ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A transnational lens into international student experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

We analyse the experiences of international students living in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of transnationalism that understands mobility as broadly uninterrupted, continuing and taken-for-granted, and international student migration (ISM) literature. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people had to contend with sudden border closures and stringent restrictions on all forms of travel. International students are regarded as the archetypal trans-migrants with frequent mobility and often multiple attachments to place. We interrogate these assumptions of mobility by drawing on interview data from 13 international students in Ontario from April to June of 2020. We found that international students experienced the pandemic transnationally and faced increased challenges, which heightened their reliance on support from transnational families, and generated anxieties about their future career and mobilities. We bring transnational theories into conversation with ISM literature to better understand international students' lived experiences in Canada during a pandemic.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, families, international students, mobility, transnationalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

International student migration (ISM) is part of a set of multinational migrations, a term proposed by Paul and Yeoh (2020) that moves away from an overly linear imagining of migration. The term captures the varied and multiple

international movements migrants engage in over their lifetimes, including moving between visa categories, as well as between countries. ISM is viewed as one part of a lifetime of mobility (Raghuram, 2013). The ISM literature tends to present international students (IS) as possessing 'a sense of unlimited global mobility' (Gomes, 2015, p. 10) with career aspirations that are borderless and open (Findlay, Prazeres, McCollum, & Packwood, 2017). This characterization of IS contributes to their portrayal as archetypal transnational migrants ('trans-migrants') with frequent mobility and often multiple attachments to place.

IS occupy a unique position as trans-migrants due to the transitory stage of their migration. The conditions (economic/financial, socio-cultural, political and familial) in both the home and host countries inform their post-study personal and professional lives and mobilities. Few studies investigate this critical transitory stage of their migration trajectory (exceptions include Baas, 2019; Collins, Ho, Ishikawa, & Ma, 2017; Findlay et al., 2017). Typically, IS experience an 'emerging precarity', unique to their student status and changing political contexts that determine their ability to stay and work after earning their degree. These economic, legal and personal dimensions of precarity (Gilmartin, Rojas Coppari, & Phelan, 2020) are suffused with rhetoric of immigration and citizenship (Bahrainwala, 2020). Overall, student choices are constrained (Geddie, 2013, p. 205), and ISM is, therefore, uneven, dynamic and heavily reliant on the changing economic, socio-cultural and political conditions of home and host countries and the conditions of IS' transnational relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced drastic and unprecedented changes to trans-migrants and presents unique challenges and limitations to the representation and reality of uninterrupted, continuing and taken-for-granted mobility typically associated with IS. The changing conditions in IS' home and host countries due to the pandemic require them to adjust, adapt and revisit their career and citizenship strategies, making this group a particularly revelatory population to interrogate transnationalism's assumptions in the context of the pandemic.

We draw on interviews with 13 IS living in Ontario, Canada, during the initial stages of the pandemic (April–June 2020) to interrogate IS mobilities, precarity and strategies further. Based on our findings, we propose that the COVID-19 pandemic be understood as a social-political moment that challenges the assumptions embedded in transnational theories; it is a moment of emboldened nationalism. The closures of borders and stringent restrictions on all forms of international travel placed limits on the permeability, transcendence and irrelevance of borders often associated with transnationalism and its close relative, globalization. Nation-states thus became a 'natural container' to understand the emplaced lived experiences and social worlds of transnational actors.

In this article, we address the transnational turn in the study of migration within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine the impacts of interrupted mobility for IS, who are represented as possessing unlimited mobility, but now encounter disruptions, and in turn, strategize to rebuild their transnational lives and activities within these limitations. Firang (2020) argues for the inclusion of IS as a vulnerable population during the pandemic due to their immigration status. Measures, such as lockdowns and the shutdown of university campuses, sent students into a state of severe anxiety. Firang (2020, p. 2) predicted that many would likely experience social and psychological distress, 'including (1) emotional distress, (2) impaired sense of personal self-worth, (3) loss of inter-personal contacts, and (4) impaired task (academic) performance'. As non-permanent residents, IS were either exempted from or ineligible for the relief programs and different measures introduced by the government. We respond to Firang's (2020) call for action and adopt a transnational lens to understand the lived experiences of IS, as a vulnerable group, during the pandemic. Despite the challenges to transnationalism theories amidst the pandemic, a transnational lens continues to be useful to explain how IS aspire and strategize to maintain strong cross-border economic, social and intimate networks, and continue the frequency of communication that is characteristic of their experience of studying abroad.

Participants revealed how the disruptions to mobility characteristic of the COVID-19 pandemic heightened experiences of precarity and worries about their futures. Their experience of the pandemic was transnational and constitutive of intense cross-border social relations and participation in daily life activities in two or more nations (Portes, 2001). Participants described a regression towards economic and emotional dependence on their transnational families due to the loss of jobs and consequently their financial independence, increased food and housing insecurities, and a push to stay for immigration purposes. There was a general increase in virtual co-presence to compensate for the

loss of proximate social intimacy resulting from lockdowns and public health measures of social/physical distancing. Situated learning and the opportunities to build diverse social and professional networks viewed as integral to career progression were stalled, increasing concerns about their future professional and mobility (immigration) prospects.

