the key findings.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using the method of narrative analysis (Mishler, 1986). At the initial phase of the coding process, the interview transcripts of the participants were divided into narrative blocks and coded inductively based on participants' perceptions of their social relationships, identities, and personal agency. During the second phase of coding, the narrative blocks and codes of all participants were evaluated, compared, and recoded based on the major themes that emerged from the identified similarities and contrasts – see Appendix 2 for a translated sample of interview coding. The new codes were divided into seven categories including the participants narratives of their relationships with (1) home contacts; (2) co-national contacts; (3) host contacts; (4) multi-national contacts in Australia; and (5) contacts in other countries, as well as (6) their perceptions of their identities and (7) their expressed agency in forming social relationships and identities. Under the first five category, there were five sub-categories that included perceived closeness, perceived support, affection, and reasons for the existence or absence of contacts in their personal networks. At the completion of the coding procedure, I wrote a narrative summary for each participant based on this framework and compared them to determine the degree to which their experiences were similar or dissimilar. After finalising this step, I was able to identify core narratives that encapsulated the commonalities between the participants' given factors that shaped the structures of their personal communities, perceptions of support received from various types of contacts and their identities. These key findings will be presented in the next chapter.

## 4.5 Limitations

A potential limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size, which may raise concerns regarding the generalisability of the results. However, researchers such as Young and Casey (2018) and Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argue that even with a small sample size, qualitative research can yield rich and insightful findings, especially when the goal is to explore deeper meanings and delve beneath surface appearances of social life. Given that the

purpose of this study is to understand international students' individual perceptions of social relationships and identity, a small sample size allowed me to conduct more in-depth conversations to uncover the complexities of these topics. As a result, while the study's findings may not be applicable to all international students, they still provide valuable insights into the motivations, thoughts, and actions of international students, laying the groundwork for future research.

## 4.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter detailed the mixed-method approach used for this study to investigate Vietnamese international students' connectedness and identities from transnational perspectives. The research design including data collection and analysis was explained along with the participant recruitment process. In addition, a brief summary of the nine participants in the study was presented and will be elaborated upon in the following chapter. The subsequent chapter will elaborate on the key findings gained from the analysis of data gathered from participant interviews and name generation.

# Chapter 5: Findings

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on findings from the social network analysis and semi-structured interviews of the nine international student participants. Specifically, the chapter offers an in-depth examination of the structures of these participants' social networks, with a focus on identifying the factors that shape their composition. Furthermore, this chapter provides an analysis of the participants' perspectives on the role of identity in their social connectedness.

## 5.2 Personal communities and perceived support

The participants' Vietnamese contacts outnumbered their host and other national counterparts by comprising up to 77 percent of the total. In addition, the majority of these contacts were based in Vietnam, indicating that the participants still remained in close contact with family and friends in Vietnam after relocating to Australia. Vietnamese contacts in Australia formed the second largest group, accounting for 34 percent of the total number.

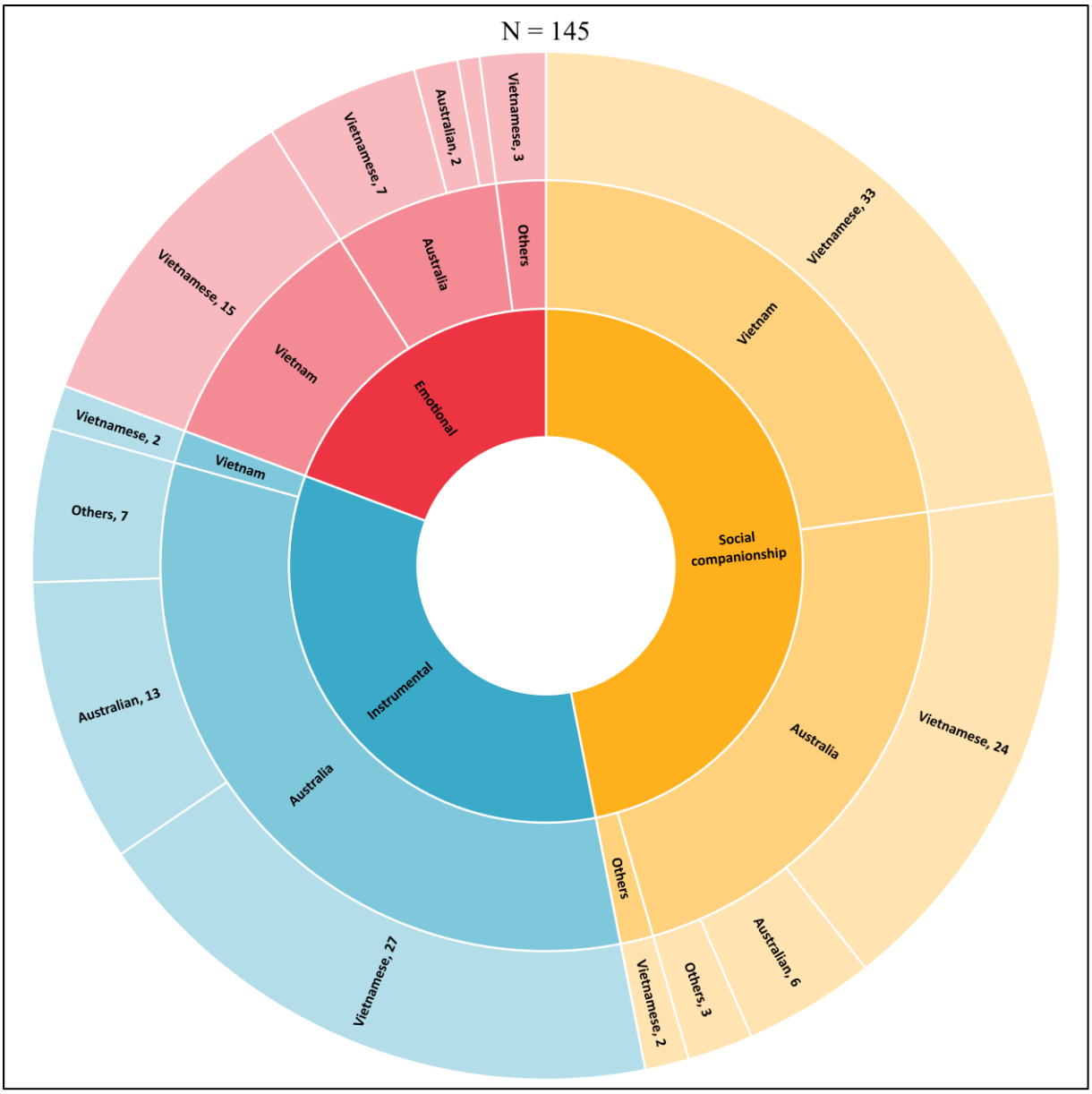
In contrast, the number of host contacts was substantially lower, with most participants having only one or two close connections with academic staff or workmates. This suggests that the participants either lacked interest or found it difficult to form relationships with local people. In addition, the findings revealed that only four participants had friends or acquaintances from other countries, including Chinese, Korean, Indian, and Pakistani nationalities.

**Table 2. Participants' contacts by location and nationality**

| Participant | Total contacts | Australia | | | Vietnam | Other countries |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Vietnamese contacts | Australian contacts | International contacts | Vietnamese contacts | Vietnamese contacts |
| Duong | 9 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| Thao | 22 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 0 |
| Trang | 9 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Nam | 14 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Hung | 11 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| My | 14 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 1 |
| Tung | 9 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 0 |
| Tuan | 11 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 |
| Quang | 14 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| Total | 113 | 39 | 17 | 9 | 44 | 4 |
| Percentage | | 34% | 15% | 8% | 39% | 4% |

After identifying the number of contacts, their locations, and nationalities, the study proceeded to examine the participants' perceived support provided by these contacts. This was achieved by further analysing the data obtained from the name generators, interpreters, and sociograms. Based on Rook's and Ituarte's (1999) study mentioned previously, this study categorises types of support the participants received from their contacts into instrumental, emotional, and social companionship. Instrumental support involved providing academic, accommodation, job, migration, or living advice; emotional support involved providing encouragement and a safe space for the students to share their feelings when they were lonely or stressed; and social companionship involved providing companionship, engaging in casual conversation about daily life, or gossiping. The results of the analysis of the different types of support are presented in Figure 1. The figure highlights the participants' preferences in terms of which contacts they turned to for various needs.

**Figure 1. Sources of support by location and nationality**




Note: Some contacts provide more than one type of support, so the total is higher than the total number of unique contacts.

The analysis of the source of support of the participants reveals a preference for communicating with contacts in Australia for instrumental support and contacts in Vietnam for emotional support. The sources of social companionship were evenly distributed between contacts in the two countries. Despite the geographical distance, the participants maintained close relationships with their families and close friends back home, communicating frequently to share news and gossip about events in both countries. Meanwhile, they turned to their

friends and acquaintances in Australia for companionship and social activities. When participants required practical advice and assistance related to study, employment, housing, migration, or everyday life, they favoured communicating with contacts in Australia who have a deeper understanding of the local social and cultural contexts and have dealt with similar issues. In contrast, when participants required emotional support, they frequently reached out to family and friends back home to discuss their struggles and seek encouragement when feeling lonely or stressed.

Despite the fact that number of Vietnamese sources of support was significantly larger than locals and other national fellows due to the high number of unique Vietnamese contacts, the ratio of Vietnamese to local and international contacts for instrumental support within Australia was much more balanced. This finding demonstrates the importance of host and multi-national contacts in providing practical support to international students, despite being relatively low in number. It also highlights the need for exploration into the reasons these contacts are underrepresented in the participants' personal communities even with their valuable support for the students, which will be discussed in the following section.

## 5.3 Explanations for the structures of the students' personal communities

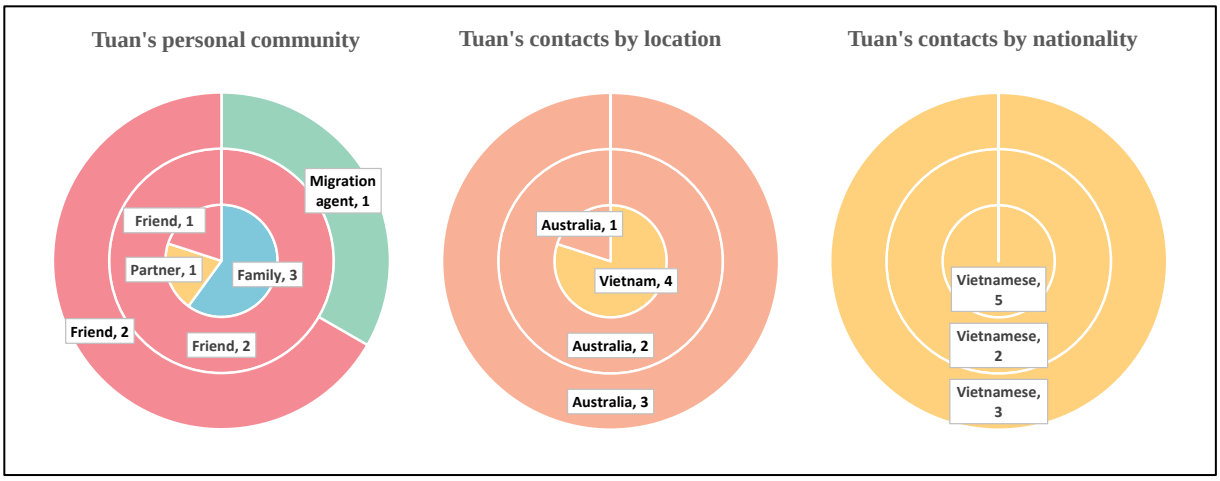
The analysis of the participants' interview data revealed five recurring themes that may shed light on the factors contributing to their personal community structures. These themes included the participants' goals for pursuing an education abroad, personality traits, environmental factors, affection for the host country, and assessment of existing connections. The subsequent section attempts to explicate various participant narratives pertaining to each theme, delving into the underlying causes for the prevalence of Vietnamese contacts in their transnational personal communities and their perception of the degree of support given by these contacts.

### 5.3.1 Study abroad goals

The majority of participants revealed that they began their study abroad journey with the intention of spending only a short time in the host country, as mandated by their student visa restrictions. The prospect of returning to their home country or relocating elsewhere after graduation was reported to influence their needs for social relationships in Australia as well as the amount of effort they invested into cultivating personal bonds. Furthermore, the interactions of participants with others may be motivated by practical goals such as making beneficial career connections or gaining insights into specific industries. To shed light on this correlation between the overseas educational aspirations of international students and the structures of their personal communities, Tuan's and Tung's accounts have been selected for elucidation.

Tuan arrived in Adelaide roughly three years ago to pursue a Master's degree after a few years of professional experience in Vietnam. After completing his undergraduate degree, he decided to continue his education by enrolling in a PhD program. Since the beginning of his overseas education, Tuan's primary objective had been to maximise the benefits that studying abroad would bring to his future professional endeavours. Rather than cultivating friendships or creating pleasant memories in the host country, he concentrated his efforts on attaining high academic achievements and establishing professional connections. Consequently, as depicted in Figure 2, Tuan's personal network in Australia was limited to a few contacts, primarily comprising Vietnamese individuals, despite his three-year stay in the host country.

**Figure 2. Tuan's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Tuan provided an additional rationale for his limited number of intimate acquaintances in Australia by indicating that he viewed such relationships as temporary. Due to the nature of his academic discipline, the majority of his classmates were non-locals and expected to return to their home countries upon completion where they had more opportunities for career advancement. Therefore, he anticipated that his relationship with them would inevitably end at some point. Tuan elaborated on this position by saying:

> "We only maintain our friendships within the classroom and rarely hang out with each other. It's because I know it'll go nowhere. Our goals when coming here is only to study, not to make friends. Everyone has their own lives and I know that they'll eventually go back to their countries anyway so there is no point in becoming too close" (Tuan).

