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COVID-19 Post-Pandemic Adaptation and Resilience: A Cross-Cultural Study of China and Canada

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic altered individuals' worldviews. This study examined how cultural values shaped the ways students navigated stress and adapted after the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and cultural psychology frameworks of individualism and collectivism, we hypothesized that university students in two culturally distinct contexts—China and Canada—would demonstrate resilience differently. Chinese students would display collectivistic coping strategies (e.g., social responsibility and perspective-taking), while Canadian students would show resilience through individualistic strategies (e.g., personal reflection and self-efficacy). A total of 814 students completed a mixed-methods survey assessing resilience, cognitive reflection, and post-pandemic adaptations. Quantitative data were analyzed using factor analysis and stepwise regression to identify predictors. Qualitative responses were thematically analyzed for context. Results revealed cultural differences in resilience and adaptation, with social responsibility, healthy habits, and third-person perspective-taking predicting the responses of Chinese students, whereas internal emotional processing and personal moral reflection predicting it for Canadian students. This study enhances cross-cultural understanding of resilience and adaptation after collective trauma.

Keywords: COVID-19; post-COVID-19; resilience; adaptability; cross-cultural psychology; collectivism; individualism; student well-being; coping strategies; self-growth



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1. Introduction

Few historical events have reshaped our collective experience as profoundly as the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. The coronavirus global outbreak, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) [2], disrupted the routine of everyday life; isolated us from each other; and altered how we perceive health, safety, and social connection. While experiences with adapting to everyday routines and quarantine policies

differed culturally and regionally, communities worldwide confronted a threatened sense of security and uncertainties about their futures.

1.1. Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Well-Being

Studies across the globe reported an alarming rise in psychological distress, ranging from depression and anxiety to pervasive feelings of helplessness resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic [3–7]. While crucial to limiting the spread of the virus, the implementation of precautionary measures, such as social distancing and stay-at-home policies, led to an increase in reports of loneliness, suicidal ideation, and other adverse psychological outcomes [5,8], especially in young adults [9]. Declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020, COVID-19 was recognized as a cause of trauma, both individual and collective. Its psychological toll mirrors post-traumatic stress, leaving individuals and communities grappling with a sense of loss and disorientation [10].

The post-COVID-19 literature addresses various consequences of the pandemic, including the prevalence of a Post COVID-19 Condition [11], impairments to general health [12], along with the social [13], psychological [14,15], political, and behavioral [16] impacts. Previous research captured the intrinsic characteristics of university students who navigated these conditions effectively and built a stronger capacity to face future stressors [3]. Factors that were found to positively influence resilience during and after the pandemic were social support [13], personal strength [15], and self-concept [3,17]. A “coherent resilience” group successfully navigated challenges posed by the pandemic, but the “at-risk” group displayed situational helplessness, which interfered with adaptation [3]. While these studies offer a robust foundation for understanding resilience, their application to culturally distinct pandemic experiences has remained underexplored. The current study examined cross-cultural resilience and adaptation to post-pandemic life in two distinct cultures.

1.2. COR Theory

From the perspective of the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory [18], widespread uncertainty and loss trigger individuals and communities to protect, replenish, and mobilize their psychological and social resources. As resources were threatened during COVID-19, whether in the form of financial stability, social connections, or emotional well-being, many individuals and communities engaged in adaptive strategies [19]. These strategies include reaching out for community support, cognitive reframing, and resource-sharing mechanisms [18]. To say that COVID-19 was a blessing in disguise would be to minimize its tragedies, but to ignore the resilience it cultivated would be to overlook human perseverance. COR Theory is a stress model that helps explain this paradox. While resource depletion was a central issue during the pandemic, it also triggered resilience-building behaviors, as individuals and societies worked to recover and protect what remained [18]. This leads to the hypothesis that the greater the economic instability and the stricter the lockdown measures, the more adaptation individuals are required to navigate. This ultimately fosters strength and adaptability in the face of adversity, which is reflected in post-pandemic worldviews and life practices.

1.3. Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism and collectivism are the most explored phenomena by cultural psychologists [20]. They refer to different value systems that shape attitudes and behaviors, with individualism emphasizing personal independence and self-interest, while collectivism prioritizes group loyalty and shared goals [21]. These value systems impact all aspects of life, including anxiety levels, which were found to differ significantly in individualist and collectivistic contexts [22].

Nisbett describes the interdependent and interrelated holistic foundation of Chinese social life “not as pieces of pie, but as ropes in a net.” [23] (p. 19). Accordingly, “feeling good about themselves is likely to be tied to the sense that they are in harmony with the wishes of the group to which they belong and are meeting the group’s expectations” [23] (p. 49). In Chinese, there is no word for “individualism,” and the closest one is “selfishness.” In contrast, the West is characterized in terms of goal orientation and a sense of “personal agency” that is expressed in terms of “causal modelling of natural phenomena” [23] (p. 128). Nisbett concludes that “there is an effect of culture on thought independent of language” [23] (p. 161). In sum, “for East Asians the world is seen much more in terms of relationships than it is for Westerners, who are more inclined to see the world in terms of static objects that can be grouped into categories” [23] (p. 162).

