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“Why is This Still Happening?”: International Students of Color’s Racial Sensemaking and Perceptions of Racial Conflicts and Racial Movements in 2020

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine international students’ racial sensemaking and perceptions of race, racism, and racial conflict in the United States in the years 2020/2021. The past year was one filled with contention, including the politicizing of a global virus and racial conflict from anti-Blackness and anti-Asian violence. Although racism felt far removed from many participants’ personal sphere until the arrival of the pandemic and racial conflicts in the year 2020, George Floyd’s murder served a critical incident that elicited reactions to U.S. racial dynamics, the Black Lives Matter movement, and racial protests. The participants’ experiences challenged what they thought they knew about race and shaped how they moved forward while living and learning in the United States.

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Introduction

International students have long been welcomed to the United States because they “increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and, related, increase our awareness and appreciation of other countries and cultures” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 381). Yet in recent years, international student enrollment has declined, such as a 1.8% drop in 2019–2020 from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2020). Speculation for the decrease in numbers was correlated to contemporary global issues including travel bans from the Trump administration and the COVID-19 pandemic. As relatively new community members in the United States, international students have had to witness and possibly experience multiple conflicts rooted in the racial contexts of the United States. Such experiences must be considered especially because many international students, especially those from predominantly nonwhite and non-English speaking countries of origin, may be (re)racialized as students of Color in the U.S. context (Caxaj et al., 2021; George Mwangi, 2014; Yao et al., 2019) who now must navigate the racial dynamics of the past year.

Most notably, the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, seemingly raised the overall racial awareness of people both in the United States and around the world. Occurring after several publicized controversial deaths of Black people, George Floyd's murder triggered protests against police brutality and racism both in the United States and around the world (CNN, 2020). Within the United States, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement resurged and gained attention after George Floyd's murder. In addition, the BLM movement crossed borders as supporters in other countries also marched and protested in solidarity with the U.S.-based movement. Overall, George Floyd's murder sparked a global reckoning of race and racism, much of it connected to the overall BLM movement that started in the United States.

U.S. policymakers, practitioners (e.g., admissions, international student offices), and scholars typically consider international students by their nationality as a form of student diversity but may not fully consider the intra-group and contextual country-specific differences within those nationalities. However, once on campus, international students are subjected to the same limited prism of U.S. racial and ethnic groupings (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau classifications) as U.S. domestic students (Loo, 2019; Yao et al., 2019). While the BLM movement went global in 2020, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars paid minimal attention to how current international students, especially those who are of Color, within the U.S. higher education context made sense of the heightened racial dynamics within the United States while simultaneously navigating a global health pandemic. The purpose of this study was to examine international students' perceptions of racial conflict and racial movements in the United States in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the resurgence of the BLM movement. The research question that guided this study was: how did international students make sense of racial conflict in the United States during the year 2020?

Understanding how international students perceived contemporary racial dynamics in the United States will illuminate how they understand their new society contexts and navigate contentious times, particularly through their identities as transnational beings. There is no question that racial and political strife in the United States and across the globe will continue to materialize in the future. Therefore, this study will provide insights for higher education institutions to proactively consider the global dynamics of race, racism, and racial conflict affecting all students on college campuses.

Making sense of race in the U.S. context

There has been a significant increase in racialized incidents on college campuses in recent years (Briscoe, 2020, 2021). Many students of Color have experienced various forms of racism on college campuses, such as

microaggressions, stereotyping, profiling, and outright hostility (George Mwangi et al., 2018, 2019; Talley-Matthews et al., 2020). Similar to domestic students of Color, international students of Color also experience stereotyping on college campuses, often relating to their nationalities, academic capabilities, chosen fields of study, and academic levels (Talley-Matthews et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2019, 2021). Yet, even as colleges and universities make attempts to address campus racial climate, many institutions are situated in local communities that do not acknowledge nor seek to confront racial tensions and oppression (George Mwangi et al., 2018, 2019; Ye & Edwards, 2017).

While much of the focus of such events and responses from educational institutions has been on domestic students of Color, it is essential to understand how international students of Color make sense of such incidents as they are navigating not only life in a new country but also acclimating to the campus culture (Yao et al., 2021; Ye & Edwards, 2017). International students of Color come to the United States with varying backgrounds due to their personal experiences and home countries' historical, sociocultural, and societal contexts. As the concept of race in the United States is vastly different from other countries, international students of Color often arrive unprepared for experiencing racism and racialized incidents, not only on college campuses but also in the United States (Talley-Matthews et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2021). Thus, the way that these students process being othered and racialized in the U.S. context and make sense of race relations varies (Yao et al., 2019, 2021).