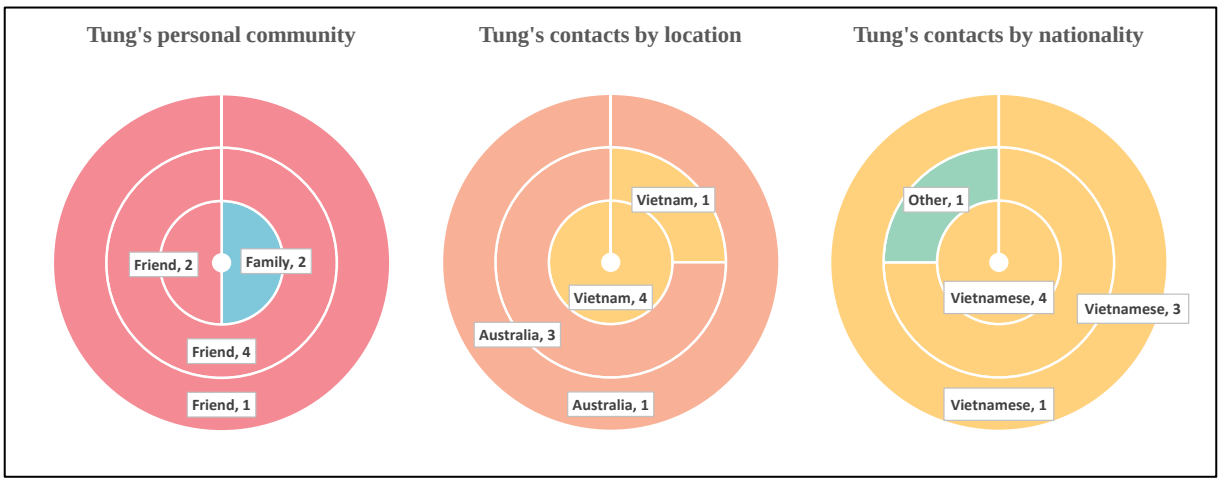
Therefore, Tuan shared to prefer investing his efforts on developing high-quality practical relationships with individuals whom he deemed to add value to his objectives and existence in Australia. Aside from his housemate, who occupied a prominent position in his personal community, Tuan's remaining contacts in Australia consist of Vietnamese fellow research students whom he met within the department, through mutual acquaintances, or contacted

himself for research guidance and later progressed into friendships. In Tuan's viewpoint, these connections offered him with invaluable advice and insights on navigating the Australian academic and industrial landscapes as a Vietnamese research student, as well as access to networks that would help his professional advancement in Australia or upon his return to Vietnam. Moreover, he expressed a greater sense of ease and comfort in the company of his Vietnamese acquaintances, citing their same cultural background, research interests, and worldviews as contributing factors to his fondness for them. It is contrast to the 'invisible barrier' he felt with host contacts, which discouraged him to build closer bonds with them, as he shared:

> "I always feel an invisible barrier between me and Australians. It's because I can see that when my supervisor talks with other Australian students and when the Australian students talk among themselves, they sound friendlier and more comfortable than when they talk to me… So maybe that's why I'm a bit hesitant to approach them, but they're not really my group of people anyway. I can't relate to them as much as I do with my Vietnamese peers" (Tuan).

Tuan's narrative on the influence of his study-abroad motivation on his social ties was mirrored in Tung's account. Tung is another first-year PhD student who had been in Adelaide for only six months at the time of the interview. When participating in the buddy program for newcomers in his department, Tung had numerous opportunities to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds. However, he developed closer relationships with Asian PhD students, specifically three Vietnamese and one Chinese student, as depicted in the Figure 3. Their shared cultural backgrounds and exchange of information, such as advice and expertise regarding the challenges of being foreign PhD students in Australia, appeared to facilitate their affinity towards one another.

**Figure 3. Tung's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Tung had a very clear objective in pursuing his doctoral program that was to complete his academic pursuits in Adelaide and subsequently return to Vietnam. He believed that his prior academic and professional experiences in Vietnam would afford him promising career prospects in his home country. Hence, he shared in the interview that he still maintained regular communication with his acquaintances and associates from his former job through Facebook, although not all of whom were incorporated in his name generation. Despite the fact that they did not provide him with immediate support asked in the name generation activities, he understood the necessity of preserving these links because they would be beneficial upon his return to Vietnam after completing his PhD program. Tung revealed:

> "I still talk to my friends and ex-colleagues back in Vietnam through Facebook. When I was in Vietnam, I worked as a lab assistant, so sometimes colleagues who took over that job would send me a message asking for help or advice. I'm happy to help them because it lets me keep work connections in Vietnam. I sometimes even message them first to ask how things are going in the lab" (Tung).

The experiences of Tuan and Tung illustrate how international students' motivations for cultivating and maintaining connections with others extend beyond mere social bonding. The students recognised the professional advantages of developing networks of support with other Vietnamese PhD fellows in Australia, which include obtaining useful insights into their industries and advice for career advancement in both Australia and Vietnam. At the same time, Tung's willingness to maintain close contact with ex-colleagues in Vietnam was based on the belief that having these work-related connections would be advantageous for his future career should he return to Vietnam.

These participants' accounts of the impact of their study abroad objectives on their social relationships align with Rizvi's (2010) assertions that international students' transnational experiences are defined by numerous connections and interactions with individuals and groups across borders that are determined by the need for mutual reciprocity and advantage. Rizvi's remark underlines that the social interactions of overseas students are not spontaneous, but rather undergo a process of examination to determine their compatibility against numerous criteria specified by the students themselves. In Tuan's and Tung's cases, the criteria for choosing who they want to bond with when studying abroad were based on their academic pursuits, interests, cultures, as well as aspirations for their future selves, such as who they want to become and where they envision themselves working and living in the future.

### 5.3.2 Personality

According to the findings, international students' personalities have a substantial impact on their personal networks. In particular, this section provides experiences of two participants, Duong and Hung, whose personalities were highlighted as a significant contributor to the lack of intimate social interactions and the predominance of Vietnamese contacts in their personal communities.

At the time of the interview, Duong, the youngest participant, was a first-year Bachelor student who had been living in Adelaide for five months. She said that adjusting to her new independent life and being apart from her family presented significant challenges. During her first three months at the university, she struggled to make friends and overcome feelings of isolation because she lived alone in a shared residence and had no university friends. It was participarly challenging because she had high expectations that studying abroad would offer her a great time, opportunities to meet new people, and create fun memories, as often depicted in social media and conveyed by her friends on Facebook and Instagram. However, seeing her peers' posts about their new friend groups or local romantic relationships only added to her pressure and left her wondering why she could not have similar experiences. She stated:

> "When seeing photos posted by friends on social media I thought that was how studying abroad supposed to be - making new friends, having a partner, and simply having a great time. But the reality hit me when I came here… I wondered why studying abroad was so tiring" (Duong).

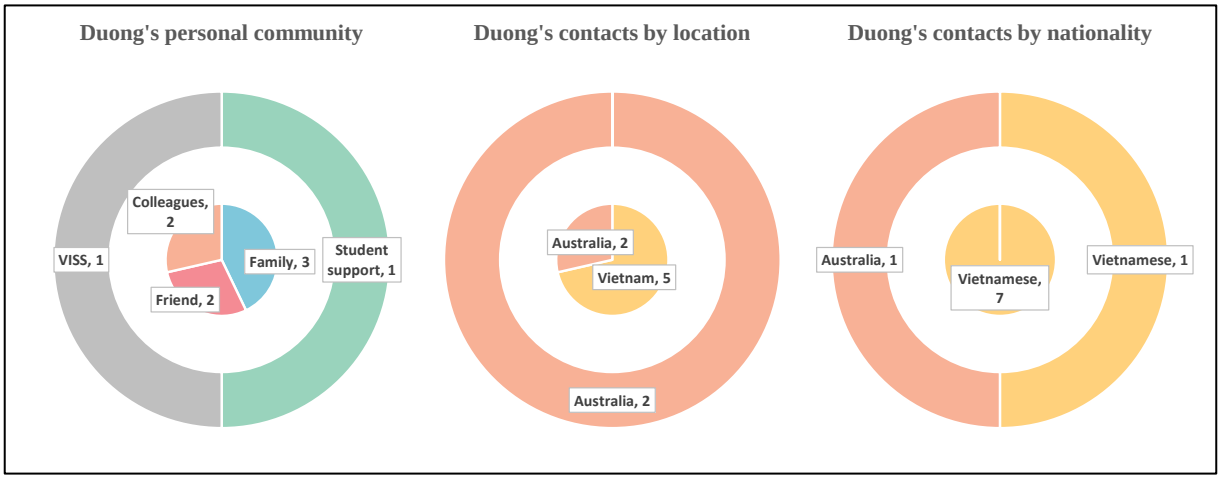
Duong characterised herself as shy, introverted, and requiring a significant amount of time to develop close relationships. Hence, she encountered challenges in establishing closer connections with her classmates, especially due to the university course structures, as she shared:

> "In high school, it took me three years to develop a strong friendship with someone, but since we continued to be in the same class, it was possible. But here, it's like going to a job interview where you only have a short amount of time to show the judges what you can do. We only see each other for one hour a week, and most of that time is spent studying. How can I show them that I'm a suitable candidate to be their friend?

> I think Australian students struggle to make friends at the university as much as I do, but since they've already had close friend groups in high school or since childhood, they don't seem to really feel the need to make new friends like I do" (Duong).

Duong's struggles to establish meaningful connections with her classmates left her feeling disheartened and discouraged from pursuing new friendships at the university. As a result, she sought a part-time job in an effort to alleviate her feelings of isolation. Through this job, she was able to develop friendships with two Vietnamese colleagues, as depicted in Figure 4, who provided her with companionship and opportunities to socialise during leisure time.

**Figure 4. Duong's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Note: VISS stands for Vietnamese international student societies.

In contrast to her classmates, Duong recognised that forming friendships with colleagues was easier due to the amount of time they spent together, which fostered a more natural process of bonding. In addition, she and her Vietnamese colleagues had more topics to talk about because they shared similar interests in news and gossips about their home country, a commonality which would be less likely to be shared with her non-Vietnamese peers:

> "Talking to Vietnamese people is much easier than talking to people from other countries because we have a lot more things in common. Like some hot news and gossips in Vietnam that only Vietnamese people would know about" (Duong).

Besides her newly formed friendships with colleagues, Duong also sought social and emotional support from her family and friends in Vietnam. She explained that studying abroad made her realise the value of her family and friends back home, as they were the ones who provided her emotional comfort to overcome loneliness, stress, and boredom, as well as offered her a great deal of helpful guidance to navigate her new life. This will be ellaborated in more details in later section.

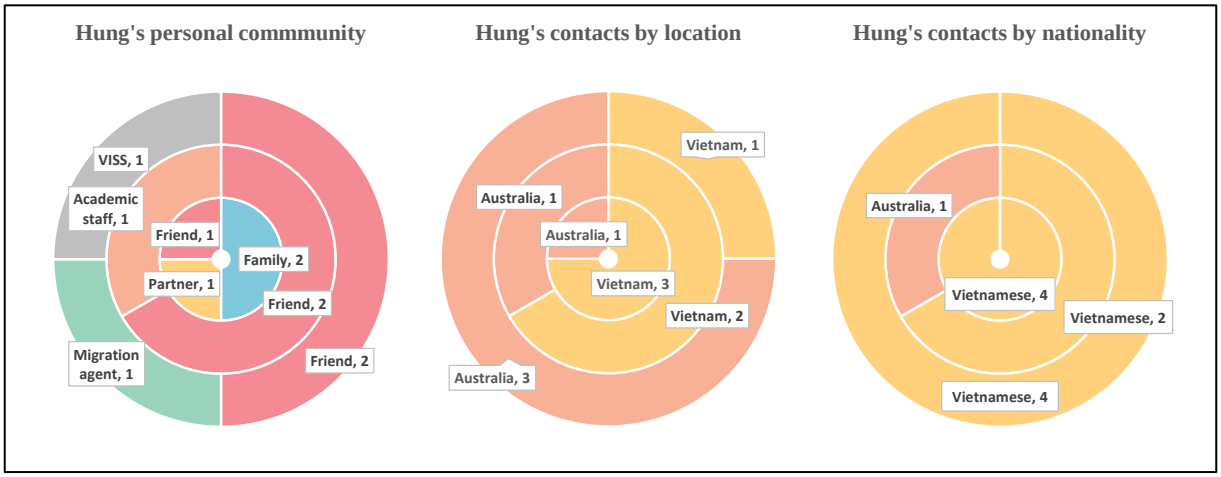
Hung, a first-year Masters student who moved to Adelaide just two months before the interview, was another participant who reported that his personality significantly impacted his social relationships. He described himself as someone who was hesitant to approach strangers, content with being alone, and disinterested in developing many acquaintances. According to his own words, he stated:

> "I think personality affects my personal network a lot. Those who are more outgoing can make friends easier than someone like me. I'm a bit shy and reluctant to meeting new people so it would be harder for me" (Hung).

As seen in Figure 5, this tendency explains the concentration of Hung's personal community on a handful of people. In Australia, he had formed four close relationships, including one with his best friend from Vietnam, who recently moved to Melbourne, as well as with his supervisor and classmates with whom he met through online courses prior to the reopening of the Australian border. Hung acknowledged that despite these relationships, he rarely spent time with any of these individuals. His only contact with his supervisor was for academic

advice, while his interactions with his two students were limited to class enrolment and assignments. As of the interview, he disclosed that he had only met with them twice in person and it was them who initiated the meetings.

**Figure 5. Hung's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Although Hung recognised the need of making interpersonal connections, he found it difficult to initiate contact with strangers, especially non-Vietnamese ones, due to his shyness and self-conscious about his English ability. Thus, in an effort to overcome his reluctance and forge new friendships in Adelaide, Hung applied to join the Vietnamese international student society committee at his university not long before the interview. The main responsibility of this group's committee members is to organise cultural and informational events and gatherings for Vietnamese international students. His stated reason for applying was as follows:

> "I think that when I first came here, I looked for people I could talk to easily, and they happened to be students from the same country as me. After I've lived here for a while, I think I'll become for comfortable to reach out to people from other countries… I think the issue here is cultural differences that make it's hard to talk to them, especially Australians. But I think it's easier for Asians who have lived in

> Australia for a long time and gotten used to the culture to make friends with Australian students" (Hung).

