Scrolling Across Borders: Student Insights on Study Abroad in Europe in the Digital Age

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Abstract in English

This study investigates the self-reported motivations, expectations, challenges, and successes of 147 students participating in semester or year long U.S programs in Europe through a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative survey analysis. While international education remains pivotal in shaping global perspectives, the student experience has evolved post-COVID, with the rise of short-form content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram increasingly influencing and documenting these journeys. The research explores students' pre-program and on-site reflections, as well as the intersection of their experiences with social media engagement. Findings reveal that experiential learning, including personal travel, is a key motivator and setting for student learning, with social media serving as a tool, resource, and source of influence and pressure in expectation-setting, preparation, and cultural exploration. The analysis also examines areas of alignment and disconnection between practitioner and student perspectives on the study abroad experience, offering recommendations for practice based on these insights.

Abstract in French

Cette étude porte sur les motivations, les attentes, les défis et les réussites de 147 étudiant·e·s participant à des programmes américains d'un semestre ou d'une année en Europe, par le biais d'une analyse quantitative et qualitative. Alors que la mobilité internationale reste essentielle pour façonner des perspectives mondiales, l'expérience des étudiant·e·s a évolué depuis la crise de COVID-19, avec l'essor du contenu court sur des plateformes telles que TikTok et Instagram, qui

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influence et documente de plus en plus ces voyages. La recherche explore les réflexions des étudiant·e·s avant le programme et sur site, ainsi que l'intersection de leurs expériences avec l'engagement dans les médias sociaux. Les résultats révèlent que l'apprentissage par l'expérience, y compris les voyages personnels, est un facteur de motivation et un cadre clé pour l'apprentissage des étudiants, les médias sociaux servant d'outil, de ressource et de source d'influence et de pression dans la définition des attentes, la préparation et l'exploration culturelle. L'analyse examine également les domaines d'alignement et de déconnexion entre les perspectives des administrateur·rices et des étudiant·e·s sur l'expérience de la mobilité universitaire, et propose des recommandations pour la pratique professionnelle sur la base de ces observations.

Abstract in Italian

Questo studio esamina le motivazioni, le aspettative, le sfide e i successi di 147 studenti universitari iscritti a programmi statunitensi di durata semestrale o annuale in Europa, attraverso un'analisi quantitativa e qualitativa. Sebbene l'istruzione internazionale rimanga fondamentale per la formazione di prospettive globali, l'esperienza degli studenti si è evoluta dopo la crisi del COVID-19, con l'aumento dei contenuti brevi su piattaforme come TikTok e Instagram che influenzano e documentano sempre più le esperienze di questi viaggi. La ricerca in oggetto esplora le riflessioni degli studenti prima del programma e in loco, nonché l'intersezione delle loro esperienze con l'impegno sui social media. I risultati rivelano che l'apprendimento esperienziale, compreso il viaggio personale, è una motivazione e un contesto chiave per l'apprendimento degli studenti, con i social media che fungono da strumento, risorsa e fonte di influenza e pressione nel definire le aspettative, la preparazione e l'esplorazione culturale. L'analisi esamina anche le aree di allineamento e disconnessione tra le prospettive del personale amministrativo e degli studenti sull'esperienza di studio all'estero, offrendo suggerimenti per un operato più consapevole in base a queste osservazioni.

Abstract in Spanish

Esta investigación estudia las motivaciones, expectativas, retos y logros reportados por 147 alumnos participando en programas estadounidenses de semestre o de año en Europa, mediante un análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo exhaustivo de la encuesta. Mientras la educación internacional sigue siendo fundamental en la formación de perspectivas globales, la experiencia de los estudiantes ha evolucionado después del COVID, con el auge de contenido de formato corto en plataformas como TikTok e Instagram que influyen y documentan cada vez más estas trayectorias. La investigación explora las reflexiones de los estudiantes antes y durante el programa, así como la intersección de sus experiencias con su participación en las redes sociales. Los resultados revelan que el aprendizaje experiencial, incluso los viajes personales, es un motivador y un entorno clave para el aprendizaje de los estudiantes, y que las redes sociales sirven como herramienta, recurso y fuente de influencia y presión en el establecimiento de expectativas, la preparación y la exploración

cultural. El análisis también examina áreas de alineación y desconexión entre las perspectivas de los administradores y los estudiantes sobre la experiencia de estudiar en el extranjero, ofreciendo recomendaciones para la práctica basadas en estos conocimientos adquiridos.

Keywords

1. Introduction

This research explores the motivations, goals, and expectations of students during the preparatory phase of studying abroad with American programs in Europe, followed by an examination of their on-site cultural exploration, challenges, and successes. In an era where social media's influence is pervasive—especially post-pandemic—we also investigate how social media intersects with and shapes these student expectations and experiences. By focusing on students' self-reported experiences, our work provides a unique perspective, highlighting areas of alignment and divergence from program administrators' views. Finally, we offer concrete recommendations for practice, emphasizing how the expansive communication potential of social media can be harnessed to engage with this age group effectively.

2. Literature review

Study abroad is often glamorized as a coveted experience for American college students, valued not only for personal growth but also as part of universities' global engagement strategies. However, conflicts frequently emerge between institutional expectations and students' motivations (Li et al., 2013). The goals of study abroad from a program perspective include the development of intercultural understanding, language learning, personal and social growth, global-mindedness, and academic and career development (Allen, 2010; Carlson et al., 1990; Kehl & Morris, 2007; Maharaja, 2018; Orahood et al., 2004). Harrell et al. (2017) observed varied intrinsic and extrinsic motivations among study abroad students, impacting their experiences and outcomes, often diverging from initial expectations. Martin et al. (2015) noted that while study abroad enhances cultural understanding, unanticipated challenges may impede skill development, particularly for students unprepared for unexpected obstacles. Comparing different motivations pre-program, Anderson et al. (2015) discovered that students primarily driven by entertainment factors showed limited gains in intercultural competence, influencing preferences towards less challenging destinations and accommodation options. With the rise of social media, its

prevalence shapes various aspects of the study abroad experience, from influencing choices to facilitating relationships (Sandel, 2014). Compiegne (2021) identified distinct social networks abroad intertwined with virtual spaces, underscoring their impact on social adjustment and language learning, while Costello (2015) highlighted the challenge of connecting with locals amidst reliance on digital communication.

Understanding students' digital media usage pre-program and onsite is paramount for educators, as social media has a significant presence and impact on students' perspective and experience (Gottfried, 2024). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are increasingly popular among young adults and they influence their communication preferences (Hofer et al., 2016; Montag et al., 2021; Mou, 2020; Qin et al., 2022). Leveraging digital media literacy, educators can foster intercultural competency by facilitating reflection and dialogue, and promoting connections with host communities (Gibson & Capdeville, 2019). This integrated approach aims to enhance students' study abroad experiences and facilitate smoother reintegration upon return. This study aims to contribute to existing research by examining a pan-European sample of students and their self-reported motivations, challenges, and successes studying abroad in Europe with today's level of social media presence.

3. Methodology

The research team developed and distributed a survey instrument intended for current and past students participating or having participated in a United States affiliated study abroad program post-2020 pandemic anywhere in the European Union. The survey was distributed to study abroad administrators based in Europe through the European Association of Study Abroad (EUASA). Member institutions of the national associations of EUASA were contacted by email in January 2024 with a request to share the survey with current and former students. Students completed the survey between mid-February to mid-April 2024.

The research team did not collect data regarding the number of member institutions that were contacted or the number of students who were solicited for participation, which was voluntary. The research team did not receive responses from EUASA member countries Czech Republic, Greece and Switzerland. Due to the UK's national study abroad association not being a member of EUASA, the survey was not distributed to programs based in the UK.

The research team collected a total of 160 anonymous responses from various programs. Program administrators were initially asked to distribute the survey among students of varying program durations. Only 13 responses came from students who had studied abroad for less than a semester, representing just

eight percent of the total. Due to this low representation and the differences between experiences for short-term students and semester or academic year students, the survey team excluded this subset from the analysis and proceeded with 147 responses representing a minimum one-semester length from five countries (France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Ireland).

The distribution of survey responses by country of study is as follows: 27.2% (40) from France, 21.8% (32) from Spain, 17.7% (26) from Italy, 17.7% (26) from Germany, and 15.6% (23) from Ireland. The 2024 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange (Institute for International Education, 2024), presenting data from 2022-2023, indicates that the leading study abroad destinations in Europe, ranked in descending order, were Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Ireland and Germany (IIE, 2024). Except for the United Kingdom, twenty or more responses were obtained from each of these countries. Information regarding the program length and structure was collected from the sample of 78% (114) semester length respondents and 22% (33) academic year students. Notably, 67.3% (99) of respondents were enrolled in a language immersion study program, 30.6% (45) took part in a study program without a foreign language component, and 2% (3) participated in an internship-based program. Concerning the language of instruction, 49% (72) of participants reported that the instruction was in a target language other than English, 45.6% (67) indicated that it was in English, and 5.4% (8) stated that it was an equal mix of both. Additionally, for the 15.6% (23) of respondents from Ireland, English is the primary language of instruction and daily communication. It is important to recognize that this sample represents a part of international education that makes up less than half of the broader U.S. study abroad landscape, where 63.9% of programs are short-term (Open Doors 2024**)** and less likely to emphasize language immersion. Our findings are shaped by this specific context of mid- and long-term, primarily language-focused programs. While this subset offers valuable insights for this part of the field, we encourage further research across other program types and durations to broaden understanding of these dynamics.

4. Results and Discussion

The presentation of the results is organized into two sections: Pre-Program Reflections and On-Site Reflections. The survey included a mix of required and optional questions, featuring multiple-choice, ranking, and open-ended formats. Response counts for optional questions are often lower and will be clearly indicated.

