

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Travel Alienation and Coping Strategies of International Students: A Qualitative Exploration of the Role of Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the transactional model of stress and coping, this study explores how international students experience and cope with travel-related alienation, while paying attention to the role of social support. Based on in-depth interviews of respondents from South Korea, the study identifies six types of travel alienation: powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, cultural alienation, and self-estrangement. The coping strategies—problem-focused and emotion-focused—emerged as responses to these experiences. Social support—including emotional and informational support as well as institutional support—was identified as a key element in mitigating alienation and facilitating coping. By shedding light on the under-explored issue of travel alienation among international students as a vulnerable group, this study bridges tourism and social psychology. The study offers recommendations for universities and authorities to reduce travel alienation by improving multilingual support, promoting social inclusion, enhancing the authenticity of tourism experiences, and offering meaningful tourism information.

1 | Introduction

The travel experience can be seen as an attempt to escape the alienation of everyday life, yet it often brings about new forms of alienation, as MacCannell (1976) observed: “The alienation of the worker stops where the alienation of the sightseer begins.” Alienation, encountered in everyday work settings, drives tourists to seek authenticity through travel, but paradoxically, they often experience new forms of alienation during tourism. Considering the forms of alienation in tourism, recent studies have focused on alienation of general tourists and local communities affected by tourism development, enriching discussions on authenticity (Cuong 2020; Shang and Pan 2024; Zhang and Lee 2022; Zhang et al. 2024). However, little research has been

conducted on the travel alienation experienced by international sojourners, such as international students, who are vulnerable to alienation in host nations.

Given that alienation functions as a stressor in tourism, exploring how international students cope with it is essential. Recognized as an important tourist segment, international students contribute to visiting friends and relatives tourism, promote their host countries online and offline, and demonstrate strong revisit intentions (Gardiner et al. 2013). Driven by global mobility, the number of international students reached over 6.9 million in 2022—an increase of 2.7 times from 2.5 million in 2002 (Migration Data Portal 2024). Despite their growing role in tourism, research on their travel-related alienation and coping

remains scarce. Understanding how they manage stress in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic settings is essential to their adaptation, well-being, and mental health (Jiang et al. 2024).

Expanding on this, this study investigates how different forms of social support influence international students' experiences of travel-related alienation and their coping strategies, recognizing their significance in mitigating stress responses. While previous tourism research has addressed social support among residents (Jordan et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2024) and general tourists (Kim and Tussyadiah 2013), little attention has been paid to international students. As sojourners, they experience social support differently from both tourists and residents, necessitating a closer examination of its influence on their travel experiences and coping strategies.

The present study, grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transaction theory of stress and coping, aims to: (1) examine the types of alienation international students experience during travel, (2) explore their coping strategies, and (3) investigate the role of social support in shaping these experiences. A qualitative approach combining thematic analysis and analytic induction is employed, using in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture participants' experiences in their own words. Thematic analysis involves both a semantic approach focusing on surface meanings and a latent approach exploring underlying thoughts (Braun and Clarke 2006), offering nuanced insights into tourist experiences by uncovering subtle interactions and contextual dynamics that shape travel-related alienation.

This study yields several theoretical and practical contributions. First, by examining the link between alienation and coping in travel, it contributes to connecting two areas that have largely been studied separately. Second, it advances the literature on international student tourism by identifying specific forms of alienation encountered during travel, grounded in the lived experiences of globally mobile sojourners. Third, the study provides tourism service providers with insights into how tailored services can address alienating conditions, improve student well-being, and promote more inclusive and supportive tourism environments. The paper is structured as follows: First, a

literature review explores international student tourism, the concept of alienation in social sciences, and relevant tourism research on alienation and coping strategies. The research methodology is then outlined, followed by empirical findings that highlight how alienation and coping shape international students' travel narratives. Finally, the theoretical and practical implications are discussed, along with limitations and suggestions for future studies.

2 | Theoretical Backgrounds

2.1 | Studies on International Student Travel

International students are individuals who temporarily reside in a foreign country for academic purposes (Gardiner et al. 2013). International students are also important to the tourism sector of the host country, with many engaging in tourism activities during their stay and increasing the reciprocal visits of friends and relatives to tourist destinations (Michael et al. 2004). Previous tourism research on international students can be categorized into five main themes as shown in Table 1: exploring international students' study abroad destination choices and their relation to tourism; visiting friends and relatives' tourism; analyzing international students' tourism activities; the economic impact of international student travel on host countries; and cultural differences and adaptation.

The first theme of tourism research on international students explores the causes and consequences influencing both academic and tourist destination choices and their interconnected impact. It was found that international students' satisfaction is linked to the images of countries, cities, and universities (Herrero et al. 2015), as well as to cognitive, affective, and conative destination images (Lam and Ariffin 2019). Furthermore, word-of-mouth and social media, with accessible destination imagery, play a significant role in shaping the academic and tourism choices of international students (Davies and Cairncross 2013). On the other hand, international students play a key role in VFR tourism, benefiting host countries, as shown in studies from New Zealand, Australia, the UK, and Taiwan, with recent

TABLE 1 | Key research themes on international student tourism.

Research theme	Key content	References
Study destination and tourism link	Study and tourism choices are interrelated; shaped by destination images.	Davies and Cairncross (2013); Herrero et al. (2015); Lam and Ariffin (2019); Michael et al. (2004)
Visiting friends and relatives (VFR)	International students drive VFR tourism; patterns include joint or transit travel.	Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis (2007); Michael et al. (2004); Tran et al. (2020); Weaver (2003)
Travel behavior analysis	Segmenting international students by motivation, patterns, nationality, and constraints.	Gardiner et al. (2013); Varasteh et al. (2015)
Economic contribution	Student and VFR spending boosts local tourism economies.	López et al. (2016); Weaver (2003)
Cultural adaptation and understanding	Travel involves cultural adjustment, identity, and intercultural learning.	Bae and Song (2017); Brown (2009); Selby (2021)

research shifting from measuring scale and behavior to exploring nuanced patterns such as third-place travel and transit visits (Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis 2007; Michael et al. 2004; Tran et al. 2020).

The third line of research examines international students' travel behavior from a marketing segmentation perspective, identifying characteristics such as travel motivation, visit patterns, nationality, and constraints, while highlighting the similarities and differences between international students and general tourists (Gardiner et al. 2013; Varasteh et al. 2015). Tourists are a heterogeneous group with varied motivations and backgrounds, requiring segmented market approaches (Cha et al. 2024). From this perspective, tourism studies have focused on the travel experiences of international students.