For an introverted newcomer like Hieu, the Vietnamese international student society was a means of adjusting to the new host country. This community provided a welcoming and safe environment in which he could seek companionship and remain connected to Vietnamese culture in a familiar setting, while also being involved in the major broader campus scene. Hieu's engagement in student society committees offered him and other members several opportunities to develop rapport through collaboration towards shared goals, thereby creating a sense of belonging that was missing his life when he moved to a new country.

These findings are consistent with research by Doeven-Eggens et al. (2008), which argued that the interpersonal relationships of individuals are influenced by their preferences for interaction as a result of their personality traits. According to this study, introverted individuals have a more difficult time creating new relationships and are more likely to become dependent on their family and/or existing relationships. This describes Duong and Hung, whose introverted and shy dispositions make them hesitant to develop friendships in big-group environments such as classrooms. On the other hand, in circumstances that allowed them to take their time forming connections and where they felt more culturally at ease, such as workplaces predominantly comprised of Vietnamese or Vietnamese student communities, these introverted students demonstrated better social adeptness and developed friendships more easily.

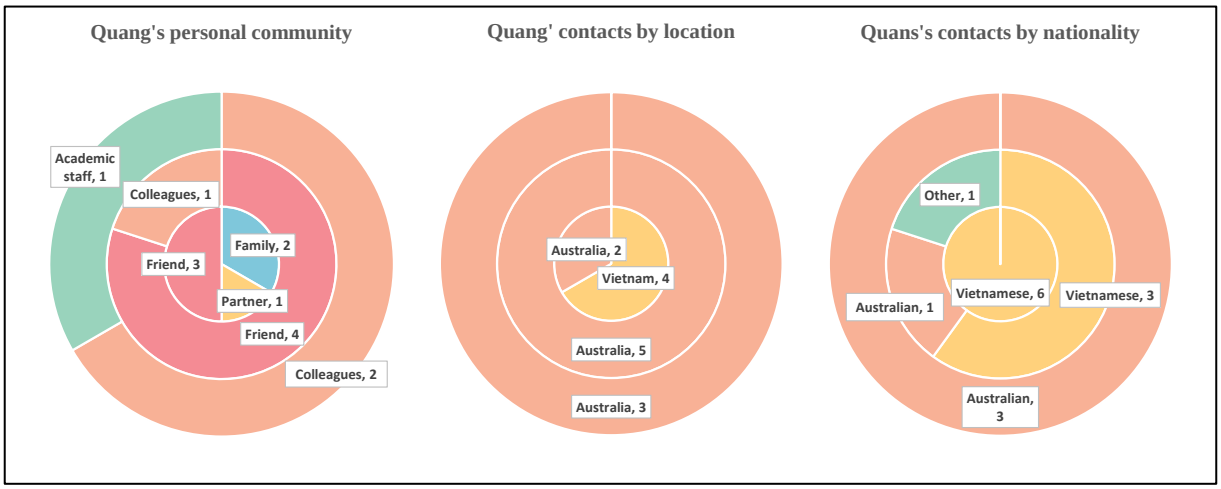
### 5.3.3 Affection towards host country

The current study found that participants' affection to the host country influenced their personal networks to a considerable degree. All participants chose Australia as their study location based on practical considerations, such as its quality education, favourable migration

policies, and geographical proximity to Vietnam. The participants did not exhibit a strong interest in Australian culture, and as a result, did not exert effort in engaging with local communities, developing relationships with local individuals, or experiencing the local ways of life.

Despite residing in Adelaide for over five years, Quang, a final-year PhD student, maintained what he referred to as a 'Vietnamese lifestyle'. He revealed that he solely cooked and ate Vietnamese or Asian cuisine, celebrated only Vietnamese festivities, and primarily socialised with Vietnamese peers despite having numerous local connections from whom he disclosed receiving substantial academic-related support as showed in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Quang's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Long-term residence in Adelaide taught Quang a great deal about Australian culture, and his English proficiency helped him to communicate fluently with locals. Nonetheless, a lack of shared interests in each other's cultures prevented him and his local contacts from developing stronger ties than mere acquaintances or colleagues:

> "Food is the first thing. I can't eat Western food, so it's not fun to hang out and eat with locals because none of the locals I know like Asian food. The second thing is

> festivals. I know about their big holidays like Christmas and Easter, but I don't celebrate them. Yet, I still tell them "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter" on those days, but when Lunar New Year comes, they don't say anything back. This makes me think that they don't care much either. These little things make it hard for me to get close to the Australian people I know" (Quang).

Quang revealed that he was content with who he was and had no desire to modify himself in order to get closer with the locals. Instead, he learnt to value the companionship of other Vietnamese students with whom he felt more at ease and who shared more common interests, such as migration and visa concerns.

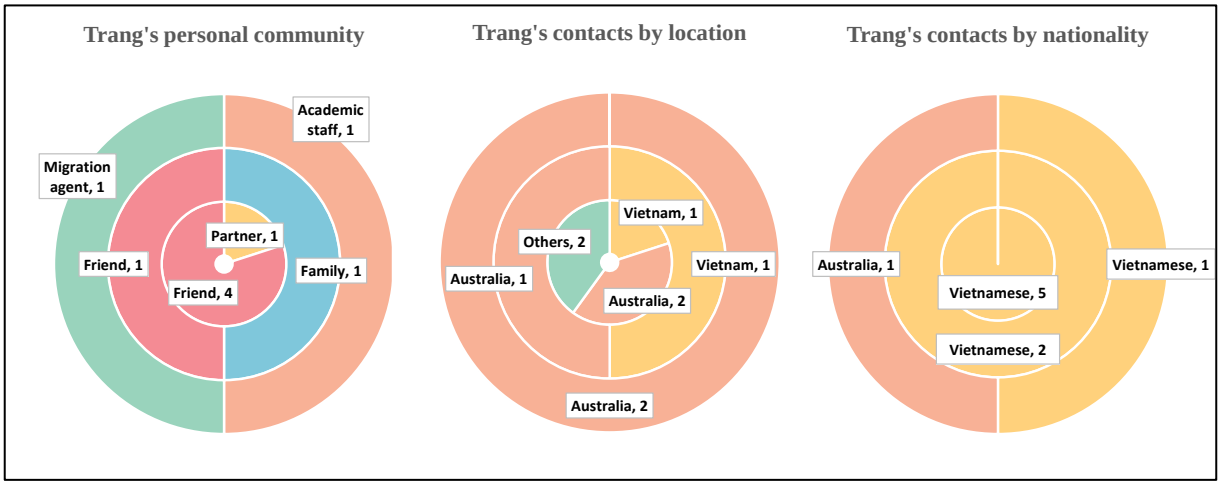
Trang, a final-year Bachelor student, shared views similar to Quang regarding her lack of interest in Australian cultures. She confessed to not follow Australian news and only consumed them when they were posted on Facebook by her friend circles, despite living in Adelaide for an extended period of time. Additionally, she was also uninterested in Australian sports and popular culture, as well as unfamiliar with any Australian television shows because she did not possess a television at home. As a result, Trang said that she had always gotten along better with her Vietnamese peers than with the locals because they shared the same cultures and sense of humour. She shared:

> "When it comes to making friends, I don't care if they're local or international students. But most people I feel compatible with are Vietnamese or other Asians. It's partly because we share the same sense of humour. I get the Australian humour but I enjoy the Asian senses of humour more. And Australians don't seem to understand my jokes either. My friends also like Japanese pop cultures or things like musicals like I do… At first, I also tried to introduce local students I knew to Asian cultures but the responses were lukewarm, so I don't bother doing it anymore… They also don't

understand what it's like to be an international student or how hard it can be, so I can't talk to them about much" (Trang).

Trang's lack of interest in Australian culture reduced her inclination to make friends with the Australians, but this did not hinder her experience in Adelaide because she found fulfilment in developing relationships with Vietnamese people as depicted in Figure 7. Trang was a loyal committee member at the Vietnamese international student society at her university. Her status as a long-standing member facilitated close friendships with other members whom she identified individually in the name generator, in contrast to Quang who mentioned his co-national student society as a single contact due to lacking proximity to other members.

**Figure 7. Trang's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**



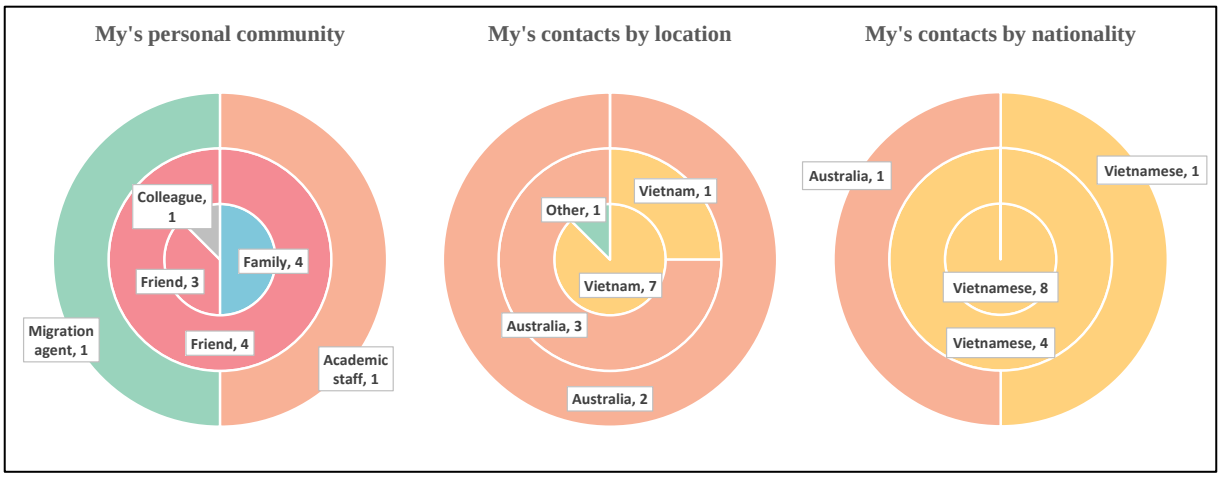

The stories of Quang and Trang demonstrate that not all international students are fascinated by host cultures, have a desire to become close with locals, or perceive negative impacts from the absence of these contacts on their study abroad experiences. For international students like these participants, strong ties with co-national individuals and communities allow them to expand their social circles and cultivate friendships with individuals from a variety of Vietnamese cities whom they might otherwise never have the opportunity to meet, thereby broadening their understanding of their own cultures.

### 5.3.4 Environments

When questioned about the scarcity of both local and international contacts within their personal communities, participants frequently cited the predominance of Vietnamese students in their university courses as the reason. Therefore, they had limited opportunities to cultivate relationships with members of the local and diverse international community.

My, a Master's student in her first year who came to Adelaide for four months before the interview date, is a prime example. Her name generator highlighted that her only local contact was with a professor in her course. She explained that the Masters by coursework program in her discipline attracted a significant number of Vietnamese and other Asian students while consisting only a couple of local students. Hence, she primarily interacted with Vietnamese classmates. While she also communicated with classmates from other countries, they were not close as it appeared that most people preferred to socialise with compatriots.

**Figure 8. My's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Despite My's effort to participate in volunteer programs and social gatherings arranged by the university student support, she encountered challenges in forging new friendships through these activities:

> "The first few times I went on these trips and events, I thought about meeting new people. But it was hard because everyone seemed to go with their friends and stayed in their groups. So I also went with my friend, and all we did was talking with each other. Even though I tried to talk to other people and followed them on social media, we didn't really stay in touch. I don't think you can make friends at these events because you don't have enough time to really get to know someone" (My).

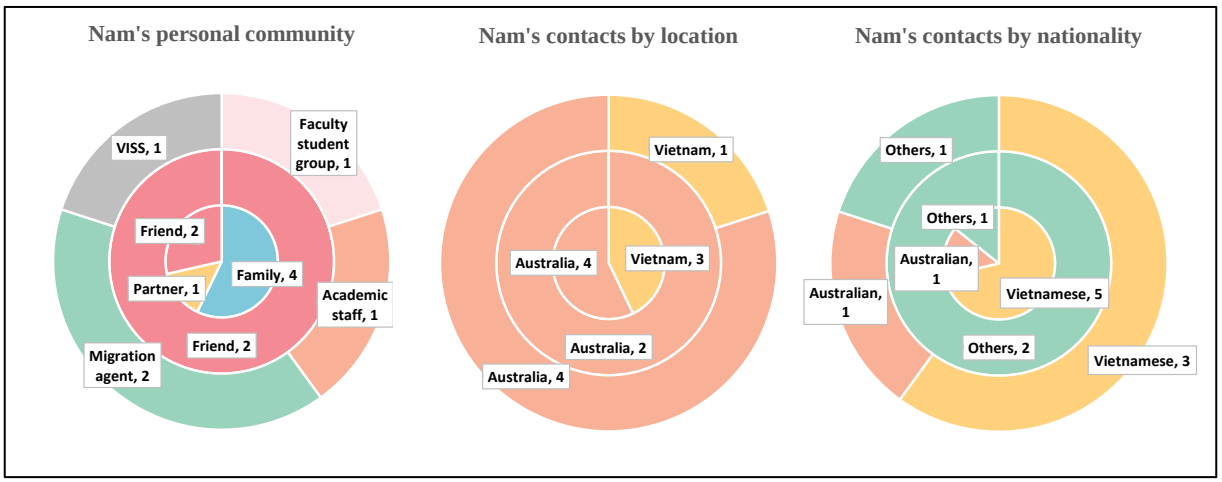
Due to the mentioned hurdles, My resorted to developing relationships with her Vietnamese colleagues and housemates, the majority of whom were Vietnamese, as illustrated in Figure 8. My revealed that she found her current housing through a Facebook group called "Vietnamese international student association in Adelaide", where individuals frequently post advertisements for affordable housing unlike the expensive university accommodation options. Likewise, she secured a job at a Vietnamese restaurant through this platform. My encountered significant difficulties in finding employment upon her arrival in Adelaide due to her lack of connections and prior local work experience, but eventually found her current job after coming across its recruitment ad on this Facebook group. Hence, My expressed that this group was a helpful source of information. Although she did not personally know any other members, the housing and employment opportunities she discovered through this channel facilitated numerous offline interactions with Vietnamese people.