A meta-analysis exploring 123 samples of state anxiety from 28 countries found an inverse effect for state anxiety and level of individualism, except at extreme levels, where individualism becomes linked to higher state anxiety [22]. In individualistic societies, people may be more self-reliant in adapting to the pandemic, whereas collectivistic ones rely more heavily on community support. The difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures can also be contrasted by state and trait approaches to personality theory [24]. This behavioral-cognitive approach emphasizes how enduring individual dispositions and competencies differ from temporary state-induced conditions [24]. Under this theory, how individualistic and collectivistic tendencies manifest in long-term dispositions and context-dependent behaviors is discernible.

The transactional theory of stress and coping states that stress is a product of the interaction between individuals and their complex environment [25]. Stress is not equally experienced by everyone facing the same stressor, but differs in accordance with multiple individual and situational factors, such as culture, norms, and resources [25]. For instance, individual readiness (e.g., emergency funds) and local government initiatives, combined with previous experience and current perspectives, affect the way a stressor appears. When faced with stressful situations, research shows that people often rely on their normal coping strategies, which are shaped by cultural values and norms [26]. Shekriladze et al. (2021) demonstrated how individualism, collectivism, and meaning in life shape coping with anxiety, influencing whether they engage in passive, avoidant, or action-oriented coping strategies [27]. In individualistic cultures like Canada, individuals are more likely to respond independently, prioritizing personal freedom over group harmony. According to Gelfand et al. (2021), collectivistic cultures (e.g., East Asian and South Asian countries) were more effective at controlling the virus compared to looser, individualistic cultures (e.g., North American and Western European countries) [28]. This difference was partly due to the influence of cultural values, with collectivist societies being more compliant with collective measures. Although culture significantly shapes our resilience and coping in multiple ways [29], a major gap remains in understanding how collectivistic and individualistic adaptation processes in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic differ across cultural contexts, particularly reflected in the current lifestyle.

1.4. Present Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze predictors of resilience in a collectivistic society with stringent lockdown measures, compared to an individualistic society with less restrictive lockdown measures. A comparison between China and Canada provide an illustrative case. To minimize the spread of COVID-19, China implemented a zero-COVID policy, which involved strict and localized lockdowns, mass testing, contact tracing, and surveillance [30]. This policy was effective at keeping numbers low in the beginning. However, it was controversial as challenges began to arise with an increasing number of cases,

as well as the impact of isolation measures on the economy and individuals [30]. Canada focused on localized, temporary restrictions, economic support, and gradual reopening, although many provinces took divergent approaches [31].

Although Canada is often portrayed as a well-established individualistic society, it is made up of multiple cultural groups, some of which emphasize more interdependent values. For example, previous research has shown that Asian Canadians report more interdependent behaviors than European Canadians [32]. In our sample, over a quarter (27.5%) of Canadian students identified as international students, further highlighting this cultural diversity. Similarly, China cannot be treated as a culturally homogeneous society. A growing body of research points to differences in collectivism with northern and southern regions [33]. The “triple-line framework” by Ren et al. (2021) integrates ecological, historical, and social characteristics to differentiate regional variations in collectivism, which addresses the homogenous assumption in China [34]. While our study treats Canada as a heterogeneous culture and China as a homogeneous culture for our comparison, we acknowledge that this is an oversimplification.

This project provides a case study of students at a Canadian university and at a Chinese university, examining how they coped with pandemic stressors and viewed their lives in the post-pandemic period. It offers a unique exploration of adaptation processes in both collectivistic and individualistic societies, influenced by the severity of pandemic-related experiences. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather a broad range of data on students’ emotional states, their reflections on the actions they took during and after the pandemic (e.g., forming healthy habits), and their concerns regarding personal and others’ health risks. We also explored their sense of identity related to resilience, the physical and social support to which they had access, and their current and future concerns around health and financial security. From a qualitative perspective, students were invited to share a difficult life experience, either from school or daily life, and how they managed it.

Our goal was to examine adaptation processes in collectivistic and individualistic societies, influenced by the severity of pandemic-related experiences. Drawing from the approach of the COR theory, individuals in China, due to the greater severity of pandemic-related experiences, should have leveraged stronger social and cultural resources to foster resilience, reflecting interdependence and community-based support. Canadian students should exhibit resilience through predictors that reflect individualistic coping strategies related to personal growth and self-efficacy.

2. Materials and Methods

The University of Toronto Research Ethics Board approved the procedure of this study (Approval No. 2023-09). Email invitations were sent to returning students at the University of Toronto Scarborough in Canada, from January 2024 to March 2024. 440 students participated in an anonymous online survey that was hosted on REDCap (Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA). Invitations were also sent to returning students at the Nanjing University in China from 1 March 2024, to 3 March 2024, and 385 students responded. 11 responses from the participants in China were excluded due to duplicate survey entries, therefore leaving 370 points of data to analyze. In total, 825 responses were received from both universities that participated in the study, and 814 data points were analyzed.

The survey began with a series of demographic questions. There were six quantitative parts to the survey: (1) Describing Yourself Now [Resilience Measure], (2) Reflecting on the Past, Present and the Future, (3) Precautionary Health Actions During the Pandemic, (4) Looking Back and Looking Forward, (5) Reflecting on Your Actions, and (6) Actions After the Pandemic. All measures had respondents answer on a 7-point Likert scale, except for one question (2) that asked for the percentage of time respondents spent during a week

thinking about the past, present, and future, totalling 100%. The survey also contained a qualitative section that inquired about a particular challenging situation during COVID-19, as well as how the respondent's life has changed after the pandemic.