Fourth, in terms of the economic contributions of international students due to academic mobility in host nations, some studies have examined the benefits of their expenditures on accommodation, food, and leisure activities to the local economy (López et al. 2016); as well as the economic impact of tourism activities from visits by friends and family.

Finally, from a cultural perspective, international students' travel has been studied in relation to cultural distinctions between nations, intercultural understanding, and adaptation. Lee and King explored how nationality-based cultural differences affect international students' tourism in Taiwan, while Bae and Song (2017) examined the impact of intercultural understanding on their travel. Brown (2009) and Selby (2021) approached international students' travel in terms of sojourner adjustment and acculturation.

Building on this line of research, few studies have examined international students' travel experiences from a sojourner perspective (Brown 2009; Selby 2021). International students, who temporarily reside abroad for education, are classified as sojourners, referring to individuals who stay temporarily for work or study in a foreign country, as opposed to migrants or tourists (Zhang and Giles 2018). Like other sojourners, they navigate cultural differences in the host country, balancing emotions, building relationships, and pursuing personal fulfillment while managing uncertainty, anxiety, power imbalances, prejudices, and identity conflicts (Zhang and Giles 2018). Despite extensive research on host-tourist interactions, the travel experiences of international sojourners such as students remain underexplored in terms of alienating travel experiences.

2.2 | Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping suggests that stress is not solely caused by external stressors, but is shaped through cognitive appraisal, with coping strategies leading to either adaptation or maladaptation. Lazarus and Folkman's theory has been applied in the tourism field to examine the stress and coping of general tourists and local residents (Jordan et al. 2015; Zhu et al. 2020). This theory provides a framework for examining travel alienation and coping strategies of international students, along with a data-driven qualitative approach.

International students, as sojourners, experience alienation in various aspects (Al-Habies et al. 2025). MacCannell (1976) suggested that everyday alienation can lead to travel alienation, indicating that international students may also experience daily alienation that extends into their travel experiences. Previous studies on stress linked with travel also indicate the existence of alienation-related stress in travel contexts. While leisure is often linked to stress relief (Coleman and Iso-Ahola 1993), it can also induce stress due to factors such as interpersonal issues, environmental and cultural differences, work, health concerns, logistics, and post-trip holiday syndrome (Zehrer and Crofts 2012). Despite the documented presence of alienation and tourism stress, research on coping strategies for travel alienation among international students remains limited, emphasizing the need for the current study given their status as international sojourners.

2.3 | Alienation in Tourism: Theoretical Roots and Research Developments

Alienation—derived from the Latin *alienare*, meaning “to separate” or “detach”—refers to a multifaceted sense of disconnection from the self and broader social, economic, and cultural contexts, forming a theoretical foundation in tourism studies (see Table 2). Among the foundational thinkers, Hegel described alienation as the spirit's estrangement from its own creations, with self-realization emerging through dialectical synthesis—much like how encounters with otherness in international student travel foster self-discovery and intercultural growth (Brown 2009). Tourism studies on alienated leisure and labor detachment draws on Marx's (2023) materialist conception of alienation as the separation of workers from the products of their labor under capitalism (DiPietro and Pizam 2008; MacCannell 2024; Oyinlade 2018). Existentialists like Sartre understood alienation as a tension between inner authenticity and external expectations, as reflected in how travelers feel constrained by the host society's gaze, echoing Urry's notion of the tourist gaze (Larsen and Urry 2011; Pomeroy 2013; Wassler and Kirillova 2019). Lacan's (2014) psychoanalytic approach views alienation as the formation of the self through external recognition, producing a sense of lack—a void that tourism symbolically seeks to fill (Vidon and Rickly 2018).

Recent tourism research, in integrating diverse theoretical views, explores alienation as both a personal experience and a socio-structural phenomenon. Drawing on Marxist, existentialist, and Lacanian perspectives, Vidon and Rickly (2018) linked alienation to the pursuit of authenticity, but such authentic moments are fleeting for hiking tourists. Xue et al. (2014) examined alienation across tourism production, consumption, and existential dimensions. Drawing on Seaman's and Durkheim's notions of anomie and normlessness, Shang and Pan (2024) expanded the concept of alienation to include general tourists in unfamiliar cultural settings. Contemporary studies further highlight how alienation manifests among tourism stakeholders during tourism development and has extended to general tourists in the hyper-connected era. Tribe and Mkono (2017) introduced the concept of e-alienation to illustrate how digital technologies disrupt meaning-making and sensory engagement in tourism, with information overload and diminished human presence intensifying leisure-related

TABLE 2 | Theoretical roots of alienation and their applications in tourism studies.

Theoretical lineage	Concept of alienation	Tourism application	References
Idealism	Estrangement between spirit and the world, with alienation leading to dialectical self-realization	Travel as a medium for self-discovery and intercultural development.	Brown 2009; Hegel 1977
Materialism	Alienation of labor from production and outcomes because of the capitalist system	Alienated leisure and labor; commodified forms of tourism experience	DiPietro and Pizam 2008; MacCannell 2024; Marx 2023
Sociology	Anomie or normlessness, marked by uncertainty in navigating social approved means to achieve goals.	A sense of social dislocation and normative uncertainty during tourism in unfamiliar environments	Durkheim 2023; Seeman 1959
Existentialism	Loss of true self under others' gaze	Tourist identity shaped or constrained by the host society and local community's gaze	Sartre et al. 2022; Wassler and Kirillova 2019
Psychoanalytic theory of lack	A sense of inner lack and desire arising from perceived incompleteness of the self.	Tourism as a search for meaning and wholeness in response to feelings of existential lack and incompleteness.	Lacan 2014; Vidon and Rickly 2018
Technological	E-lienation due to digital over stimulation and detachment	Disruption of authentic travel experience due to media and smartphone dependency	Harmon and Duffy 2021; Tribe and Mkono 2017

alienation (Harmon and Duffy 2021). Recent studies have examined how marginalized stakeholders experience alienation within tourism—for instance, Cuong (2020) investigated the alienation of ethnic minorities in Vietnam during interactions with tourists and tourism enterprises, while Zhang and Lee (2022) analyzed that of performers in intangible heritage settings in China. Despite a growing corpus of research, the alienated travel experiences of international students remain underexplored, despite their global mobility and vulnerability.