Unlike most of the participants, Thao and Nam had a considerable number of non-Vietnamese contacts in their personal communities. At the time of the interview, Thao, a second-year Bachelor's degree student, had lived in Australia for five years, while Nam, a third-year Bachelor's degree student, had lived in Adelaide for nearly a decade. Both participants attended public high schools in Australia, which they viewed as a crucial factor in their ability to communicate more confidently and effectively with locals and individuals from other countries. Nam elaborated:

> "Environment is very important. I went to a public high school where there were many local students. Since we were all kids, there were no such things as racism or prejudices. That was why I got along well with my classmates and formed a group of close friends pretty easily. I still keep in touch with most of them, but I'm only really close to two or three of them. But my cousin, for example, even though she was born here she only hangs out with Asians because she went to a prestigious high school where a lot Asian parents sent their kids to" (Nam).

Nam explained in the interview that, due to his experiences in high school, he had no difficulty making friends with local university students and attending social events with them. Their relationships were close enough for him to text them when he needs assistance or information, but the majority of his close friends were still from Vietnam and other Asian countries as showed in Figure 9.

**Figure 9. Nam's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Nam explained that he still prefered hanging out with Vietnamese and Asian friends because of the shared cultures and ways of socialising. He discovered that his Australian friends only

enjoyed going out to drink, whereas he liked trying out new restaurants and good food, a common interest that helped him and his Asian friends bond.

Thao attended a public high school in Sydney for two years before moving to Adelaide to pursue her Bachelor's degree. She shared with Nam similar experiences:

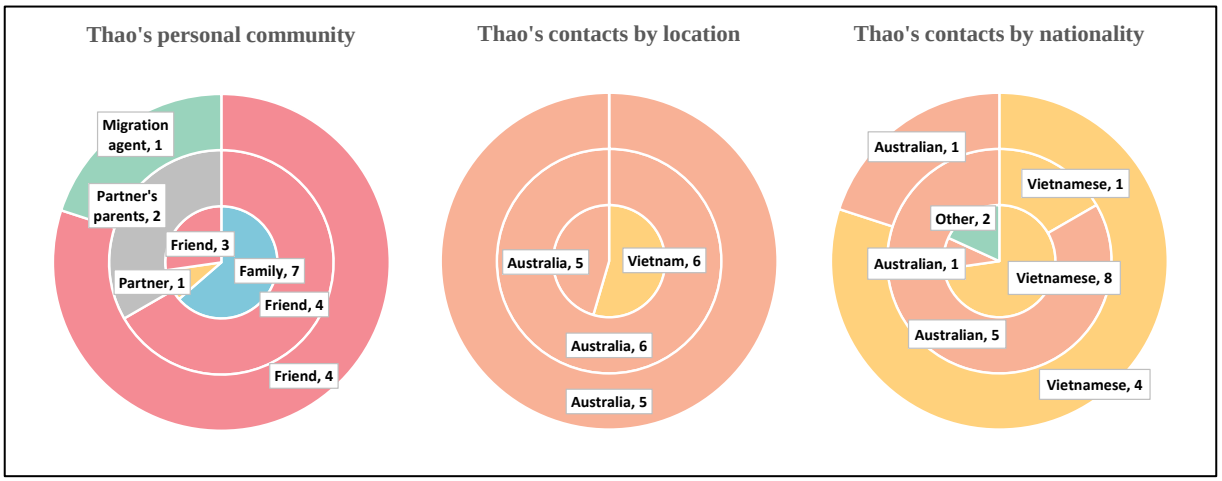
> "Since I went to high school in Australia, I got used to the culture here better than most international students. It was hard for me at first, too, because of the differences in cultures, like how they spent their free time and how they spoke English, which was different from the English I learned in Vietnam. They used more slang and different expressions. I still notice the differences, but not as much as I used to. This is because my high school had a lot of local students, so I spent a lot of time with them and got used to it" (Thao).

The school environment, which required students to spend five days a week together and share common subjects and activities, contributed to Thao's ease in forming relationships with other students during her high school years. However, the situation changed when Thao relocated to Adelaide. In contrast to Nam, who had lived in Adelaide for the entire duration of his stay in Australia, Thao lost contact with the majority of her high school friends and struggled to form new friendships at the university where she found that most people were in their own cliques. She said:

> "When I first moved to Adelaide, I had a hard time making new friends. I was too shy to talk to new people, and it seemed like everyone had their own cliques. During that time, I only hung out with Vietnamese people I met through my housemates or talked to my cousins in Sydney or my family back home" (My).

Thao was only able to establish local connections when she began working part-time in a restaurant where the majority of her colleagues were Australians. Meeting her current partner, who is from Adelaide, from a dating app also helped Thao expand her network of local contacts, including his family and friends. As depicted in Figure 10, Thao's personal community contains a large number of local contacts.

**Figure 10. Thao's personal community and contacts by location and nationality**




Thao revealed that her Australian contacts provided her with the social support and companionship she lacked when arriving in Adelaide, as they frequently spent time together. However, she reserved the innermost circle of her personal network for her family and friends in Vietnam, her cousins in Sydney, and her partner. Thao turned to these contacts whenever she felt lonely or stressed. She explained that family members and friends in Vietnam held a significant place in her life as they were the only ones who truly understood her, so their presence and support could not be replaced by those she had known for only two years, with the exception of her partner. Hence, Thao stated that she would need more time to become as close to her local friends as she was with her family and friends from back home.

Overall, the most difficult aspect of making friends at universities in Adelaide for the majority of participants was that the environments did not encourage enough interactions between

individuals and groups, nor did the classroom settings provide sufficient time to forge bonds that could be maintained outside of the universities. Hence, in order to make friends and meet new people, the participants turned to alternative sources such as colleagues and housemates, or in Nam's case, he relied on his existing high school friendships.

### 5.3.5 Established connections

In analysing the interviews with the nine participants, it became evident that establishing close relationships in Australia was not a priority for the majority of them, regardless of whether the individuals they interacted with were Australians, Vietnamese or other international students. This was primarily due to the fact that the participants already had strong established relationships with family and friends back home or elsewhere who fulfilled the emotional support they need. The advancement in communication technologies and social media platforms meant that these ties remained unaffected by geographical distances. In some cases, the participants found that their relationships with people back home had become even stronger than before.

For instance, Duong realised that studying abroad allowed her to appreciate the importance of her family and friends back home. Before she was able to make friends in Adelaide, she could only turn to family and friends who were residing in Vietnam or other countries, as she recalled:

> "I used to keep everything to myself because I thought that was being independent. But I've learned that talking to family and friends about my problems makes me feel better... Now, whenever I have to make important decisions, I always think of my family and consult with them. I've learned that no one can give me good advice like they can... And my friends told me not to be silly and to just tell them everything when I'm having trouble" (Duong).

Duong found herself chatting with her family and friends in Vietnam more frequently than she had previously before studying abroad. She shared that she had learned not to suffer in silence and that her family and friends would always be by her side.

As a consequence of Australia closing its borders in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, communication with family in Vietnam became even more vital for the participants. Family support helped students overcome homesickness due to being stranded in the host country as well as the loneliness that resulted from a lack of social interactions during lockdowns. During this time, the participants also yearned for updates and news from their families back home, particularly in early 2021, when Vietnam was severely impacted by the pandemic. Quang related his account:

> "I video called my family 5–6 times a week instead of 3–5 times a week like before to see how they were doing and ask about the Covid situation in Vietnam… I was under a lot of stress because of the lockdown in Adelaide which also affected my PhD progress… So It was comforting to see my family members' faces and talked with them because haven't been able to see them in person and have meals with them in a long time" (Quang).

In Tuan's case, the two years of closed Australian borders during the pandemic were extremely difficult because he was unable to physically be with his family and share the positive and negative events that occurred in his life. However, communication technologies served as a helpful tool for maintaining contact with his loved ones and partially bridging the physical distance between them. Despite being geographically separated, they remained a source of motivation and emotional support for one another. enabled them to continue motivating and supporting one another despite their physical separation.

> "I was fine when everything went smoothly, but when something went wrong, I missed them. We talked a lot during that time, and they always asked how I was doing and tried to cheer me up by telling me 'everything will be fine' and "stay positive" (Tuan).

Along with family, romantic partners were very important in the lives of the students who took part in this study. Six of the nine particpants were in relationships, with their partners living in Vietnam, Adelaide, or other regions of Australia. The social network mapping and interviews of the participants reveal that those in relationships received significant emotional, social, and even informational support from their partners, regardless of whether the relationships are local or long-distance.

For instance, Thao acknowledged that her Australian boyfriend was present in every aspect of her life in Adelaide. He assisted her with her studies, provided her with companionship, and was always by her side whenever she was sad, lonely, or stressed. Now that they were living together, Thao revealed that he became the first person who learn of anything that occured to her. Thao was also able to expand her local networks and make friends with individuals she would have never met without her boyfriend.

Hung and Tuan agreed on the significance of the emotional support they receive from their Vietnamese long-distance partners. Thanks to social media platforms that enabled parties to be present in each other's lives, long-distance relationships have become less difficult:

> "My professor warned me that being a research student would be very lonely because I would have to do everything by myself. But I have my girlfriend. I have someone to share my concerns and problems that cause me stress with, so at least I have that

> advantage even when she's living far away. If you are a research student, you need to have a partner [Jokingly]" (Hung).

However, one reported disadvantage of engaging in a romantic relationship while studying abroad was that it may result in a reduced interest in making new acquaintances and cultivate friendships. Nam, for instance, desired to expand his social circle after his Australian partner moved to a different location. He revealed that his girlfriend's departure had left a void in his social life, prompting him to realise the importance of being open to new social connections. Likewise, Trang acknowledged her dependence on her Vietnamese partner after he relocated to Brisbane for work:

> "It's actually pretty scary to imagine what would happen if we broke up… I go with him to almost everywhere and we also have the same friends. I'll move to Brisbane to be with him after graduation, but I don't know anyone there. The only people I know are his friends whom he introduced to me the last time I went to see him… Hmm I think I really should find my own friends" (Trang).

After Trang's partner left to Brisbane, she no longer had him as a constant companion to accompany her to various locations and social gatherings. Hence, she shared to force herself to learn how to drive and reconnect with friends she had neglected since entering this relationship for her remainting time in Adelaide.

To sum up, initernational students' expansion of their personal communities in the host country can be influenced by the characteristics of their existing relationships. The findings of this study show that the participants were less inclined to cultivate deep relationships with people in the host country when their needs for emotional support and/or virtual companionship were met through established ties, such as family, close friends, and romantic

partners whether local or transnational. This finding is consistent with Eve's (2002, p.401) research, which suggests relationships do not arise spontaneously between individuals due to favorable impressions of one another. Rather, the prospects for forging relationships are determined by "the potential for enriching and maintaining another [already important] relationship". When new relationships were perceived to offer little value to their lives and existing relationships or were not durable, the participants demonstrated the tendency to refuse opportunities to strengthening such connections. Instead, they chose to focus on maintaining the existing relationships that offer them a sense of familiarity and security, which may not be readily available from new connections.

## 5.4 International students' perceived identities

Although identity has direct translations in Vietnamese, such as 'căn tính' (refers to self identity), 'danh tính' (refers to one's identification such as name, origin, etc.), or 'bản sắc' (commonly used to refer to cultural or national identity), the participants were unfamiliar with these terms because they were not commonly used in everyday life. Hence, all participants used the English term in their responses as it was more recognisable and easier for them to conceptualise.

The second research question in this study is interested in exploring the way international student exert their personal agency in social exchanges with others to reflect their perceived identity. To find the answers to this question, it is necessary to first investigate how students understand the concept of identity and whether it resembles or differs from the Norton's (2013) conceptual approach used to frame this study. The rationale for this is that in the context of an identity-related research, it is essential to prioritise the participants' opinions on what is significant to their identity, as opposed to making assumptions.

The majority of the participants' narratives of their identities closely aligned with Nortons's (2013) definition of identity, as they considered identity as the unique and individualistic characteristics that differ themselves from others and based on the person they envisioned themselves evolving into in the years to come. My's and Tung's takes on identity offered good examples for this:

> "I think *identity* is what helps us distinguish one individual from another. For example, I'm a Vietnamese, and that's always the most important one. Then I'm someone who wants to work in education. My third attribute is that I'm someone who's always eager to learn. I'm a Vietnamese who always desire to learn more about education so that I can help improve the lives of others. That's my identity" (My).

> "I think *identity* is how one stays true to themselves and stand out from a diverse crowd… Like I'm someone who's funny, friendly, and cheerful. But there are times when I'm pretty calm and quiet as well, like at the moment because I'm still getting used to the new environment. Once I'm more settled, I'll find some ways to help me stand out more from the PhD peers, like joining the *departments*' *HDR committee* or something like that. And finally, I'm a meticulous person" (Tung).

Some other participants, such as Quang, Thao and Tuan, revealed that identity can only be realised by using others as points of references:

> "For me, *identity* can only be understood in relation to others. It's like *labelling*… I see myself as someone who is quite eccentric, seemingly *intelligent*, seemingly *wise*, but at the same time *foolish*. And someone who is sentimental... I never thought about defining my *identity* but I realised those labels because I became aware that I was different from the majority. For example, I was in a group of people and felt that I

wasn't really like any of them and couldn't really *identify* myself with them, then I joined a different group and felt the same... After several times like that I gained *self-awareness* of my identity" (Quang).