4.1. Pre-Program Reflections

This section of the data delves into students' initial motivations, goals, expectations, and the influence of social media on their pre-departure perspective.

4.1.1. Student Motivations

Understanding student motivations that were key to their decision to engage in a specific study abroad program and how social media may have influenced that decision was addressed in the first section of the survey. Students were asked to rank factors that impacted their choice of program from most to least important, selecting only those factors that had had some significance for them (Table 1).

TABLE (1)

RANKED FACTORS INFLUENCING A STUDENT'S CHOICE OF PROGRAM (N = 147)

Factor Influencing Choice of Program	% Ranked 1st	% Ranked 2nd	% Ranked 3rd	Did not rank
Cultural and Linguistic Immersion - Engaging with a new culture and language	47.6%	17%	3.4%	0%
Travel Opportunities - Exploring and visiting different cities or countries	37.4%	12.9%	13%	0%
Making Connections - Building friendships with fellow program participants, locals, and other international students	21.8%	22.4%	18.4%	0%
Academic Opportunities - Expanding knowledge in your field of study	19.7%	17.7%	17.7%	2%
Professional Development - Gaining career-related experiences and skills	16.3%	21.1%	18.4%	1.4%
Exploring New Academic Subjects - Trying out courses outside your major	10.2%	15.6%	15%	4.8%

The research team observed that "cultural and linguistic immersion" was ranked as the most important factor in choosing their study abroad program for the highest number of respondents. The second most frequent choice for the most important factor was "travel opportunities" and the third most important factor was "making connections". Responses for the second and third most important factors were more evenly divided among the choices listed. Students were instructed to rank only those factors that had some significance to their decision-making process. Only three of the factors: "cultural and linguistic immersion", "travel opportunities" and "making connections" were selected by

100% of respondents and therefore are understood as the most significant of the six factors.

While "travel opportunities" was indeed the top factor for a significant number of students, this factor was notably absent among the top responses for the second and third most important factors. This correlates with responses to another survey item in which students were asked to indicate to what degree the accessibility of traveling to various European countries from the chosen study abroad location influenced their choice of destination. While 49% (72) of respondents indicated that travel accessibility was moderately important, 16% (24) indicated that it was extremely important, and 10.6% (16) indicated it was not an important consideration in their choice. One respondent commented, "I think it's important to understand that most students go abroad hoping to prioritize personal growth, cultural experiences and travel, often before academics." A study focused on students participating in short term study abroad programs in Italy asked a similar question and reported much higher results, with over 61% citing travel as the main purpose of study abroad and over 90% of students stating that they intended to travel every single weekend (Merle, 2024).

4.1.2. Students' Personal Objectives

Intercultural competence and global citizenship are important goals for study abroad that provide the backbone for the comprehensive internationalization that higher education institutions strive to foster (Jones, 2018, Li et al. 2013). When study abroad programs resumed after the pandemic, the dual goals of fostering intercultural competence and global awareness continued to infuse the academic programs designed and implemented abroad. But do these goals align with those of students who choose to study abroad in Europe?

We asked students to choose up to three answers from a list of primary personal objectives or goals for their study abroad program (non-ranked choice). The student responses are summarized in Figure (1). The top five responses were chosen by at least 40% of respondents. Students frequently travel throughout Europe while studying abroad (Robinson, Barneche, et al., 2025). Study abroad practitioners often observe that travel is a top priority for many students, particularly those in Europe. This perspective is supported by Merle (2024), who found similar findings among students in short-term study abroad programs in Italy. Our analysis further confirms this trend, with self-reported priorities from students in long-term programs across Europe aligning with these observations.The continent's extensive public transportation network and budget airlines offer students quick and easy access to a multitude of countries and cities, making travel a particularly appealing part of their experience. It is understandable that many students hope to capitalize on their time on the

continent to explore Europe, even though linguistic and cultural immersion programs encourage students to travel primarily in their host country.

FIGURE (1)

PRIMARY PERSONAL GOALS (PRE-PROGRAM) REPORTED BY STUDENT RESPONDENTS (N = 147)
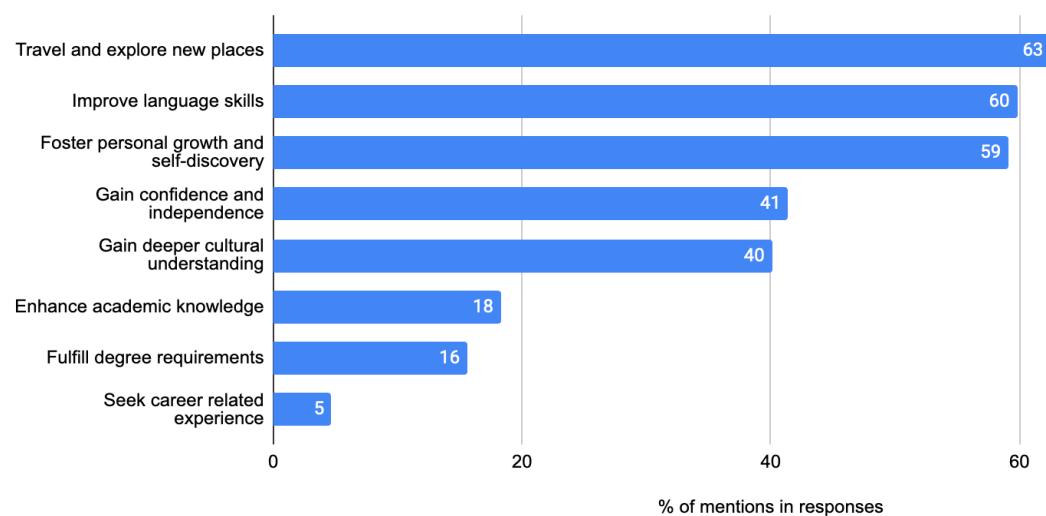
"Improving language skills" and gaining "cultural understanding" can reassure practitioners, as they align well with the goals of many programs. However, students may sometimes find it challenging to reconcile a desire to travel across Europe, where they may rely on English as a common language, with their goal of improving target language skills and developing deep cultural understanding.

Rounding out the top five goals students reported were important to them before they began their program, "personal growth and self-discovery" and "gain confidence and independence" are objectives that programs hope students will develop alongside their cultural and linguistic learning. These goals are easily reconciled with the others, as foreign language and cross-cultural learning have well-researched personal benefits and traveling teaches valuable skills such as planning, organization, flexibility, and adaptability. Fewer than 20% of students selected "academic knowledge" as a primary goal. This highlights that students view their semester abroad primarily as an opportunity for experiential learning – prioritizing cultural and linguistic immersion, travel opportunities, and making connections over purely academic pursuits. This suggests that study abroad programs might reflect on how their messaging and program objectives align with the often informal experiential learning experiences that students value most. Indeed, it is common for students to perceive their time abroad as a departure from their usual academic demands (Forsey et al., 2012; Merle, 2024) and it is important to understand and encourage students prioritizing the unique experiential opportunities available during their time abroad. However, it is

important to note that study abroad is still primarily an academic endeavor. Encouraging students' dedication to their studies while abroad remains an objective for on-site practitioners, and this may particularly challenge direct-enroll programs that lack the flexibility to design their own experiential classes and coursework. How can programs balance these elements to ensure both academic rigor and rich, experiential learning? This question warrants further exploration and thoughtful consideration among practitioners.

4.1.3. Preparation and Setting Expectations with Social Media

In setting the stage for the contemporary student experience abroad in Europe, it is essential to grasp the role that social media plays, even before students set foot in their host country. Consumption and creation, particularly of the short form video content that is a hallmark of TikTok, Instagram reels, and YouTube shorts is increasingly present since the peak in popularity of TikTok led other platforms to introduce the function in 2020. When surveyed on their social media use, 86% (135) of respondents reported that they actively use or used social media while abroad. These respondents were asked to indicate which platforms they used. Among those who did, 65% used Instagram, 36% used TikTok, 21% used Facebook, and 16% used X (formerly known as Twitter). Other platforms mentioned included Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr, and BeReal (respondents could check all platforms used).

As students prepare for their overseas experiences, it is inevitable that expectations will be affected by the content encountered for those engaged with social media. When queried about whether or not they used social media to gather information about their study abroad destination before departure, 67% (86) of social media users said that they did and 33% (42) reported that they did not. When asked "In what way did you use social media platforms to gather information about your study abroad destination, if you did so?" as an open-ended, optional question, the survey instrument recorded 77 responses. Upon coding the qualitative data analysis of the sample, the majority cited utilizing social media to solicit recommendations for various activities (Figure 2). Others specifically mentioned seeking advice about study abroad experiences from students who had previously studied abroad or participated in the program, while an equal proportion specified following their study abroad program's official account as their method of preparing for their time abroad. Some students indicated using social media to enhance their cultural and linguistic comprehension of their destination. Each direct quotation below represents a distinct response that illustrates the identified themes.