Because conceptualizations and definitions of race are socially constructed within specific contexts (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997), international students may find race and race relations in the U.S. context baffling and confusing. For many international students, their home countries are more likely to be racially homogenous; thus, race and race relations may have less significance than other identities which led to an unexamined racial identity prior to arriving in the United States (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). For students from such countries, they have a worldview that there is only one human race, not having lived in and been socialized to a highly racialized society such as the United States (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). Therefore, much of the cultural schemas that international students have developed in their home countries influence the way that they perceive and respond to race relations in the United States. While racism may not be a societal issue in their countries of origin, they may be able to relate to discrimination based on other identities, such as ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Furthermore, the racialization of international students of Color, often for the first time in the United States, can influence new perceptions of racism in the United States and how they see their identities (Yao et al., 2021).

International students of Color may experience microaggressions based on intersecting identities. For instance, Talley-Matthews et al. (2020) found that female Caribbean college students studying at predominantly white

institutions in the U.S. South experienced a chilly and hostile campus environment due to their racialization, foreign status, and gender. In addition to microaggressions and stereotypes, international students of Color experience overt forms of racism as well (George Mwangi et al., 2019; Yao, 2018; Yao et al., 2019; Ye & Edwards, 2017). For instance, with the racist rhetoric that the COVID-19 virus began in East Asia, there has been an increase in acts of racism and discrimination, particularly hate crimes against Asian international students during the ongoing pandemic (Yao & George Mwangi, 2022). Both Asian and non-Asian international students of Color have described fears of and being subjected to acts of racism due to their foreign status and other intersecting identities (Koo et al., 2021). Thus, while racist nativism did not begin with this global pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated and exacerbated negative racialized experiences because of their status as foreign-born students, including feeling lonely and alienated and the perceptions that they are unwelcome and unsafe in the United States (Koo et al., 2021).

The concept of race has different meanings in varying countries. Thus, some international students may have an unexamined U.S. racial-ethnic identity, due to a belief that race relations in the United States do not have an impact on their lives (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Loo, 2019). Other students, upon facing racial-ethnic encounters, respond to racism and racialized incidents in varying ways, from reluctantly making sense of such encounters to accepting and utilizing their identity to enact social change (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). With technological advances in recent decades and the increased awareness of racism and discrimination in the United States, social media has become another avenue for activism. As international students cannot participate in engagement such as national political voting, activism via social media platforms allows students to raise awareness of racial issues and incidents in the United States as well as work toward enacting social change (George Mwangi et al., 2019).

Additionally, there are emotional and affective aspects of students' sense-making of being racialized in the U.S. For many international students of Color, it can be very challenging to have such discussions that involve highly charged emotions (Hernandez, 2021; Talley-Matthews et al., 2020). International students who perceive that they do not have a sense of belonging with domestic students of Color often have a detachment from race that allows them to avoid becoming distracted from their academic studies and additional emotional stress (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; George Mwangi et al., 2019). Yet, Talley-Matthews et al. (2020) and Caxaj et al. (2021) found that immigrant students may not be able to distance themselves due to being racialized as students of Color. For students who come to terms with the racialization forced upon them, perceptions change as they understand how racism impacts their lives in the U.S. context (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2021).

Conceptual framework: Racial sensemaking

Racial sensemaking is the conceptual framework guiding this study. The framework addresses the gap in the literature about how international students derive meaning and process racialized experiences, highlighting how international students of Color make sense of race as they pursue academic studies in the United States. The developing framework, which is informed by prior research (Evans, 2007; Fries-Britt et al., 2014), is used to explain how international students of Color move along a racial sensemaking spectrum from neutral to a critical awareness of U.S. concepts of race and racism, where the students began to acknowledge race and racism and how it influenced their lives. Conceptually, on one end of the spectrum is neutral awareness, where race and racism are unknowns and the student has no direct experience with race or racism. In the middle of the spectrum is awareness, where the student begins to gain some knowledge of race and racism, but still has no direct experience with racism. Lastly, the spectrum is anchored by critical awareness, where the student knows about race or racism, and has some direct experience or exposure to race or racism. Thus, racial sensemaking builds upon the framework of Learning Race in the United States Context (LRUSC) (Fries-Britt et al., 2014), in which foreign-born students make sense of race on their U.S. campus along the racial sensemaking spectrum.

While researchers have begun to explore how international students of Color navigate conventions of race in the context of higher education in the United States (e.g., Caxaj et al., 2021; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Lewis, 2013; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017; Yao, 2018; Yao et al., 2021), there is room for further documentation of the racial experiences of international students studying in the United States. The informal processes that international students use to learn about the U.S. concepts of race and racism during their academic studies transitions into critical understanding and racial sensemaking. Sensemaking is generally understood to be the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals.

Sensemaking in a racial context (Evans, 2007) contends with how and to what end individuals negotiated the multiple contexts, multiple identities, and the sociopolitical dimensions of race. The ways in which people make sense depend on the clues they receive from multiple, overlapping contexts. Furthermore, the ways in which they interpret the clues depend on the embedded values, beliefs, and assumptions of the context, as well as their own background, beliefs, roles, identities, and group affiliations. In other words, individuals “realize their reality by reading into their situation patterns of significant meaning” (Weick, 1993, as cited in Evans, 2007, p. 161). Sensemaking also maintains the importance of individuals’ specific and

unique worldview, which interacts with the contexts and clues people receive and enact to help them frame information in ways that make sense to them. For international students, a home country's context can influence their sensemaking and perceptions of race.