"Identity is who you are. But I don't know who I am right now... My Vietnamese friends told me I was too Australian, but my Australian friends told me I was too Vietnamese. My parents also said my way of thinking and dressing was like an Australian... I'm simply carefree. Even when I say that I'm stressed, I'm still the least stressed among the people I know. My Asian friends in Australia aren't like that, they really care about what others think. But then sometimes I think I'm really Vietnamese, I do things I can't imagine myself doing, but I do them anyway. At those times, I thought to myself how come I'm this Vietnamese... So sometimes I feel like having an identity crisis. I don't know who I am and who I will become" (Thao).

"I think identity is something you don't realise until it is contested… Like when I was being looked down by a student in my tutorial class for not speaking English like a local… That day, I suddenly felt such a strong sense of *Asianess*, I listened to the intro song of the Beijing Olympics for hours to remind myself that I'm an Asian and I'll not let anyone look down on that part of me" (Tuan).

As showed above, 'being Vietnamese' or 'being Asian' was frequently mentioned in the participants' descriptions of their identities. Interestingly, in contrast to the common assumption in prior studies on international students regarding the significance of cultures and nationalities in students' identities as discussed in Chapter 3, the participants in this study did not place the same level of importance on these aspects as they did on their unique individual characteristics when it comes to identity. As the participants shared:

> "I think everyone is born differently and has their own way of living and enjoying lives. Cultures and nationalities are just like icing on the cake" (Nam).

> "I think that at the end of the day, a person's *identity* comes down to their essence. And these types of essences are what everyone in the world has in common, like whether you're kind, friendly, or cheerful or not... I don't think cultures have much of an effect on it. When people from two different cultures meet, there may be language barriers or culturals differences, but they can be mitigated with time or other solutions. For example, I get along very well with a Chinese classmate because we're the oldest in the class and have a lot of common interests to talk about, even though we sometimes have trouble communicating with each other. Sometimes we don't know the exact English words for what we want to express, and when that happen, we try to find ways to talk and understand each other like using Google Translate... Although it's also true that where you live and work can partly shape your personality... But then there are always different kinds of people wherever you go" (My).

> "For me, culture is just a catalyst that connect people with similar backgrounds with each other. But I think it is individuals' personalities and characters that determine whether those connections will last or not" (Hung).

> "I always think that I'm a Vietnamese person, but that doesn't mean I hang out every Vietnamese I meet... I'm selective about who I want to be friends with. I prefered my friends to be someone who also do research like me, or simply someone who always strive to move forwards in life" (Tuan).

These responses paint a complex picture of how the participants understood and expressed their identities in their everyday lives. They demonstrate that identity cannot be

comprehended solely through the prism of culture. Despite the fact that all the participants were Vietnamese, their perceptions and expressions of identity were different according to their unique qualities and life experiences. Observably, the participants did not like being regarded solely as representatives of their culture and country, because they believed that they had much more to offer in terms of individual attributes and personalities. The participants were also aware that even within a culture, there could be various types of people. Hence, they agreed that individuals should not be categorised based on their cultural backgrounds. In addition, the participants did not view cultures as the only facilitators or hurdles to creating intra-cultural or cross-cultural connections, as they recognised that a person's attributes were more important than their origin.

To further elaborate on the linkages between social connections and identity, most participants reported that identity could influence and be influenced by their relationships with others. In some cases, participants displayed their personal agency in managing the social contacts in a way that complement their perceived identity. As Tuan elaborated:

> "I think my identity and relationships with others are connected and affect each other. My social relationships *speak something about myself.* I'm rather practical in the sense that I want to connect with people from who I can gain some benefits, for example, they help me become a better person... Like your circles, I'm still friendly with everyone but whether they can make it to the innermost circle or not is up to my decision. If I want them to, I will make an effort and invest in these relationships... And I think those *intentions* are driven by how I perceive my *identity.*" (Tuan).

Tuan's narrative tells that he took control over which contacts to include or exclude in his personal communities, based on the extent to which they were aligned with this current identity and beneficial to his envisioned future selves. This strategy is different from another

example provided by Quang who disclosed that rather than selecting contacts that suited his identity, Quang adapted his identity depending on the group of people with who he communicated:

> "When I hang out with my colleagues at the restaurant where I work part-time at, I don't talk about topics like politics or social affairs because they don't care. When I want to discuss these topics, I talk to another group of people. And if I want to tell stories about my everyday life, I have a different group for that. Because I don't want to be the *odd one out* and isolate myself... But that doesn't mean I don't feel *belong* to these groups... I still feel *belong* to them but there are some ways in which I'm different that make me realise I'm not yet completely one of them. Once I know how I'm different from other people, I tweak myself a bit" (Quang).

Quang's account highlights that international students' identity is multidimensional and fluid, involving an ongoing process of incorporating new experiences and balancing between one's perceptions of self and the identities or traits that are attached to the social groups to which they are belonging.

Overall, these findings support Collin's (2012) position that international students' identity is complex and cannot be understood in a fixed sense. Through providing the participants an opportunity to express their perspectives on identity, this study manages to gain deeper understanding of the multiple facets of their identity. Additionally, the various ways in which the students' identity affect and be affected by their social exchanges with others, and the role the students play in facilitating these reciprocal relationships between identity and connectedness are also highlighted.

## 5.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter provided insights into how international students connect with multiple social groups and the relationships between these social exchanges and their perceptions of identity. In this concluding section, findings from the social network analysis and interviews will be related to literature in Chapter 2 and 3 to illustrate how they can contribute to deepening the understanding of international students' transnational connectedness and identity.

The analysis of data from the nine participants' name generation activities validates earlier findings on international students' inclination of being friends with co-national fellows. Some participants' personal communities displayed characteristics of Gomes's (2015) parallel society, whereby they limited their social connections in Australia to individuals of their own nationality. This study's findings explain the general trend of international students' social exchanges primarily occurring between co-nationals and the lack of local-international relationships by presenting five possible causes, provided by the students themselves. They include goals for studying abroad, personalities, affection to the host country, and established connections as the personal factors and environments as the external factor that are outside of the students' control.

In contrast to the expectations set out by the education policies by the Federal and State Governments as well as previous scholarship in the field, the majority of the participants in this study shared to not have the desire to cultivate meaningful relationships with local students and community. The given reasons included the transient nature of their staying in Australia, the lack of interest in Australian culture, or introverted personality that did not enjoy socialising with others. In some instances where participants had established sufficient quality ties with family and friends back home, local co-nationals, and/or partners to fulfil their requirements for support and companionship, they also lost interest in establishing new host connections. These findings challenge the preference for host contacts as the most

valuable sources of social support, highlighting the capacity of home and co-national contacts to provide important social support to international students, particularly in terms of emotional support and companionship both physically and virtually. The role of communication technology in facilitating the student' access to social assistance was significant. It bridged the gap between the participants and their loved ones back home or in another country, enabling them to stay in touch and be present in each other's lives. In addition, it connected participants to readily accessible sources of support in the form of Facebook co-national groups, which played a crucial role in enabling migration and aiding students' settlement in the host country. Before moving to Adelaide, the participants were able to secure housing using these resources. Subsequently, once in Adelaide, they were promptly able to receive assistance for employment or other concerns from other members in these Facebook groups.

This chapter challenged the deficit model prevalent in prior research that emphasises international students' inability to develop social interactions with locals, by highlighting the students' agency in deciding who to include and exclude in their personal communities. These decisions were made based on the previously mentioned personal circumstances or the students' perspectives on their identities. Through the interviews, it was found that the students had a tendency to gravitate towards contacts who reinforced their self-identity or helped them achieve the aspirations of who they would want to become in the future. Finally, the findings brought into attention the need to examine the impact of external factors such as university and classroom environments in the exploration of international students' connectedness and identity. Although international students' intentions, motivations and agency in establishing and maintaining social relationships with other are notable, the impact of the environments in facilitating or restricting these efforts cannot be overlooked.

The next chapter will address these findings more in depth with reference to the literature review in Chapter 2 and 3, particularly transnational social fields and agency theory.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

## 6.1 Introduction

The findings of the previous chapter shed light on the structures of international students' personal communities, the factors that contribute to their formations and the students' perceptions of identity. This chapter seeks to consolidate and analyse these findings in response to the two research questions that have been posed. Specifically, the transnational social fields theory will be used as a theoretical framework to contextualise the analysis. Furthermore, the findings will be linked to other relevant literature in the field of international student research to provide a more in-depth understanding of the research findings, drawing on additional relevant data from the research to support the analysis.

## 6.2 International students' connectedness in the context of transnational theory

This section addresses the first research question - In what ways do international students cultivate and handle their relationships with multiple contacts, including those from local and cross-border domains, and how do they perceive these connections? - by evaluating the primary findings regarding international students' connectedness within the framework of transnational social fields theory in order to elucidate their active roles in navigating and managing both local and transnational social connections. Subsequently, an in-depth analysis of the participants' perceptions of their relationships with their home, co-national, and host contacts follows. Although three of the nine participants reported having multi-national connections within their personal networks, there were insufficient data to draw definitive conclusions. While acknowledging the potential significance of these ties for international students, I have excluded analysis of multi-national contacts because they were less relevant to the participants in this study. In addition, this section also discusses the effect of communication technologies, which were reported to play a crucial role in facilitating connections with home and co-national contacts.

### 6.2.1 International students' balancing acts

Through the analytical framework of transnational social fields, this study delved into the personal communities of international students, revealing their inclination for including or excluding interactions and the roles they assign to their contacts for various forms of support. This investigation provided valuable insights into the personal agency and initiatives employed by international students to regulate their social relationships and pursue the necessary assistance during study abroad.

All participants in this study displayed an understanding of the importance of building new local contacts while preserving existing transnational relationships in order to access necessary resources before, during, and after their study abroad journey. This was reflected in their discussions on the desire to make new acquaintances in the host country for company and practical support, the need for emotional support from contacts back home, as well as the recognition of the future benefits they could gain from maintaining certain connections. The participants' motivations for establishing and maintaining social connections varied and were affected by a number of factors, including their study abroad objectives, attraction to the host culture, and evaluation of the support provided by their current contacts, which helped them determine their need to forge new social relationships.

These motivations direct the participants' behavioural strategies in establishing and maintaining relationships according to their needs and circumstances. The social network analysis revealed that individuals established relationships in both their home and host countries, with each fulfilling different forms of support and social companionship. The participants' explanations of the compositions of their personal communities also provided insights into the actions they took to foster new relationships, such as attending university events, and to maintain established connections, such as keeping a regular calling schedule with family in their home country. These findings also shed light on the impact of personality

traits on international students' preferred types of social interactions, which is rarely discussed in the scholarship on this topic. For example, students with introverted personalities like Hung and Duong were reported to rely on pre-existing social connections rather than striving to develop new ones. Even when they made such efforts, they preferred to interact in smaller and more comfortable group settings, such as at workplaces or shared houses over an extended period of time rather than approaching strangers. On the other hand, extroverted individuals like My and Nam tended to enjoy participating in large social events held by universities to network with other students.

Despite international students' efforts to develop new contacts, not all attempts are successful, due to personal reasons such as lack of common interests, cultural unfamiliarity, and language barriers, or environmental factors outside of the students' control. Favourable social circumstances can facilitate the development of social connections, as evidenced by Nam's and Thao's experiences in their high school environment where they were able to befriend local students with ease. In contrast, environmental constraints can impede students' agency, hindering their ability to establish new connections despite significant effort and motivation. The cases of Duong and My exemplify this phenomenon, as they encountered difficulties in making friends at university due to the inadequacy of the university environment in fostering interactions among individuals and groups, as well as not providing sufficient time for students to establish strong and lasting friendships and acquaintanceships. When international students are unable to form bonds with new local connections, it can lead to emotional experiences of rejection and disappointment, driving them to seek alternative options. For example, in My's case, her inability to form friendships with individuals she met through university events prompted her to turn to her housemates and colleagues for company. Similarly, in Duong's case, her discouragement as a result of her inability to connect with classmates caused her to rely on the comfort of family and friends back home to alleviate loneliness in the new setting.

The above findings demonstrate international students' capacity in arranging and managing their social ties across many geographic regions, as well as their tenacity in the face of obstacles that limited their access to assistance and companionship from certain persons or groups. They align with Erdal and Oeppen's (2013, p. 877) concept of "migrants' balancing acts", which refers to migrants' ability to maintain a balance between the demands and expectations of their societies of origin and settlement, as well as between their connections with home and host individuals within transnational social fields. This notion is particularly applicable in the context of international students, who must navigate the challenges of juggling responsibilities, roles, and attachment to both home and host countries, due to the transient nature of their stay and the uncertainty surrounding their future migration, relocation or return. These responsibilities include enduring the pressures of performing well as students and workers in the host country, while simultaneously fulling their duties as family members, friends, and romantic partners to loved ones back home. To keep up their social ties and obligations in both their home country and host country, international students develop individualised strategies that reflect their unique circumstances and support requirements. Successfully implementing these strategies requires a complex balancing act in which students constantly have to swing back and forth between home and host, physically and virtually, throughout their study abroad journey.

### 6.2.2 International students' perceptions of relationships with home contacts

Home contacts were reported to provide crucial emotional support for international students. According to Figure 1, contacts in Vietnam accounted for fifty per cent of the total number of individuals contacted by participants to mitigate the feelings of loneliness and stress and to obtain virtual companionship. These contacts included family, friends, and romantic partners of the students. The majority of participants reported that since they had spent a considerable amount of time with their home contacts, this group had a better understanding of the

students' situations than newly formed connections in the host country. As a result, participants frequently sought personal advice from or shared personal struggles and concerns with their home contacts more than with other types of connections.