FIGURE (2)

PURPOSE OF PRE-PROGRAM SOCIAL MEDIA USE (*N* = 77)

% of responses
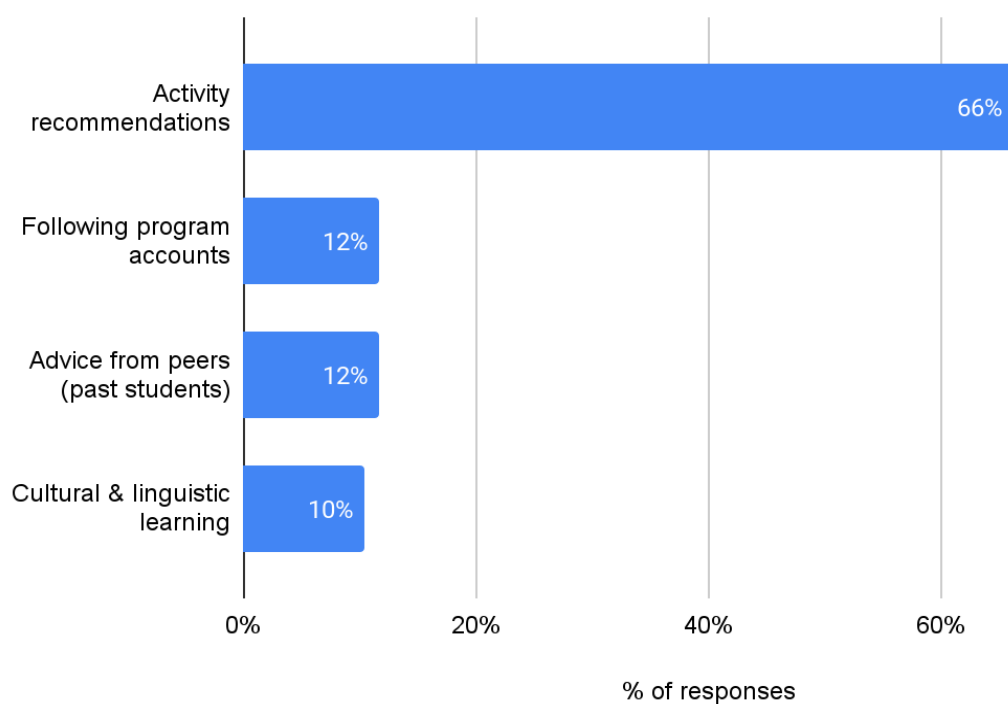
4.1.3.1. Activity Recommendations

TikTok was a great resource for getting a tourist's perspective on my destination. It was informative enough to prepare me for the beginning weeks.

Searching Granada on TikTok and finding low level influencers who live there/have vacationed there/have studied abroad there and seeing what their experience was like.

4.1.3.2. Advice from Past Students

I used it to go on sites like TikTok to look up what people's experiences were/are while studying abroad. Some of the videos would be guides about Paris, study abroad overall, guides of the city, things to know about French people and many others.

I used Instagram to get an idea of what activities/events my study abroad program was hosting and what current participants of that study abroad program had to share about their experiences.

4.1.3.3. Study Abroad Program Social Media

I was following the Instagram of the study abroad program and was able to see some of the activities that they did.

4.1.3.4. Cultural and Linguistic Learning

> I used social media predominantly to get a head-start on my language learning to facilitate the "acquisition" element of language-learning... .

> I watched videos about Spanish culture and social norms and looked at posts from people who had previously studied abroad, both in Spain and in different countries.

The following question "How did social media influence your expectations and perceptions of your study abroad location?" was also open ended and optional and the instrument recorded 75 responses. Responses that reported social media as not affecting their expectations or having a minimal effect (23), made up 31% of the respondents, while 70% (52) reported that it did. Coded analysis of the written responses affirming that it did affect their expectations revealed the themes reflected in Figure (3).

FIGURE (3)

SOCIAL MEDIA'S EFFECT ON PRE-PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS (*N* = 52)
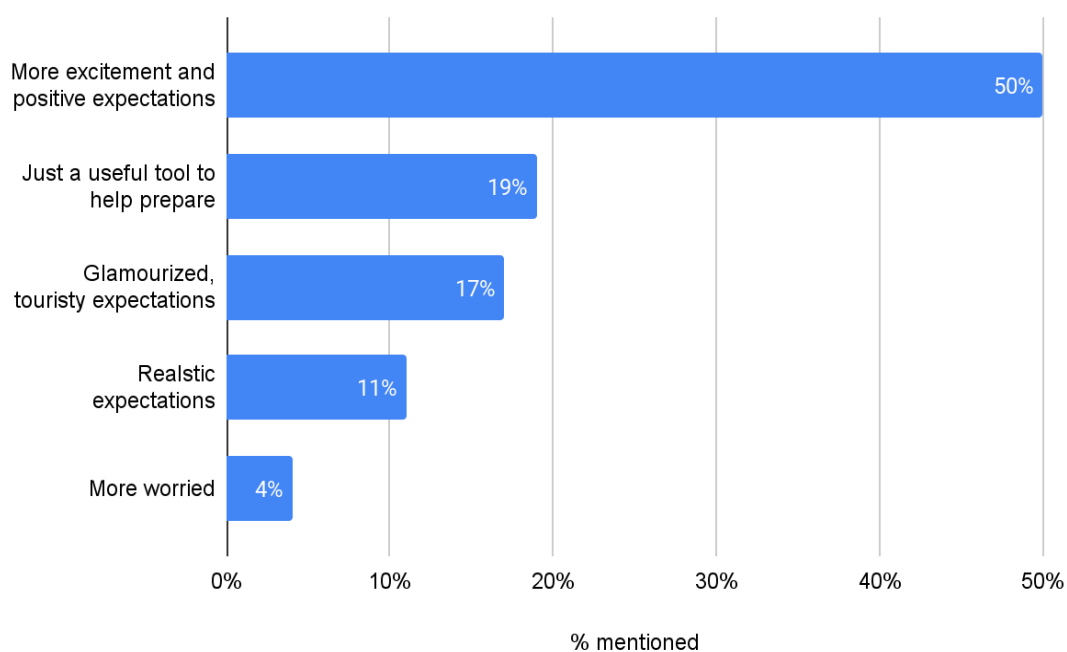
Exactly half of the responses (27) reported that social media increased their excitement and gave them positive expectations, "It gave me many options and ideas I may not have thought of or found on my own and made me even more excited for my semester abroad." Another 17% (9) explicitly characterized these as being "glamourized", "romanticized" and "touristy", "social media slightly romanticized the abroad experience. It definitely shows the most rosy, aestheticized sides of study abroad." These together make up 67% (36) of the responses.

Ten students (19%) cited social media as simply a helpful tool for preparation. Six others (11%) felt that it set realistic expectations. One said: "In my opinion it made [my expectations] more grounded and realistic, though it also helped to prepare me for the culture shock that I knew was to come." Another student said: "It made me more familiar with the program and the location and gave me a better idea of what to expect going into the program." Two respondents (4%) felt that social media made them more nervous or worried, but they did not elaborate further.

The data suggests that social media constitutes a significant aspect of students' pre-program preparations, serving as a significant source of excitement and inspiration and underscoring the power of social media as a tool for program marketing. Moreover, the data provides a nuanced understanding of its utility, as social media also offers a platform for soliciting peer advice on the experience and facilitates access to localized insights concerning the customs and language of the destination. Nevertheless, for some students, the expectations generated by social media content may be misleading. One student noted,

> People online portray the study abroad experience as a glamorous, travel-filled semester when in reality, there is a lot of work to do. I found that courses here are more difficult and require more hours than my courses in my home institution, even though it's my home institution's campus in Madrid.

While program administrators cannot know or predict what each student's social media algorithm offers them, the data underscores the influence programs may have as students often engage with program social media channels for information. Employing an intentional social media strategy that balances positive inspiration, practical guidance, and realistic expectations, could enhance students' preparedness. Furthermore, involving current students and alumni in content creation to provide valuable peer perspectives and mentorship, while aligning the subject of their content with program ethos and structure, could represent an effective means of conveying essential messaging tailored to our audience's preferences for such social media content.

4.2. On-site Reflections

This section explores data collected from students about their on-site experiences, with a focus on their engagement with social media and its multifaceted influence on their cultural exploration and personal growth. It examines the advantages of social media as well as the challenges students encountered—including those directly related to social media—and the impact these had on their experiences abroad. The section delves into their learning environments, areas of growth, and shifts in perspective. Students also comment

on the unique dynamics of studying abroad in Europe and they reflect on what they would like study abroad practitioners to understand about their journeys.

4.2.1. Engaging with Social Media On-Site

To begin the on-site section of this paper, we explore how students reported using social media during their time abroad and analyze their impressions on how their social media consumption influenced their overall experience. As we recognize that some users primarily consume content rather than actively create it, the instrument specifically asked students who reported using social media whether they used it to actively document their study abroad experience. The majority, or 77% (87 of of 113 respondents) affirmed that they did, and of these, the reported frequency of posting is displayed in Figure (4).

FIGURE (4)

REPORTED FREQUENCY OF POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA WHILE ONSITE ($N = 113$)
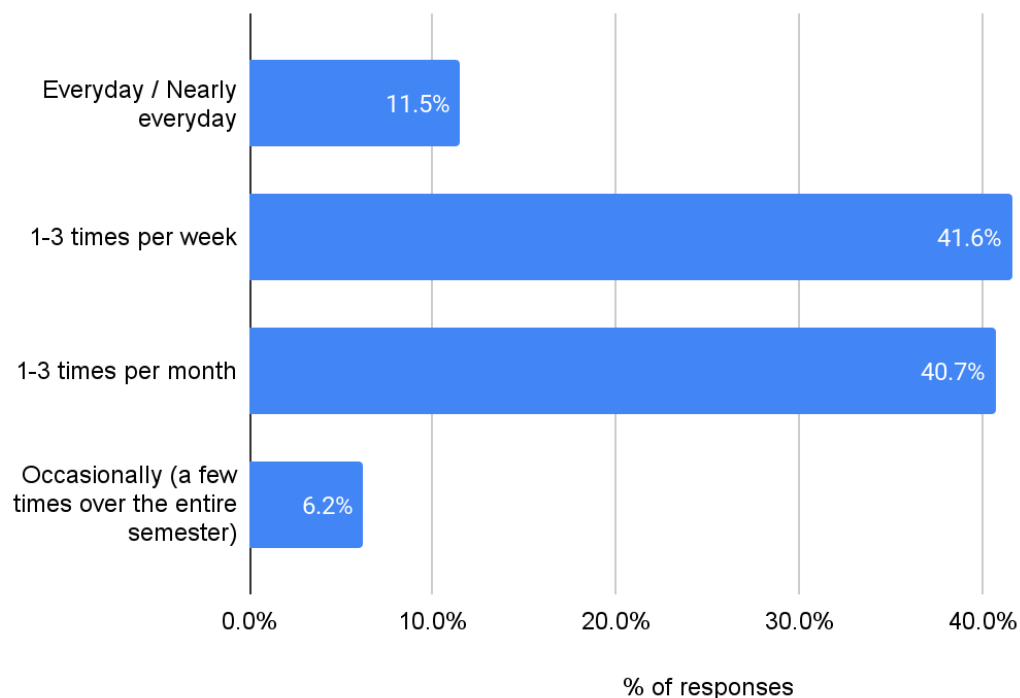
For survey respondents who did not use social media, several offered explanations. One noted,

> I didn't use social media because I was trying to engage and focus on the environment around me. Historically for me social media has created a space where I can completely transport myself into the internet world and not fully engage with the things going on externally around me. Not having social media is an attempt to limit the barriers of not engaging with the environment around me.