This article is organized as follows: we begin with the contextual factors influencing IS in Canada, followed by an overview of ISM literature, which we bring into conversation with assumptions embedded in transnational theories. We then describe our research approach and discuss our findings towards concluding remarks, including contributions and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations to better support this vulnerable group as they navigate an unprecedented global crisis.

2 | INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CANADA

IS mobility is rapidly changing the Canadian higher education landscape as Canadian governments and institutions invest in the internationalization of Canada's academic environments. The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) identified 572,415 IS at all levels of study in Canada in 2018, a 16% increase over the previous year (CBIE, 2019). IS pay an annual average tuition ranging from $20,000 to $60,000, which accounts for a substantial portion of the operating budgets for many educational institutions. Global Affairs Canada found that in 2016, IS in Canada spent approximately $15.5 billion on tuition, accommodation and discretionary spending (Global Affairs Canada, 2017). The international education sector also supported 170,000 jobs in 2016 and 'had greater economic impacts than Canada's exports of auto parts, aircraft and lumber' (The Canadian Press, 2019). Based on a 2018 survey conducted by CBIE, 60% of IS stated that they planned to apply for permanent residency after completing their studies (CBIE, 2019).

In the last decade, Canada has emerged as an important player in the global higher education landscape (Geddie, 2015). IS promotion was made a federal policy priority in the mid-1990s. Since then, the Federal government has taken substantial steps to retain global talent by favouring IS as potential skilled immigrants and desirable future Canadian citizens. In 2006, Canada launched the 'Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP)', allowing students to remain in the country with an open employment permit of initially one and later three years. The Canadian government introduced the Canadian Experience Class in 2008 with a separate stream for students to facilitate permanent residency applications from IS residing and studying in Canada to continue to live, work and settle in the country. In 2009, a new regulation permitted students to work off-campus during their studies compared to the previous allowance of 20-h weeks on-campus. The federal skilled immigration regime has undergone significant changes since 2013; nonetheless, IS continue to be a priority group for permanent residency and ultimately citizenship. Under the current Express Entry system, introduced in 2015, IS receive additional points for tertiary education completed in Canada. Most recently, the federal government allotted $148 million of the 2019 budget to recruit IS over the next five years as part of a new international education strategy (Macdonald, 2019).

2.1 | International students during the COVID-19 pandemic

The first case of the coronavirus in Canada was reported in January 2020 (The Canadian Press, 2020), after which the real impacts started to be felt nationwide with the closures of borders, airports, public institutions, schools and all non-essential businesses in March 2020. The speed and scale of these disruptions resulted in significant negative economic, social and psychological consequences for IS, including stalling and damaging their career trajectories (Jenei, Cassidy-Matthews, Virk, Lulie, & Closson, 2020) and mobility plans. As university campuses shutdown, IS faced financial, housing and food insecurities compounded by unprecedented challenges with remote learning and online academic environments (Jenei et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). Corbera, Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés and RuizMallén (2020) note the inherent inequities in confinement and the acute risk with online teaching to deepen inequities in educational opportunities and social inequities more broadly.

In recognition of the worsening condition and concerns of IS, the Canadian government took action to provide some relief to this group. As of 18 March 2020, IS with a valid study permit were exempt from travel restrictions that prevented foreign nationals from countries other than the United States from entering Canada. IS were permitted to continue working on- or off-campus if their study permit allows it (IRCC, 2020). Until 21 August 2020, IS were permitted to work more than 20 h per week if they were in an essential service/function. IS who remained in Canada could renew their study permit and continue to study and work while their renewal was being processed (EduCanada, 2020). Furthermore, remote-learning, part-time or stalled studies would not affect their eligibility for a PGWP. For students beginning a new program of study in the 2020 spring, summer or fall semesters, the same rules would apply as long as they complete at least 50% of their program. Finally, there would be no deductions in eligibility for a PGWP for studies completed outside Canada until the end of 2020 (IRCC, 2020).

Although some IS became eligible for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), a large number did not meet the requirements for CERB as they were not working prior to the COVID-19 crisis to focus on full-time study (Jenei et al., 2020). IS continued to face financial hardships, anxiety about their healthcare and health of their loved ones in their countries of origin, as well as loneliness (Bilecen, 2020). The growing concerns about the social and psychological costs borne by IS remained in place (Sciarpelletti, 2020). Since the first identification of COVID-19 in China, Asian IS have reported experiences of social exclusion, xenophobic attitudes, discrimination, microaggressions and verbal assaults (Zhai & Du, 2020; Bilecen, 2020). IS also struggled with accessing appropriate and timely information during the COVID-19 crisis (Henriquez, 2020).

Current and former IS have called for further changes to Canada's immigration rules with dozens of demonstrators gathering at Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland's office on Saturday 5 September and Sunday 6 September 2020. They demanded more leniency in permanent residency applications in recognition of the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Although IS were permitted to work more during the pandemic to offset economic and social insecurities, the restriction to only essential services/functions worked to their disadvantage when it came to their permanent residency applications, as it did not meet the continuous high-wage work requirement and put them at risk of deportation (McKenzie-Sutter, 2020).

Finally, there are growing concerns over the economic impact of drastic cuts to the numbers of IS across all educational institutions and provinces in Canada (Gordon, 2020; Xing, 2020; Silberman, 2020). New study permits fell by 22.3% in 2020 compared to the same time in 2019 (Gordon, 2020). One measure to offset the reduced economic returns is fee increases (Burman, 2020). For IS, however, such measures can feed into the negative cycle of insecurity, vulnerability and place their futures in Canada at further risk.