As a result of contextual experiences, individuals extrapolate that “artifacts” of racial sensemaking — words, actions, and behaviors that may depict a relationship between meaning making and specific racialized experiences — are used to interpret the meanings of the issues and events for themselves. For example, international students of Color may feel concerned about their safety on campus when faced with racialized events on campus, sometimes changing previous behaviors to avoid experiencing racism directly. Additionally, they may begin to ponder if other students have similar racist ideations or behaviors and even begin to rethink their interactions with friends and other people who do not share similar racial and ethnic identities (Yao et al., 2021). In fact, these students develop a sense of belonging in shared communities with other international students (Talley-Matthews et al., 2020), not only to process such incidents but also as a means of ensuring that they are not surrounding themselves with people who hold or espouse racist ideologies (Yao et al., 2021). Racial sensemaking, therefore, is situated within the broader racialized context that provides a framework for socially acceptable actions and behaviors (Evans, 2007).

Methods and methodology

This study was part of a larger study on international students' perceptions of democratic and civic engagement. During our analysis, findings revealed how much the events of 2020 affected international students' sensemaking of race and racial conflict in the United States. We conducted a narrative inquiry study (Clandinin, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1995), which allowed us to draw upon “diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). We combined this methodology with participant-generated photo elicitation which allowed us to use “visual prompts to guide the research interview to gain information from participants about a particular topic” (Denton et al., 2018, p. 18). We purposefully added photo elicitation because photos, as stated by Latz (2017), are “important aspects of society, culture, and personal life” (p. 7). As such, the inclusion of photos allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how participants made sense of the racial dynamics in the United States. By doing so, the photos served as prompts that were used to contextualize their experiences in addition to exploring “their thoughts and understandings about potentially sensitive topics” (Denton et al., 2018, p. 19). Thus, by combining narrative inquiry and photo elicitation, we were able to engage in richer conversations with participants as they made sense of their collegiate experiences.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Self-identified gender	Education level	Region
MJ	21	Female	Undergraduate student	South America
Joy	29	Female	Doctoral student	East Asia
Juan Miguel	34	Male	Doctoral student	South America
Max	31	Male	Doctoral student	West Africa
Gupta	29	Male	Doctoral student	South Asia
C	30	Female	Doctoral student	East Asia
Joe	34	Male	Doctoral student	West Africa
MJ 2	21	Male	Undergraduate student	East Asia
Eams	27	Male	Master's student	South Asia
Harry Potter	30	Male	Doctoral student	South Asia
Jon	21	Male	Undergraduate student	South Asia
Jessica	30	Female	Master's student	South America
KJ	34	Female	Doctoral student	East Asia
RJ	28	Male	Doctoral student	South Asia
Sam	29	Female	Doctoral student	South Asia
Evergreen	30	Female	Master's student	East Asia
Cade	32	Male	Doctoral student	South Asia
Emily	34	Female	Doctoral student	East Asia
Mona Svherz	23	Female	Master's student	West Africa
Ann	31	Female	Doctoral student	Eastern Europe
Ana	26	Female	Master's student	South Asia

Participants and data collection

We used purposeful sampling and recruited 21 international student participants from one institution. Participants self-identified as 11 woman/female and 10 man/male, and represent the South Asian (8), East Asian (6), West African (3), South American (3), and Eastern European (1) regions (see Table 1). Three participants were undergraduate students, and the remaining were master's ($n = 5$) and doctoral students ($n = 13$). We interviewed participants twice, except for three participants who declined to continue beyond the first interview. In the second interview with 18 participants, participants were asked to share photos that represented their view of the pandemic, race in the United States, and politics in the United States. Some participants shared photographs that they took around campus; however, most of the submitted photographs were taken from the internet by participants, including the three photos highlighted in this manuscript. We then used the participant-generated photos as prompts within the interview to probe deeper into the context and representation of the visual meaning from the photos.

Data analysis

Data analysis included first constructing narratives for each of the participants. We followed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) considerations of moving from field texts (i.e., interview transcripts) to interim texts (i.e., initial narratives) to research texts (i.e., final published text) that engaged with "patterns, narratives threads, tensions, and themes" (p. 132). Narratives were initially crafted based on chronology of students' experiences within the years 2020–2021, and then

after further engagement with these “interim texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 133), we reworked the narratives based on thematic elements that we identified in our continuous individual and team reviews of participant data. Narratives were then uploaded into Dedoose for analysis. Prior to each member individually coding, we engaged in intercoder agreement (more details below) as we coded three initial transcripts. Members of the research team used in vivo coding to summarize existing text into short phrases and words while reviewing participant submitted photographs. As a team, we would meet regularly to develop themes and pattern codes to elucidate meaning and create categories for further analysis (Saldaña, 2016). We continuously refined our categories and codes as we engaged in iterative meaning making throughout our review and analysis of narratives. In addition, we would continuously engage and reengage with the participant-generated photographs to make deeper meaning and engage in rich data.