Another said,

I don't like the way that it impacts my perceptions of my own life, I feel like I have a weird desire to frame things differently when I use social media and that removes a lot of authenticity from day-to-day life.

Through a ranking question, the research group explored the primary reasons for using social media. The results in Table (2) consistently show that staying connected with family and friends back home was identified as the top priority. Close behind was the desire to share and document personal experiences. These two reasons, shaded in Table (2), alternated between first and second place among respondents, highlighting their significant role in social media usage.

TABLE (2)

STUDENTS' PRIMARY REASON FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE WHILE ABROAD (*N* = 112)

Primary Reason for Social Media Use While Abroad	% Ranked 1st	% Ranked 2nd	% Ranked 3rd	Did not rank
Staying in touch with family and friends back home	24.1	17.0	15.2	3.6
Documenting and sharing your study abroad journey	17.9	17.0	11.6	11.6
Gathering local information and recommendations	11.6	9.8	19.6	14.3
Making local connections and friendships	11.6	8.9	11.6	23.2
Discovering cultural events and activities	9.8	13.4	9.8	11.6
Connecting with other students and forming a supportive online community	8.9	6.3	12.5	24.1
Influencing travel decisions and excursions	5.4	11.6	10.7	16.1

The role of social media in facilitating communication and maintaining connections with loved ones from afar is widely recognized. While it is acknowledged as a potential obstacle to complete immersion in the host culture, it also serves as a valuable resource for students' emotional well-being, providing them with the means to stay connected with their support networks (Mroz & Gorham, 2024).

Based on the high ranking, it may be presumed that most students willingly post on social media to update their community of friends and family. That being stated, in an optional open-ended response asking if students ever felt pressure to present their experience in a certain way on social media, a few students articulated an external expectation for their consistent engagement with social media. One said, "My family gently asked (before I left) if I would post

regularly so they could see what I was up to…. that way they could live vicariously through me." Another added,

> There was so much going on I felt like I had a lot of content to show, but didn't always feel the need to share. Plus, my family was badgering me to post so they could see what I was doing.

A third student said they felt pressure to post "to show the people supporting me what I am doing instead of contacting a lot of people."

When examining its function as a platform for documenting and sharing the study abroad experience, social media can be viewed as a form of digital storytelling. However, its effectiveness in this regard can be highly variable, depending on the individual's approach and execution. According to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning style theory, students should have a stage of reflective observation after their experiences to be able to move forward into abstract conceptualization, or meaning making. The discussion of reflection on experiential learning practices continues (Savicki & Price, 2022) and has evolved from reflective journaling to digital storytelling by making use of students' engagement in digital documentation with social media tools they already use (Buckner, 2015; Czarnecki, 2009; Hamilton, 2019; Perry et al., 2015). In the digital age, the emergence of social media raises pertinent questions, such as could these platforms serve as contemporary conduits for such reflective practices? The efficacy of social media as a medium for reflective engagement hinges on several factors, including the content and the depth of a post. Posting quick snapshots or videos, accompanied by brief captions inherently lacks the depth afforded by traditional journaling or blogging. Hamilton et al. (2019) assert that digital storytelling can be a complementary tool for reflection but not as a replacement for writing.

Moreover, the inclination to curate a polished, positive image on social media may deter students from candidly addressing the challenges inherent in their study abroad experiences—a crucial aspect for growth and learning. Nevertheless, an emerging trend among social media influencers to present authenticity and candidly discuss challenges suggests a potential avenue for more authentic discourse. In the previously mentioned question about pressure to present study abroad in a certain way on social media, out of 133 responses recorded, 64% (85) of students reported that they did not experience such pressure and 36% (48) said that they did. Thirty-seven students chose to elaborate by answering an optional, open response prompt. A recurring theme was feeling pressure to present a positive and fun experience with a lot of traveling. The following quotes illustrate this theme.

Although I only post for my close friends and family (not for views or likes to gain viewership), social media is generally used to be a solely positive insight to your life studying abroad. It is completely one sided. My friends and family do not want me posting about how for three days I sat either in my room or at school doing homework and stressing about exams. They want to see the places I explored or the cool experiences I've had. It paints my experience here as a complete joy and wonder when in reality, I have ups and downs just like any other place.

There is a certain pressure to make it seem like you are having the time of your life and visiting as many locations as possible. I got the impression that a lot of the time, people focus on quantity instead of quality for this reason.

Most people mostly post their travels to other European countries, not the ones they are actually studying in. I am more interested in the studying side than the traveling to other parts of Europe side, so I do feel pressure to make my experience still look 'interesting'.

It can be noted that a great majority of the responses specifically cited showing travels to various destinations as a key concern. Some students specifically mentioned the additional pressure to present a positive experience so as not to be perceived as ungrateful. For example, one student said,

I know it is a real blessing to be able to study abroad and that not everyone gets this opportunity. I also feel the weight of my family's sacrifice it took for me to get here. For this reason, I feel the need to only show the best parts and to look really happy in all my pictures. I am making incredible memories, but just like anyone, some days I don't feel quite as motivated or excited for certain things. Sometimes I'm homesick or feel antisocial, but I don't want to share that part of my experience with others.

Another student said, "I only highlighted the positive parts of study abroad because people think you're ungrateful if you say that your experience wasn't perfect. They think you're on vacation which isn't true."

To better understand the nuanced and evolving role of social media in sharing students' experiences, future research could examine students' social media documentation practices. This would include exploring the benefits and drawbacks they associate with documenting their experiences, as well as how the anticipation of documenting affects their decisions about which experiences to pursue.

Discussing social media documentation with students and offering tips for curating an authentic digital story of their experience as a means of reflection could offer the additional benefits of normalizing staying in for a weekend to study, discovering hidden gems in their host city, etc. Program social media could also be curated to document students' experience in the program authentically,

by varying between photos of "fun" experiences with tips for addressing common challenges and highlighting some of the more ordinary as well as the exciting aspects of life in the host city/country.

4.2.2. Paradoxical Influence of Social Media

Gathering local information and recommendations ranked as one of the top three reasons for social media use abroad. When asked how often students used social media to discover local events, activities, and sites in their study abroad location, 58% of respondents *sometimes* used social media for recommendations of places to go, 30% *often* used it and 12% of students reported *not using it for that purpose*. An optional question asking if social media created a feeling of pressure over things to do, places to visit or travel to recorded 128 responses. More than half of respondents, specifically 61% (78), agreed with the statement, while 39% (50) did not identify with it.

When asked specifically about the influence of social media on their travel decisions, 49% (66) of participants reported that it did not influence their choices, while 51% (69) said it did. This aligns with findings from the Italy-based short-term program, where 56% of participants indicated that social media informed their travel choices (Merle, 2024). An additional question was asked to allow students to write in responses to elaborate and of 123 responses, 63% (78) stated that it influences and inspires their own personal traveling, 29% (36) said it had no impact on their own personal travel plans or habits, with three specifically stating that this was due to a lack of time and/or resources. Seven percent (9) of the written responses explicitly noted that observing others' experiences on social media generated a sense of pressure to engage in more travel activities. This sentiment often revolved around comparison, with respondents citing a fear of missing out (FOMO) as a significant factor influencing their perceptions. These responses would indicate that the content students are consuming on social media is both powerful and a pervasive part of both their experience abroad and exploration of their host city, country, and continent.

In the contemporary era, students' avenues for gathering information about travel destinations and activities have undergone a significant transformation. Rather than relying solely on traditional sources such as printed guidebooks and word-of-mouth recommendations from locals, program administrators, or faculty, they are now immersed in a digital landscape rich with diverse social media platforms offering an abundance of easily consumable content, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at the swipe of a finger. Social media platforms use algorithms that are designed to promote content that keeps users on the platform for longer periods, leading to a proliferation of addictive short-form content (Qin et al., 2022; Smith & Short, 2022). TikTok has

one of the most intensely addictive algorithms of all social media platforms (Iram & Aggarwal, 2020; Qin et al., 2022; Smith & Short, 2022 ; Zhang et al., 2019; Zhao, 2021).

Students who engage with social media are inundated with quick, easily digestible content that can shape their perceptions and influence their choices regarding cultural exploration. This digital deluge, often filled with glamorized and exciting portrayals of endless activities to do and places to visit can feel dizzying. Seamless transitions in these posts—suggesting instantaneous location changes with the snap of a finger—may inspire viewers, but also create pressure to visit as many places as possible and as quickly as possible, to maximize the experience. Furthermore, as highlighted in earlier data, the act of documenting and sharing these experiences can fuel a cycle of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) for viewers of that content (Hetz et al., 2015).