2.4 | Coping Strategies

Coping is defined as a constantly changing cognitive and behavioral effort to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding one's resources (Folkman and Lazarus 1980; Park 2024). In the tourism context, coping strategies span individual, organizational, community, and macro-environmental levels, reflecting adaptive responses to various stressors. Macro-level studies have examined coping through urban planning (Hospers 2019) and climate adaptation (Matzarakis et al. 2007). Studies have examined individual and community-level coping, including residents' strain in dark tourism (Jordan and Prayag 2022), airline staff stress (Chua et al. 2022), and tourists' coping strategies (Shang and Pan 2024).

Folkman and Lazarus' (1980) stress and coping framework has been widely applied to understand how individuals respond to stress. Their model distinguishes between two primary strategies: problem-focused coping, which involves directly addressing the source of stress and modifying the stressful environment, and emotion-focused coping, which focuses on regulating emotional

distress. Several studies have applied this model in leisure contexts to examine the impact of coping strategies on health, while recent studies emphasize coping with alienation to enhance well-being (Iwasaki and Mannell 2000; Schuster et al. 2003).

2.5 | Social Support

Social support refers to the actual or perceived assistance and resources individuals receive from their social networks, such as family, friends, colleagues, and society, to help them cope with personal difficulties (House et al. 1988), along with individuals' perceptions of the quantity and quality of support received. The primary types of social support include emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support (Langford et al. 1997). Emotional support, which involves affection, empathy, and encouragement, fosters a sense of belonging and mitigates feelings of alienation (Thoits 2011). Informational support, such as advice on local customs and transportation, facilitates decision-making and enhances cultural understanding (Kim and Tussyadiah 2013). Instrumental or tangible support, which includes material goods, services, and mobile applications, provides practical assistance and can be particularly beneficial during travel (Thoits 2011).

In this study, social support in the context of international student travel refers to the emotional, informational, and tangible assistance received through various social networks, both online and offline, in a leisure tourism context. This includes support from host country residents, co-nationals, fellow international students, and broader international networks. Social support is known to reduce uncertainty about oneself, others, and relationships, while enhancing one's sense of control over experiences as well

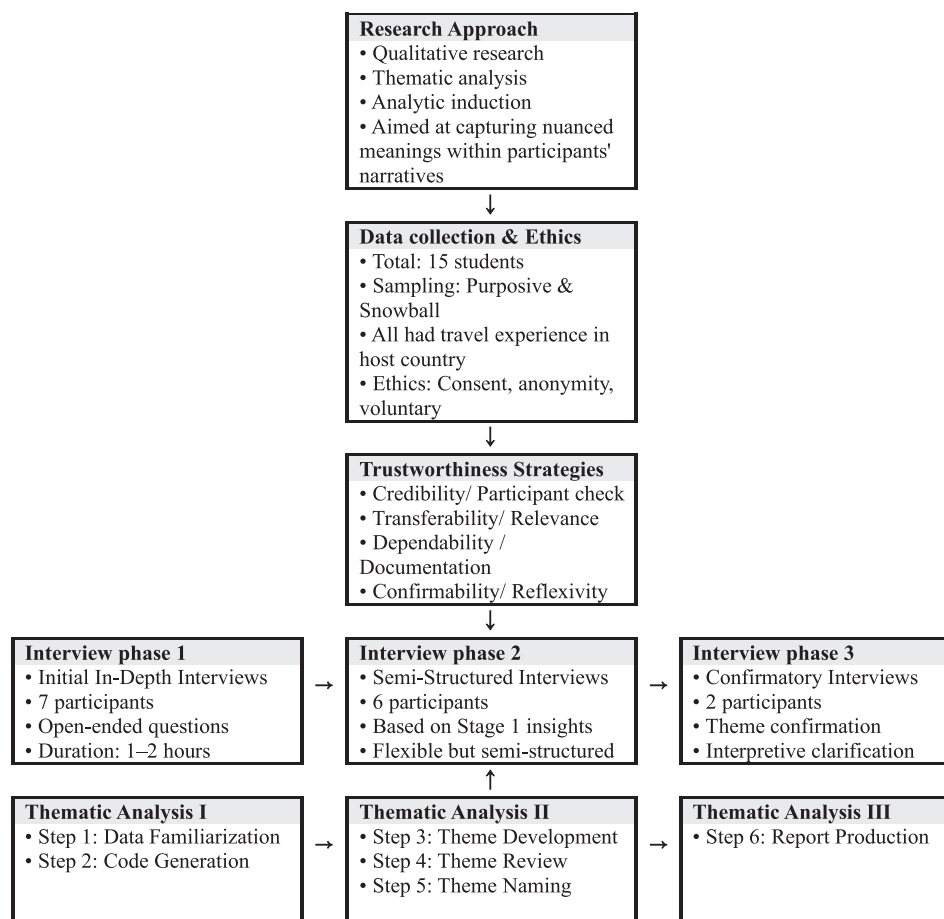


FIGURE 1 | Research process overview.

as promoting psychological and sociocultural adaptation (English et al. 2021). This highlights the positive influence of social support on international students' alienated travel experiences.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design and Participant Demographics

The present study employed qualitative research, through thematic analysis and analytic induction, in line with recommendations from Braun and Clarke (2006). The rationale for adopting a qualitative approach in this study was to allow for a deep understanding of the perceptions interview participants assigned to their experiences in their own words, and to draw insights from their views. An overview of the research process is presented in Figure 1. Participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling, were limited to those with travel experience within the host country, with additional participants recruited through referrals from initial ones. Table 3 provides a demographic summary of the interviewees.

3.2 | Interview Procedure and Study Site

As of 2023, international students in South Korea numbered approximately 209,000, representing about 9% of the

university population and 0.41% of the total population (Ministry of Education 2023). Despite their growing presence, international students remain a marginalized group within South Korean society, and to explore their alienating travel experiences, this study conducted a three-stage interview process in Busan, South Korea, with all sessions carried out in Korean and documented primarily through detailed note-taking.

First, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven university students in 2017, each lasting 1 to 2h and using open-ended questions to explore key aspects of travel in the host country. Stage 1 focused on exploring participants' general travel experiences and emotional states. The comfortable interview setting facilitated candid discussions about international students' travel motivations, emotional states, and experiences of alienation in both travel and everyday contexts. To reduce social desirability bias and encourage authentic responses, the researcher established rapport using general questions and neutral prompts that elicited rich and self-reflective narratives. Insights from these interviews informed the design of the Stage 2 semi-structured interviews by identifying salient domains from the participants' perspectives.