Trustworthiness and researcher reflexivity

Although “multiple minds bring multiple ways of analyzing and interpreting the data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 36), collaborative research can allow for broadened perspectives and additional checkpoints for research studies. However, we recognize the importance of trustworthiness in collaborative research. In this study, we engaged in several strategies that were used to ensure trustworthiness such as member checking, intercoder agreement, peer debriefing, and memoing during the data collection and analysis phase. Member checking was attempted by emailing each participant their narratives, yet only one participant replied with minor feedback and comments. However, in our second interview with participants, we did review prior information that they had shared with us in their first interviews.

We also engaged in intercoder agreement throughout the analytic process. Because we conducted a qualitative study, we chose to engage in “intensive group discussion . . . and simple group consensus” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 37) rather than quantitative percentages of agreement. We individually conducted in vivo coding on the same three identified narratives, and then met to discuss the similarities and differences. We came to an understanding of how we individually determined our codes, and then after significant discussion, came to an agreement of how to move forward in the coding process. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted starting with the first-round interviews and continued through the entire research process. Research team members met regularly and shared perspectives and reflections after interviews and during the analytical process. Research team members regularly memoed after interviews and shared these insights during team debrief meetings.

Ultimately, researchers are responsible for making sense of participants’ interviews and narratives. As such, we reflect upon both our individual

experiences as well as how we may be positioned with/against participants who identify as international students in our four person research team. The first author identifies as an Asian American woman faculty who studies the re/racialization of international students of Color in the United States. She is the daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong which has strongly influenced her own understandings of racialization, coloniality, and nativism. The second author identifies as a Black woman faculty who studies the marginalized experiences of students and faculty of Color, specifically Black, intergenerational leaders, examining familial and cultural influences, and the intersections of race, class, and gender on their work. She positions this work within her own narrative of growing up as transnational immigrant from the Caribbean and attending a PWI in the Southern United States. The third author identifies as a white cisgender woman who grew up and attended PWIs in the U.S. South. Her life experiences and academic background not only inform the privileges afforded to her from her intersecting identities but also shapes her understanding of racialization, nativism, and international affairs. The fourth author identifies as an Asian woman who did her undergraduate in Shanghai and has been studying as an international student in the United States for seven years. She lived in a Midwest state and then moved to a Southern state for her doctoral study. The racial and cultural differences from the Midwest and the South shaped her understanding of race and racialization in different cultural contexts, and her own reflections on internationalism. As a team, our diverse backgrounds and experiences allowed us to engage with participant narratives from multiple lenses, contributing to nuanced analysis and understanding of the researched phenomenon.

Findings

The study revealed diverse understandings and experiences of race and racialization in the United States. Most participants indicated some racial identity awareness and knew about racism and race relations before coming to United States. However, they did not realize the extent of how prevalent racism and discrimination is in the United States through the historical lens of Black/white racial dynamics. While many participants knew that racism and other forms of discrimination existed from their experiences in their home countries, they were not expecting to deal with similar sentiments in the United States. There was some cognitive dissonance regarding the participant's perceptions of life in the United States and what they experienced due to information gathered, cultural assumptions or stereotypes, and from secondary sources such as home country media, word of mouth, and movies/entertainment. Racism felt far removed from their personal sphere until the arrival of the pandemic and racial conflicts in the year 2020.

The narrative and photo elicitations of the international student participants demonstrated similar perceptions, familial concerns, anticipated experiences, and the realities of racism in the United States. Within the context of a racialized pandemic in the United States, participants were confronted with the brutality, isolation, and mental fatigue of being racialized, both as a victim of racism and an observer of racial violence. The participants' experiences contributed to their sensemaking by challenging what they thought they knew and shaped how they moved forward while in the United States. Again, sensemaking is the cognitive act of taking in information (i.e., clues and artifacts), framing it, and using it to make meaning for individuals. Thus, the findings cover racial sensemaking of racial realities in the United States to post-conflict considerations and are presented as three clues and artifacts collectively used by participants in their racial sensemaking: critical incidents, social movements, and political action, using three photo exemplars to illustrate participants' experiences.

Critical incidents – George Floyd's murder

When asked about their perceptions of racial conflicts in the United States, all participants shared their perspectives about George Floyd's murder as a high impact factor in their understanding of race relations in the United States. They expressed shock and some confusion over the events that unfolded in the summer of 2020. For many of the participants, watching the video of George Floyd's murder was emotion-provoking, unnerving, and scary. Their awareness of racial conflicts certainly moved from neutral to critical, with George Floyd's murder serving as a critical incident. Max said,

I just couldn't imagine it happening. I just couldn't imagine the security forces doing that and being supported by security forces and people are standing by and can't do nothing about it, so I was really, really hurt and psychologically down by such an event.