The omnipresence of sites, restaurants, destinations, etc. that are trending on social media, raises intriguing questions about the homogenization of student experiences. A considerable number of students may find themselves drawn to these same places, spurred by the collective influence of social media trends. However, the personalized nature of algorithms means that while some individuals may indeed converge on similar exploration paths, others may embark on distinctly different journeys, reflecting the inherent variability in online content consumption habits. Thus, the paradox emerges wherein the digital landscape both unifies and diversifies students' cultural exploration experiences. To gain insight into students' perspectives on the impact of social media on their cultural exploration, an optional open-ended question was included in the survey instrument: "Does/did social media affect your cultural exploration experience?" This question garnered 102 written responses, with 68% (69) indicating that it did. Of these, 55% (38) mentioned that it provided information and recommendations about local activities, sites, and events, with four students specifically noting that it helped them discover "hidden gems," and one student remarking that it contributed to a more touristy exploration. A second student said, "Significantly, I spent a lot of my time at cafés that Instagram suggested, or making itineraries based off of influencers." A third student added,

> Yes, I think with the expansion of technology I was able to find somewhat more local and immersive things to do, however a lot of what you find online is gentrified/curated to the types of people that spend a lot of time on social media.

A fourth student further said, "[social media] helped me discover spots that I ended up cherishing; also made me more inclined to take lots of pictures which can take you out of the moment but also help you document memories."

As previously discussed, the algorithm can offer a variety of different content and some of it serves as an accessible, educational tool. In the same dataset about social media's effect on cultural exploration, five students mentioned that having local content contributed to their cultural and linguistic knowledge and three said that social media facilitated making connections with locals.

> My use of social media abroad definitely changed my experience of German culture and enhanced my exposure to sides of the culture that I might not have seen in the classroom. For example, because I changed the language/location in my apps to Germany, I saw many more German-language TikToks and Instagram reels. This gave me a fantastic look into German youth/internet culture -- particularly into the humor and vocabulary -- that I was able to use to connect with both Germans and non-Germans during my time abroad. Since many of my closest friends were other American students (especially early on), it was a great way to broaden my horizons. I also used social media to keep up to date with campus activities and, now that I'm back in the US, to stay connected with the people I met abroad."

These findings suggest an opportunity for encouraging students to train their algorithm to offer them more local, cultural, and linguistic content in addition to the more generalized activity recommendations. Educators could collaborate with students to curate and maintain updated lists of social media accounts that could be a resource for target language, cultural nuances, in-country travel and contribute to students' learning about local culture and language, like the student in Germany. Such initiatives align with the broader pedagogical objective held by study abroad programs of cultivating mindful engagement with digital media platforms to augment students' cross-cultural competencies and deepen their understanding of the host environment.

4.2.3. Challenges: Types and Impacts

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the student perspective and on-site experience, the survey moved from examining pre-program and on-site engagement with social media to exploring students' broader insights about their time abroad. The research team prompted respondents to reflect on the challenges and successes encountered during their time abroad. Students were asked to select one or multiple challenges provided that were significant or impactful during their experience abroad. The results are presented in Figure (5).

Culture, language, finances and academic expectations emerge as the four most dominant categories of challenges students report facing, all garnering more than 50% of responses, with time management a close fifth at 49%. This is consistent with research on language as a common challenge during a semester abroad (Karakaya et al., 2024) and interview data reported by Walsh and Walsh

(2018), which points to language as the biggest challenge to study abroad students. Other challenges such as loneliness, social integration, and homesickness follow closely behind, with only a small percentage difference separating them. The survey also provided space for students to elaborate on their most impactful challenges through written responses. Ninety-two respondents did so. Many of these written responses highlighted how multiple challenges intersected, which, as illustrated in the quotes further below, helps explain the closely ranked list.

FIGURE (5)

CHALLENGES FACED WHILE STUDYING ABROAD (*N* = 147)

% of respondents who checked this as a challenge faced
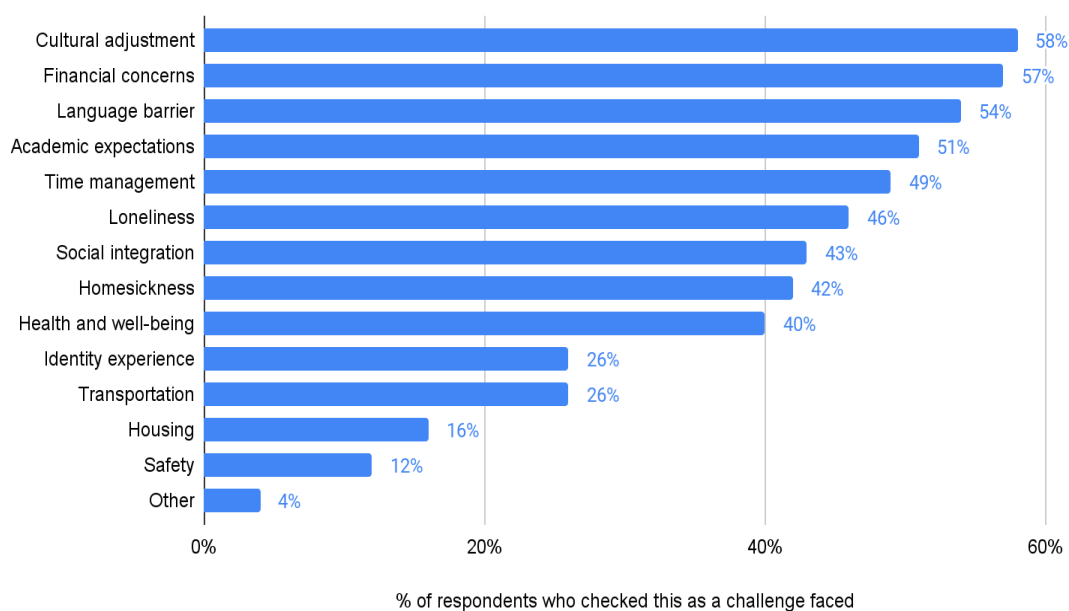
For a long time I felt I couldn't be myself--wasn't comfortable being myself--in the French culture, even though I spoke French well. I felt I dressed too casually, didn't do my hair right, wore too many colors (the French wear a lot of black and neutral colors), etc., which was hard for me to overcome. In the US, I've never felt out of place culturally (makes sense, since I'm American!), and it can be a very isolating feeling... I felt I was just too different from French people my age for them to like or relate to me enough to become friends.

I have often felt very lonely, yet at the same time frustrated with myself that I feel miserable in a place where I should be growing as a person. Feeling like I don't have the time or money to do certain things has also increased my stress levels. I compare myself to those around me every day, and being abroad has only heightened that.

My language inability was the worst in my experience- this stemmed to greater feelings of loneliness and homesickness. I am very ashamed of the lack of knowledge in my target language and it has led to some embarrassing moments.

These challenges highlight the diverse obstacles students face abroad, a narrative shared across countries. While study abroad programs are designed to support students with cultural and linguistic challenges, the student quote about the language barrier triggering issues like loneliness, homesickness, and shame reinforces the need for continued emphasis on language learning. Advocating for pre-departure and on-site language instruction remains essential, especially for long-term programs like semesters or year-long stays.

The third most cited challenge was financial. While this is often discussed as a barrier for students to participate in study abroad (Whatley, 2017) this data shows that financial challenges continue to be a barrier and stressor while abroad. Students should actively engage with accurate information about expenses and budgeting abroad to their finances effectively. Collaboration between U.S. institutions and on-site staff to provide and regularly update this information is essential. Involving student' peers in the conversation by creating and delivering student surveys about on-site expenses as well as providing simple and engaging information on budgeting abroad via social media could be a useful addition. The subsequent section will delve into the specific challenges students report having at the intersection of study abroad and social media.

4.2.4. Challenges with Social Media

Recognizing the complex interplay between social media use and the broader study abroad experience, the survey instrument asked an optional, open-ended question about challenges experienced with social media use while abroad. The question recorded 75 responses. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure (6).

FIGURE (6)

SOCIAL MEDIA AND STUDY ABROAD CHALLENGES (N = 75)
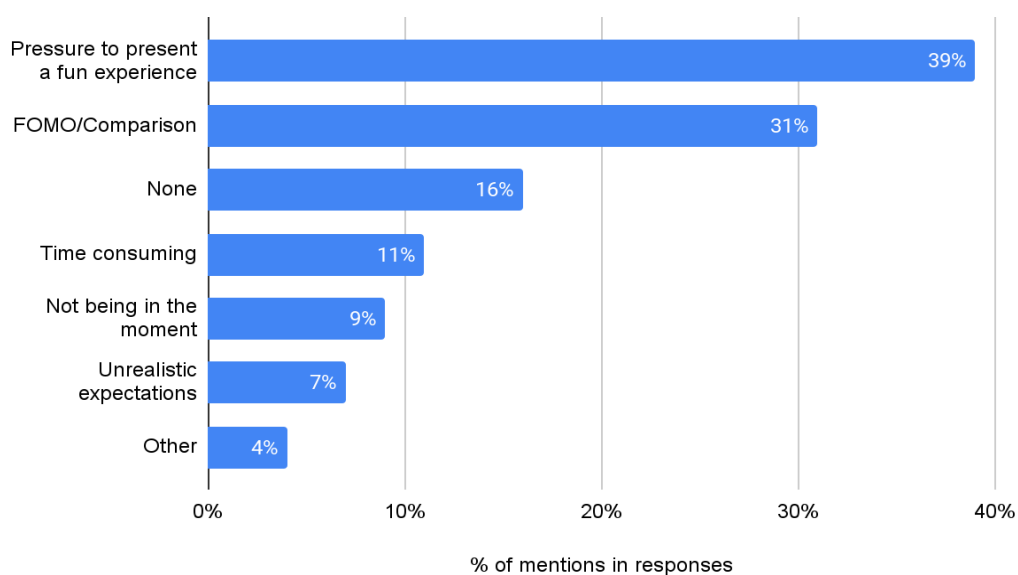
As shown in the previous figure, five key themes arose for respondents who reported challenges. Four percent of the responses addressed challenges not cited in any other responses. The two themes most frequently cited corresponded with a theme of pressure to have and/or present a "fun" experience and FOMO/comparison with others. As this study seeks to give voices to the students' perspective, each of these challenges is illustrated by direct quotes from the responses. These quotes are presented under each theme below.