In Stage 2, semi-structured interviews with six students were conducted between December 2024 and January 2025. Building on insights from Stage 1, these interviews used pre-established questions that allowed the researcher flexibility for deeper exploration. The focus was on participants' personal experiences of travel-related alienation, feelings of disconnection and

TABLE 3 | Participant demographics.

Respondent	Nationality	Age	Gender	Occupation
Respondent 1	Vietnam	22	Female	University student
Respondent 2	Vietnam	22	Female	University student
Respondent 3	Vietnam	23	Female	University student
Respondent 4	Vietnam	23	Female	University student
Respondent 5	China	22	Female	University student
Respondent 6	China	22	Female	University student
Respondent 7	China	23	Male	University student
Respondent 8	China	23	Male	University student
Respondent 9	Kazakhstan	23	Female	University student
Respondent 10	Kazakhstan	23	Female	University student
Respondent 11	Uzbekistan	22	Female	University student
Respondent 12	Uzbekistan	22	Female	University student
Respondent 13	Russia	22	Female	University student
Respondent 14	Russia	22	Female	University student
Respondent 15	Russia	23	Female	University student

marginalization. Narrative prompts such as “Can you recall a time when you felt misunderstood or like an outsider?” encouraged self-reflective accounts. Open-ended questions helped minimize interviewer bias and allowed participants to guide the conversation. This stage also examined participants’ coping strategies and the social support they accessed. Follow-up questions like “What kind of coping was available?” and “Was that support effective?” prompted critical reflection on the usefulness of these strategies.

In Stage 3, theme validation and interpretive refinement, follow-up interviews were conducted with two participants from earlier rounds to confirm and clarify the key themes that had emerged. These interviews enabled continuity and deeper insight, as participants reflected on whether the coded themes resonated with their experiences. Clarifying questions—such as “Does this theme reflect what you went through?” or “Would you describe it differently?”—encouraged critical reflection. This final stage enhanced conceptual accuracy, strengthened

trustworthiness, and allowed for the incorporation of participant feedback into the final interpretation.

3.3 | Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a recursive six-step process: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke 2006). Specifically, researchers first immerse themselves in the data to gain a deep understanding and identify preliminary insights by repeatedly reading transcripts or notes. Second, initial codes were generated by labeling meaningful data segments to capture patterns. Third, related codes are grouped to develop preliminary themes that reflect the research questions. In the fourth step, themes are reviewed to ensure coherence and relevance across the dataset, with adjustments made as needed. Fifth, themes are clearly defined and named to capture their core meanings. Finally, a report is produced, presenting the themes with supporting quotes and analysis in a coherent and compelling narrative (See Figure 1).

The researcher conducted the interviews, and later revisited the themes, and the prominent themes based on both semantic and latent meanings were discussed. To ensure rigor, the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability from Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied. Credibility was ensured through participant checking, where interviewees provided feedback on the research findings’ alignment with their experiences. Transferability refers to the research findings’ applicability to other international students’ travel experiences. Dependability focuses on design stability, while confirmability was ensured through a reflexive journal, memo writing, and participant feedback.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Travel Alienation

The travel alienation experienced by international students includes feelings of disconnection, detachment, and otherness in various aspects of their travel experience, such as social relationships, environment, culture, and self (Sarfraz 1997). Through analyzing the interview data and extracting key concepts, powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, cultural estrangement, and self-estrangement were identified as major categories of international students’ travel alienation. Table 4 illustrates how alienation manifests in their travel experiences.

4.1.1 | Powerlessness

Powerlessness, a form of alienation, arises when individuals feel they have little control over their circumstances and consequences (Seeman 1959; Sarfraz 1997). Research indicates that tourists often experience a sense of powerless alienation when external constraints—such as package tour limitations, service regulations, and obligations related to family, work,

TABLE 4 | Types and aspects of international students' travel alienation.

Type and definition	Aspects and causes of travel alienation
<i>Powerlessness</i>	
A form of alienation where individuals feel they have little control over situations or outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Lack of multilingual support in local systems. • Predetermined tourism practices (e.g., dual pricing)
<i>Normlessness</i>	
A condition marked by difficulty in adhering to host society norms due to ambiguous or weakened social expectations within the tourism context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion over local customs & unfamiliarity with local linguistic & sociocultural norms (e.g., honorifics, dining etiquette) • Conflict between personal norms and host norms (e.g., fast-paced vs. slow and immersive travel styles)
<i>Meaninglessness</i>	
A state of alienation in which individuals struggle to find meaningful engagement, or comprehensive information or goals within tourism experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of contextual or historical information of tourism attractions • Insufficient or overwhelming tourism information • Difficulty accessing relevant tourism details • Discrepancy between expectations shaped by prior tourism information and the actual experience
<i>Social isolation</i>	
A state marked by minimal human interaction, often arising from a diminished bond with a relevant social group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation triggered by language and cultural barriers, national prejudice, or COVID-19-related stigma • Feelings of social distance from the host society • A tendency to rely on familiar social networks (e.g., friends and family), accompanied by weakened or broken ties with the home country
<i>Cultural alienation</i>	
A sense of disconnection resulting from cultural differences and a lack of integration into the host culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverging cultural values (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism) • Differences in communication styles (e.g., indirect vs. direct forms of expression) • Limited awareness of cultural norms and practices (e.g., Muslim dietary restrictions) • Neglect of religious and cultural needs • A perceived indifference or lack of cultural sensitivity
<i>Self-estrangement</i>	
A sense of detachment from personal values and goals, triggered by unfulfilling or value-conflicting tourism experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of authenticity in travel experiences • Superficial interactions during tourism • Commodification in commercialized areas

or seasonal demands—undermine their autonomy in making tourism-related decisions (Shang and Pan 2024). Similarly, international students encounter travel-related powerlessness due to financial constraints and academic or work responsibilities. Notably, participants in this study reported feelings of powerlessness triggered by language barriers, including monolingual transportation systems and discriminatory practices, such as dual pricing, which left them feeling compelled to conform to local tourism norms.