Other participants waited to see more details before making any judgments on the situation. C said, "I was just seeing the snippets of it, so I wasn't exactly sure what happened. So, I was very careful not to judge the police right at once like other people." For Eams, it was difficult to come to terms that George Floyd's death contradicted his previously held belief that even if something unjust were to happen in the United States, there would still be law and order. Yet after seeing the video, he shared that "what happened to George Floyd was not just at all."

Some participants were appalled by seeing George Floyd's murder. Ana said, "It's a life . . . There are some laws, or rules, regulations, to give punishment. And people [are] supposed to follow them. Nobody has the right to kill anyone." RJ stated that treating George Floyd in this way was unnecessary, saying, "he's already in handcuffs, so there is no need for the cop to really push

him down the way he did . . . It was complete brutality from the part of the cops.” For Juan Miguel, it was hard to see a person be killed by the police, who are people who should be trusted to care for people. When Sam saw the video of George Floyd’s death in May 2020, she thought “it was actually chilling that somebody would do that to George Floyd.” Despite understanding “that he is an offender” and “had to be taken to trial,” she said that “it has to be done with a respect for human, the nature of humanity was missing, absolutely missing there.”

The critical incident was not limited to George Floyd. There were several other incidents of police brutality against Black men that resulted in a loss of life (e.g., Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks) that served as critical markers in the participants’ racial sensemaking. Gupta recalls conversing with his roommate, where they discussed how disturbed they both felt after watching the video of George Floyd and remembered hearing about Rayshard Brooks’ death in Atlanta, another tragedy at the hands of police. In addition to seeing the video of George Floyd, Jessica remembered seeing other videos on social media of police officers threatening or killing Black U.S. citizens, and when a friend asked how she felt, she said she felt empathy. She stated, “yes, empathy. They have the right to go to the streets and protest and I agree with that.” Jon’s photo (See [Figure 1](#)) depicted the collective outrage regarding the fight against racism. For Jon, George Floyd’s death was the first major incident of racism that he saw in the U.S., for which he shared “there should have been consequences for the people, the cops who did that . . . [it’s] scary to think how people can judge someone by just their color of their skin.”



Figure 1. “George Floyd” submitted by Jon (Source: Rayford, 2020).

Similarly, Sam felt that the circumstances of George Floyd's death contradicted the U.S.'s sentiments and actions for equal rights across the world. She shared,

the U.S. is no different from [South Asian country]. Or U.S. as a developed nation is not very different from an underdeveloped or developing nation. So, because we've seen deaths in police custody, so we call them police custody in [South Asian country]. So, in their custody because they just wouldn't have somebody to blame. So, they would just take, bring somebody from the street who's like homeless and then rack them and kill them to death. And then they say, he was the convict for such and such case. And then they would just kill him like that. So, we've seen all of that. And we thought that it was in the backward sections of [South Asian country]. So, they'll be like, so when you come to the U.S. you don't expect such things to happen. And when you see it online with your own eyes, this is not what somebody who supposed to be with forward thinking and a role model for different nations as a superpower, has to be showing the rest of the world that this is how it is. So, I think that was my tipping point. Like, okay, you're no different.

Overall, the participants grappled with the violent and indifferent attitudes displayed in George Floyd's murder. Their eyes were opened to the realities of racism in the United States. As the pandemic had the world in lockdown, this incident garnered national and international attention. Thus, the subsequent reactions to George Floyd's murder were visible on a global scale, thereby allowing these international students to use their multiple cultural contexts and multiple identities to make sense of this critical incident.

Social movements — Black Lives Matter

In terms of racial sensemaking, the Black Lives Matter social movement served as another clue or artifact — along with the participant's decisions to support or participate in the racial justice movement. The responses from participants were mixed when they spoke about social movements for racial equity like the Black Lives Matter Movement and the protests that took place during the summer of 2020. Most of the photo elicitations ($n = 13$) from this section of the study focused on protests and police violence. Ann feels that while there have been protests after murders of Black people, the year 2020 acted as a catalyst for protests in a way that other years have not. Ann goes on to say,

It was a time that people didn't even care about their life but they just wanted the justice happen. They just wanted everyone's life to matter. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm going to get the COVID." They looked at the bigger picture. When you think about, what you said is that, "I'm not even as worried about COVID anymore because the bigger picture is that racism is going to kill me first, right?"

Harry Potter said that "it was sad but unsurprising with the history of police brutality that has occurred within the past, such as the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice." While he believes that the United States has

championed human rights through struggle and civil unrest, he also knows that there is still room to improve upon when it comes to reckoning with racial injustice in the United States, stating: “this racism and this kind of injustice, you cannot actually get rid of by making laws. So, because you cannot, make change of the human minds.”

While participants were against racism, the photo elicitations revealed mixed perceptions of the phrase “Black Lives Matter” where several interviewees submitted pictures that countered with all lives matter and not just Black. MJ said, “I think, of course Black lives matter, but also Asian lives matter for me. Not only Asian people, all the races matter. Not just White or Black people.” Similarly, Ann shared,

Like not Black, white or anything, but everyone’s lives matter. A person is not a person because of their race or anything. . . We understand that their gender, their race and everything describes them, but that doesn’t make them a good or a bad person. That’s why we were saying all lives matter, regardless their gender, their race.