The 15 items from the Describing Yourself Now measure derived from an earlier study on resilience conducted in Egypt and Canada [35]. A measure with 20 items was created by the team pertaining to Actions After the Pandemic. Precautionary Health Actions During the Pandemic (10 items) was derived from Cupchik et al.'s (2024) adaptation of the Precautionary Health Measures Index [3]. Reflecting on Your Actions (10 items) was derived from the Situated Wise Reasoning Scale, a cross-validated situation-sensitive scale that measures wisdom-related thoughts and behaviors in specific situations [36].

2.1. Participants

The demographic data from the Canadian university students reflected the diversity of the sample, which aligns with the broader student population on campus. In terms of gender identity, the sample included 311 females (70.7%), 119 males (27.0%), six (1.4%) who selected "other", and four who selected "prefer not to answer." Out of 440 students, 298 (62.7%) identified as Asian, 58 (12%) as White, 28 (5.8%) as Middle Eastern, 38 (8%) as Black, 11 (1.8%) as Hispanic/Latinx, and one as Indigenous. 33 (9%) identified as a cultural identity that was not listed. Most Canadian respondents (72.5%) were domestic students (319), while 27.5% (121) were international. 237 students (53.9%) were in their first year, 84 (19.1%) in their second year, 56 (12.7%) in third year, 53 (12.0%) in fourth year, and 10 (2.3%) in their fifth year or beyond.

The Chinese student cohort comprised 212 females (56.7%), 158 males (42.2%), one student who identified neither as male nor female, and three who preferred not to disclose their gender identity. One hundred and twelve (29.9%) students were in their first year, 138 (36.9%) in their second year, and 124 (33.2%) in third year. All Chinese respondents were domestic students. Eleven responses were dropped due to duplication of entry.

2.2. Data Analysis

A blended quantitative and qualitative approach was used to understand student adaptation after COVID-19. A factor analysis of the combined Canadian student data and Chinese student data was performed on the five Likert scale measures: Precautionary Health Actions During the Pandemic, Describing Yourself Now (i.e., Resilience), Looking Back and Looking Forward after the Pandemic, Reflecting on Actions During the Pandemic, and Reflecting on Actions After the Pandemic. Stepwise multiple regressions were then performed to predict factors associated with Actions After the Pandemic based on the four other measures, along with the measure asking for the percentage of time spent reflecting on the past, present, and future post-COVID. The Canadian and Chinese data were analyzed separately for the regressions.

Students were also asked to describe "life changes after the pandemic." These critical episodes were used in a qualitative analysis to complement the quantitative findings of students' resilience and adaptability to their new realities in the Canadian and Chinese cultural contexts. Using a thematic, data-driven approach, two researchers analyzed the top and bottom 50 Canadian respondents on two Actions After Pandemic factors, based on their factor scores. A parallel analysis was conducted on the Chinese dataset by two other researchers. The qualitative teams then compared themes across both groups to identify overarching patterns.

3. Results

3.1. Precautionary Health Actions During the Pandemic

Students responded to 10 items measuring their actions taken to care for their well-being and safety during COVID-19. The data were factor analyzed, with Varimax rotation, to look for an underlying structure (see Table 1). Three factors were derived with Eigenvalues of 3.15, 1.57, and 1.08, accounting for 19.1%, 15.0, and 13.8% of the total (47.9%) variance. Factor 1, *Healthy Habits & Social Engagement*, is characterized by healthy eating and sleeping habits, volunteering, and connecting with others regularly. Factor 2, *Life-Fulfilling Responsibilities*, involved undertaking hobbies, physical exercise, and duties at home. Factor 3, *Physical Precautionary Actions*, encompassed following physical distancing and other public health rules.

Table 1. Factor Loadings for Precautionary Health Actions During the Pandemic.

Factors and Eigenvalues	Items	Loadings
(1) Healthy Habits & Social Engagement 3.15	Healthy eating habits related to food choices, amounts, and weight management.	0.73
	Healthy sleeping habits so I felt rested when I woke up.	0.70
	Volunteered to help others.	0.52
	Connected with friends, family, and colleagues regularly.	0.50
(2) Life-Fulfilling Responsibilities 1.57	Maintained hobbies such as art, writing, collecting, baking, cooking, etc.	0.63
	Exercised at home.	0.62
	Attended to duties at home, such as pets, plants, dependents, etc.	0.59
(3) Physical Precautionary Actions 1.08	Physical distancing (2 m apart).	0.79
	Followed public health rules while lining up for stores and services.	0.74

3.2. Resilience

In the “Describing Yourself Now” survey section, students were asked to rate themselves on a series of items pertaining to their resilience after the pandemic. A factor analysis was performed with Varimax rotation, and a two-factor solution was derived with Eigenvalues of 5.03 and 1.53, accounting for 21.5% and 17.2%, respectively, of the total 38.7% of the variance (see Table 2). The results reveal two underlying dispositions related to resilience. Factor 1, *Active Reflection & Social Responsibility*, is characterized by learning lessons from others, reflecting on one’s actions, and a better understanding of the self. Factor 2 reveals *Self-Perceived Resilience*, with an emphasis on personal agency and an appreciation of recovery from trauma.