There is an urgent need for evidence-based and theoretically informed research to better understand IS' condition in Canada, who remain an economic and political priority. Global public health measures, which include restrictions on international travel with indefinite timelines, and unprecedented policy changes regarding IS' work permit and long-term mobility have made the IS experience during the pandemic a unique context to examine transnationalism and challenge its underlying assumptions. While the long-term implications of these measures and changes on IS' coping with the pandemic and their future migration trajectories are still unknown, we contribute to this effort by documenting their challenges and concerns right after the implementation of drastic public health measures in Canada, as well as their sense-making practices and coping strategies, with the aim to inform future research and policy to best support this increasingly vulnerable and precarious population.

3 | INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS QUINTESSENTIAL TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS

IS are broadly defined as 'individuals who have physically crossed an international border with the objective of enrolling in education in a country other than their own'. (Baas, 2019, p. 222). IS are emblematic of multiple overlapping spaces and scales involved in mobility, representing transience and simultaneous mobility and emplacement (Collins, 2012). They also have multiple identities as students, workers (present or nascent), family members and

political actors, among others. Their lives play out at the intersection of multiple spheres, identities and roles. A transnational lens can be useful to capture these multiple and overlapping spaces, scales and identities, and understand how students constitute and maintain strong cross-border economic, social and intimate connections, and frequently communicate and travel back to their home countries during their studies abroad (Geddie, 2013).

IS are viewed as archetypal trans-migrants with frequent mobility and often multiple attachments to place (Waters & Brooks, 2012). They are embedded in a 'migrant institution', which operates across borders in imaginative, embodied and material ways (Goss & Lindquist, 1995). The decision to move is economically, socially and politically embedded. Murphy-Lejeune (2002) uses the term mobility capital to describe a specific disposition, including family and personal history, previous experiences of mobility, language competence, personality traits and first experience of adaptation and overcoming cultural shock. Educational institutions also play a key role in reproducing a 'transnationalist capitalist class' (Sklair, 2001) and can act as 'anchors' or 'IQ magnets' for desired individuals (Gertler & Vinodrai, 2005; Shachar, 2006).

Skills have become an important part in selecting, admitting and integrating migrant groups. Student migration accounts for the fastest growth in migration streams in several OECD countries (Raghuram, 2013). IS are valued as drivers of economic growth (being future skilled immigrants for the labour force) (Geddie, 2015) and as more socially integrated immigrants. Student migration is a step towards becoming internationally mobile that might be uneven and lead to transformations in identity (Collins et al., 2017) and in which returning 'home' is only one option (Findlay et al., 2017). Raghuram (2013) notes that politically, the erosion of study and work is seen as an affront to the objectives of the migration stream, thereby placing new controls and limits on student streams. IS are desired because of their internationalization and fee contributions and as unwanted because of the politics of migration control in the context of securitization (King & Raghuram, 2013). Students inhabit and negotiate a contradictory policy landscape; a dyad of 'desired' or desirable migrants v. unwanted, 'problematized' migrants lies at the heart of migration regulations and policies (Baas, 2019). Nonetheless, there has been a gradual fine-tuning of migration policy to attract student migrants.

Overall, IS have multi-layered identities and multi-local social networks; they are both transnationally mobile and locally emplaced and draw on local and transnational economic, social and cultural resources (Fincher & Shaw, 2009). Their lives cannot be understood in a fixed sense. Our study aims to explore the available resources, mobility and emplacement of Canadian IS amidst a pandemic. We predict that COVID-19 could have short- and long-term consequences for IS' lives and decision making, as they negotiate a contradictory policy landscape detailed in the previous section. Next, we discuss how transnationalism is an appropriate theoretical framework to understand the fluid and complex lives and identities of the IS in our study, as they cope with a crisis and make decisions about their futures.

4 | TRANSNATIONALISM AND MULTINATIONAL MIGRATIONS

Transnational theories are typically informed by some key assumptions: cheaper and more accessible technologies of travel and long-distance communication, as well as frequent and often simultaneous interactions and relations among individuals and organizations in at least two or more nations (Quayson & Daswani, 2013; Vertovec, 2004; Wilding, 2006). Therefore, social articulations of transnationalism include the simultaneity of daily lives, consciousness and identity, such as regular phone/video calls, remittances, keeping up with transnational family gossip, participating in long-distance family decision making and trips for a range of reasons (Bailey, 2001). Transnational communities are defined by intense cross-border social relations and trans-migrants participate in daily life activities in two or more nations (Portes, 2001).

Nation-states are widely considered to be the container of society constitutive of a culture, a policy, an economy and a bounded social group. Methodological nationalism is the tendency to view nation-states as a 'natural container' for understanding the 'social and political form of the modern world' (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 302). Transnational scholars used trans-migrants' lives to critique methodological nationalism, reveal the fragility of this container and undermine the stability of the assumed territorial boundedness of nation-states. Wimmer and Glick

Schiller (2002), in their original account of this critique, emphasized the theoretical limitations and exclusions of viewing nation-states as an absolute territorially limited entity.