4.2.4.1. Pressure to Have and Present a Fun Experience

> I feel myself being highly critical of what I post and how I can seem cool online. There have been times where I get so frustrated with an activity or how I look all because I can't get the perfect picture to capture the moment.

> Pressure to be traveling as much as everyone else every weekend, not to cities around the country, but to different countries across Europe.

> Social media is designed to show the best, happiest, easiest sides of life, even when our experiences abroad are naturally going to be more complex and challenging than that, at least some of the time. Social media can sometimes give the false impression that everyone else is having a perfect time, which can be tough if you personally are struggling to acclimate to life abroad.

4.2.4.2. Fear of Missing Out/Comparison

> I would say a key challenge is maybe not being able to do what somebody else is doing. For example, if you wanted to go to this one country because of an Instagram post that someone posted and you can't, you could feel a type of way about it because you feel like you're missing out or you wanna do that exact thing but can't.

> I think it's possible to feel an overwhelming sense of opportunity and wanting to make the most of your time abroad by going everywhere, but at the same time, this mindset can be draining. It can be difficult to balance…lots of traveling with school… social media could also influence people to think they are missing out on different adventures, when really, everyone is having their own adventure, and that doesn't make your own less valuable.

4.2.4.3. Time Consuming

> I spend much more time on social media! While before I left I would… only use it for around 30 minutes a day, now I have an average usage of like two hours every day. I think this is because I have much more free time and also it helps me feel connected with my friends, family and culture back home. However, that benefit only goes so far.

> I think my biggest issue was that I don't want to waste my time on social media especially when I am somewhere new. I wish I had spent less time on a screen and more time exploring.

4.2.4.4. Takes You out of the Moment

> One of the most challenging things about social media, I think, as a non-influencer, is to make sure one enjoys life while living it, instead of analyzing everything from the lens's perspective... I'd rather spend my time admiring a view or a moment than editing it away.

> Too much social media can pull you away from appreciating being in the present and enjoying the present moment. For people who socialize in more tightly knit social circles back home, this can raise pressure to present your experience in a certain way or at a certain frequency.

> Well, just getting sucked into social media and not exploring the place that you are in! Although it is a useful travel tool, it's also an addictive technology that can take away from the experience itself.

4.2.4.5. Unrealistic Expectations

> Study abroad is exciting but also lonely, so don't let the rose-colored lens of social media invalidate your experiences and mental health.

It is clear that social media can create additional distractions, pressures, and FOMO that can contribute to these feelings that were discussed when discussing overall challenges. Study abroad orientations can encourage students to stay present in their time zone and understand that it is impossible to be fully engaged in two places at once. The temptation to continue to live one's life "back home" through the lens of social media may prevent true immersion on-site. When revisiting the general challenges highlighted in Figure (5), several connections emerge. The pressure to curate or present a fun experience on social media may create or exacerbate financial concerns or contribute to difficulties meeting academic expectations. The time-consuming nature of social media could intensify challenges related to time management and social integration. Feelings of FOMO (fear of missing out) and social comparison likely play a role in the reported challenges of loneliness and homesickness. While FOMO abroad traditionally stemmed from communications with friends, students' today experience it even more frequently from the content of friends and strangers on social media. Practitioners could consider informing and preparing students for some of the social media specific challenges they may face, in addition to the more "traditional" challenges. Since students have more control over their social media use than they do of what they may encounter while abroad, raising awareness could help them alter or reduce their social media use.

4.2.5. Benefits of Social Media

The instrument also requested that students report the primary advantages of social media use while abroad. From 90 responses about the advantages of social media, three themes were identified: staying connected with friends and family back home, documenting their experience, and getting information and recommendations. The percentage of each mention is illustrated in Figure (7), followed by direct quotes that demonstrate each theme.

FIGURE (7)

ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA ABROAD (N = 90)
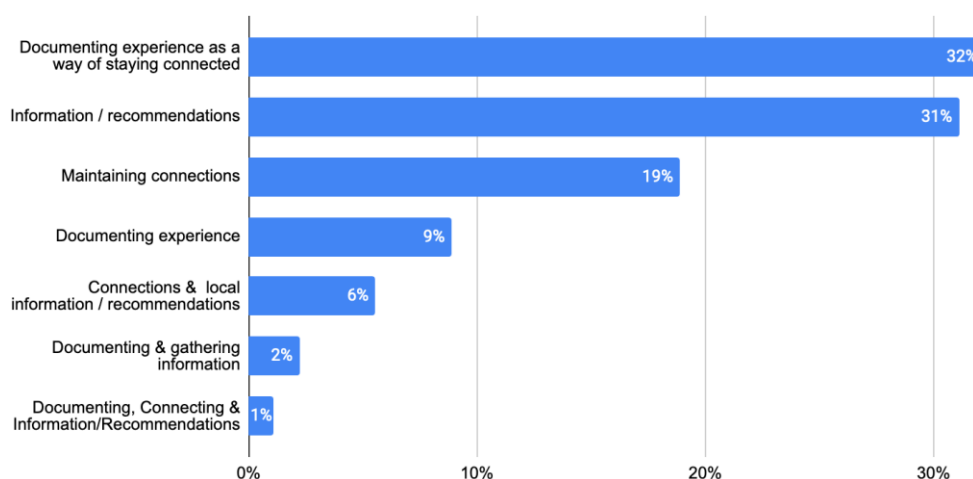
> The primary advantages for me were staying connected with friends and documenting my experience. It sounds silly, but I love looking back at my Instagram posts and story highlights from when I studied abroad because it's like a digital scrapbook for me.

> I am able to document where I am going and what I have been doing academically so my family is able to see what I am up to without always calling home.

> I like that I can keep everyone back home posted at the same time. This way I don't have to continuously tell the same story. I also like when people comment and interact with my posts because it helps me feel that they care about me and haven't forgotten about me.

The discourse in the field recognizes the significant role of social media in the lives of students studying abroad and has both called for and sparked numerous studies that have evolved the conversation about social media in study abroad from lamenting its disruption of cultural immersion (Allen & Dupuy, 2012; Compiegne, 2021; Hofer et al., 2016; Iwasaki, 2019; Mroz & Gorham, 2024; Zimmerman, 2020) to acknowledging its multifaceted utility as a tool for enriching cross-cultural experiences (Howard, 2019; Kinginger, 2019; Mroz & Gorham, 2024) even if not without the aforementioned challenges. The data from

our research illustrates the diverse ways students use social media platforms to contribute to and share their cultural exploration. They document their experiences for themselves and others, foster connections, discover local sites, and, for those who intentionally seek it, deepen their cultural and linguistic understanding.

4.2.6. Learning Goals and Growth

Building on these insights, the survey also explored students' self-reported learning outcomes and personal growth during their experience abroad. Through a combination of ranked-choice and open-ended questions, the research team examined how students perceived their personal, academic or professional growth while abroad. and the significant learning experiences that shaped their overall development while on-site.

4.2.6.1. Student-Reported Growth

Students ranked areas of noticeable growth from most to least important, selecting only those growth areas that had had some significance for them. The results are reflected in Table (3).

TABLE (3)

STUDENT SELF-REPORTED GROWTH (*N* =147)

Self-Reported Growth ranked from most to least significant	% Ranked 1st	% Ranked 2nd	% Ranked 3rd	Did not rank
Foreign language proficiency	28.6	8.8	12.9	11.6
World exploration / discovery	25.2	13.6	7.5	7.5
Adaptability and resilience	20.4	12.9	17.7	6.8
Independence and self-confidence	17.0	17.0	16.3	10.2
Strengthened interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills	12.2	15.0	16.3	8.8
Expanded academic knowledge in their academic discipline	8.8	7.5	7.5	15.6
Networking opportunities	8.2	2.7	2.7	19.7
Career exploration	6.8	6.8	8.8	16.3
Problem solving and critical thinking	6.8	6.8	15.6	10.2
Broader perspective on an academic discipline	6.8	7.5	10.9	16.3

The data shows that the top areas of growth reported by students during their study abroad experiences closely align with their initial motivations (Table

1) and objectives (Figure 1) discussed in the pre-program section. This alignment suggests that students view study abroad as effective in achieving their personal growth goals. The data also shows alignment in the learning outcomes study abroad staff expect students to achieve - foreign language proficiency and enhanced interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills. The prominence of personal growth aspects such as independence, self-confidence, and resilience reflects the transformative impact of living and studying in a foreign environment. These experiences foster significant personal development, equipping students with essential life skills. Academic knowledge is reported much lower on the list, indicating that primary perceived benefits of their time abroad is more experiential and personal than academic and professional.

