

Fear of COVID-19 and Psychological Adjustment Among International Students: Solution-Focused Thinking as a Moderator

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This study examined the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and solution-focused thinking and how it affects the psychological adjustment of international students amid the pandemic. A total of 167 international students participated in this cross-sectional survey using snowball sampling. Solution focused thinking was revealed to have negative and significant relationship with fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems. However, positive association was noted in the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems. The moderation analysis performed using the PROCESS Macro shown that solution focused thinking significantly moderated the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems. The findings in this study have important implications to interventions intended to facilitate international students' adjustment to consider solution-focused thinking-oriented interventions. [Chinese traditional](#) [Chinese simplified](#) [Full paper in Spanish](#)

Introduction

Being an international student may mean stepping beyond one's comfort zone, taking risks, being apart from one's family and childhood friends, and adjusting to living in a foreign nation. They may encounter diverse emotional challenges as they work through these particular challenges and attempt to create a new identity (Elemo et al., 2022; Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). These challenges, combined with language barriers, untreated mental health issues, acculturation stress, perceived discrimination and lack of understanding of the host community (Elemo & Türküm, 2019; Huang et al., 2020; Sherry et al., 2010; Xu, 2021) may account for deteriorating mental health conditions among international students. As a result, this group of students physical and mental well-being could be negatively affected in a stressful experience like the COVID-19.

During the pandemic, international students, like everyone else, have had to learn how to live with the challenges and changes brought about by the pandemic. Nationwide school closures that shifted university education to distance learning, however, following advances in vaccination efforts, a return to in-person education was announced (Özer et al., 2022) and university-level education nationwide shifted to in-person or hybrid education. For most students, moving from an online learning environment to a hybrid

or in-person learning environment can be a positive experience because it gives them a chance to reconnect with their professors and other students. However, for some students, returning to the classroom after strict quarantines can trigger anxiety (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020; Sherry et al., 2010).

Studying abroad and adjusting to the abrupt changes brought on by COVID-19 as well as the culture of the host country at the same time can be overwhelming and frustrating, on top of the many stresses and anxieties that come with being a university student (Sherry et al., 2010). The reluctance of some international students to seek professional help despite being more likely to experience mental health issues (Huang et al., 2020), could also worsen the challenges they face particularly when they adopt problem-focused thinking. Therefore, determining whether solution-focused thinking can contribute to better adaptation of international students during stressful situations such as COVID-19 is important to help researchers and practitioners identify ways to better prepare international students for life during their studies abroad.

Compared to international students who left the country and went home, those who stayed behind during the COVID-19 quarantine were more susceptible to mental health issues (Lai et al., 2020). Worries about education, loved ones' safety and well-being, and the stigma and discrimination they encounter while studying abroad might account to their deteriorating mental health condition. While being in those overwhelming situations, it is important that they choose to pay attention to what works instead of what does not, and continue to amplify the available resources that help to adapt and cope with the challenges.

One of the psychological traits that helps individuals overcome stressful experiences is their ability to control how they respond to stress and the way of approach towards solving the problems. The amount of time spent on the causes of the problem or on generating solutions varies from person to person. While some people spend a lot of time on the causes (problem-focused thinking), others prefer to spend time on solutions (solution-focused thinking) (Anaswara et al., 2016). Individuals who adopt a positive approach to discover what works instead of focusing on the negatives can focus on practical solutions and distance themselves from the problems by activating their existing qualities and resources (McAllister, 2013), thus increasing their self-efficacy and strengthening their resilience (Şanal Karahan & Hamarta, 2020). Therefore, it is whether international students choose to focus their attention, inner strengths, and resources on what works, and how well they approach the stressful situations with a solution-focused approach to adaptively manage stressful situations.

The solution-focused thinking is shaped around three themes: goal orientation, problem disengagement, and resource activation (Al-Ma'seb, 2018). Problem disengagement is the extent of thinking with a problem in mind. Goal orientation pertains to an individual's orientation towards

their goals, taking into account the desired outcomes and developing self-regulation. Resource activation is defined as a person's recognition and use of their resources and capabilities (Grant et al., 2012). A person's resources can be strengthened and their ideas and sense of self can be expanded by focusing on what is working rather than what is not working (Murphy, 2015). This necessitates the ability to focus on and be conscious of what is occurring at the present time.