3.3. Looking Back and Looking Forward

The Looking Back and Looking Forward measure quantified students’ reflections on their approach to their futures in the post-pandemic circumstances. A factor analysis resulted in two factors with Eigenvalues of 4.57 and 1.49 that accounted for 45.7% of the variance (see Table 3). Factor 1, *Adaptation*, addressed confidence and adaptation to changes, as well as health, the presence of a supportive family, recovery, and a sense of purpose in life once the pandemic was over. Factor 2 encompasses *Emotional Challenges* (e.g., loneliness) faced during COVID-19.

Table 2. Factor Loadings for Self-Ratings of Resilience.

Factors and Eigenvalues	Items	Loadings
(1) Active Reflection & Social Responsibility 5.03	I learn valuable lessons from the experiences of others.	0.70
	I am trying to understand myself better.	0.68
	I often reflect on my reasons for doing things.	0.62
	I try to control events rather than be a victim of circumstances.	0.57
	My own actions determine my life.	0.50
	I value others in my community and often express it to them.	0.50
	I put a high value on promoting equality and reducing poverty and hunger.	0.49
(2) Self-Perceived Resilience 1.53	I feel self-confident, appreciate myself, and have a healthy concept of who I am.	0.84
	I have good coping strategies toward stressful events.	0.59
	I am recovered from traumas.	0.51
	I always have negative moods like sadness, anger or fear.	−0.46
	I've been made stronger and better by difficult experiences.	0.44
	I know how to behave in different social situations.	0.43
	I am treated fairly in my community.	0.42

Table 3. Factor Loadings for “Looking Back and Looking Forward” Items.

Factors and Eigenvalues	Items	Loadings
(1) Adaptation 4.57	Were you quick to recover back into your routine once restrictions were lifted?	0.67
	How high would you say your confidence was during the pandemic?	0.64
	Did you have a supportive family environment during the pandemic?	0.59
	Do you have a strong sense of your purpose in life now that we are out of the pandemic?	0.53
	Were you easily able to adapt to the life changes during the pandemic?	0.51
	Looking back, rate your health during the pandemic.	0.51
	Did the pandemic cause you to lose hope in your future endeavors?	0.50
	Looking back, how strict would you rate the COVID restrictions in your country?	0.44
(2) Emotional Challenges 1.49	Did you have emotional distress during the pandemic?	0.85
	Did you find yourself lonely during the pandemic?	0.75
	Did you find it difficult to accept the losses of opportunities because of COVID-19?	0.63

3.4. Reflecting on Actions During the Pandemic

After recalling a challenging situation during COVID, students reflected on thoughts and behaviors done “as the situation unfolded” and assessed them on 10 items. A factor analysis, with Varimax rotation, yielded two factors with Eigenvalues of 4.30 and 1.02 that accounted for 32.2% and 18.3% of the total 50.5% of the variance (see Table 4). Factor 1, *Insightful Resolution*, encompassed a sense of mutuality, balancing critical reflection on one’s own understanding of different solutions to the situation with an appreciation of the other person’s perspective. Factor 2, *3rd Person Perspective*, reflected an appreciation of how an “outside person” would view the situation.

Table 4. Factor Loadings for Reflecting on Actions During the Pandemic.

Factors and Eigenvalues	Items	Loadings
(1) Insightful Resolution 4.30	Looked for different solutions as the situation evolved.	0.75
	Took time to get the other person’s opinions on the matter before coming to a conclusion.	0.69
	Put myself in the other person’s shoes.	0.65
	Though it may not have been possible, I searched for a solution that could result in both of us being satisfied.	0.65
	Double-checked whether my opinion on the situation might be incorrect.	0.56
	Viewed it as very important that we resolve the situation.	0.54
	Believed the situation could lead to a number of different outcomes.	0.52
(2) 3rd Person Perspective 1.02	Thought about whether an outside person might have a different opinion from mine about the situation.	0.95
	Wondered what I would think if somebody else were watching the situation.	0.56

3.5. Reflecting on Actions After the Pandemic

A series of 20 items provided respondents with an opportunity to reflect on actions and lived experiences after the pandemic. A factor analysis, with Varimax rotation, yielded two factors with Eigenvalues of 4.72 and 1.34 that accounted for 23.3% and 22.1% of the total 45.4% variance. (see Table 5). Factor 1, *Appreciation for Life & Relationships*, included items having to do with appreciating nature, friends, and family, as well as desiring new experiences through travelling. Factor 2, *Inner Growth*, encompassed a “clearer connection to the inner self,” more self-compassion and enjoyment of the present moment, forming healthier habits, and analyzing the bigger picture when solving a problem.

3.6. Stepwise Multiple Regressions

Separate stepwise multiple regressions were performed for the Chinese and Canadian students, treating both Reflecting on Actions after the Pandemic factors (*Appreciation for Life & Relationships* and *Inner Growth*) as criterion variables and the factors underlying Precautionary Health Actions, Resilience, Looking Back and Forward, and Reflecting on Actions During the Pandemic, as well as Time Spent Thinking About the Past, Present, and

Future as predictor variables. Both the Chinese and Canadian regression models for Factor 2, *Inner Growth*, are discussed first because they were stronger and accounted for more variance compared with Factor 1, *Appreciation for Life & Relationships*.

Table 5. Factor Loadings for Reflecting on Actions After the Pandemic.