4.2.6.2. Perspective Shifts

To better understand the factors students found impactful during their study abroad experience, the survey explored how they perceived any changes in their perspective after their experience abroad. Out of 51 open-ended responses, the following themes were coded and recurring: a deeper cross-cultural awareness and personal growth (e.g. improved language skills, higher self-confidence and independence) was mentioned in 60.8% (31) of the responses, an increased global perspective was mentioned by 33.3% (17), while 31.4% (16) of respondents mentioned deeper cross-cultural awareness and understanding. The study highlights the voices of the students to demonstrate how these themes were discussed with direct quotes from the student respondents. One reflected, "Since being immersed in a different language and culture, my cultural perspectives have expanded, and I've seen how more people live--and how that can make sense even though it's different from how I live in the US!" Another student remarked, "My ability to hold two truths has developed exceptionally. The way my culture and another culture do something… both can exist together and it can be the right way for different people."

The results of these students' self-reported growth in this area are in line with the extensively well documented assertion that study abroad boosts cultural awareness and understanding (Haas, 2018). One student expanded on their growth, commenting that "[study abroad] made me more curious about the world, its cultures, its different people, and its nuances, and therefore made me more determined to continue practicing language and immersing myself in other multicultural opportunities and environments." Another also cited the development of a more global perspective, commenting,

> I think that I am a much more open minded and understanding human being after this experience. There is so much in this world that I don't know and may never know, but it's always good to keep learning and

challenging yourself. I think that study abroad has planted a seed or cultivated one that was already there, of a curiosity of this world.

This recurring theme aligns with research about these types of benefits resulting from a first international experience abroad (Netz, 2021).

The perspective shift that was most frequently cited in this question was personal growth, as illustrated by the three respondents, one asserting "I've become more confident, self-reliant, and more flexible," and another stating that "It taught me important social skills, the power of building meaningful relationships even if it may be uncomfortable at first to put yourself out there." A third student explained that,

> Studying abroad was a great way for me to become more independent and self-reliant. I learned how to use public transportation, traveled on my own for the first time, and gained a lot of confidence finding out I was capable of doing things I had only watched adults do my whole life.

These responses reveal that students viewed study abroad as an opportunity to explore new realities and cultivate the essential skills needed to navigate them. According to Cardwell (2019), academic achievement can be seen as a broad educational experience beyond just grades, encompassing increased confidence and skill acquisition. This aligns with our findings, where more than half of respondents reported this type of growth. However, students more often addressed a broader global perspective more generally rather than deep cultural understanding. This could correlate well with the amount of personal travel across Europe, rather than spending this time with locals in their host country.

Contrary to Cardwell's (2019) assertion that studying abroad generally enhances academic achievement, this survey indicates that students did not report significant academic shifts despite finding academics challenging in a new environment. They did, however, experience improvements in language skills and personal growth, overcoming initial language barriers and developing self-confidence.

4.2.6.3. Learning Experiences

Respondents were asked to identify the setting where they experienced the most significant learning during their time abroad. The results are summarized in Table (4). Professional and academic settings were much less frequently chosen as the most significant setting for learning experiences. These responses emphasize the importance to students of day-to-day, informal interactions outside of a guided or scaffolded experience in the classroom, internship or volunteer setting. As one respondent noted, "I am going [abroad] to get more experience in my language, but that does not mean that I want busy

work or to be spending most of my time on homework from program-based classes*.*"

TABLE (4)

STUDENT-REPORTED SOURCES OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES (*N* = 147)

Where do you believe your most significant learning experiences occurred while abroad?	% Ranked 1st	% Ranked 2nd	% Ranked 3rd	Did not rank
Day to day (cultural differences, adapting, personal growth)	32.0	17.7	12.9	6.1
Travel and exploration	25.2	17.0	14.3	8.8
Day to day (target language immersion)	23.8	12.9	15.0	12.2
Cultural and social interactions	21.1	18.4	9.5	8.8
Professional setting (internships, volunteer work)	12.9	7.5	9.5	32.0
Academic setting	9.5	20.4	13.6	9.5

Survey data related to program structure does allow some inference about potential sources of embedded learning opportunities outside of the classroom. Ninety-three students (63.1%) indicated that their program included some element of academic immersion (direct enroll or hybrid program formats), which, for the European countries whose first language is different from English, could have provided language immersion and learning through regular cultural and social interactions. In the sample, 48 of respondents (32.7%) reported living with a host family, highlighting an additional source of cultural and linguistic immersion facilitated by program structure.

Students surveyed reported that their most impactful learning experiences often took place outside the formal structures of study abroad programs. However, these programs play a crucial role in setting the stage for such engagement by organizing housing, facilitating university exchanges, and offering cultural activities. These foundational elements enable students to engage in meaningful, day-to-day interactions. By prioritizing experiential learning opportunities—through housing arrangements as cultural and/or linguistic spaces, or organizing other types of linguistic or cultural exchanges with locals through buddy systems or activities—practitioners can continue to align their programming with the types of experiences students find most effective, contributing to the attainment of learning outcomes.

4.2.7. Europe as a Destination

Finally, since this study focused on students studying abroad in Europe, the research team explored their perspectives on the continent as a setting for

their experience. Students responded to an open-ended question about their time in Europe, highlighting perceived benefits, challenges, and distinctive aspects of the region.

Ease of travel around Europe was the most commonly mentioned positive aspect of studying abroad in Europe, by 39% (58) of respondents. Students noted efficient transportation systems and easy access to historical and architectural sites as motivating factors. Beyond the experience in their host country, students reported gaining intercultural learning and personal growth from traveling to nearby countries. This included being exposed to additional languages and cultures, being able to gain a more local perspective when visiting friends studying abroad in other countries, and gaining interpersonal and life skills (such as organizing trips and solo traveling) that fostered greater independence and confidence. For a few students, the ease of travel was considered a negative factor, as it can lead to spending more free time visiting other countries than their host country. This, coupled with significant pressure to keep up with peers' travel schedules, can be both exhausting and alienating for those who cannot afford to do the same. At the same time, many students appreciated what they perceived as the improved quality and price of food, a more affordable cost of living, a slower pace of life, and a healthier lifestyle in Europe compared to the U.S.

With respect to intercultural development, there was a mix of responses on whether students perceived adapting to a new culture, language barriers, and the commonality of English being spoken in Europe as positive, neutral, or negative factors of studying abroad in Europe. Students' opinions on these aspects appeared to depend on their motivations for studying abroad and how they handle challenges. Among the 146 respondents, 13% (19) stated that they found similarities between U.S. and European cultures to be a positive aspect of studying abroad in Europe, and one which made for easier adaptation. Academic culture, commented on by only seven individuals, or 5%, was a mix of being seen as better (in terms of student/professor interactions, work-life balance, and classes offered) or worse (different system, higher workload than expected). It is difficult to draw specific conclusions on this topic, as respondents came from a variety of program types and locations.

Conflicting with students' widely-expressed initial perception of Europe being a more comfortable, safe, and easily adaptable continent for studying abroad, some students reported racism (ranging from microaggressions to threats of violence), homophobia, and intolerance to be a challenge they encountered within their host country or Europe broadly. One student felt that "Europe is far less tolerant than advertised and it becomes extremely evident among those you are around. More importantly, I've found that many Europeans

are (willingly) ignorant to their intolerance." On the other hand, others believed that their European host country was a more open-minded, tolerant, and inclusive environment compared to their experience in the U.S. or amongst American peers. A few students who identified as White American and/or of European heritage reflected that their racial identity made it easier for them to integrate and be accepted by European nationals, since they did not immediately stick out as a foreigner. For instance, one student said:

> One of my biggest challenges comes from the language barrier [...] and the assumptions people have about Americans and possibly about me when hearing my accent, but as a white student I feel I don't experience some of the greater challenges that students of color face when moving to Europe.

Another negative sentiment held by several respondents was that of perceiving Europeans (e.g., France and Germany as mentioned in responses) to be less openly friendly and welcoming compared to Americans, as well as having to deal with negative stereotypes and prejudice held by Europeans towards Americans. One respondent recounted:

> One of the challenges I've found is that when Europeans ask where you are from and you say America, most of them have something negative to say. Americans are not very well liked and this can be difficult to process because you did nothing wrong, yet you feel looked down upon.

The dominance of "ease of travel" as the most commonly cited advantage is unsurprising considering the previously noted importance of travel in student motivations and objectives, discussed in the pre-departure section of this paper. The recurring theme of students choosing to study abroad in Europe because of perceived similarities between U.S. and European cultures coupled with the theme of some students' encountering unexpected racism, intolerance, or negative stereotypes about Americans indicates that students may require more preparation and guidance for overcoming unexpected cultural differences and remaining enthusiastic about engaging with their host culture.

4.2.8. What do Students Want Practitioners to Know About Their Experiences?

In the spirit of this article being written by scholar-practitioners working with students onsite in Europe, the last question of the survey invited respondents to articulate any insights they would like to share with program administrators regarding their study abroad experiences in Europe. The question was open-ended and optional and 72 written responses were received. These qualitative responses were coded when two or more respondents mentioned the same theme. Many responses cited more than one theme. Each time a theme was addressed it was counted and this is illustrated in Figure (8).