Participants linked their experiences of powerless alienation to the absence of multilingual support in local transportation systems. One participant described the difficulties of traveling: “The road signs are mostly in the local language. When you take the subway or trains, English signs are rare, and it’s even harder to find tourism information in Russian.” This is further supported by previous studies, which highlight the importance

of multilingual signage and transportation systems in the formation of a tourist-friendly destination (Anuar et al. 2012).

The interviewees identified the tourism practice of dual pricing, where foreigners are charged more than locals, as another source of powerlessness during their travels. One participant shared: “When traveling with my family, we went to a small restaurant and discovered that, as foreigners, we were charged higher prices than locals. I felt it was unfair, but there was nothing I could do about it.” This illustrates how tourists feel powerless in unfair travel situations due to external forces, like predetermined tourism practices, which limit their control over the experience. Tourism studies on dual pricing indicate that it is linked to negative emotions, such as anger and perceived unfairness. Apollo (2014) found that dual pricing triggered anger and a sense of injustice in Nepal, while Khandeparkar et al. (2020) suggested that the perception of

unfairness in dual pricing could be mitigated if additional services are provided.

4.1.2 | Normlessness

Norms refer to socially accepted behaviors, values, or rules, either explicit laws, implicit customs, or etiquette (Hage 2005). Seeman (1959) defined normlessness as alienation resulting from the breakdown of social norms, where individuals, unable to achieve goals through approved behaviors, resort to unapproved actions. Interviewees expressed that they sometimes found it difficult to adhere to the norms of the local host community during their travels due to an unclear understanding of local norms, travel activities, or procedures, reflecting a lack of norms in the context of travel.

The interviewees reported that travel experiences of normlessness stemmed from a lack of understanding of linguistic and sociocultural norms, causing confusion. One respondent shared: “During a group tour dinner, I wasn’t sure how to address an older member. Using honorifics felt unfamiliar, and I hesitated to speak, fearing I might use the wrong form of politeness. I started eating before the senior member, unaware that it’s customary to wait.” This highlights how unfamiliarity with cultural norms, such as honorifics and dining etiquette, leads to normlessness.

Another interviewee highlighted that conflicting norm between personal and host countries caused confusion and a loss of behavioral guidance during travel. They mentioned that differences in travel pace—where hosts prefer fast-paced travel and international students prefer a slower, immersive experience—also contributes to normlessness. One participant shared, “My friends liked moving quickly, visiting as many places as possible in a day. I prefer to take my time, but I followed my host friends’ fast-paced travel style.”

According to social-influence theory, individuals rely on group norms for self-evaluation (Festinger 1954). When host-country norms conflict with personal values, the pressure to conform can disconnect individuals from their authentic selves, leading to normlessness. Prior studies underscore the influence of norms on travel behavior: Kroesen (2015) explored norms in couples’ and household travel; Haustein et al. (2018) examined norms around travel time and punctuality; and Wasaya et al. (2022) found that injunctive and descriptive norms shape revisit intentions, with personal and cultural norms mediating these effects. Collectively, these findings suggest that norm confusion among travelers may foster normlessness.

4.1.3 | Meaninglessness

Meaninglessness arises when individuals cannot derive meaning from the information in their environment or their goal-oriented activities (Sarfranz 1997). Seeman (1959) defines it as the inability to understand or predict events, while others see it as a lack of comprehension or purpose, failing to grasp events essential to life and happiness (Sarfranz 1997). In tourism, meaningless alienation arises from the poor quantity and quality of information when it is outdated, inaccurate, or overly complex (Shang and Pan 2024).

Several interviewees mentioned that the difficulty in accessing relevant information about the historical and cultural significance of tourism attractions for foreigners leads to a sense of meaninglessness, hindering the ability to derive personal meaning from tourism activities. One participant shared: “When I visited Andong Hahoe Village, I enjoyed the traditional beauty, but I felt like an outsider because I didn’t know how this place was built or its historical and cultural background. Although the information might be available somewhere, it was hard to find, making it difficult to understand its meaning.”

The relationship between tourism information and the sense of meaningless alienation has been examined in previous studies. Shang and Pan (2024) argue that insufficient, excessive, or distorted information can prevent general tourists from finding meanings, as unclear or overwhelming information hinders decision-making and causes feelings of meaninglessness. Cremers (2020) suggests that tourism information exaggeratingly portraying Santa Cruz la Laguna in Guatemala as a paradisiacal nature site creates a gap between tourists’ expectations and reality, resulting in alienation when core decision-making expectations are unmet.

4.1.4 | Social Isolation

Social isolation is characterized by the breakdown or absence of human interactions (Sarfranz 1997). Socially isolated individuals may devalue societal goals or beliefs, experience exclusion from social groups, and feel a sense of separation from others and the broader social system (Seeman 1959). Respondents indicated that feelings of isolation in the host nation arise from the breakdown of relationships with one’s home country. In the context of international student travel, social isolation is linked to a sense of social distance from the host society or the absence of travel companions.

The interviewees stated that they felt isolated during their travels when they feel social distance from the host society due to language barriers, cultural differences, and tightly-knit social groups. One respondent described their experience: “During a group trip with people from the host country, I felt isolated. They seemed very close to each other, and I didn’t know how to join their conversations. The language barrier, differences in appearance, and national biases made it even harder to connect with my travel companions from the host country”.

According to a study by Añaña et al. (2023), social isolation is linked to the lack of connection with a reference group that an individual values. For international students, if their reference group is the host country, which they wish to belong to, and they feel excluded from its social circles, this can lead to heightened isolation in daily life, extending to travel-related alienation. Other interviewees noted traveling primarily with co-nationals or family to avoid social isolation, suggesting that international students may reduce isolation through such travel. This indicates that social isolation from the host society does not hinder travel; rather, it motivates individuals to seek new experiences and reconnect with others (Añaña et al. 2023).

4.1.5 | Cultural Alienation

Cultural alienation occurs when individuals feel disconnected from the dominant culture, leading to cultural dissonance due to cultural differences (Seeman 1959). International students often experience differences between their home country culture and the host country culture (Al-Habies et al. 2025). Interviewees reported discomfort from cultural differences and the pressure to adapt to the host culture, stating that cultural alienation persists in travel contexts.

One interviewee expressed feeling cultural estrangement due to the differences between individualism and collectivism, saying, “As a Chinese person, I prefer traveling with others. Interestingly, my local friends in the host country, although generally more individualistic, also travel in groups sometimes”. This sense of cultural estrangement aligns with Kim and Lee’s (2020) finding that differing privacy perceptions between individualistic and collectivist cultures significantly shape tourist experiences.