Transnationalism takes the nation-state as merely one agent in a more complex variety of global actors, and proposes that the transnational life of migrants be viewed as the prototype of the human condition. Trans-migrants, although mobile, do live with physical, mental and symbolic borders. Borders bear significance as territorial lines, images, practices and stories; migrants contend with an absent-present border in their daily transnational lives and activities (Gielis, 2009). Nation-states remain an important factor in shaping the daily lives of trans-migrants as outsiders who 'await designation (international student, skilled migrants, temporary migrants, etc.) to determine how they are received, their length of residence, social status, and access to economic and state resources' (Quayson & Daswani, 2013, p. 15). Transnational migration both rejects and confirms the importance of nation-states (Blanc, Basch, & Schiller, 1995).

To acknowledge both the suspicious fixity of the nation-state proposed by transnational scholars and the rigid role of national borders in classifying migratory movement, Paul and Yeoh (2020) propose 'multinational migration' to capture the varied movements of international migrants across overseas destinations with significant time spent in each country. Migrants engage in multiple international migrations within their lifetimes – involving 'complex, dynamic, and open-ended multinational trajectories that are contingent on shifting and uneven capitals, structured by fluid multinational migration infrastructures, and shaped by migrants' evolving geographical imaginaries, aspirations and sense of themselves' (Paul & Yeoh, 2020, p. 4). These might be upward, downward and lateral movements. Multinational migrations initiate a process in which intimacies are shattered. The 'community of space' of vivid, on-going face-to-face relationships is lost (Werbner, 2013). Transnationalism, therefore, involves complex emotional and moral dimensions, resulting in guilt, loss and rupture (Werbner, 2013).

In this study, we interrogate the assumptions embedded in transnational theories, specifically, uninterrupted, continuing and taken-for-granted mobility and sociality across two or more nations, in the context of a socio-political moment of emboldened nationalism. Global public health measures intended to reduce the onset and spread of the lethal COVID-19 have enforced territorial boundaries of nation-states and interrupted international mobility. We investigate the implications of this interrupted mobility on the daily lives, consciousness and identities of one group of archetypal trans-migrants – IS – to reveal the complex economic, social and emotional dimensions of their transnational lives.

5 | RESEARCH APPROACH

We conducted an inductive, qualitative study to explore the challenges and concerns of IS affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our process involved a type of methodological experimentalism, following Mitchell, Kearns and Collins (2007) underpinning principle that 'people are "experts" on their own lives and therefore should be empowered to play a prominent role in research about them'. (p. 618), as explained in more detail below.

5.1 | Data collection approach

We collected our data following principles of transformative interviewing (Roulston, 2010; Marn & Wolgemuth, 2016; Way, Kanak Zwier, & Tracy, 2015), which rejects the notion that interviews are neutral activities in which knowledge is transferred from participants to researchers (Brinkmann, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Rather, we embraced the assumption that the interviewer influences the participants' process of sensemaking and aims to intervene with intention (Marn & Wolgemuth, 2016). These interventions are intended to create opportunities for self-reflection in which new understandings are made possible (Way, Kanak Zwier, & Tracy, 2015).

TABLE 1 Participant information

Pseudonym	Gender	Subject of study	Time in Canada	Type and year of degree	Country of origin
Alex	Male	Film studies	4 years	Undergraduate—fourth year	Nigeria
Alice	Female	Film studies	2 years	Master's—second year	India
Chloe	Female	Film studies	2 years	Master's—final semester	Nigeria
Emma	Female	Environmental engineering	1 year	Master's—first year	India
Jasmine	Female	Communication and media studies	4 years	Undergraduate—fourth year	Uganda
Ivy	Female	Gender studies	2 years	Master's—second year	Ivory Coast
Laura	Female	Sociology	2 years	Undergraduate—second year	Vietnam
Lily	Female	Cognitive science	2 years	Undergraduate—second year	South Africa
Lucas	Male	Computer science	9 months	Master's—first year	Nigeria
Lucy	Female	Environmental engineering	9 months	Master's—first year	India
Mary	Female	Geography	9 months	PhD student	Iran
Noah	Male	Cognitive science	2 years and 5 months	Undergraduate—second year	Rwanda
Peter	Male	Cognitive science	N/A	Incoming master's student	Nigeria

In this study, we experimented with two interventional techniques to facilitate reflection. With some participants, we used a photo elicitation technique (Wilhoit, 2017) and used three photographs of their choice to discuss their experience of the pandemic. With others, we adapted integral coaching conversations (Hunt, 2009) to an interview format. In these interviews, we invited participants to co-create a metaphor of their current way of experiencing and dealing with the challenges they have identified and a metaphor of an alternative approach that could bring different results. All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams by two of the authors and took between 60 and 90 min (average 80 min). After completing each interview, we took detailed process and content notes, which were used to inform weekly discussions with other members of the research team.

We identified IS through our networks and university student services. We recruited a total of 20 participants and of those 14 were IS enrolled in a Canadian university, and six were Canadian students studying abroad on exchange. As we narrowed the focus on this paper on IS living in Canada, we excluded the exchange students from further analysis and one IS who was on exchange abroad. Twelve of the students were in Canada at the time of the interview and one was in their home country. Of the 13 remaining participants, nine are women and four are men. Students in our sample were from multiple disciplinary backgrounds and were majoring in film studies (3), environmental engineering (2), computer science (1), communication and media studies (1), cognitive science (3), sociology (1), geography (1) and gender studies (1). Furthermore, they came from different cultural backgrounds, mostly from the Global South, including Nigeria, India, Uganda, Vietnam, South Africa, Iran, Ivory Coast and Rwanda. Eight participants were doing graduate studies and five were undergraduate students. All students came to Canada for their university education and have resided in Canada from one to four years. Detailed information on all 13 participants is provided in Table 1. Participants were assigned Anglo-Saxon names for added anonymity.