Factors and Eigenvalues	Items	Loadings
(1) Appreciation for Life & Relationships 4.72	I enjoy sharing a meal with others more so since the end of the pandemic. (ex. family dinners)	0.68
	I have more appreciation for nature, such as mountains and lakes.	0.67
	I am more willing to travel to different places to experience new things in life.	0.66
	I enjoy celebrations more so since the end of the pandemic.	0.66
	I have more appreciation for my relationships with my friends and family.	0.64
(2) Inner Growth 1.34	I have a clearer connection to my inner self and the life I want to live.	0.73
	I find myself enjoying the present moment more after the pandemic.	0.62
	When I need to solve a problem, I am more likely to slow down to analyze the big picture.	0.59
	I am less harsh on myself after the pandemic.	0.56
	I find myself forming healthy habits more often.	0.52
	I find myself getting prepared for future accidents that could happen.	0.48

3.6.1. Chinese Students

A significant model for *Inner Growth* was derived, $F(4, 369) = 51.04, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.36$, comprising four factors, including both Resilience factors *Action Reflection & Social Responsibility* ($t = 6.63, p < 0.001$) and *Self-Perceived Resilience* ($t = 4.43, p < 0.001$), along with both Reflecting on Actions factors *Insightful Resolution* ($t = 4.83, p < 0.001$) and *3rd Person Perspective* ($t = 3.76, p < 0.001$) (see Table 6). Chinese students' inner growth was enhanced by their self-perceived resilience, reflections on actions they can control, and sense of social responsibility. Feeling a clearer connection to their inner self, better readiness for the unexpected, and greater enjoyment of the present was also significantly shaped by insightful problem-solving and perspective-taking during a challenging COVID-related situation.

Another significant model was derived, $F(4, 369) = 17.95, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.16$, demonstrating the impact of four factors predicting the feeling of *Appreciation for Life & Relationships*. These included Precautionary Actions factors *Healthy Habits & Social Engagement* ($t = 2.63, p = 0.009$) and *Life-Fulfilling Responsibilities* ($t = 3.63, p < 0.001$), along with *Adaptation (Looking Back and Forward)* ($t = 3.76, p < 0.001$) and *3rd Person Perspective (Reflecting on Actions During the Pandemic)* ($t = 2.27, p = 0.024$) (see Table 6). Chinese students' appreciation for life and their relationships was enhanced by daily health practices during COVID-19, particularly healthy eating and sleep habits, social engagement, maintaining hobbies, and

attending to duties at home. It was also determined by their ability to adapt to changing circumstances during and post-COVID. Lastly, whether Chinese students would actively practice perspective-taking as they reflected on a pandemic-related situation strongly influenced both inner growth and appreciation for life and relationships.

3.6.2. Canadian Students

A significant model involved six factors predicting *Inner Growth* (see Table 7), $F(6, 431) = 60.01$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.46$. Time Spent Thinking About the Past ($t = -2.65$, $p = 0.008$) and Physical Precautionary Actions ($t = -2.30$, $p = 0.022$) were negative determinants of *Inner Growth*, whereas Active Reflection & Social Responsibility ($t = 9.24$, $p < 0.001$), Self-Perceived Resilience ($t = 11.06$, $p < 0.001$), Emotional Challenges ($t = 2.02$, $p = 0.046$), and Insightful Resolution ($t = 2.40$, $p = 0.017$) were positive determinants. The less they reflected on the past and followed physical precautionary actions, the more Canadian students demonstrated inner growth. Moreover, inner growth was enhanced by (1) active reflections on their own actions, intentions, and value placed on their community; (2) self-perceived resilience (i.e., healthy self-concept, coping strategies, and recovery from traumas); and (3) having endured emotional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 6. Two Models of Multiple Regression Analyses for Chinese Students: Predicting Actions After Pandemic Factors.

Model	Scale and Independent Variable	B	SE B	β	p
(1) Appreciation for Life & Relationships	Precautionary				
	(1) Healthy Habits & Social Engagement	0.17	0.06	0.14	0.009
	(2) Life-Fulfilling Responsibilities	0.21	0.06	0.19	<0.001
	Looking Back and Looking Forward				
	(1) Adaptation	0.23	0.06	0.19	<0.001
(2) Inner Growth	Reflect on Actions				
	(2) 3rd Person Perspective	0.12	0.05	0.11	0.024
	Resilience				
	(1) Active Reflection & Social Responsibility	0.28	0.04	0.32	<0.001
	(2) Self-Perceived Resilience	0.19	0.04	0.19	<0.001
	Reflect on Actions				
	(1) Insightful Resolution	0.23	0.05	0.23	<0.001
	(2) 3rd Person Perspective	0.15	0.04	0.16	<0.001

Note. N = 374. (1) Appreciation for Life & Relationships $R^2 = 0.16$, (2) Inner Growth $R^2 = 0.36$. B = unstandardized regression coefficients; β = standardized regression coefficients.

Another significant model was found with four factors predicting *Appreciation for Life & Relationships* (see Table 7), $F(4, 435) = 46.58$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.30$. These factors were the Resilience profile and Active Reflection & Social Responsibility ($t = 8.30$, $p < 0.001$), both Looking Back and Forward factors, Adaptation ($t = 4.06$, $p < 0.001$) and Emotional Challenges ($t = 3.14$, $p = 0.002$), and Insightful Resolution ($t = 3.40$, $p < 0.001$). Like inner growth, Canadian students' appreciation for life and relationships was significantly shaped by active reflections on their own actions, motives, and sense of responsibility towards their community.