FIGURE (8)

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT GOALS, MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCE
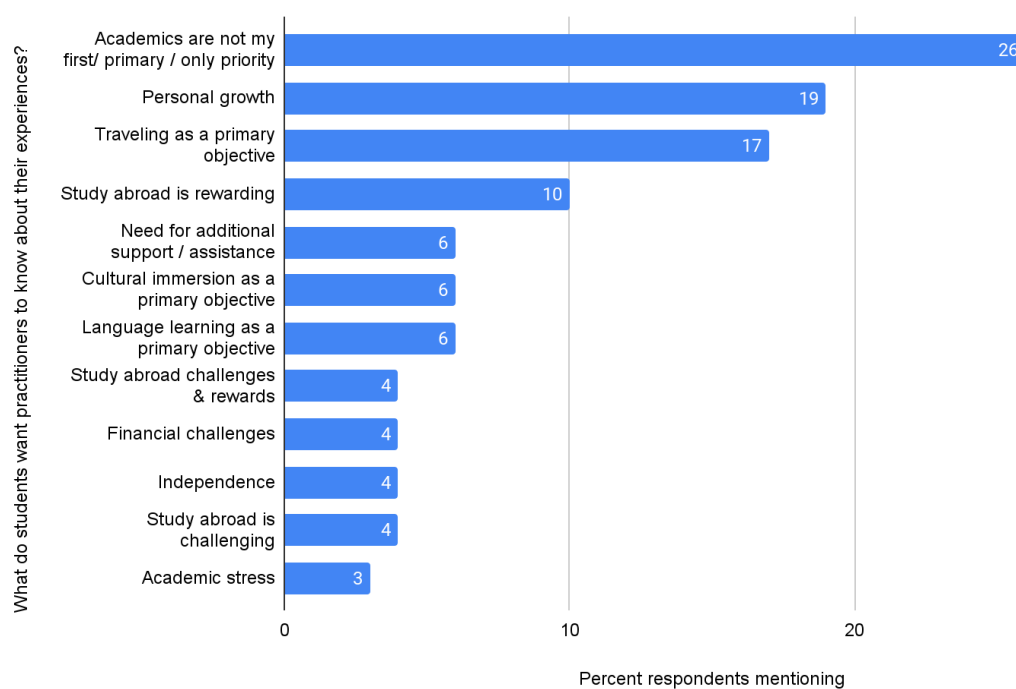
The four quotes presented below from the sample illustrate the top three themes that came up, usually in conjunction with each other:

> Study abroad professionals should recognize that my reasons for studying abroad are diverse and personal, encompassing academic, cultural, and personal growth goals. I aim to expand my horizons, develop new skills, and build meaningful connections that will shape my future positively.

> I think it's important to understand that most students go abroad hoping to prioritize personal growth, cultural experiences and travel, often before academics. That's not to say that students shouldn't take their studies seriously while abroad, but for many of us, we've been working extremely hard academically for many years and sincerely want to take the opportunity to expand our horizons in other ways.

> My goal was to gain independence in solo traveling and navigation [sic] a new culture alone, and I did so successfully, and although I am a very different person now than when I started, it did not come without its struggles. My mental health, sleep schedule, and even personality suffered. But I am grateful for everything I have experienced.

> Most people are here to travel more than anything else, not for the studying part. The only people I know that do study abroad for just educational purposes are people who do summer programs since they don't want to leave their home school during the academic year.

5. Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The scope of the survey instrument upon which this study is based was broad and touched on many aspects of the student experience. The discussion of survey data, illuminated by literature examining the different facets of the student experience, has allowed the research team to frame conclusions and formulate suggestions for further development of the aspects of student experience that have been examined.

5.1. Communication

The evolution of the student experience in a post-pandemic, social media-infused context continues to pose challenges for Europe-based study abroad professionals who may feel out of touch with the rapidly evolving digital world in which students operate. From a pre-program perspective, it is essential to rethink key elements of institutional communication strategies and program delivery to better connect with these students. If they rely heavily on peer-generated social media content when choosing a study abroad program, how relevant and effective are traditional sources of institutional communication and recruitment? Will traditional tools like brochures, websites, handbooks continue to play a central role in students' decision-making processes? Programs must adapt to students' evolving information consumption habits by balancing traditional formats with the engaging, short-form content they seek out on program-managed social media platforms.

Program social media channels can serve as a useful platform for reaching a wide audience of prospective students. By regularly sharing a mix of cultural activities, academic highlights, and authentic student testimonials on these channels, programs can effectively communicate an authentic and balanced representation of the study abroad experience. These efforts should be complemented by traditional communication channels such as brochures, websites, and informational sessions to ensure consistency in messaging and reach students who may not be active on social media. By adopting a cohesive approach across all communication channels, programs can enhance their outreach efforts and provide prospective students with a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, opportunities and challenges of an educational abroad program.

Since academics were often cited as less important to students as a motivator, objective, and learning space, detailed descriptions of academic offerings and expectations may be overlooked unless they highlight experiential learning aspects integrated into the curriculum. Additionally, emphasizing how

participation in a different educational system fosters personal growth, independence, and self-confidence—outcomes students prioritize over traditional academic focus—can make such descriptions more compelling for students.

5.2. Objectives

It is crucial to recognize and formally address the opportunities study abroad programs provide in terms of the personal growth experiences students seek. Increased independence, confidence in one's ability to "travel as an adult", functioning and perhaps even thriving in an environment where they may have access to less structure and support than on their home campuses are all learning outcomes as valuable to students' as development of intercultural competence and language skills. The following direct quotes detail these experiences of personal growth.

> I especially find that I learn the most through the travel I've done within my study abroad. I recently took a trip to Greece which opened my eyes to a whole new world of cultural and language differences. These experiences have taught me a lot about time management (like making it to your flight on time), asking for help (like when you don't understand what someone is saying), and rolling with the punches (like when something isn't as you pictured it would be). Studying abroad has definitely pushed me outside of my comfort zone, but it's instilled within me a confidence and a motivation that I was lacking at the beginning of my trip.

> It's been a big change, and I have learned to become more independent generally and more confident in using public transportation to go places[…]. The travel component was one that I had not expected to do. When I thought of studying abroad, I mostly considered staying in Spain [the host country], connecting deeply with the local community, and improving my language skills. I had not really considered traveling to other countries to be very valuable or necessary to my study abroad experience, but now, I would say this component has added so much worth to my experience abroad. The privilege of exploring places I have never been, trying foods in their origin countries, and interacting with the locals has added so much value to this semester, and I am truly looking forward to exploring more.

A significant number of the students surveyed indicated that traveling and exploring new places ranked as one of their top three objectives and factors influencing program choice (Figure 1 and Table 1 from the pre-program section of the paper). While studying abroad provides students with the opportunity to achieve a goal many regard as significant, this also highlights a broader discrepancy between the priority of academic coursework and culturally immersive experiences, which program administrators and faculty aim to offer,

and the interests of a large number of students. This discrepancy is clear for both the long-term program participants we surveyed and the short-term program participants from the Merle 2024 study and it may not be unique to study abroad but reflective of a larger issue in undergraduate education overall. How should this information inform how study abroad program staff design, communicate, and assess programming for this high-impact practice? To what extent can program staff adapt to students' objectives or tailor communication to better align with them? A balance must be struck between adapting to students' objectives while also grounding our approach in foundational student development research. This includes encouraging students to pursue learning that may not align with their immediate objectives and may be challenging, but are essential for fostering meaningful learning and resilience (Sanford, 1966) and can connect with their personal goals. Addressing these questions could inform future research and improve the effectiveness of targeted communication strategies.

5.3. Challenges

The survey highlights that students face challenges in language, culture, and finances while studying abroad, areas that education abroad programs are already designed to address. However, the data shows that students often turn to peers and the quick, engaging, limitless content on social media, rather than faculty or administrators, for advice. Social media content, while offering inspiration, can also induce stress or FOMO, impacting students' cultural exploration and travel choices. As suggested in the discussion section of this paper, to provide a balanced and holistic understanding of their host country, students should be encouraged to curate their social media feeds to include culturally and linguistically valuable content from local creators and peers. Reassessing the information provided on expenses and budgeting and ensuring it is clear, accessible, and possibly even engaging, through sample budgets or worksheets and social media content developed by peers in collaboration with U.S. and local administrators could further enhance financial preparedness.

5.4. Successes

According to the survey, students noticed major shifts in three areas, namely increased global perspective, deeper cross-cultural awareness and understanding, personal growth in terms of improved language skills as well as higher self-confidence and independence. Students specifically cited their personal travel experiences, namely to various countries, as some of the most impactful for their cultural learning and the development of personal growth like independence and adapting to unexpected circumstances. While students' self-report of their cultural and linguistic learning and independence may not

always align with program assessments, this study seeks to acknowledge and highlight their perspectives. This may allow us to consider how assessments of student learning abroad can encompass both program objectives and student goals, successes, and personal growth. It is notable that a vast majority of students' open-ended responses demonstrate genuine interest in cultural learning and they often view their personal travel as an integral component of this process. Europe as a highly interconnected destination, with distinct languages and cultural traditions, may foster greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

6. Conclusion

Despite the inherent limitations of self-report studies, this research provides valuable insights into the motivations, expectations, challenges, and successes of semester- and year-long study abroad students in Europe, as well as how their social media engagement interacts with these factors. Follow-up studies similar in scope but focusing on the experience of students engaged in different program types and length would provide the necessary depth to examine the student experience from a more complete spectrum of programs.

Students overwhelmingly identified a primary shift in perspective during their time abroad, with an emphasis on enhanced global perspective, followed by personal growth and cultural understanding. While Europe's physical geography and interconnectedness serve as a backdrop for diverse cultural learning, it is important to recognize that this may not always translate to a deep understanding of its individual cultures. Even so, the alignment of students' reported learning with traditional high-impact program objectives can offer reassurance that the core benefits of education abroad remain enduring. Moreover, the study sheds light on the modern facet of student experiences: the extensive engagement with social media, utilized both for information and inspiration, albeit not devoid of challenges like FOMO and pressure. Understanding the nuanced impact of social media on students' expectations, experiences, and exploration requires educators to actively learn, question, engage with, and leverage these digital resources. Both practitioners and students can reflect on social media's influence on their experience and identify the contexts in which students have the most significant growth and learning and the extent to which general and social media related challenges can hinder or push forward that learning. Our research calls for greater understanding from both administrators and students about the impact of study abroad and social media on student learning and development while abroad today.

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