5.2 | Analytical approach

We analysed the data using an inductive, grounded approach, allowing initial analyses and findings to inform further data collection and subsequent iterations of analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Locke, 2001). We began our analysis as we entered the field by preparing summative and comparative tables and memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout the data collection and analysis process, we wrote memos, exploring our evolving understanding of relationships and patterns and our emerging insights into the impacts of the pandemic on IS. For each student, we prepared a summative memo describing their experiences using their own descriptions of critical events.

Our first round of coding focused on broad themes related to the challenges facing IS, and their coping strategies. Through this process, it became clear to us that IS were experiencing the pandemic transnationally, which led us to further explore issues relating to transnational theories in conversation with ISM literature. We then engaged in an iterative process of coding and theorizing (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) to further categorize the data, using the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose. We proceeded with the coding and the creation of categories simultaneously, revisiting the codes as new categories and themes emerged from the data.

6 | A TRANSNATIONAL PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

The narratives[1] IS shared with us revealed an account of their daily enactment of transnationalism with an emphasis on the challenges, limitations and strategies to constitute their transnational lives in the context of a pandemic. We identified several challenges facing IS, such as interrupted access to transportation, housing insecurity, precarious and/or temporary immigration status and unemployment. While these challenges were not unique to the pandemic environment, we found that the severity of the challenges was intensified by measures to curb the pandemic. As a result of the implementation of safety measures, travel bans, economic lockdown and their precarious or uncertain immigration status, IS faced more challenges than usual. Ivy's narrative below reflects the interconnectivity of these challenges amidst a generalized sense of fear, uncertainty and ambivalence. Pursuing a master in gender studies, Ivy elaborated on the difficulty of living in campus residence during the pandemic:
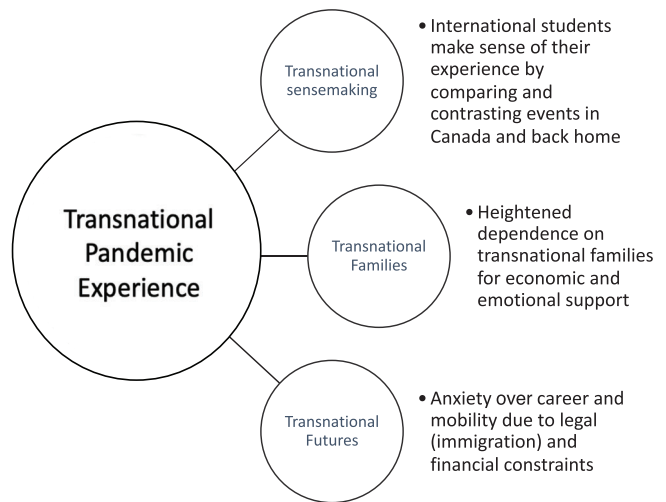
> I don't have someone that I can call and say, oh, can you please pick that up for me or can you buy this for me … Yes, you can use the bus but you don't feel safe … Ubers started getting really expensive because they were trying to encourage people to stay in.

> And then, when you start to get scared when you go out because you don't live alone, you share a space, so you think twice before you go out because you don't want the person you share the space with to think, where did she go, you know, and start getting worried because you might come in and have caught the virus from someone. [Ivy, Ivory Coast]

Participants understood these local and emplaced challenges transnationally, as they tried to make sense of their experience in light of what was happening in their home countries. Moreover, they became more dependent on their transnational families and experienced anxieties about their transnational future (i.e. professional, immigration and long-term residency prospects). These three aspects, as illustrated in Figure 1 and elaborated below, are interconnected, and combined to make the pandemic a transnational experience for IS.

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[1] We made small grammatical adjustments and deleted filler words (e.g., you know, like) to increase readability.

FIGURE 1 Transnational pandemic experience

- International students make sense of their experience by comparing and contrasting events in Canada and back home

- Heightened dependence on transnational families for economic and emotional support

- Anxiety over career and mobility due to legal (immigration) and financial constraints

6.1 | Transnational sensemaking

The pandemic has triggered the need for individual sensemaking, whereby individuals organize information to understand cause and effect and the sequencing of 'ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events' (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015, p. 266). It became particularly prominent in situations where IS were faced with dilemmas. Jasmine, an IS from Uganda during her last year of undergraduate study, compared the affective landscapes of the pandemic in both her home and host contexts, facilitated by her transnational identification. She used both landscapes to re-evaluate her levels of anxieties and coping strategies during the onset of the pandemic.

> I think I shouldn't have panicked for as long as I did, but I couldn't blame myself for panicking for as long as I did, because everybody else was panicking…the reactions back at home, they are completely different. People were not that scared …I guess people were calmer about everything and there was not that general atmosphere of panic. [Jasmine, Uganda]

Jasmine felt torn while living in two realities. Her description is reminiscent of Gilroy's (1993) notion that 'migration engenders a split subject, a fractured reality' (p. 126) – she negotiated her sense of self in more than one national context to determine how to cope with a challenging situation.