Similarly to Chinese students, Canadian students' perceived ability to adapt to changing situations was also a major determinant of this appreciation. However, a unique result in the Canadian group was that emotional challenges during COVID-19 (e.g., distress and loneliness) strongly influenced both their inner growth and appreciation for life and relationships. They were also quite introspective with their reflections and mindsets, as noted by their search for insightful resolutions, which enhanced their appreciation for nature, travels, life events, and loved ones.

Table 7. Two Models of Multiple Regression Analyses for Canadian Students: Predicting Actions After Pandemic Factors.

Model	Scale and Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
(1) Appreciation for Life & Relationships	Resilience				
	(1) Active Reflection & Social Responsibility	0.35	0.04	0.37	<0.001
	Looking Back and Looking Forward				
	(1) Adaptation	0.19	0.05	0.18	<0.001
	(2) Emotional Challenges	0.13	0.04	0.13	0.002
(2) Inner Growth	Reflect on Actions				
	(1) Insightful Resolution	0.14	0.04	0.13	<0.001
	Reflecting on Past Resilience	−0.01	0.00	−0.10	0.008
	(1) Active Reflection & Social Responsibility	0.33	0.04	0.37	<0.001
	(2) Self-Perceived Resilience	0.41	0.04	0.45	<0.001
(2) Inner Growth	Precautionary				
	(3) Physical Precautionary Actions	−0.09	0.04	−0.09	0.022
	Looking Back and Looking Forward				
	(2) Emotional Challenges	0.07	0.04	0.08	0.046
	Reflect on Actions				
	(1) Insightful Resolution	0.08	0.03	0.10	0.017

Note. N = 440. (1) Appreciation for Life & Relationships $R^2 = 0.30$, (2) Inner Growth $R^2 = 0.46$. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficients; β = standardized regression coefficients.

3.7. Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis uncovered four overarching themes reflecting the Canadian and Chinese students, with top 25 and/or bottom 25 scores on Actions After Pandemic Factor 1, *Appreciation for Life & Relationships*, and the bottom and top 25 s on Factor 2, *Inner Growth*. Chinese accounts were translated to English for this article.

3.7.1. Theme 1: Attitudes Towards Life

Canadian and Chinese students in the Top 25, for both *Inner Growth* and *Appreciation for Life & Relationships* factors, generally expressed positive outlooks in the post-COVID period. Canadians often expressed optimism, exhilaration, and openness to new opportunities and experiences. Although Chinese students were also open to new life choices, they mainly focused on accepting life's unpredictability, seeking stability and self-growth instead of perfection, and appreciating each moment in life.

"Post-COVID I opened myself up to new opportunities, experiences, and interactions that I did not during my undergrad. My Masters was far more exciting, liberating, and influential to my personal journey in academia and my career."
(Canadian, 25, male)

"No longer pursuing being the top or the best, but able to calmly accept efforts and results that are 'good enough' after a brief period of regret." (Chinese, 20, male)

Some Canadian and Chinese students, most with Bottom 25 factor scores, expressed a pessimistic view characterized by anxiety, regression of skills, and deteriorated quality of life.

"I feel like my life has changed for the worse. COVID gave me a lot of trauma. I was full of hope right before the pandemic hit, and now I feel mostly hopeless."
(Canadian, 21, male)

"The epidemic has shown me the risks and the uncertainty of life. It made me stop pursuing high achievements or a certain path, and instead pursue more stability

and tolerance, while considering more uncertainties. The epidemic has made me more anxious and confused than ever before.” (Chinese, 22, male)

3.7.2. Theme 2: Changes in Concerns, Routines, and Values

Many Canadian and Chinese answers from the Top 25 groups described positive changes in their daily routine, including more opportunities for adventures, travelling, and enjoying nature. The Canadian accounts also appeared to place significant value on social relationships, autonomy, and the flexibility that comes with virtual work and activities. The Chinese accounts expressed an appreciation for quality time spent with loved ones and finding contentment through simplicity.

“After COVID I [became] more aware of my surroundings and less focused on technology. I enjoy going on walks [...] and just enjoying mother nature. I also understand the value of social interaction with my friends and family.” (Canadian, 18, female)

“I was very irritable about the relationship with my family [during COVID-19] due to my parents’ occasional quarrels and sudden changes [...] However, after the pandemic, my mentality seems to have changed a little, and I gradually understood my parents’ hard work for the family. Cherishing the present and selfless contribution are the eternal labels of parents.” (Chinese, 23, male)

Some Chinese and Canadian students struggled to adapt to their new daily routines. Both groups described challenges with transitions to in-person or online learning, but some Canadians also faced social difficulties. Moreover, many Canadian students described an increase in mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety and depression), and some coped with stressors using substances. Conversely, the Chinese accounts had some mentions of anxiety and stress attributed to pandemic-related inconveniences, such as resource shortages. The Chinese group also emphasized cautious spending and a preference for job stability, illustrating economic concerns that differed from the Canadians’ focus on mental health.

“Post-COVID, I ended up developing a nicotine and marijuana addiction. Thought it was going to help me cope with the pressure of securing a job after graduation and the burnout I’ve experienced these four long years.” (Canadian, 22, female)

“After the pandemic, consumption was downgraded. In the past, I would spend a lot of money on skincare products and cosmetics. During the pandemic, the consumption concept has changed. It is believed that cost-effective products can also be used” (Chinese, 28, female)

3.7.3. Theme 3: Prioritizing Health

This theme highlights the emphasis on health and wellness in the post-COVID era among both Canadian and Chinese students across Actions After the Pandemic Factor 1 and Factor 2: Top 25 and Bottom 25 groups. Both student groups expressed increased responsibility, caution, and vigilance, though with some differences. Canadian students were primarily focused on personal health, citing outdoor activities and caution in crowded spaces for self-care. In contrast, Chinese students offered a more holistic view, mentioning concerns for family members’ well-being and taking preventive measures to avoid both infection and disease spread.