Some respondents mentioned feeling alienated during their travel experiences due to differences in language and communication styles. One participant shared, “As a Vietnamese person, I prefer direct expressions when planning the itinerary or choosing restaurants, but my Korean friend uses indirect language, such as saying ‘Well, it’s fine’ instead of directly saying ‘no,’ which reflects the Korean practice of considering others’ feelings and minimizing conflict.” This is supported by Jonasson and Lauring (2012), who argue that cultural differences in language and communication can create barriers to intercultural interaction, and that managing these differences is crucial.

The participants described feeling culturally alienated during travel when local companions showed indifference toward understanding religious dietary differences, such as Muslim food practices. They shared, “When traveling, I often encounter restaurants where the menu doesn’t indicate whether dishes contain pork. Although my friends know I’m from Kazakhstan, they sometimes take me to places that serve pork. While it’s important for me to learn about local culture, it’s equally important for locals to understand other cultures.”

This reflects the host society’s lack of awareness of other food cultures, such as Muslim dietary restrictions, which can lead to cultural alienation. Several studies demonstrate that Muslim tourists consider religious cultural concerns, such as avoiding pork, finding halal food, and daily prayer needs, when visiting non-Muslim countries (Said et al. 2022). Their intention to visit non-Islamic countries is influenced by perceived halal risks and Islamic values through their attitudes (Aji et al. 2021). These studies support the notion that indifference to cultural differences can lead to travelers’ sense of cultural alienation.

4.1.6 | Self-Estrangement

Self-estrangement refers to a sense of disconnection from one’s true self when experiences fail to provide intrinsic fulfillment, leading to a state where self-actualization is not met (Seeman 1959). Interviewees described feeling alienated by superficial interactions and inauthentic experiences that conflicted

with their values during travel. Travel-related self-estrangement with tourism activities was linked to misalignment with their expectations.

One respondent shared, “When shopping during my travels in commercial areas like Dongdaemun Market in Seoul, I feel like I’m treated as money, not as a person. If I don’t buy something, the vendors get annoyed, and I feel alienated”. She added, “In those moments, I do feel annoyed at the situation, but I suppress it. I feel like I’m not really being myself—like who I am doesn’t belong in that space.” This commodification conflicts with core values like mutual respect, leading to self-estrangement. Tourism workers also experience self-estrangement when they work purely for external rewards without a sense of pride in their jobs, leading to mutual alienation between tourists and vendors (Oyinlade 2018).

Another respondent described experiencing self-alienation, saying, “At first, I hoped to learn something new through this trip, but everything turned out to be about shopping and dining. I was excited initially, but later, I felt empty.” This reflects how a mismatch between expectations and the reality of a trip can lead to self-estrangement and a lack of true fulfillment. Zhang et al. (2024) discuss self-estrangement in tourism, suggesting that local performers detached from intangible cultural traditions may experience a disconnection from their own identity.

4.2 | Coping Strategies

Through inductive concept generation from interviews and deductive reasoning using Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) framework, it was found that international students address travel-related alienation using two main coping approaches—problem-focused and emotion-focused—each comprising distinct techniques with specific psychosocial functions, as summarized in Table 5.

4.2.1 | Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Problem-focused coping was identified as a key strategy for international students in addressing travel alienation, by directly changing the situation or relationship causing it (e.g., confrontational coping, planful problem-solving) (Folkman et al. 1986). For international students, sharing personal and cultural backgrounds and fostering mutual understanding are proactive strategies to alleviate travel alienation. One participant explained, “When host friends are not aware of Muslim dietary restrictions during travel, I make it a point to explain my preferences.” Similarly, another participant shared, “When I mentioned that I was born in Uzbekistan and my ancestors are the same as those of the host nation, it created a psychological connection during the trip.” Cultural dialogue serves as a problem-focused coping strategy, helping to alleviate alienation during tourism leisure interactions. This is supported by Prebensen and Foss (2011), who highlight that coping interactions contribute to co-creation in both host–guest and guest–guest relationships.

Participants mentioned that engaging in shared activities, such as sports and language exchange, helps prevent social isolation

TABLE 5 | Coping strategies for alienated travel experience among international students.

Types	Sub-type	Definition	Function/outcome
Problem-focused coping	Confrontational coping	Directly addressing the source of stress	Reduces misunderstanding; Promotes understanding
	Planful problem-solving	Systematic efforts to resolve the problem	Fosters shared identity; Builds psychological connection
	Social/behavioral engagement	Participating in shared activities to foster inclusion	Encourages integration; Strengthens social bonds
Emotion-focused coping	Emotional distancing and self-control	Handling reactions by detaching or controlling moods	Demonstrates composure; Deescalating tense situations
	Avoidance	Withdrawing from or avoiding stressful social interaction	Minimizes social friction; Prevents further alienation
	Cognitive reappraisal	Reframing the situation to find a more acceptable meaning	Enhances tolerance; Reframes cultural expectations
	Expression/seeking social supports	Expressing feelings through writing or talking to others	Restores emotional balance; Facilitates perspective-taking

in both daily life and travel contexts. One participant shared that engaging in a hobby helped them connect with locals during their travels: “I played basketball in China from junior high to high school, and I’ve been part of a club here in the host country. Through club activities, I had the chance to travel together. During the trip, I taught Chinese, and my Korean friends taught me Korean. It was meaningful to exchange languages while enjoying the trip.” These proactive strategies, like shared interests and language acquisition, are planful problem-focused coping strategies that help reduce the likelihood of alienating travel experiences. Similarly, Prebensen and Foss (2011) highlight the co-creative benefits of problem-focused coping through social interaction and behavioral engagement.

4.2.2 | Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

Emotion-focused coping refers to managing emotional responses to stressors like alienation through strategies such as positive reappraisal, self-control, escape avoidance, distancing, and acceptance (Folkman et al. 1986). Among participants, conflict avoidant approaches, including emotional distancing and self-restraint, were commonly used to manage unwanted attention and the local gaze that triggered feelings of estrangement. One participant shared, “When people stare at me because of my appearance during my travels, I try not to notice and remind myself to keep my emotional distance by staying composed. Their reactions are probably due to unfamiliarity.” Another recounted choosing not to confront a store clerk: “When a clerk ignored me, I didn’t argue. It wasn’t right, but I didn’t want to fight. I just stood still for a moment.” Such strategies help mitigate potentially negative interactions by preserving emotional control.