> There was kind of tug-of-war between me, because sometimes I'd be oh my God, this is not that serious, then everybody [in Canada] is panicking so I should also panic and you really don't know what is going on. … I'm kind of used to life here, so I'm used to be expecting things to be a certain way here. If this happened at home [Uganda], I think I would be reacting completely differently, because you kind of know that you can't afford to panic too long… [Jasmine, Uganda]

Another prominent dilemma for many participants in the face of overwhelming uncertainty characteristic of the pandemic was the decision to leave or stay in Canada, further complicating their transnational lives, subjectivities and decisions. For some IS, like Noah, the decision to leave or stay carried consequences for lifetime mobility. The decision to enrol in online learning involved weighing the real costs of living in Canada and the opportunity costs of leaving and forgoing future career prospects and permanent resident status.

Well, my goal is to try to apply for one course at least – keep me busy when I'm home in the summer. And then, apply again for the fall semester. Everything's going to be online anyway … I feel that the most tough thing for international students right now is what's happening in the fall. I get it – it's going to be online. But, if we go home, are we coming back? That's the biggest question in everyone's mind. And if we don't come back, for how long is it going to be? Is it going to be just the fall semester? Is it going to carry on to the wintertime? Are we looking at staying home for that long? But then again, we can't stay here because of the expenses … Will it affect our work permit or permanent residence if we get it? [Noah, Rwanda]

Alice, in her attempts to cope with the same dilemma (i.e. leave or stay), came to terms with the emotional burden of the transnational pandemic experience by strengthening her commitment to make the best of her present situation. She justified her choice to stay in Canada by drawing on her familiarity with the perceived socio-cultural norms, practices and behaviours.

I am willing to be here. I'm not stranded, I'm not awaiting the Minister of External Affairs saying, please, I need to go home. I'm comfortable here. I understand how the system works here and I know where to buy groceries, I've lived here for a while, so I'm not a fish out of water. I don't think of myself as stranded. [Alice, India]

Some participants drew on their transnational families to support their transnational sensemaking. While contending with the same dilemma, Ivy relied on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their capacity to create a sense of virtual co-presence (Madianou, 2012; Bacgalupe & Lambe, 2011). ICTs facilitated her connection with and support from her transnational family, specifically her mother, who helped her cope with deteriorating mental health at the height of distancing measures recommended by public health authorities, and later with the fears, uncertainties and anxieties about her future.

[My mom] knew that I had nobody. […] And then seeing that I was also having some fears around my future and around what everyone was also experiencing, her jumping in was my daily dose of therapy. It does not matter how I felt, I could be open and speak to her and not being afraid of sharing how I feel, and for me that's what therapy is… It was kind of an emotional support in the uncertainty. [Ivy, Ivory Coast]

6.2 | Transnational family support

In line with Ivy's experience in the section above, transnational family support was another key factor in participants' transnational negotiation of their pandemic experience. Families have come to replace 'family' as an analytic concept to signify it as a culturally specific, symbolic and ideological construct, as opposed to singular or natural form of human social organization. The definition has become even less stable with the increase in global migrations and persons living transnationally. Transnational families are separated physically between two or more nation-states and maintain close ties and relationships while coping with family separation and its associated challenges (Shih, 2016). More researchers (e.g. Kilkey & Merla, 2014) now conceptualize migrants and their kin as transnational families.

Many participants described additional challenges when financing their study and living costs in Canada, informing their overall pandemic experience. Specifically, unemployment, lay-offs, limited job opportunities and the fears and risks associated with potential exposures to COVID-19 made it difficult for participants to support themselves financially. As a result, financial support from their transnational families, particularly parents, played an important role

in sustaining participants' choice to stay in Canada and future aspirations of living, working and becoming Canadian citizens. At the same time, they felt it would be burdensome for their families in the long run, as Ivy explains.

> I know the financial thing is a big threat. Even for me, even for my parents, it was a huge thing. Because I got an apartment hoping that I would start working soon… Now it is already harder for Canadians to get jobs. Financially, I think that's one big stressor for international students, because even if you pay tuition fees that are expensive, it does not mean you have money lying around all the time. [Ivy, Ivory Coast]

The availability and sustainability of financial support from transnational families of IS was also impacted by the transnational nature of the pandemic. For Lily, the fluctuation of exchange rate and her parents' employment status in South Africa made prolonged transnational financial support untenable.

> I was not really planning to stay here so long. I wish I would be with my family… Financially, the currency exchange [is an issue]. When my parents send me [money], it's less money than before. And that is putting a toll on my parents as well because South Africa is going through official lockdown where they can't go work. [Lily, South Africa]

In addition to practical constraints on this form of support as described by Lily, some participants, like Lucas, discussed the psychosocial costs of this increased financial dependence on parents living back home.