Disengaging from the problem and focusing on the solution (Grant et al., 2012) can increase self-confidence, enhance the capacity to produce solutions, and utilize strengths (Ayar & Sabanciogullari, 2021), by enabling individuals to be more goal oriented (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). Such a way of thinking has the potential to reduce psychological distress, support psychological wellbeing (Şanal Karahan & Hamarta, 2020). Thus, choosing to engage in solution-focused thinking via setting goals, taking specific steps to act on what works, and then observing the process to achieve these goals can allow to manage stressful situations like the COVID-19.

Psychological adjustment is the capacity of an international student to remain in a balanced mental and emotional state by mobilizing coping resources to meet the demands of adaptation and to focus on achieving their goals (Elemo & Türküm, 2019). However, some international students may hesitate to face adaptation challenges, seeking familiarity or choosing to avoid the stressors. This becomes a disadvantage for them in terms of meeting adaptation demands and adjusting to life abroad. Thus, the more aware international students are of their resources and respond adaptively to stressful situations like the COVID-19, through solution-focused approach by remaining more relaxed, and focused on what works (Hick & Bien, 2008), the more they manage the stressors and cope up with adjustment demands.

Therefore, the outcome of this study will help the counseling centers in the universities to consider the role of solution-focused thinking in facilitating international student's adjustment. Moreover, it may help to develop insights into whether international students tend to think problem-focused or solution-focused when dealing with adjustment challenges and stressful situations like COVID-19, which may contribute to their capacity to focus on what works and make better use of their resources. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of solution-focused thinking in the relationship between psychological adjustment challenges and fear of COVID-19. Accordingly, the present study proposes the following hypotheses (Hs):

H1: Fear of COVID-19 is negatively related to solution-focused thinking in international students in Turkey.

H2: Solution-focused thinking moderates the relation between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment in international students in Turkey.

Table 1. Participants Demographics.

Demographics		M	SD	f	%
Age		25.6	5.18		
Sex	Male			103	61.7
	Female			64	38.3
Length of stay in Turkey	< 1 year			12	7.2
	1-3 years			65	38.9
	4-6 years			59	35.3
	6 years and above			31	18.6
Country of Origin	Africa			101	60.48
	Asia			55	32.93
	Europe			10	5.99
	South America			1	0.60
Hospitalized due to COVID-19	Yes			14	8.4
	No			153	91.6

Note: M-mean, SD- standard deviation, f -frequency; % - percentage

Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

A total of 167 (103 males, 64 female) international students in Turkey participated in an online survey disseminated via the social media accounts of international students between March 2021 and June 2021 through snowball sampling. The study was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. As part of the study procedure, the purpose of the study was disclosed, and electronic informed consents were obtained before the participants begin to give responses to the survey. The *Google Form* was in English and it was prepared in a way it could allow the participants to withdraw from the study at any time.

As given in [Table 1](#), the average age of the participants was 25.6 years ($SD = 5.18$). Regarding the participants' countries of origin, most of them (60.5%) were from Africa. The remaining 32.9%, 5.9% and 0.6% of the participants were from Asia, Europe and South America respectively. Their years of stay in Turkey were as follows: < 1 year ($N = 12$, 7.2%), between 1 and 3 years ($N = 65$, 38.9%), between 4-6 ($N = 59$, 35.3%) and 6 years and above ($N = 31$, 18.6%).

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S): The FCV-19S is a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) used to assess the fear of COVID-19. It was developed by Ahorsu et al. ([2020](#)) and comprises seven items (e.g., 'My heart races when I think about getting coronavirus-19') with a single factor. The scores that can be obtained from the FCVS-19 vary between 7 and 35, and higher scores indicate a greater fear of COVID-19. The internal consistency of the FCV-19S in the current study is .90.