The findings generated from the name generator and interviews conducted among participants suggest that transnational family practices, as defined by Goulbourne (2010) and discussed in Chapter 2, are highly relevant to international students. By means of scheduled video calls and regular messaging via social media platforms, notably Facebook and the Vietnamese social media application Zalo, international students are able to sustain a sense of ordinary co-presence (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) with their family members. This enables both parties to remain integrated in each other's lives, stay updated of current events, and exchange support when needed. For example, Tuan and Quang reported to experience feelings of loneliness during challenging circumstances in their host country or holiday periods, when they observed local residents gathering with their families for occasions such as Christmas or Easter. In response, they increased the frequency of their communication with family members in order to mitigate these emotions.

Nonetheless, transnational family practices may not always yield positive emotions for international students. Although social media platforms facilitate transnational caregiving, a term coined by Baldassar, Baldock, and Wilding (2007) to refer to individuals' capacity to deliver care despite geographical distances, the students are still prone to family conflicts and intergenerational issues that can impose emotional burdens on international students. Thao, for example, complained with her parents' persistent pressure to get permanent residency in Australia, a goal which she was still unsure about. As a result, she opted to avoid discussing this matter to maintain familial harmony, including by not calling her parents entirely for a couple of days. These findings on international students' transnational familial relationships suggest that this is an intriguing subject that future research may be interested in

investigating. While a considerable attention has been paid on transnational family practices and transnational caregiving among transmigrants, its application in the context of international students remains mostly unexplored. Therefore, future investigations aimed at examining the manifestation of transnational caregiving between international students and their families, and the associated positive outcomes and emotional burdens for international students, would be a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

Home-based friendships, an aspect of international students' friendship networks that is frequently neglected, were considered by the participants to be important sources of virtual companionship for these students. Through these friendships, international students were able to engage in candid discussions and share concerns that they may not feel comfortable discussing with their families or newly formed friendships in Australia. For example, Thao stated that she spoke almost daily with her best friend in Vietnam, whereas Tung shared that he remained closely connected with his friends on Facebook and was unconcerned about his study abroad decision affecting their friendships because authentic friendships can withstand the long-distance separation. Moreover, this study reveals that international students may maintain connections with individuals in their home country, not only to satisfy immediate needs, but also to establish advantageous relationships for future endeavours. These connections may become handy when they seek employment or professional networking upon returning to Vietnam. Therefore, the findings demonstrate that temporal factors, such as the length of time an international student plans to reside in the host country, can significantly impact the strategies utilised in cultivating social ties in both home and host countries. Hirsch and Kayam (2021) previously advocated for the inclusion of temporal factors when examining transmigrant relationships and experiences, which this study supports that they should also be considered in the analysis of connectedness among international students.

### 6.2.3 International students' perceptions of relationships with co-national contacts

Following the home contacts in Vietnam, co-national contacts constituted the second largest source of emotional support and social companionship for these international students, while ranking first in terms of providing instrumental support. By gathering data through name generation based on international students' perceived support, this study was able identify other types of co-national contacts outside of the co-national student groups. The data collected highlighted the presence of migrant agents, offline Vietnamese international student societies, and online co-national community Facebook groups as valuable sources of support. Notably, six out of nine student participants identified migrant agents within their personal communities with whom they shared close relationships. Moreover, three participants mentioned Vietnamese international student societies as a source of informational support within their personal communities, while eight out of nine participants reported joining the "Vietnamese international association in Adelaide" Facebook group to obtain information on Adelaide and seek advice from other members. This Facebook group was found to be a one-stop-shop for international students, offering a variety of services and resources beyond its initial purpose as an information hub for Vietnamese international students. Alumni, other types of migrants, and businesses also participated in the group, which served as a platform for job postings and business promotions targeting the Vietnamese community.

The role of support from the wider migrant community is largely absent in previous research on social support for international students. However, in Australia, the Vietnamese-born population represents a significant portion of the country's total population, ranking fourth in terms of overseas-born population after England, India, and China, according to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2021. In South Australia, the 2021 census recorded 17,033 Vietnamese-born people, making it the fourth largest overseas-born population in the state. This highlights the substantial size of the Vietnamese-born community in Australia.

Furthermore, recent data from the Department of Home Affairs in 2021 shows that Vietnamese permanent migrants involved in business innovation and investment constituted the second highest category, indicating a rise in Vietnamese-owned businesses in Australia. This trend presents potential employment opportunities for Vietnamese international students, who possess valuable assets in their nationality and understanding of both Vietnamese and Australian cultures, which can benefit these businesses. For example, My found it easier to secure a job at a Vietnamese-owned business through the co-national Facebook group than by searching for employment at Australian-owned businesses. Likewise, Trang noted that her involvement in the Vietnamese international student society at her university provided her with opportunities to network with Vietnamese business owners and employers, which could lead to job prospects both in Australia and Vietnam.

Contrary to concerns that home and co-national ties may impede the adjustment of international students to their host country, this study demonstrates that such ties provide these students with valuable resources. Home contacts play a crucial role in offering international students the essential emotional support and virtual companionship that is imperative during their stay abroad, given the emotionally taxing and isolating experience that many students often encounter. Regarding co-national connections, not only do they assist international students in adjusting to their new environment by providing accessible and helpful information, but also facilitate success within the Vietnamese community in Australia. Despite the large number of foreign-born populations who contribute to Australia's multicultural society, the majority of research on international students in Australia are reported to adopt an institutionalist stance, using the dominant culture of the host society as a standard for evaluating international students' social experiences (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). This study emphasises the significance of recognising the existence of culturally diverse communities in Australia, as well as the positive effects of international students' connectedness with these communities on their overall social and lived experiences.

### 6.2.4 International students' perceptions of relationships with host contacts

Table 5.1 shows that, with the exception of Thao and Quang, who had a considerably large number of local contacts in their personal communities, the remaining participants engaged with local contacts only infrequently. These findings corroborate previous research by Lim and Pham (2016), Page (2019), and Gomes (2015), which found that most participants form social relationships with their co-nationals. Furthermore, in comparison to home and co-national contacts, host contacts were primarily focused on providing instrumental support, with little emphasis on providing emotional support or companionship. The findings of the study shed light on the root cause of the lack of international-local relationships, which was discovered to be a lack of interest on the part of both international and local students.

The majority of participants reported feeling no pressure to form friendships with host students, as evidenced by Trang's statement that "friends are friends, regardless of where they are from," and Nam's comment that "putting pressure on myself to befriend local students seems unnecessary". Personal factors, as previously mentioned, were found to play a significant role in explaining international students' lack of interest in developing relationships with locals. For instance, their study abroad goals and the awareness of their temporary stay in Australia may lead them to believe that investing time in developing relationships with locals is futile since they will eventually leave the country. This phenomenon is consistent with Jennissen et al.'s (2019) documentation on the lack of relationships between transient migrants and local residents in the Netherlands and other European countries, which was attributed to the absence of the migrants' need to develop close relationships with locals since they plan to leave eventually. Additionally, if the perceived benefits of establishing relationships with locals are deemed insignificant and unlikely to help them achieve their study abroad goals, as in Tuan's case, students may also lack the motivation to make friends with them. Finally, pre-existing connections with co-national and home contacts may also influence students' decisions, with some students feeling

that their existing relationships already meet their support needs and facilitate their success while studying abroad.

The results of the interviews revealed that a lack of affection towards the host country was also associated with a lack of interest in forming friendships with locals. This study's findings support Doerr's (2017) research, which found that students who have little prior knowledge or expectations of the host country may feel less pressure to integrate into local cultures. Consistent with these findings, the majority of participants in this study did not perceive the need to become friends with local students. Instead, they formed close relationships with other Vietnamese international students and openly enjoyed each other's company. For these participants, the lack of local friendships was not considered a shortcoming in their study abroad journey because they still experienced living in a foreign country, met people from diverse backgrounds within Vietnam, formed close connections with those with whom they felt compatible, and learned to navigate their lives and thrive in the host society with support from co-national communities.

While some students displayed little interest in building local connections, others, such as Duong, initially believed that befriending local students was essential for success but encountered challenges that made them turn to fellow co-national students for companionship. The reluctance of local students to befriend international students was found to be another barrier to intercultural friendships. Existing literature has identified the existence of international students' parallel society and ethnic enclaves (Gomes, 2015; Page, 2019), but little attention has been paid to the "local bubble" (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016, p. 703). According to McKenzie and Baldassar (2016), local students frequently have established friendship groups that are hard to break into. They display hesitance to accept new members who may weaken their existing bonds, especially those of different cultural backgrounds. As discussed in previous chapters, students such as Duong and Thao acknowledged encountering

challenges in establishing local friendships at their universities, explaining that most local students stay in their groups or pairs. Consequently, they opted to maintain relationships with their co-national contacts or local colleagues at work rather than investing efforts into building local connections in university environment.

The findings indicate that the participants did not prioritise establishing social connections with their local peers, and they perceived that local students reciprocate this sentiment by displaying a lack of interest in developing friendships with them. A review of studies conducted in Australian institutions by McKenzie and Baldassar (2016), Tran et al. (2022), and Fincher and Shaw (2019) suggests that institutional practices that emphasise the separation between local and international students might be responsible for this mutual lack of interest. As argued by Fincher and Shaw (2019, p. 1898), "casual segregating practices are clearly present in local students' perceptions of international students, serving as a supportive basis for the more formal separating practices of institutional administrators". Such practices include culturally specific student clubs and cultural events that target students from specific countries rather than the entire campus community (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016), and accommodation that is specifically designed for affluent international students and not accessible to local students who cannot afford or do not want to pay as much (Fincher & Shaw, 2019). Additionally, Tran et al. (2022) contend that institutional efforts to create a welcoming environment for international students by offering a wide range of services specifically for them may have the unintended consequence of hindering intercultural engagement between international and local students. Therefore, the apparent lack of enthusiasm exhibited by both international and local students in establishing social relationships poses potential obstacles to the Australian and South Australian Departments of Education's goal of promoting intercultural engagement, requiring a revisit of institutional practices and student support services.

### 6.2.5 Communications technologies in facilitating home and co-national connections.

Communication technologies have become an integral part of the lives of international students. They facilitate the students' communication with loved ones while also providing access to online communities of co-nationals. International students' use of communication technologies and social media platforms enables them to maintain what Diminescu (2021, p. 74) calls a "connected presence" across borders. This allows them to remain virtually present while physically absent and temporarily absent while being physically present. In transnational contexts, students' use of communication technologies reflects their desire to stay in touch with loved ones, interact with individuals in the host country, and gain access to pertinent information. Social media platforms and mobile devices have become deeply ingrained in the participants' social lives to the extent that they shared to cannot envision life without them. Communication technologies were especially important during the two-year period of Covid-19-related travel restrictions, as they were the only way for participants to stay in touch with family, friends, and partners in Vietnam and other locations.

Social media promotes the establishment of online co-national support networks, as demonstrated by the "Vietnamese international student association in Adelaide" Facebook group previously mentioned. Chen and Choi (2011) argue that social media communities are an effective supplement to offline co-national social support, providing vital information and assistance to international students, both prior to their relocation and during the settlement. Due to their limited prior knowledge of Adelaide and Australia, some participants in this study shared that they joined the co-national Facebook group before departing from Vietnam to obtain necessary information to prepare for their study abroad journey and seek housing advice. For instance, My reported having joined the "Vietnamese international student association in Adelaide" Facebook group prior to relocating to Adelaide, with the intention to explore housing options. During her search, My discovered more affordable alternatives than

those offered by the university. These findings align with Komito and Bates' (2009) observation which find that the information shared among online community members enables migrants to engage in more strategic planning for their new lives and to thrive in the host country. In addition, they serve as emotional buffers, allowing members to maintain a connection with their home country through posts and discussions dedicated to their cultures.

Findings from this study also reveal that, in comparison to institutional support provided by universities, co-national Facebook groups were more frequently used by participants for seeking information, job opportunities, accommodation, and assistance. The group was regarded as a favoured means of obtaining information and support, and this may be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, they offer unofficial or street-smart information, especially regarding visa and living issues, which can be more practical and helpful than official channels of information, such as university student body or government websites. (Oirzabal, 2012). For instance, Tung mentioned connecting with someone he called his saviour through the co-national Facebook group before moving to Adelaide. This individual provided Tung with valuable information concerning document requirements for entry to Australia immediately after the border closure was lifted, and even helped him find a place to stay overnight in Melbourne while he waited for his flight to Adelaide. Tung's positive experience inspired him to assist other Vietnamese individuals who later messaged him to seek advice.

The second reason given by the participants regards the accessibility of the co-national Facebook group in comparison to the university student support services. Of the eight participants who were part of the group, seven reported using its search function to locate information, rather than posting on the group. This function was considered especially helpful for introverted students in this study who preferred looking up information by themselves than approaching someone in person for assistance. In contrast, the participants perceived

university student services as having high levels of what this study describes as ‘friction’, a concept borrowed from the field of business and marketing. Friction refers to any aspect of a service experience that impedes users from using it effortlessly or seeing value from it (Anders, 2016). In the context of international students in this study, friction relates to the need for students to exert greater effort in obtaining assistance from university services. For example, Quang stated that he had to email the international student support service at his university to seek help with his emotional and physical stress when he first moved to Adelaide, as instructed on the Orientation Day. He then had to wait a couple of days for this service to contact the counsellor service before being able to schedule an appointment. Similarly, Duong expressed reluctance to contact the counsellor service at her university because she was told by her friends that there were several steps involved, including form submission, waiting for a call back, phone screening, and the possibility of not even securing an appointment. With regard to housing assistance, some participants including My, Thao, Tuan and Quang observed that utilising university accommodation services was both expensive and time-consuming. By contrast, securing private rentals or sublets directly from potential landlords or housemates they found on the co-national Facebook group was much more affordable and straightforward. Hence, it can be seen that these frictions diminish the appeals of university support services to the participants, leading them to turn to alternative sources of assistance from their home or co-national contacts.

These findings highlight the importance of communication technologies in the lives of international students as an integral means of maintaining connections with transnational contacts, including loved ones at home and abroad, as well as gaining access to vital information and support from online co-national communities. In addition, communication technologies and social media platforms simplify the process of seeking information and assistance than services offered by universities do, thereby allowing international students to access the support they need quicker and easier.