> I wanted to get one of these [frontline] jobs, just to financially support myself, but my parents were against it. And they've been making sure that I get my rent and funds to sustain me… It's been a while since I've been totally dependent on my parents. They pay my school fees, right? Because before I came to Canada, when I finished my undergrad, I'd been working for two years. So, I've been independent, and I know how it feels. So, going back to dependent on my parents just felt really awkward… And also, it's not very easy for them, because they're going to be sending money from Nigeria to Canada. It's going to be expensive and demanding, because of the exchange rate. [Lucas, Nigeria]

Loretta Baldassar (2007), in her ethnography of transnational family relations, identified various forms of support in sustaining bonds of emotion across distance. In addition to financial support in the form of remittances and described above, Baldassar (2007) added practical support (e.g. babysitting and shopping), personal support (e.g. child and elder care) and emotional support, maintained by the persistent use of a host of communication technologies to maintain virtual contact. For many participants, emotional support from transnational families became vital to their pandemic experience. While the pandemic restricted physical interactions, real-time virtual co-presence flourished as participants craved connection to their long-distance families and communities. Many participants described an increased frequency and intensity in communication with their distant family members, and as a result, increased levels of intimacy. As predicted in the literature on digital/virtual co-presence (Madianou, 2012; Bacgalupe & Lambe, 2011), the use of ICT allowed participants to spend more time with their families back home than in pre-pandemic times.

> We didn't used to get that much in contact because of the time differences […] and they were also working. But due to COVID, everyone is staying at home. Nobody had that much work to do. Then everyone manages to take time from their work from home. So, we're getting more contact, we are more interactive. In that manner, it's good; we are getting time for us. [Lucy, India]

Lucas adds that it is not only a matter of time spent but also the quality of interaction. During the pandemic and its associated distancing, ICTs helped sustain and reinforce familial intimacy (Robertson, Wilding, & Gifford, 2016) and allowed for an increased sense of emotional closeness or 'being there' for each other (Baldassar, 2016).

> I think this period has gotten a lot of people closer to their families, because before COVID, we'd all have so many things we have to do that kept us from keeping in touch with our friends and family. But [now], family and friends are all you've got. You talk a lot and just try to help one another in any way you can.

> Honestly, conversations have been helping in so many ways, for the psychological part – a lot of times they gave advice on how to approach things, things that I feel are disturbing me. So, we talk about – I've also been able to talk about things that have happened in the past, that I haven't had time to sit and talk about. [Lucas, Nigeria]

'Real-time' virtual presence has the potential to create a complete family experience while also amplifying conflicts (Madianou, 2012). Participants included in their positive encounters of virtual co-presence more challenging accounts of fatigue and a perceived loss of autonomy. Alice expressed her frustration with repeating the same conversations with her family everyday although she realized that it is part of an important routine to keep in touch at this uncertain time.

> My experience of this pandemic is my mother calls me every day, and then talks to me for one hour about everything that I know already, which is fine. [Such as] grocery store is not working, we can't go out, my Daddy said something stupid, now they're fighting. So that conversation will go on for one and a half hours. She called me every day before the pandemic started as well, but it would be short, usually like 20, 30-minute conversations. But I think now because obviously we both know that we may not be able to see each other for a pretty long while, it's this need to talk, even when there's nothing to say. [Alice, India]

6.3 | Transnational futures

For many, the pandemic disrupted travel plans, graduation and prospective employment. Like all young adults, IS worried about their post-pandemic futures. For IS, however, the negotiation of a post-pandemic future is transnational in nature. As discussed above, IS are sought after by governments as socially integrated immigrants and future workers. Participants discussed uncertainty about their professional and immigration prospects in Canada and future global mobility based on their education and skills acquired during their study abroad. For instance, Jasmine's internship was put on hold by the university due to the pandemic, exacerbating her growing concern about her career prospects and what might come next for her in Canada.

> My plans included completing an internship…I thought that I'd work on that during the summer. And hopefully that would give me a kind of in into getting a research job, either at a university or an NGO or something like that. And due to the whole COVID thing, I think the university decided to terminate more internships. [Jasmine, Uganda]

For Ivy, the fear and anxiety over an ambiguous future had a significant impact on her mental and emotional health, worsened by her fears of continuing to draw on her transnational family for financial and emotional support.

I just didn't know what to do with myself. I think I was buried so deep into fear that I was losing myself completely … it was fear and anxiety of my future here, fear about what is happening, even the virus… I was supposed to be graduating, I was supposed to move out, I was supposed to apply for a work permit and get a job. So, how is it going to play out? I don't have any other financial support other than, my family, my parents, which I am truly grateful for. I am coming to terms with [the fact that] I'm not in control anymore of the situation and I need to accept the fact that I don't know what's going to happen in a month or two. [Ivy, Ivory Coast]

For IS, a unique and significant concern and source of anxiety is the negative impact of the pandemic on establishing a future (career and residency) in Canada based on their temporary immigration status. Alice discussed her challenges with getting a work permit and finding a job in Canada and her anxiety about having no other prospects but to return home.

I think my current situation is there are days when I am hopeful that I will be okay, and then there are days that I can't move because I'm so paralysed by anxiety. I've applied for my work permit, but the biometric thing is not open, and I don't know when it will be open. And then of course, the job situation…now it's pretty much non-existent. Will I be able to get a job? Will I be able to support myself? Because I can't expect my family to continue to support me. I don't want to go back. Of course, I want to go and visit, but I don't want to go back home forever… [Alice, India]

Similarly, Ivy reported anxiety about her prospects, highlighting her disadvantaged position as non-Canadian.