“...since the world started to reopen, I’ve found myself being more cautious and selective about where I go and who I spend time with.” (Canadian, 18, female)

“Pay more attention to the people you care about, such as family members and friends you can talk to. I don’t know what will happen in the future. At the

same time, constantly strengthen your ability to resist risks, such as strengthening physical exercise and learning more skills needed for work.” (Chinese, 22, female)

3.7.4. Theme 4: Self-Growth, Self-Reflection, and Adaptability

This theme represents self-reflection for personal growth, resilience, cognitive appraisal, and learning from experiences. Many Canadian students with Top 25 scores on the *Inner Growth* and *Appreciation for Life & Relationships* factors reflected on their actions, emotions, and self-discipline, enhancing their resilience in the face of life’s challenges. High-scoring Chinese students took a holistic approach, linking identity and values to family relationships and life’s meaning. By valuing a strong mindset, recognizing life’s finiteness, and prioritizing health and family, they strived to cultivate calmness and collective well-being during stressful times.

“I became more self-aware of my feelings towards myself and the trauma I endured during my childhood. I tried to understand myself more.” (Canadian, 19, male)

“In the face of the postgraduate entrance examination, my mentality has been more relaxed. The ‘old me’ might have fallen into heavy worry and anxiety about this matter. Now I can face it more calmly. [...] It’s not a big deal.” (Chinese, 20, male)

A few Canadians and Chinese answers, most from the Bottom 25 factor groups, reflected pessimistically on their actions and experiences, with the Canadian students feeling “robbed of experiences” and the Chinese students showing confusion and hopelessness about their self-growth and their future.

“I used to think that my life [...] was in a proper upward trajectory but now I feel like I’ve been robbed from experiences and have been punished permanently through my marks” (Canadian, 21, male)

“Anxiety about final exams. With the downward pressure on the economy after the pandemic, the anxiety phenomenon has not improved much, and I am always confused about the future.” (Chinese, 19, male)

3.7.5. Theme 5: The Feeling of Freedom

The newfound feeling of liberation from restraints, lockdowns, and quarantine orders illustrates this last theme. This theme is more prominent in the Chinese cohort, likely due to the prolonged severe intensity of the quarantine lockdowns they have experienced.

Among Canadians who scored in the Top 25 for *Inner Growth* and *Appreciation for Life & Relationships*, this theme was often intertwined with an appreciation of autonomy over lifestyle choices. Instead of directly mentioning “freedom,” many referred to a sense of relief about no longer having to follow pandemic-related rules. For those who did directly mention freedom, their reflections were often more emotionally driven with deeper meaning.

“Right after COVID I finished high school and travelled back to my home country to visit family, [...]. I remember going outside a lot and always taking the opportunity to get some fresh air and even sleep outside when I could. It felt as if I was a bird that was finally allowed out of the cage.” (Canadian, 18, female)

Many Chinese students, with Top 25 scores and Bottom 25 scores on the *Inner Growth* and *Appreciation for Life & Relationships* factors, were vocal about their freedom to attend the events and places that they missed. The word “freedom” itself (自由) was brought up

11 times. Although they can go out and enjoy life, social duties such as wearing a mask in public, are still prevalent in most of their outings.

“I can be free to go to my favorite concerts on weekends, travel to places I long to go during winter and summer vacations, and see natural and cultural landscapes that I have never seen.” (Chinese, 20, female)

4. Discussion

The present study explored how predictors of resilience and adaptation influenced by the pandemic shaped post-pandemic life for Chinese and Canadian students. While both groups demonstrated statistically significant predictors of growth, the types of predictors and their related interpretations varied in culturally meaningful ways. For example, although interdependence still exists in an individualistic multicultural context, it is exhibited in ways that are different than the Chinese context. Canadian students illustrate predictors from a Western, individualistic framework, and Chinese students display these from an Eastern, collectivistic framework. Lastly, it is important to be reminded that while our study treats Canada as a heterogeneous culture and China as a homogeneous culture for the purposes of comparison, we recognize that this simplification does not capture the nuanced and continuous nature of independence and interdependence, which cannot be reduced to binary categories.

Chinese students' *appreciation for life and relationships* was significantly shaped by maintaining hobbies and social connections, attending to duties at home, healthy sleep and eating habits, and their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Additionally, *third-person perspective-taking* is a recurring predictor of both factors, hinting at a collectivistic way of evaluating experiences. These findings suggest that Chinese students process growth through externalized reflection and socially oriented behaviors, consistent with collectivistic cultural frameworks. Practicing precautionary health actions appears to reflect social obligation and collectivist duties rather than protecting oneself. This aligns with Nisbett's (2003) evaluation of collectivistic societies where meeting group expectations and living in unison is related to feeling good about oneself [23].