One interviewee mentioned using cognitive reframing as an emotional coping strategy to manage feelings of alienation during travel without changing external conditions. The interviewee shared the experience of positively reinterpreting an alienating cultural difference: “At first, I felt uneasy that locals in big cities like Seoul didn’t greet strangers warmly, but later

I saw it as part of urban culture respecting personal boundaries.” Another participant coped with social alienation through journaling and talking to co-nationals: “During a group tour, I felt prejudice against my home country. Writing or talking with family and friends helped restore my emotional balance and allowed me to see the situation objectively.”

The interviewees believed that they frequently used emotional coping strategies, such as regulating emotions and avoiding confrontation, to manage feelings of alienation during travel, seeing these strategies as inevitable for adapting to life in a foreign environment. The prevalent use of emotional coping strategies has been highlighted in tourism studies (Jordan et al. 2015; Zhu et al. 2020). While previous research links problem-focused coping to positive outcomes and emotion-focused coping to negative effects (Jordan et al. 2015), interviewees reported that strategies such as understanding and expressing emotions were partially helpful in emotional management.

4.3 | Social Support

Interview participants reported that social support enhances their sense of connection to society, alleviates feelings of alienation during travel, and acts as a buffering factor that influences how they cope with stress. This study identified three types of social support: emotional, informational, and instrumental (Langford et al. 1997).

4.3.1 | Emotional and Informational Support

Some participants perceived that social support through interpersonal relationships plays a critical role in reducing the sense of isolation and alienation they experienced during tourism. One participant shared that verbal and emotional support from a friend helped relieve feelings of alienation: “Not all host friends are willing to help. Fortunately, I had a helpful local friend who helped me during my part-time job and while

traveling. She even took me to her hometown, helped me order at a restaurant, and talked to the owner for me, which made me feel at ease.” Another participant emphasized the importance of informational support received through social media: “Before the trip, my friend recommended hidden tourist spots through Instagram, and during the trip, they guided me via KakaoTalk, which made my travel experience much more enjoyable.”

People experiencing alienation were found to reduce such feelings through social support, and the alleviation of negative emotions through support has been observed in other tourism studies as well. Kim and Tussyadiah (2013) reported that informational social support through social networking services significantly enhances tourists' travel experiences. The findings of this study also align with those of English et al. (2021), who found that sojourners in cross-cultural environments where social isolation tends to intensify experienced reduced anxiety through emotional and informational support from hosts, international peers, and co-nationals. General social support from friends and close others plays a significant role in mitigating feelings of alienation. Accordingly, prior studies have supported the importance of emotional and informational support in understanding the travel experiences of vulnerable groups.

4.3.2 | Instrumental Support

Social support from formal institutions—such as university exchange centers, international student associations, and religious organizations—offers practical assistance that helps international students adapt to unfamiliar environments and mitigates feelings of alienation. One participant shared, “I joined a travel program organized by my university's international student office and visited Love Island. Spending time with friends from other countries, sharing meals, and exploring cultural sites made the host nation feel less unfamiliar.” This example illustrates how institutionally organized programs can ease the cognitive load of navigating new settings, foster intercultural exchange, and encourage visits to lesser-known destinations. Such experiences not only deepen cultural understanding but also promote emotional stability, thereby reducing feelings of alienation. From the perspective of instrumental social support, these findings resonate with those of Lee et al. (2024), who demonstrated that support from intermediary organizations through learning opportunities, information access, and resource connections contributes to participants' subjective well-being in community-based tourism. Their study reinforces the role of practical support in alleviating social alienation.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 | Discussion

This study identified six key forms of travel-related alienation among international students: powerlessness (restricted autonomy), social isolation (difficulty forming connections), meaninglessness (lack of relevant tourism information), lack of norms (confusion about local norms), cultural estrangement (cultural dissonance), and self-estrangement (unfulfilled needs for self-actualization). While general tourists may also experience

alienation due to factors like travel constraints, inadequate services, value mismatches, overt commercialization, or unmet expectations (Shang and Pan 2024), such conditions likewise shape the tourism experiences of international students.

However, for sojourning students, alienation is not simply a momentary disruption during travel but often an extension of their ongoing marginality. Factors such as cultural differences, social distance, subtle discrimination, national stereotypes, monolingual infrastructures, and limited access to services and information contribute to a more enduring and structurally embedded sense of disconnection. Their alienation may stem not only from linguistic and cultural barriers but also from broader social dynamics—such as heightened caution toward foreigners or tourism ethnocentrism in the post-pandemic context (Kim and Hyun 2024).

This study shows that international students employ both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to navigate travel-related alienation. Problem-focused strategies—such as language acquisition, intercultural dialogue, and shared leisure activities—served to mitigate feelings of alienation and foster emotional connections with local residents. In contrast, emotion-focused strategies were directed toward managing internal emotional states rather than altering external realities. Participants engaged in self-reflective journaling, emotional distancing, and cognitive reframing to reinterpret adverse experiences. Although often linked to negative outcomes, several participants viewed these strategies as constructive ways to maintain emotional balance amid unavoidable travel alienation. Unlike general tourists, international students' coping strategies reflect the demands of prolonged cultural immersion and adaptation, involving deeper processes of negotiating identity, belonging, and daily intercultural engagement.

This study demonstrates that social support buffers travel-related alienation among international students. Emotional and informational support from peers fosters stability and reduces isolation, while instrumental support from institutions lowers psychological barriers during travel. These findings indicate that social support not only mitigates alienation but also shapes the choice of coping strategies. Figure 2 illustrates how various forms of social support moderate the relationship between travel-related alienation and coping strategies among international students, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between stressors, responses, and social resources. It highlights the need for a context-sensitive understanding of how support functions across tourism settings, as its effectiveness may vary by source (e.g., host nationals, co-nationals, institutions), type (emotional, informational, instrumental), and timing (e.g., pre-travel vs. during travel).