### 6.2.6 Summary of findings for the first research question

This section has addressed the first research question concerning international students' connectedness to home, co-national, and host contacts, which is analysed through the lens of transnational social fields. In particular, the analysis focuses primarily on international students' agency in navigating multiple relationships across borders in order to obtain the necessary support from their contacts, while also exploring the role of communication technology in promoting cross-border and local communication.

The findings from this research reveal international students' connectedness and social strategies are intricate and highly personalised. The study identifies five factors that influence international students' interpersonal relationship management, namely their future goals abroad, affection for the host country, personality traits, pre-existing connections, and the surrounding environment. Based on these factors, international students gain a comprehensive understanding of the support they require, the goals they hope to achieve through their relationships, and the relationships they want to prioritise.

International students in this study not only had a high number of home and co-national contacts in their personal communities, but they also perceived these contacts as the most important and helpful sources of support that are made more accessible through communication technologies. These findings suggest a more favourable perspective on the impact of such contacts on international students' social and well-being, as well as their adjustment to the host country, diverging from the common notion found in previous literature that home and co-national contacts may hinder international students' adaptation to the host country as discussed in the Chapter 3.

This study further reveals that host contacts' supportive role is less significant than previously assumed. International students and local students seem to show a mutual lack of interest in

cultivating friendships with each other and prefer to stay in their international bubbles and local bubbles respectively. Drawing on participants' observations and a review of relevant literature, this study hypothesises that, besides personal factors, educational institutions may unintentionally deepen the divide between international and host students by emphasising on their differences through specialised services and treatments. This may reinforce a perception of the two groups as "Others" rather than recognising their shared identity as students.

In addition, this study supports Montgomery and McDowell's (2009) contention that the absence of social interactions between international and domestic students should not be viewed as a deficit. It does not appear that superficial ties with locals contribute considerably to the growth of students, nor do social and cultural contacts with the host country determine the success of their experiences there. Rather, researchers should recognise the strength and value of co-national and home contacts in providing crucial support and information to help international students thrive in their study abroad and future endeavours.

In terms of implications for future research, the analysis of findings related to the first research question serves as a foundation for additional studies on the subject of international students' connectedness. This study suggests further investigations into transnational family and caregiving in the context of international students, as well as further exploration of temporal factors that may influence their management of interpersonal relationships. The analysis highlights the necessity of acknowledging the diversity of host cultures and expanding the analysis of international students' social relationships, social support, and adaptation beyond the dominant culture of the host society. In countries with a high migrant population, like Australia, it is particularly crucial for research to recognise the support provided by co-national communities to international students, enabling them to prosper in the host country by leveraging their cultural backgrounds.

In terms of practical applications, the findings of this study provide useful insights that can inspire a re-evaluation of university student services, with a focus on determining its effectiveness and whether the design of these services may unwittingly promote the division between international and host students. Such investigation is critical, especially considering the relevance of fostering intercultural engagement, a goal underscored in both federal and state higher education strategies. This study also underlines the pivotal role of communication technology in enabling international students to access information and support easily and comfortably, thereby emphasising the necessity of enhancing the university services to become more accessible online. This is critical if universities are after promoting greater engagement between international students and the wider campus community, rather than international students relying mainly on alternative support networks, such as those provided by their transnational and co-national contacts.

## 6.3 The interplay between international students' identities and connectedness

This section investigates the second research question - How does the interplay between international students' identity and social interactions unfold? This section is divided into two parts: the first examines the participants' perceptions of their identities, while the second examines how international students perceive their identities in the context of their social relationships.

### 6.3.1 International students' perceptions of identities

Despite a shared understanding of identity as a set of distinguishing characteristics that differentiate a person to one another, realised through social interactions with others, the students in this particular study exhibited different views of selfhood. Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of transnational social fields offers a useful lens for exploring identity in relation to being and belonging, which resonates with the participants' perceptions

of identity. The analysis of the interview data reveals that the students' narratives of their identity were shaped by various factors, including their past histories, present state of including their occupational or student status, self-perceived personality traits, values, and interests, as well as their sense of belonging and future aspirations. Similarly, the participants' sense of being and belonging exhibited differences. Despite their current residence and academic pursuits in Australia, some participants expressed a strong attachment to their Vietnamese cultural heritage, which they considered an essential aspect of their sense of identity. In other cases, the sense of being and belonging overlapped, leading to a state of confusion, as demonstrated by Thao's experience. Thao underwent an identity crisis because, while considering herself as a Vietnamese, she shared certain traits with her Australian fellows including the ways of thinking and dressing, which resulted in her feeling that she did not fully belong to either culture. This phenomenon is common among individuals who spend an extended period of time in a foreign country, where they may adopt new customs, values, and ways of life that deviate from those of their home country. Several studies have documented instances of reverse culture shock experienced by international students upon returning home as a result of such changes (Gaw, 2000; Wen et al., 2018). Illustrated by Quang's story, which is detailed in the previous chapter, defining and articulating a sense of belonging can be difficult. This sense of belonging does not have to be limited to specific cultures, but can also be associated with smaller groups of people with whom students interact on a regular basis. Furthermore, the feeling of belonging is not absolute; a sense of incomplete belonging does not always imply total exclusion. Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of international students' identities, they may find that certain aspects of themselves resonate with particular groups, while other facets align better with other groups. These observations highlight the need for studies on international students' identity to acknowledge the intricate and fluid nature of their identities, rather than relying on assumptions, as will be elaborated further below.

The participants acknowledged the significant impact of their Vietnamese identity in shaping their sense of self. Nonetheless, they expressed discontent with the idea of being treated as merely representatives of the Vietnamese culture, as it disregards their autonomy in determining who they are and want to be. These findings support Dervin's (2011) assertion that international students' identities should not be approached through a culturalist lens that rigidly characterises individuals based on assumed cultural traits, because such traits constitute only a part of individuals' identity. Therefore, this study suggests that when studying international students' identity, preconceived ideas of certain cultures should be reviewed carefully and not be taken for granted. In assessing scholarship on international students' identity, Dervin (2011) and Marchart (2018) record a considerable number of studies that implicitly or explicitly emphasise certain specific characteristics associated with Confucianism to account for differences in behaviour between Asian and Western students. Specifically, Asian students are often portrayed as collectivist, tending to remain within their own ethic groups and avoid interactions with others. The researchers argue that such depictions not only involve broad generalisations of entire cultural populations, but also fail to accurately reflect the diversity inherent in the cultures being discussed.

Research conducted by Takano and Sogon (2008) and Vignoles (2018) provide an illustrative example on how cultural stereotypes and preconceived notions regarding certain cultures can be misleading. Takano and Shogun (2008) note that it is commonly assumed that Japanese are collectivists and Americans are individualists, yet after reviewing empirical studies on the topic for two decades, they found little evidence to support this assumption. Similarly, Vignoles (2018) discovered that no national culture is entirely individualistic or collectivistic, with individuals from all countries exhibiting aspects of both individualism and collectivism. Despite this, researchers often overemphasize the individualistic aspects of Western cultures and the collectivistic aspects of Asian cultures, exploiting the ambiguities in the definitions of these terms.

The implications of these findings for research on identity are significant. Researchers should be critical of commonly held beliefs and preconceived ideas about cultural characteristics when studying the identity of international students. While culture does play an important role in how students perceive themselves, there is much more to be discovered about their identity. This includes how their past, present, future, and sense of belonging intersect and shape the ways in which they perceive themselves. In order to gain these insights, researchers must engage in real-life observations, maintain an open mind to various perspectives, and acknowledge that identity is constantly evolving. In light of these considerations, this study suggests future research on international students' identity moving beyond cultural assumptions and stereotypes to gain a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

### 6.3.2 Relationships between international students' identities and connectedness

Interview findings suggest that international students' identity and connectedness are closely intertwined. As per the participants' definitions of identity, which emphasises its manifestation and realisation through social interactions, it is evident that interactions with others play a crucial role in international students' self-realisation, construction, and evolution. By engaging with people and groups, students gain an understanding of the similarities and differences they share with others, which groups they feel they belong to, as well as which social ties add value to their lives. These understandings of their relationships with others affect the students' motivation and decision-making on how to manage social relationships surrounding them. The participants' accounts of how their identity and connectedness influence each other resonate with Norton's (2013) conception of identity as how individuals perceive their relationship with the world, how that relationship evolves over time and space, and how they comprehend future possibilities.

These findings also shed light on the connection between international students' identity and the personal factors found to influence international students' relationships with others, namely their study abroad goals, affection for the host culture, personality traits, and pre-existing connections. Specifically, the students' understanding of their own identity, interests, and values had a significant impact on their perceptions of their personalities and the level of interest in the host culture. This was demonstrated by the inclusion of personality traits and interests in participants' descriptions of their identities. Moreover, the vision that international students had of their future selves played a critical role in shaping their goals for study abroad and determining the kinds of support they required from others to achieve these objectives. The way the students feel about themselves in relation to others also affected their assessment of existing relationships and influenced their ideas of whether they need to establish new relationships and what they expect from them.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates how international students' identity influence international students' management of their connections with others. The findings on agency among the participants are consistent with the three types of agency identified by Tran and Vu (2017), which include: needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, and agency for becoming. The needs-response agency is illustrated in previous section of this chapter, which addresses the interplay between international students' relationships with others and their perceived access to resources. International students exercise agency by consciously choosing to include or exclude people from their personal networks based on the perceived instrumental and emotional support, as well as social companionship, that these relationships provide. Furthermore, international students actively seek help and information from support channels such as home contacts and co-national communities, while also helping their co-national fellows through online platforms such as Facebook groups.

With respect to agency as struggle and resistance, Tuan's story provides an insightful example of how international students manage challenges and how such challenges engender self-discovery and shape their decisions about their future selves. In the face of being disparaged by local students for his accented English, Tuan became acutely aware of his Asian heritage and how it set him apart from the dominant local culture. He struggled with inner conflicts before deciding to work harder to demonstrate his abilities to others instead of letting himself feel dispirited and sad about the incident. As studying abroad in a foreign country poses numerous challenges to students, it also provides them with opportunities for reflection, self-realisation, and identity development. These challenges may necessitate changes in how international students perceive themselves and how they want to project themselves to others.

The agency of becoming is reflected in the narratives of international students regarding their identity. Previous sections of this study have explored the connections between international students' relationships with others and their perceptions of gained support and resources through these contacts. In addition to the support required at the time of seeking assistance, this section's findings indicate that international students' perception of support is closely tied to their aspirations for the future. They evaluate social relationships based not only on the support provided to them at the time but also on the values these connections add to their lives and their ability to help them achieve their desired future selves before investing in these social exchanges.

For instance, Tung's ambition to become a successful researcher after graduation motivated him to maintain good relationships with other PhD fellows and research colleagues in Australia and Vietnam, as well as joining the Higher Degree by Research committee to distinguish himself from peers. This demonstrates that international students actively participate in designing their life course and self-transformation. The degree to which a student designs their future and nurtures aspirations for their identity and career path

significantly influences their inclination to engage with the relationships they establish with their transnational and local contacts.

This study's findings also reveal that international students use different strategies to manage their contacts, either by including or excluding them entirely in their personal communities or strategically switching certain parts of their identities on and off to align more closely with the culture and characteristics of the members of the group they are interacting with. It is worth noting that international students' agency is not entirely based on free choice, as a variety of social circumstances can limit their access to, or ability to use, agentive resources. As previously stated, environmental factors are critical in the analysis of international students' identity and connectedness because they can either foster or hinder students' ability to form desired interpersonal connections. Other factors, such as the other party's willingness to participate in social engagement, are also important because mutual interest is required for the formation of relationships, and the agency of international students alone is insufficient to achieve that.

### 6.3.3 Summary of findings for the second research question

The present section has attended to the second research query, which is concerned with the interplay between the identity and connectedness of international students. The analysis of interview data, informed by Levitt and Schiller's (2004) and Norton's (2013) concepts of identity, revealed the intricate and multifaceted nature of international students' self-perceptions. This investigation also established the connections between the personal factors previously identified as affecting international students' relationship management with others in response to the first research question and their identity. The findings highlight that international students' identity is both influenced by and influences their social connections. With each new encounter, international students gain a deeper understanding of themselves,

which subsequently shapes the factors that impact their approach to developing and managing relationships with others.

This study draws on Tran and Vu's (2013) framework of agency to explore the ways in which international students exercise their agency in shaping their identities and interpersonal relationships within local and transnational contexts. The analysis of interview data reveals that international students actively exercise agency in managing their identity and connectedness. Specifically, they project certain identities and reach out to specific contacts in response to their own needs. Furthermore, international students demonstrate their agency by reflecting on their identity and how they wish to present themselves in response to challenges they encounter. Finally, international students exercise their agency in shaping their future and realising their aspired selves. This self-determination influences their prioritisation of certain relationships over others, highlighting the importance of agency in shaping international students' personal and social trajectories.

The analysis recommends that future research seek to comprehend the complexity of international students' identity beyond cultural assumptions, with the goal to gain a nuanced understanding of students' perspectives regarding their social relationships, as well as their agency and efforts in cultivating and managing said relationships. Through this approach, this study not only gained valuable insights into international students' personal narratives regarding their identities but also the identity conflicts they encounter in relation to their home and host country. Furthermore, the analysis also shed light on the different strategies employed by international students in managing their social connections to advance their desired selves.

## 6.4 Concluding remarks

Through the use of Levitt's and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of transnational social fields as the framework for analysis, this research yielded insights into the highly individualised and complex nature of international students' connectedness and their perceptions of identity. In particular, the analysis shed light into the ways in which international students employ to exercise their agency and individual tactics for managing social engagements to obtain the necessary resources and assistance for the fulfilment of their prospective goals. By providing a platform for international students to express their personal narratives and opinions, the study also obtained valuable insights regarding the factors that were significant to the students' identities and held genuine importance to them. Building from the findings and discussion, I propose a number of theoretical implications and recommendations for universities to improve their support for international students in order to promote intercultural engagement more effectively which I discuss in more detail in the final chapter.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions

This concluding chapter provides a summary of the research conducted and identifies key contributions to the field of research on international students. The theoretical implications of the findings and recommendations for universities will be discussed.