In the regression model for the Chinese group, *inner growth* was strongly predicted by both Resilience factors: *active reflection & social responsibility*, along with *self-perceived resilience*. *Active reflection & social responsibility* was characterized by learning lessons from the experiences of others, reflecting on one's actions, a better understanding of the self, and valuing community and equality. *Self-perceived resilience* encompassed a sense of personal agency and an appreciation of one's own recovery from trauma. *Inner growth* was also significantly influenced by *third-party perspective-taking* in combination with *insightful resolution*, which is the critical reflection on one's own understanding of different solutions to a situation. These findings are consistent with ideas in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, having to do with the ways that perception of societal expectations promotes social duties in Chinese culture [37].

In contrast, the Canadian students demonstrated *inner growth* mainly through self-reflection and internal strength. Internal reflections, individual emotional processing, adaptation, and valuing community and equality were found to positively impact these students' *appreciation for life and relationships*. Although *active reflection and social responsibility* is the highest predictor of *appreciation for life and relationships*, this may reflect individual morals rather than societal duties or expectations. Moreover, actions such as being “cautious and selective with your surroundings” warrants protection of oneself. The point is that Canadian processes may pertain more to individuals, whereas Chinese processes relate to the group.

This finding may also imply that, despite the Canadian group displaying mostly individualistic characteristics, they may also endorse the collectivistic value of social responsibility to a certain degree. Individualism and collectivism can be seen as two ends of a spectrum, rather than a binary, and Canadian culture would not fall perfectly on the individualistic end [38]. It is also important to note that even though independence and individualism is valued in the Canadian culture, our respondents are from a variety of backgrounds due to the multicultural nature of Canada. Respondents can align themselves with other cultures that resonate with collectivism, and this reflects the diverse sample of the Canadian students.

Interestingly, the regressions results revealed *physical precautionary actions* (e.g., social distancing) as a negative determinant of the Canadian group's *inner growth*. It is possible that some students were simply not adequately following public health rules while in high density spaces (i.e., lining up for stores and services), while others avoided being in places with a lot of people or even leaving their home in the first place, which did not justify the need to frequently practice physical precautionary actions. Moreover, autonomous decision-making is a priority in individualistic cultures, and having to follow mandatory restrictions may trigger psychological reactance. This response can be precipitated when personal freedom is threatened [39]. In a study based in Saudi Arabia, the researchers found that psychological reactance is an influencer of the population that did not adhere to social distancing measures during the pandemic outbreak [40]. The responses associated with psychological reactance may block pathways through which personal growth and reflection happen, thus, may explain why compliance of physical precautionary measures are negatively associated with *inner growth*.

Emotional challenges during the pandemic, such as distress and loneliness, were a significant predictor of both Canadian students' *inner growth* and *appreciation for life and relationships*. In the written responses, Canadian students were more directly vocal about their emotions, particularly using more emotion words and descriptions of internal sensations, whereas Chinese students were more likely to express their emotions in terms of their circumstances of the events occurring around them. This is consistent with the emotion socialization literature, which suggests that Canadians understand their emotions through a psychological perspective and thus express them in a more confrontative, introspective, and self-validating manner [26,41].

In contrast, within a collectivistic perspective that values moral and social harmony, Chinese are more likely to practice emotional inhibition and assess the social implications of their emotions, particularly negative ones [23]. After all, collectivistic individuals perceive emotion expression to serve more the functions of their "public selves", while individualistic individuals primarily tie it to their "private selves" [26]. Moreover, past studies suggest that emotion inhibition generally has a less negative effect on Chinese's well-being than it does on Canadians' well-being, since Canadians are socialized to ascribe more importance to the direct expression and validation of their feelings [26,41]. This may explain why the Canadian students in the present study were notably more sensitive to the emotional challenges they faced during COVID-19 than the Chinese students were.

Viewing emotional challenges from the perspective of the COR Theory meant that individuals and societies worked to recover and protect the resources that remained in the event of resource depletion [18]. This process not only mitigates losses, but ultimately fosters strength and adaptability in the face of adversity reflecting the idea that "whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. In the current study, *emotional challenges* is a predictor of *inner growth* for the Canadian group, suggesting that our findings align with the COR theory: the more intense the emotions linked to the pandemic's negative impacts (e.g., economic instability), the more individuals are pushed to adapt, fostering inner growth.

This process often leads to a deeper appreciation for life and relationships, as well as the strength to bounce back once the crisis has passed.

Our findings suggest that Canadian students who were less preoccupied with their past demonstrated enhanced personal growth. This aligns with existing literature indicating that excessive rumination, which is repetitive overthinking on distressing events, can impede psychological well-being and health [42,43]. Studies have also shown that rumination is associated with the onset and persistence of depression and anxiety disorders [44]. In a previous study, students classified as being a part of an “at-risk” profile group spent more time thinking about the past than students a part of the “resilient” group [3]. While past experiences can offer valuable insights, an over focus on them may lead to excessive caution and mental health conditions, which hinder growth. Research indicates that individuals who engage in deliberate rumination, which is thoughtful reflection aimed at learning from past experiences, are more likely to experience post-traumatic growth, especially when they possess high self-efficacy [45,46]. In a study by Xu et al. (2023) analyzing the relationship between deliberate rumination and post-traumatic growth, the results show that deliberate rumination can be a positive predictor of post-pandemic growth [45]. This suggests that balancing intentional reflection with the present is crucial for fostering resilience and personal development [45]. Taken together, findings from this study along with previous studies underscore the importance of not only shifting mental focus towards the present, but having a balance of personal reflection when thinking about the past for self-growth.

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