5.2 | Theoretical Contribution

This study offers several academic implications. First, it foregrounds the experiences of alienation among international students, a marginalized sojourner group often overlooked in tourism research. Their encounters with social isolation, cultural dissonance, and language barriers during travel reflect not only surface-level discomfort but also deeper psychosocial and cultural tensions that hinder meaningful engagement in

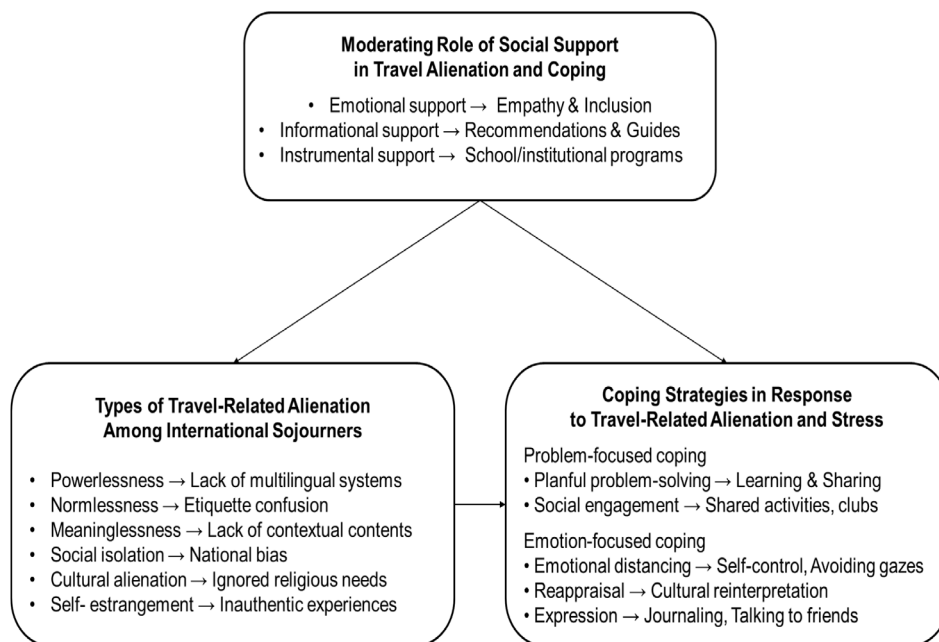


FIGURE 2 | Integrative framework based on travel alienation, coping, and social support.

tourism. By examining how travel alienation manifests across sociocultural contexts, this study reveals its multidimensional nature and extends the scope of alienation research beyond general tourists (Shang and Pan 2024) and local performers (Zhang and Lee 2022), positioning international students as a distinctive and understudied group in tourism and leisure literature.

Second, by integrating the stress-coping framework into the analysis of alienation, this study goes beyond mere description of alienation and explores how individuals cope with alienation. This study differs from studies that focused exclusively on alienation (Vidon and Rickly 2018) and extends Zhu et al. (2020), which analyzed travel stress and coping strategies among general tourists, and Jordan et al. (2015), which examined residents' responses to tourism. This theoretical expansion within the context of minority sojourners contributes to filling an important gap in the literature.

Third, this study contributes to the growing body of tourism literature on social support by confirming its role in alleviating alienation among international students. It extends prior research on the importance of social support for tourists (Kim and Tussyadiah 2013) and aligns with Lee et al. (2024), emphasizing the role of intermediary organizations in providing social support that fosters residents' well-being. These findings suggest that social support functions as a multidimensional resource that fosters emotional stability and improves life satisfaction within the tourism context.

Finally, this study offers theoretical insights by qualitatively exploring travel-related alienation, an underexplored area within international student tourism research. Recognizing the increasing relevance of alienation in postmodern, technology-driven tourism, international students experience the multidimensional nature of travel-related alienation, confronted by linguistic, institutional, and cultural barriers, thereby providing a complementary alternative to authenticity-driven approaches (Chen et al. 2025).

5.3 | Practical Implications

This study offers an in-depth analysis of travel alienation among international students, encompassing powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, and self-estrangement. Based on empirical interviews, it proposes practical recommendations for tourism authorities, local governments, and educational institutions to promote greater inclusivity and intercultural responsiveness. As travel-related alienation can leave negative emotional memories and reduce revisit intentions (Ju et al. 2025), this highlights the need for inclusive tourism policies that address travel alienation faced by international students.

First, it identified the lack of multilingual support in tourism settings—such as signage, transportation, and attraction information—as a significant barrier to information access, contributing to feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness. These findings suggest the need for municipal governments and tourism organizations to enhance multilingual infrastructure. Strategies such as implementing QR-based information systems and developing integrated, user-friendly multilingual apps or websites across public transport and tourism facilities could create a more accessible and inclusive environment for international visitors.

Second, to address normlessness, universities and tourism agencies should co-develop culturally sensitive guidebooks and pre-departure orientation materials. Early-stage programs—such as welcome tours incorporating experiential learning—can help students understand local travel customs and norms.

Third, to mitigate social isolation and cultural alienation stemming from language barriers, physical appearance, or group dynamics, universities should partner with local communities to implement peer exchange initiatives. Small-group, cohort-based

travel involving both local and international students can foster intercultural understanding and strengthen belonging.

Fourth, feelings of self-estrangement arising from dissatisfaction with superficial, commercially driven tourism experiences highlight the need for more authentic, meaningful engagement. In response, tourism providers are encouraged to design story-driven, culturally immersive tourism programs that facilitate identity exploration and personal reflection, thereby fostering emotional and cultural resonance for international student travelers.

This study highlights the importance of social support in reducing travel-related alienation among international students, with practical implications for education and tourism policy. First, higher education institutions should develop support programs that address international students' emotional, informational, and instrumental needs. These may include structured mentoring systems for linguistic and emotional support, multilingual orientation materials, and reliable digital platforms providing accessible, multilingual information. Delivering accurate content through social media, mobile apps, and university websites can help reduce informational alienation and strengthen students' confidence in navigating unfamiliar environments (Zhu et al. 2024).

5.4 | Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

Although the study offers rich qualitative insights, it is constrained by limited demographic information, particularly regarding participants' country of origin, duration of stay, and travel background. As with many qualitative studies, the findings are also shaped by the specific participants, research setting, and time frame. These limitations highlight the need for further research on diverse groups of international sojourners—including migrant workers and refugees—to advance the sociological understanding of tourism experiences. Future research could take several directions to deepen our understanding of travel-related alienation. First, the causes, impacts, and coping strategies related to alienation could be assessed through quantitative methods. In addition, it would be valuable to investigate how international students' experiences of alienation influence the development of place attachment and life satisfaction, as forming more authentic and emotionally meaningful relationships with destinations may help alleviate feelings of disconnection (Pai et al. 2024). Finally, attention should also be given to the role of tourism service providers (Li et al. 2024) by examining how their perceptions and attitudes may contribute to or mitigate such alienation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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