First of all, the stress of the situation…when you speak to people, people are telling you, well, it's the pandemic, already you are an international student, you are not a Canadian citizen, so it will be difficult for you to find a job, especially in your field of study […] you have to do small jobs … [Ivy, Ivory Coast]

Ivy and Alice confirm Firang's (2020) predictions about the particular vulnerabilities of IS related to their precarious immigration status and mobile lives. A popular coping strategy among participants to deal with these fears and anxieties about their future was to better prepare for when things get back to normal. Alex, in his hope to pursue a career in film making, invested time in building his skills.

I was trying to look up ways of developing my writing skills. I've been watching screenwriting videos on YouTube. I've been looking at acting jobs, but I really haven't gotten far in terms of the application process for them, they're mostly postponed. [Alex, Nigeria]

As a software engineer, Lucas has been trying to do the same.

So, what I've been doing is trying to prepare myself. And I've been working on a lot of things, taking online classes to better myself and my skills and my crafts. And I feel like, by the time this all ends, I'll be much more ready… [Lucas, Nigeria]

7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This exploratory study analyses the experiences of IS living in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. We spoke with current and graduating students between April and June 2020, a period characterized by strict closures of borders and

airports, severe interruptions to international travel, as well as shutdowns of public institutions, schools/universities and all non-essential businesses. IS were particularly vulnerable due to their precarious and temporary immigration and resident status; the disruptions, therefore, resulted in significant negative economic, social and psychological consequences.

We found that IS in our study experienced the pandemic transnationally. They engaged in a form of transnational sensemaking, organizing and comparing information on the pandemic from two or more national contexts to understand cause, effect and sequencing of this unprecedented situation. Moreover, their transnational lives and identities informed a major dilemma they shared: to leave or stay in Canada. They negotiated this dilemma based on the unique circumstances of their lived realities, including but not limited to housing insecurities due to campus closures, unemployment due to terminated internships and lay-offs, and balancing short-term financial and psycho-social costs with long-term career and immigration goals. To assist with transnational sensemaking and contend with their unique circumstances, participants drew on their transnational families for support, including financial, social and emotional support, while remaining cognizant of practical constraints (e.g. economic circumstances, exchange rates, etc.). Finally, their transnational pandemic experience was overshadowed by growing fears and concerns about their transnational futures, namely, long-term mobility, immigration and career prospects. While IS are not a unitary group, our small and varied sample does not permit comparisons for gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, home countries/regions, to capture greater diversity in expectations, experiences and sense-making practices. Future research needs to investigate how different demographics within the IS population may have been affected differently by the pandemic.

Theoretically, this study provides a basis for revisiting the central assumptions of transnational theories, in particular the criticism of methodological nationalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has put the proverbial brakes on uninterrupted, continuing and taken-for-granted mobility and reinvigorated nation-states as 'natural containers' to understand social worlds. It has created a socio-political moment in which transnational lives and worlds confirm the importance of nation-states more than reject them. Furthermore, IS are conceptually revelatory of post-pandemic migration futures. As mentioned earlier, IS are uniquely positioned as transnationals in that their migration trajectories are also in transition and heavily reliant on economic, socio-cultural, political and familial conditions in both home and host contexts. In the IS case, the greater dependence on transnational families and changing educational, professional and political contexts due to the pandemic might alter their migration trajectories in substantive ways, requiring them to re-think their professional and citizenship strategies. This study is a snapshot of the much longer migration trajectory of IS and their post-study lives. Further research is needed to investigate the long-term impact of COVID-19 on IS trajectories.

Empirically, although the study is localized and based on a small sample, we contribute to the ISM literature by elaborating on the impacts of a contradictory policy landscape on IS' experiences and decision making. Despite Canada's heavy role in recruiting IS as desirable immigrants, the uncertain migration regulations and policies remained a critical factor as students dealt with the consequences of interrupted mobility. The altered migratory trajectories of IS will inevitably have a trickle-down effect on institutions and nations reliant on IS to fill economic and labour needs. There is an urgent need for further studies on the long-term impacts of the pandemic and the post-study futures of IS.

From a practical point of view, we highlight the urgent need to support IS in their negotiation of their transnational futures. All participants expressed severe anxiety over their restricted mobility and ambiguous future in Canada. We contend that if Canada wishes to retain IS as coveted future citizens, it needs to continue and expand its efforts to support IS in their transition in a post-pandemic study and work environment. This should include but not be limited to coordinated, appropriate and timely information, loosening restrictions for existing relief programs, creating dedicated funds to support IS facing financial, housing and food insecurities, adapting work eligibility regulations to be more lenient for applications for permanent residency (in recognition of widespread unemployment and underemployment during the pandemic) and for publicly denouncing xenophobic attitudes, discrimination and microaggressions, especially against Asian IS.

Fincher and Shaw (2009) use the phrase transnational and temporary to describe the ways in which IS are transnationally mobile and locally emplaced. Students actively negotiate different spaces, such as school, home, social spheres

and work, and draw on local and transnational social and cultural resources. We know from this study that IS are drawing on their transnational resources, it is, therefore, imperative that we rethink locally based supports. Many participants describe experiences of severe anxiety, loneliness and gaps in social networks during the pandemic and heavy reliance on transnational networks. There is a need to provide more effective locally emplaced, pragmatic, emotional and social support. These recommendations require multi-stakeholder engagement and support, including universities (as key anchors for this group), governmental bodies (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, as well as provinces and municipalities) and civil society organizations. We hope our study will stimulate more research and action to support this critical yet vulnerable population.

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