The International Student Adjustment Scale (ISAS): The ISAS is a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = it does not describe me, or it is not true of for me to 7 = it describes me, or it is true of for me). It is used to assess the psychological adjustment levels of international students. Originally, it was a 38-item scale developed by Crano and Crano (2016) and later reduced to 12 items (e.g., I prefer to go home immediately) by Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, and Kashima (2010). A modification that included changing "Australia" to "Turkey" was done for items 1, 3, 6, 7 and 12. The scores that can be obtained from the ISAS vary between 12 and 84. Lower scores indicate better psychological adjustment. The internal consistency coefficients of the ISAS in this study was .87.

The Solution-Focused Inventory (SFI): The SFI is a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) used to assess an individual's tendency to construct thoughts that support solution-focused changes. It was developed by Grant et al. (2012) and contains 12 items with three subscales: *Problem Disengagement*, *Goal Orientation*, and *Resource Activation*. The scores that can be obtained from the SFI vary between 12 and 72, and higher scores indicate increased ability to construct solution-focused thinking. The internal consistency coefficients of the SFI in this study was .83.

Demographic Information Form: Questions prepared by researchers helped to collect information on international students' age, gender, year of stay in Turkey, country of origin, and whether they were hospitalized due to COVID-19 or not.

2.3. Data Analysis

In order to test the proposed model, a two-step analytic approach involving descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing was performed. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics performed to determine sample characteristics and the distribution of main variables. The data was checked for adequately meeting univariate and multivariate normality, linearity and homogeneity assumptions. In order to undertake moderation analyses of the proposed model, the PROCESS Macro for SPSS v3.3 (Hayes, 2017) software was used. In addition to moderation analysis, the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples to estimate the 95% confidence intervals was employed to investigate the significance of the moderation effects.

Results

Descriptive statistics, inter-correlations for the study variables and internal reliability coefficients for each measure are shown in [Table 2](#). Fear of COVID-19 was negatively and significantly associated with solution-focused thinking ($r = -.401$, $p < .01$), and positively and significantly associated with psychological adjustment problems ($r = .178$, $p < .01$). Solution-focused thinking on the other hand was negatively and statistically related to psychological adjustment problems ($r = -.187$, $p < .01$).

Table 2. Correlations, descriptive measures, and internal consistency

Variables	1	2	3	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
1. Fear of COVID-19	—	-.401 ***	.178 *	17.8	6.84	0.454	-0.371	0.90
2. Solution-Focused Thinking		—	-.187 *	46.4	10.4	-1.21	1.12	0.87
3. Psychological Adjustment (problems)			—	37.2	12.9	0.255	-0.457	0.83

M mean, SD standard deviation, * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$, N= 167

Table 3. Testing the moderation effects of Solution-Focused Thinking

Variables	B	SE	t	95% Confidence Interval	R ²	F (3, 163)
Constant	10.00	15.94	.628	-21.47-41.48		
Fear of COVID-19	1.58	.650	2.422	.291-2.859	.07	4.31**
Solution-Focused Thinking	.47	.317	1.476	-.158-1.094		
Fear of COVID-19 X Solution-Focused Thinking	-.03	.013	-2.127	-.055-.002		

** $p < .01$

In the moderation analyses, fear of COVID-19 was the predictive variable, psychological adjustment was the outcome variable, and solution-focused thinking was the moderating variable. To verify the assumption, the PROCESS macro was used to test the moderation model. [Table 3](#) shows the moderation effects of the model.

As indicated in [Table 3](#), the model was found to be significant ($F (3,163) = 4.31$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .07$) and explained 7% of the variance. As expected, fear of COVID-19 was a significant predictor of psychological adjustment problems ($\beta = 1.58$, $p < .05$). The data did not reveal a direct significant effect of solution-focused thinking on international students' psychological adjustment problems ($\beta = .47$, $p > .05$). Rather it was the interaction of fear of COVID-19 and solution-focused thinking that significantly predicted psychological adjustment problems ($\beta = -.03$, $p < .05$). Therefore, solution-focused thinking served as a moderator in the association between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems.

To further ascertain the essence of the interaction effect in the hypothesized model, solution-focused thinking was divided into average, low (1SD below mean) and high (1SD above mean) subgroups. A simple slopes analysis was used to determine the effect of fear of COVID-19 on international students' adjustment under different levels of solution-focused thinking.