In response to the protests against police brutality, Ann talked about a photo (See Figure 2) with signage that included the text “All lives don’t matter until Black lives do.” In her processing of the picture, Ann shared that she wrestled with the language, not understanding the power and privilege dynamics embedded in a racialized society. Ann’s cognitive processing is indicative of her shift into awareness, the middle of the racial sensemaking spectrum. She is aware of the racial tensions, but has no direct experience with it. Ann had other international friends that “knew that it [racism] was a thing in the United States. It was even a bigger thing after the President because he’s been very discriminant to everyone and calling



Figure 2. “Black Lives Matter” submitted by Ann (Source: Piette, 2020).

names to everyone. He opened more room for discrimination.” Ann, along with Jessica and Joy, all shared similar sentiments and understood that such racial discrimination was wrong. Mona “was excited that Black people are fighting, and they have a voice and that other non-Black people are voicing their support. It was a global consensus based on about that.” Overall, many participants were concerned about police brutality and shared feelings of empathy and agreement on the need for a social movement against racial inequity and violence. However, participants grappled with the inclusionary or exclusionary interpretation of BLM and the protesting that ensued.

Political action – Protests and participation

The year 2020 was marred with several instances of racialized encounters with U.S. law enforcement that resulted in loss of life. The series of tragic events ignited the embers of activists, advocates, and allies within the world and ensued in global protesting for racial justice. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were sheltering in various locations within the United States and internationally; thus, they experienced this global uprising against police brutality from various localities. Protesting, an example of sociopolitical action, serves as a context clue in racial sensemaking. All participants indicated that they did not directly participate in the racial conflicts and protests that occurred, yet their reasons for not getting involved varied. A few participants talked about the COVID-19 pandemic as their reason for staying away from the conflicts. For example, Gupta said, “it was a pandemic. Morally, I supported the protest, but physically, I kept my distance.” As these protests were happening at a time that case numbers of COVID-19 infections were skyrocketing, and many governors were not locking down or enforcing safety precautions like mask mandates, Gupta said that these decisions “actually escalated this pandemic.” Joy chose not to participate in the protests because of her cultural background. She shared, “there is no such a tradition to protest in China. Most Chinese would not prefer to attend a protest especially when those things have nothing to do with you.” Joy’s racial sensemaking is mainly influenced by her international background and indicated no affiliation or affinity to the source of the protests. Participants such as Evergreen and Mona did not agree with rioting that accompanied some protests. Evergreen’s photo (See [Figure 3](#)) depicted a nighttime protest with burning buildings in the background and the sky filled with smoke plumes.

Other participants discussed how they balanced their desire to participate with concern over their student visa status. Given the fragility of their legal standing in the United States, none of the participants were willing to put their international student status in jeopardy, which served as a key factor in their decision not to get involved. RJ, Max, Jessica, Ana, Gupta, and Harry Potter all



Figure 3. “Protests” submitted by Evergreen (Source: Getty Images, 2020).

expressed wanting to avoid any extra or excessive scrutiny and avoid the risk of being arrested as an international student. RJ expressed how conflicted he felt about not being able to publicly show his support for the protests, but as an international student, he must remember that any actions he makes that can be interpreted as unlawful can be used against him. Continuing, RJ said,

So even though you support the movement, you have to kind of silently support it from the background. If I were an American citizen, if I were from here, the story would’ve been different, that I would have nothing to fear. Nobody would throw me out of the country. So keeping all those things in mind, you have to be prudent in the actions you take.

Even though they did not participate directly, several participants were supportive of the protests, viewing them as necessary so that awareness and change can put an end to police brutality. Yet, some participants felt that the message was lost once demonstrations turned violent with looting and rioting. Sam said, “you cannot save something by destroying something . . . Peaceful protests are always welcome for a change, but wildness is not the answer for everything.” Other photos elicited contemporary and historical perspectives on race relations with MJ sharing that, “there’s very little difference between the riots from the civil rights movement and the riots that were happening right now.” Even though desegregation happened, she ponders if those efforts really changed race relations in the United States, stating, “I don’t think it did, because me coming to the United States right now, I feel the racial tension.”

In the diverse responses to racialized murders, participants developed a heightened or critical awareness and engaged in self-preservation strategies. Their now acute awareness on the ramifications of racism increased their need

and desire for understanding this context of the United States. They searched social media for more information, examined their own routines, and contemplated proximal thoughts like “am I next?” and “why is this still happening in 2020?” Joe said, “knowing what’s going on in terms of racism and what happened to George Floyd, now I know if I did interact with a police officer of a different race, specifically white, I know I need to, should I say, be more attentive and take precautions so I don’t become a victim of police brutality.” Likewise, Eams began feeling nervous about being in the United States as an international student of Color, saying that he began pondering his place in a country that he wants to be a part of. Mona, who used to take occasional outdoor runs, began to contemplate her routine after seeing a police car drive by, saying, “maybe I should just workout in my room, because you just never know.” She said that it has also caused her to find an excuse to stay indoors and ponder if she wants to have a future in the United States. For international students, the choice to engage in any form of political action, like protesting in person or on social media, is a deeply personal one with high stakes.