## 7.1 Thesis overview

This thesis study started by highlighting the lack of social interaction between international students and local students, which falls short of the expectations set forth by the "Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030" by the Australian Department of Education and the "International Education Strategy 2019-2029" by South Australian Department of Education. The research aimed to bridge the gap between expectations and realities of international-host relationships by exploring international students' perspective on social relationships and how they develop and manage their connectedness with home, host, co-national, and multi-national contacts. Additionally, the study explored the connections between international students' identity and their connectedness with others.

In order to address the research questions, I used the theoretical framework of transnational social fields developed by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) to ground the research design and analysis. Moreover, the concept of personal communities, as developed by Wellman et al. (2003), was used to investigate the close contacts of the international student participants who played significant roles in providing them with resources and support. To explore the participants' identity, I integrated Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) perspective that identity is shaped by both a sense of belonging and a sense of being, with Norton's (2013) framework that identity is influenced by relationships with others and one's desired aspirations. Finally, the study employed Tran and Vu's (2017) framework of agency to examine the participants' active engagement in social relationships based on their self-perception.

By employing social network analysis and semi-structured interviews, I identified five factors that play a role in international students' development and management of social relationships. These factors include personal factors such as goals for studying abroad, attachment to the host country, established connections, and personality, as well as environmental factors. International students' perceptions of their identity shape these personal factors and can affect how they assess their needs for local friendships and their actions in developing and managing these relationships. Drawing on their sense of self and their aspirations, international students actively exercise their agency in managing their social interactions with others to access the resources they require, overcome obstacles, and realise their envisioned selves. However, some factors beyond international students' control, such as environments, can influence their ability to establish or sustain social connections. These environmental factors may offer opportunities as well as pose constraints that influence international students' capacity to develop or maintain contacts as planned.

These findings provide explanations for the lack of host friendships among international students. In particular, the international students' lack of interest in the local culture can impact their desire to integrate into the local community and establish connections with local individuals. Moreover, international students may not be inclined to form local friendships if they perceive that these contacts do not add value to their lives or if their existing home and co-national contacts have fulfilled all their support and resource needs. Personality traits also play a critical role in determining whether international-host friendships can develop. As noted by this study's participants and previous studies, such as McKenzie and Baldassar (2016), host students also display a lack of interest in establishing friendships with international students. The study delved into the reasons behind this mutual lack of interest and identified that university course and event design, which do not promote intercultural engagement and provide inadequate time for bonding, may be contributing factors.

Additionally, university services, such as culturally specific student clubs and high-priced accommodation designed solely for international students, may inadvertently segregate international and local students, both physically and psychologically, and lead to a sense of otherness rather than shared identity among international and local student population.

## 7.2 Recommendations for universities

The study revealed the importance of time in the development of relationships between international and host students. Even in cases where both parties are motivated to form friendships, the limited time spent together in class may impede the development of their relationships outside of the academic environment. As a result, universities may consider organising extracurricular activities that appeal to both international and domestic students, while also providing ample opportunities for them to facilitate bonding.

Furthermore, when combined with previous research on international-host friendships (Fincher & Shaw, 2019; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016; Tran et al., 2022), the findings of this study suggest that institutional perceptions of and treatments towards international and local students may have contributed to their mutual perceptions of difference. It is therefore suggested that universities review their student support strategies to ensure that services tailored for each group of students do not inadvertently reinforce the dichotomy between them.

Finally, the study suggests that universities provide more accessible support services to students. One such approach could involve providing online access to these services at any time – as was provided during the height of the pandemic. Additionally, the preference of the international students in this study for informal peer support from their co-national community offers insight for universities to create informal peer-support channels on social

media platforms for all students, thereby fostering a sense of unity and belonging among the entire university community, rather than solely focusing on international students.

## 7.3 Theoretical implications

The study's findings provided evidence of international students' agency in shaping and controlling their identity and social relationships, refuting the deficit model prevalent in much of the literature on international students. While all the participants were from Vietnam, they exhibited distinctive narratives in defining themselves and in managing their social connections with various groups. Thus, the study underlines the weaknesses of rigid culturalist approaches that assume a uniformity among international students from the same cultural background, as well as among international student communities as a whole. To comprehensively examine international students' identity and connectedness, it is suggested that researchers should acknowledge the diversity of cultures and recognise the influence international students' unique characteristics and personal experiences have on their identity projection and relationship management.

Moreover, this study illustrated the valuable support and resources that international students obtain from their home and co-national contacts for adjusting to the host country, questioning the notion that host contacts are the sole primary source of social support. Recognising the value of these connections in the lives of students can stimulate further research and exploration of various aspects of international students' experiences that have not received significant attention in scholarship. For instance, future research can investigate the practices of transnational families, transnational friendships, and transnational caring that international students and their loved ones engage in, as well as the emotional conflicts that arise from positive feelings and emotional burdens associated with these relationships.

The study also advocates for future research to recognise the diversity of the host society and evaluate international students' adaptation not only to the dominant culture but also to multiple cultures that coexist alongside it. From an institutionalist perspective that focuses solely on the dominant culture, international students may appear to struggle with adapting and integrating into the host culture. However, in reality, they may excel within their own communities in the host society by leveraging their cultural backgrounds. Failure to account for the diversity of the host culture may impede researcher's ability to accurately assess international students' successful adjustment to their new environment and limit its exploration and comprehension of their experiences. Therefore, future research can investigate international students' interactions with a broader co-national community and explore the social and economic benefits of these 'parallel societies' that aid in international students' flourishing and success during and after their study abroad.

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2014) recommend longitudinal research for studies on migrants' transnational social fields. However, this study was not longitudinal, and thus could only provide a momentary glimpse into international students' connectedness and identity. Although the study strived to incorporate a range of participants with varying durations of staying in Australia to obtain diverse perspectives and narratives, I recommend that future research employ a longitudinal approach to examine how international students' social relationships and identity transform over time and determine the factors that contribute to these changes. Furthermore, while this study aimed to investigate only Vietnamese students to explore the diversity of perspectives among students from the same cultural background, future studies can benefit from comparing different cultural groups of students to evaluate similarities and differences, as well as investigate the impact of culture on international students' social relationships and identity.

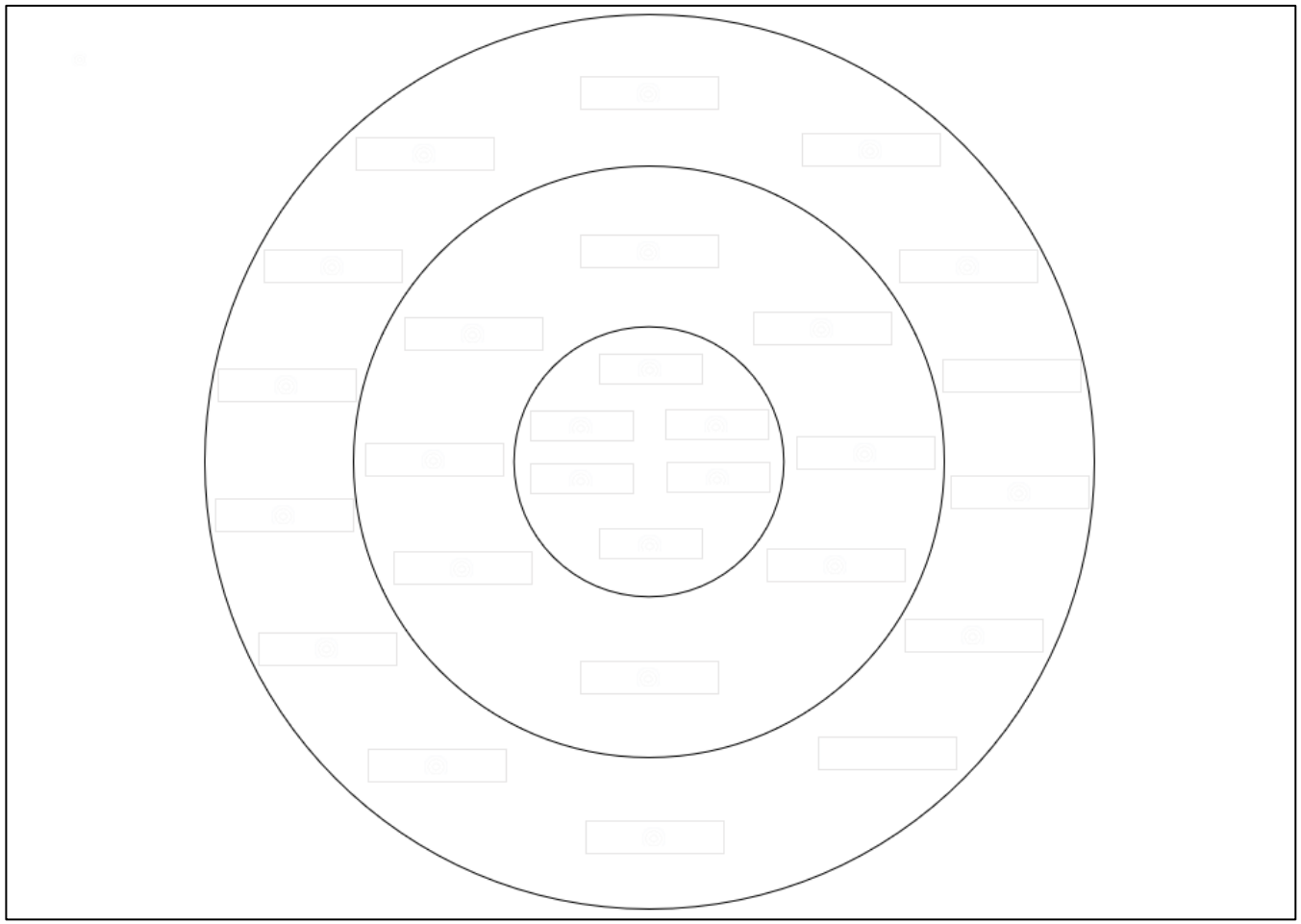
# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Name generation activity template

Name generator and interpreters

| No. | Question | Contact(s) | Relationship(s) | Contry(ies) of residence | Mode(s) of communication |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Who do you contact when seeking academic advice/ facing academic issues? | | | | |
| 2 | Who do you contact when seeking living advice/ facing living issues in Australia? (e.g. employment) | | | | |
| 3 | Who do you contact when seeking accommodation advice/ facing accommodation issues in Australia? | | | | |
| 4 | Who do you contact when seeking migration-related advice? | | | | |
| 5 | Who do you contact when seeking general information about Australia? | | | | |
| 6 | Who do you contact when seeking companions to hang out? | | | | |
| 7 | Who do you contact to share about your daily life? | | | | |
| 8 | Who do you contact for gossiping? | | | | |
| 9 | Who do you contact when feeling lonely? | | | | |
| 10 | Who do you contact when feeling stressed? | | | | |

Participant-aided network diagram



# Appendix 2: Translated sample of interview coding

| Participant | Category | Sub-category (if applicable) | Quote |
|---|---|---|---|
| Duong | Host contacts | Reasons for absence | I'm a bit timid so I'm quite hesitant to initiate conversation with Australian students. But you know what, I think Australian students struggle to make friends at the university as much as I do, but since they've already had close friend groups in high school or since childhood, they don't seem to really feel the need to make new friends like I do. |
| Quang | Host contacts | Reasons for absence | There are also some practical reasons. Food is the first thing. I can't eat Western food, so it's not fun to hang out and eat with locals because none of the locals I know like Asian food. The second thing is festivals. I know about their big holidays like Christmas and Easter, but I don't celebrate them. Yet, I still tell them "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter" on those days, but when Lunar New Year comes, they don't say anything back. This makes me think that they don't care much either. These little things make it hard for me to get close to the Australian people I know. |
| Trang | Host contacts | Reasons for absence | I just can't integrate into the local culture... but it's not like I care that much. Since starting the university, I've had one Australian friend, but... even when I'm friend with an Australian, that person still need to have an Asian or international heritage. My Australian friend is Australian-Indian... I don't think I can vibe with Australians. |
| Tuan | Co-national contacts in Australia | Reasons for absence & presence | I always think that I'm a Vietnamese person, but that doesn't mean I hang out every Vietnamese I meet. It's like, let's say I'm walking on Runddle Mall, if I hear someone speaking in Vietnamese, I'll switch to English [laugh]... I'm selective about who I want to be friends with. I prefered my friends to be someone who also do research like me, or simply someone who always strive to move forwards in life. |
| | Identity | NA | |
| | Agency | NA | |
| My | Co-national contacts | Perceived closeness | Those who I met from the events and classmates are sort of casual contacts. We hang out just for fun you know. Most of them are much younger than me. |
| My | Home contacts | Perceived closeness | I came to Australia when I were not entirely young. I have spent many years of my life in Vietnam, so my personality and worldview have been sort of shaped… That's why the people who understand me the most are still those in Vietnam… In the future, unless I find a stronger connection here, like a partner, I don't think normal social friendships can change that in a few years. |
| Thao | Home contacts | Perceived closeness | I really value my family, there are new messages everyday in my family group chat… Here, I don't really feel belong because I don't have any deep relationships like family. I only have some casual friends here... it's like, it's good to have them but I'm also fine without them. In Vietnam I also have a bestfriend, we call each other almost everyday. |
| Thao | Host contacts | Perceived closeness | With my friends here, we contact if we need something, hang out a couple of times but when it comes to things that are personal, I tell my family... I don't tell people here. |
| | Co-national contacts Australia | | |
| Thao | Home contacts | Perceived support | When I'm lonely, I call my grandma. She's just started using Facebook, she's so cute. |
| Nam | Agency | NA | I want and am working on expanding my social network. We don't neccessarily have to be close friends but more like acquaintances who can reach out to each other for help. So I want to know a lot of people whom I can seek assistance for different things. Like expanding my circle |

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