As illustrated in [Table 4](#), the results from this analysis show that the interaction of fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems is significant and positive at the low levels of solution-focused thinking ($\beta = .55$, $SE = .22$, $p < .05$). In other words, a high level of fear is associated with high levels of psychological adjustment problems, when solution-focused thinking level is low. The negative and non-significant relationship was shown when participants reported high levels of solution-focused thinking ($\beta =$

Table 4. Simple Slopes Estimates

Solution-Focused Thinking	β	SE	95% Confidence Interval	t
Average	.26	.15	-.04-.57	1.69
Low (-1SD)	.55	.22	.13-.99	2.56*
High (+1SD)	-.03	.20	-.42-.36	-.16

***p<.05; N=167

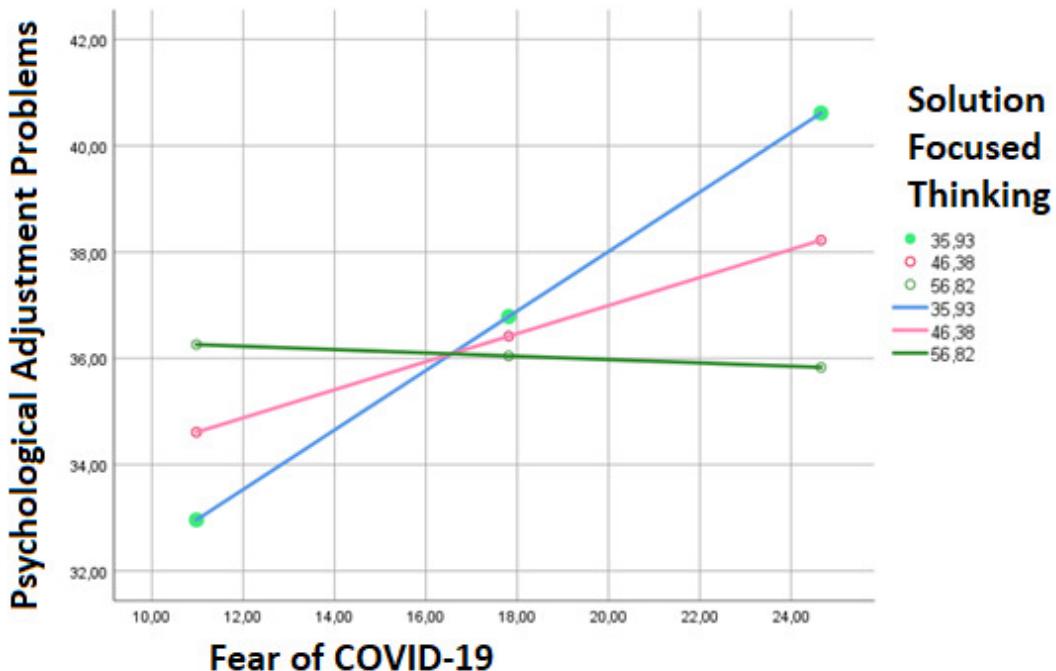


Figure 1. Graphical representation of the effect of solution-focused thinking on the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems.

-.03, SE = .20, p>.05). The same trend was shown in individuals with average levels of solution-focused thinking ($\beta = .26$, SE = .15, p>.05). When levels of solution-focused thinking is high, the relation between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems is not only insignificant but also inverse, given that the participants reported high levels of solution-focused thinking. The graphical representation of the effect of solution-focused thinking on the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems is given in [Figure 1](#).

Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine the interaction effect of the fear of COVID-19 and solution-focused thinking on psychological adjustment of international students. As a result, the analysis revealed a significant and negative association between the fear of COVID-19 and solution-focused thinking, supporting *the first hypothesis* (H1). In this condition, increased fear of COVID-19 becomes a disadvantage for international students, who do not tend to use solution-focused thinking. Although it did not assess the specific relationship between fear of

COVID-19 and solution-focused thinking, a study on nurses and midwives during the COVID-19 outbreak indicated an inverse relationship between solution-focused thinking and anxiety (Selçuk Tosun et al., 2021) which is also indicating the potential of solution-focused interventions to reduce anxiety levels (Zengin et al., 2021). International students can take the initiative to use solution-focused thinking more often and cope-up with adjustment challenges and the COVID-19 conditions, given that their fear becomes manageable.