Discussion and implications

The standstill of the COVID-19 pandemic created the space to enhance everyone’s awareness of racism while racialized events occurred during the summer of 2020, leading to increased attempts to make sense of race and racism in the United States. Participants in this study shared how clues and artifacts — namely, a critical incident, social movement, and political action — contributed to their sensemaking of how race and racism permeates the fabric of the United States. As evidenced by findings, the tumultuous incidents of 2020 made indelible marks on international students’ perceptions and sensemaking of racial conflict and racial movements in the United States.

Racial sensemaking requires individuals to make sense of context, identities, and sociopolitical events (Evans, 2007), all of which were intensified in the summer of 2020. Yet, based on participants’ positionality as international students, the identity aspect of their sensemaking centered on their international identity rather than a racial identity. Many of the participants expressed their own awareness of difference and had exposure to various forms of discrimination (e.g, caste, religious) in their home countries, yet did not explicitly address racial discrimination. For instance, Cade recalled witnessing accounts of racism and caste discrimination in his home country, while Harry Potter and Gupta spoke of discrimination and violence toward religious minorities in their home country. Ann herself has endured multiple experiences with religious discrimination as a religious minority in her home country, such as receiving failing grades, being kicked out of classes, and facing discriminatory attitudes and sentiments from teachers and students alike.

Even with such exposure to discrimination and marginalization, participants had limited prior exposure or experience with the racial discrimination found in the United States, which is consistent with prior studies (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Yao et al., 2021) and the racial sensemaking spectrum. Participants' preconceptions about race in the United States were a mixture of idealism and naivete that were met with the realities of historic and current racial discrimination. Their notions of what to anticipate in the racial climate within the United States were informed by family, friends, and the media, and unsurprisingly, their perceptions of race and racism evolved upon their arrival and initial experiences within the United States, moving from neutral to critical awareness. Such pre-arrival notions and post-arrival perceptions are consistent with the racial sensemaking conceptual framework, Fries-Britt et al.'s (2014) model on learning race in the U.S. context. Ultimately, witnessing the racial contention of 2020 did influence participants' perception and sensemaking of race, yet we are unaware to what extent this new understanding seemed to have on students' individual racial identity development.

Additionally, participants shared varied understanding and racial sensemaking of the Black Lives Matter movement. As international students, many of our participants did not have the benefit of understanding how civil rights protesting connected to the broader racial context of the United States. This response was particularly salient from participants from Asian countries. For example, Evergreen believed that "all lives mattered" and that the focus should not only be on the Black community. Similarly, MJ and C spoke about the need to also focus on Asian lives beyond only Black lives. Ann also said that a person's identity, such as gender or race, does not make you a good or bad person and commented, "That's why we're saying all lives matter." Comments of this nature indicated a lack of knowledge of the historical foundations of racism and racial conflicts in the United States. Furthermore, several respondents discussed their perceptions of Black people, prior to their arrival to the United States and during the Summer 2020 protests. For instance, Ann was warned to be careful around Black people prior to her arrival in the United States because "Black people would be scary" and would harm her. Likewise, MJ and C, both from East Asia, mentioned their perceptions of discrimination or violence from Black people toward Asians. Therefore, participants' opinions may be shaped by prior knowledge and assumptions of Black people, particularly because anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon (Beaman, 2020) that can be perpetuated by both white and people of Color (Stewart et al., 2019).

Yet it may be possible that for many of our participants, who come from relatively racially and ethnically homogenous regions, have not had to contend with the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness, and thus misunderstand the purpose and intentions of the Black Lives Matter movement that started in the United States. For example, MJ recalled being warned that the Black Lives Matter

movement was targeting Asian businesses as well as Asian individuals. Thus, as conceptualized by CritNoir, a “universal disdain . . . of Blackness and Black people . . . is maintained and perpetuated by everyone” (Stewart et al., 2019, p. 170). As a result, these participants demonstrated the difficulties in making sense of the nuanced racial dynamics within a new sociohistorical context and the emphasis on justice for Black lives, which is similar to findings from Evans (2007) and Bardhan and Zhang (2017).

Thus, we recommend that institutions provide safe spaces for international students to discuss these issues of racism and anti-Blackness with other international students. It is vitally important that international students can ask open questions without fear of reprisal, particularly when trying to make sense of how anti-Blackness is perpetuated within the sociohistorical foundations of the United States. In addition, a series of workshops on the racial foundations of the United States and how it connects to internationalization would provide explanations for contemporary racial conflicts, including police dynamics, protests and activism, and racial conflicts. An additional consideration would be for institutions to rethink departmental responsibilities for these types of student programs. Traditionally, most programmatic efforts for international students fall under the purview of the International Students and Scholars’ offices; however, we urge for increased collaboration between departments (e.g., Multicultural Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion, Student Activities, Graduate School) to ensure that all students, especially international students who are unfamiliar with U.S. racial dynamics, have a safe space to ask questions, process their perceptions, and derive new meaning and understanding.

Participants also shared their concerns about activism and protests. Most participants shared that they chose to avoid the protests for several reasons: general safety, the pandemic, and immigration policies. As stated by RJ, international students may not have the privilege of participating in activism because of their student immigration status. Thus, students may have to “kind of silently support it from the background” (RJ) without many options besides social media platforms, as found by George Mwangi et al. (2019). To support international students’ opportunities and desires for activism, we suggest that institutions explicitly communicate what rights international students have as residents in the United States, especially regarding activism and protests. We recognize that the fear of arrest or deportation limits the potential activism from international students. Thus, clearly providing clarity on legal restrictions would address any confusion. These clarifications would require collaboration between institutional legal counsel as well as student affairs and support offices, but this partnership would be of utmost importance for understanding legal restrictions and possibilities. More importantly, providing safe spaces on campus as outlets and opportunities for activism would provide valuable options for civic engagement from international students.

Participants such as Joe, Eams, and Mona shared that they felt the overt racial epithets and covert racial tensions directed at them personally warranted cautious reactions for their own personal safety. Their concerns were understandable, especially considering that international students, particularly those of Color, experienced hostility, discrimination, and perceived acts of racism and racial conflicts even prior to the pandemic (George Mwangi et al., 2019; Talley-Matthews et al., 2020; Yao, 2018; Yao et al., 2019, 2021). These contextual racialized experiences serve as artifacts in the participants' racial sensemaking. Thus, higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide clear directions on reporting perceived hate crimes and discriminatory acts that may be experienced both within and outside of the campus community. Most institutions have reporting systems in place, often through a Dean of Students' office, Title IX office, or university police/public safety. However, clarification on how the reporting process works, in addition to assurances of confidentiality, may lead to international students feeling more comfortable about reporting incidents. In addition, trained peer leaders who have been living in the United States longer could connect with newer international students of Color about the racial dynamics as well as resources in the surrounding community.

Limitations and future directions for research

We noted several limitations in our study. First, all of our international student participants were living and studying in the Southern United States. The South has a deep history of racial conflicts and racial movements because of the segregation and enslavement that continues to affect current laws, policies, and practices. Although there is value in understanding this particular context, future research could focus on the recruitment of international students from other regions of the United States for more nuanced studies that include the influence of the surrounding community. Furthermore, understanding how U.S. racial identity awareness and potential racial identity development impact international students studying in the U.S. would provide an additional lens on their perspective and interpretation of racialized experiences in the United States.

Second, the diversity of the international student population provides both opportunities and limitations. Our participants represented a variety of regions, including countries in East Asia, South Asia, West Africa, and South America. We were able to gather rich narratives that represent the diversity of experiences and background, but future research could include a larger sample size that could allow for disaggregation of regions/country of origin. In doing so, we can engage in a comprehensive analysis of international students from specific regions/countries making sense of race and racism.

Moreover, the racial conflicts of 2020 represented one critical incident, yet we recognize that further racial conflicts are likely to arise in the future. Thus, future research should include a longitudinal study to investigate how racial sensemaking may change over time. It is important to do a longitudinal study because understanding international students of Color's perceptions on racial dynamics can help higher education institutions support and engage international students in a more inclusive campus.

Conclusion

In summary, the study revealed many participants struggled to make sense of the 2020 racial conflicts witnessed in the United States and the accompanying photo elicitations captured their perspectives on race relations. Despite a heightened awareness of racial dynamics in the United States, participants shared that the summer of 2020 raised an alarming and growing anti-diversity sentiment within the United States, particularly directed toward Black and Asian presenting individuals. As international students, this created doubt about their status, place, and security while continuing with their studies in the United States.

To process and come to terms with the racial angst witnessed and experienced in the United States, this diverse group of international students engaged in racial sensemaking as their awareness of race and racism moved from neutral to critical. The artifacts of racial sensemaking (e.g., cultural background, police brutality videos, personal experiences, bystander perspectives, photo elicitations) forever changed their outlook and understanding to comprehend the depth of U.S. racial tensions. The lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely provided a global stage and context within which to engage racial sensemaking with family and friends both in the United States and in their home countries. Self-preservation and protection of the participant's international student status was a determining factor in their level of outspokenness against racialized incidents.

Despite a turbulent 2020, racial sensemaking revealed a positive outlook on the future of race and cultural relations in the United States. Several participants likened the Biden/Harris inauguration and identity-inclusive administration as a signal of hope for an inclusive political climate and improved race relations. The romanticized ideal of the United States as the bedrock of democracy and equality has been shattered by the events of 2020. Racial sensemaking highlighted and amalgamated the realities of racism and racial conflicts. Whether these racial conflicts and racial movements will impact the flow of international students studying in the United States is unknown.

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