Low levels of coronavirus anxiety were related to better psychological adjustment (G. Arslan et al., 2021). International students who reported higher scores in the fear of COVID-19 might have concerns about the uncertainties and changes during the pandemic. Hence, their thoughts might have been preoccupied with the problems they perceive. In this sense, it would be difficult for them to organize their resources towards solutions and hesitant to take little steps towards forming new habits (Elemo & Türküm, 2019). However, international students with high levels of solution-focused thinking can activate their psychological resources to adapt to the new environment and changing conditions (Zhou & Lin, 2016). Thus, despite the COVID-19 pandemic that placed a wide range of stressors, international students might have managed to adapt to the changes and keep themselves in a balanced manner in terms of mental and emotional state.

Consistent with the *second hypothesis* (H2), the noticeable finding of this study is the moderating role of solution-focused thinking in the relation between the fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment. Solution-focused thinking may change the strength of the relation between the fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment problems. This study revealed that it is only when the scores of solution-focused thinking were lower that the fear of COVID-19 is significantly related to psychological adjustment problems. These results are consistent with the findings of the previous research suggesting the protective role of solution-focused thinking against COVID-19 related anxieties (Selçuk Tosun et al., 2021) and its contribution to supporting psychological well-being (Ü. Arslan & Asıcı, 2021; Şanal Karahan & Hamarta, 2020).

When psychological adaptation of individuals is at risk due to conditions beyond one's control (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), solution-focused thinking may help to uplift the proper coping mechanism (resource activation and focused efforts towards goals) and upgrade well-being (Ayar et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2012). Having a solution-focused mindset can help individuals to shift their focus from problems to solutions (Grant et al., 2012; Kondrat & Teater, 2012). Focusing on solutions capacitates coping potential and enhances better self-awareness (Şanal Karahan & Bakalım, 2021). Thus, international students who reported higher solution-focused thinking, might have engaged in efforts of discovering and developing inner strengths (McAllister, 2013) and experience better psychological adjustment.

As a final remark, it is important to consider the limitations of the study. First, even though the survey link was fairly shared across the social media networks (*WhatsApp* and *Facebook* groups) in which international students could access the link online, there could be possibilities of selection bias. This might happen because social media platforms used by every international student in Turkey might not be accessed by the researchers. Thus, it is recommended that future studies might plan to access more international students in the country through their emails. Second, this study is based on a cross-sectional research design. The design is limited in allowing us to understand the cause and effect, and long-term effect relationship between the variables. With the access to vaccination to international students in Turkey, it is expected that the fear related to the COVID-19 pandemic may decline overtime. Thus, future research might consider undertaking longitudinal research, so that the relationship between the variables of the study would be better examined across different periods. Not with standing these limitations, the findings of this study give support for the importance of solution-focused thinking in managing the effects of fear of COVID-19 on psychological adjustment challenges, and shed light on its potential to support psychological interventions planned to facilitate international students' adjustment.

Conclusion and Implications

This study is one of the first works to imply the role of solution-focused thinking in the relation between the fear of COVID-19 and psychological adjustment in international students during the pandemic. Thus, interventions that focus on solution oriented thinking can be promising to enhance psychological adaptations. Therefore, psychological support units may consider solution-focused thinking while organizing seminars, offering seminars, and planning psychological intervention programs aimed at facilitating better adjustment of international students. Moreover, the outcome of this study may be one of the first steps for adding some solution-focused group intervention programs for international students. Thus, they could be encouraged to shift their focus from problems to their inner strengths and resources. They can also be provided with engaging and meaningful opportunities to develop skills in setting goals, developing solution-focused plans, taking specific steps, and then monitoring the progress toward achieving those goals through psychoeducation programs and group counseling programs. Universities can also play an important role in finding different ways to offer comfort and support to international students so that they choose to focus their minds on things and solutions that work.

Conflict of Interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Declaration

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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