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Study Abroad and Career Progression: Exploring Students' Career Outlook While Abroad

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Abstract in English

The purpose of this research is to identify common meanings and experiences of students regarding their career outlook within the retail, hospitality and tourism sector who had the opportunity to engage in a three-week study abroad as an experiential learning activity. Through an in-depth understanding using qualitative focus groups with 13 students (immediately prior and following study abroad) and students' daily reflections, thematic analysis revealed three major themes were identified in the data: (1) experiences enhancing engagement with careers, (2) progression from career apprehension to appreciation, and (3) culture, passion, and lifestyle taking precedence. Our findings show that an experiential learning focused course design can be effective for helping students learn from the program activities and shape their career decisions.

Abstract in Chinese

本文旨在考察零售、酒店和旅游管理专业的学生参加一个三周的海外游学项目的感受，以及这个经历对学生职业发展的作用。通过对 13 个学生的深入小组访谈（参加项目之初及之后）以及日记的主题分析，我们得到了三个主题：（1）游学体验深化学生职业规划参与度；（2）从对职业规划的忧虑到理解；（3）学生看重企业文化，个人兴趣，和生活方式。我们的研究表明体验式学习有效提升了学生对自身的职业规划。

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1. Introduction

Experiential learning, where students are immersed into real-world scenarios outside of the classroom, has been beneficial to students' access to career opportunities (Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Orahod et al., 2004; Potts & Kim, 2023). In this mode of learning, students are able to actively participate in first-hand experiences that practically demonstrate professional practice within their fields of study (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning is particularly important within the academic fields of retail, hospitality, and tourism management, which are practically focused majors. While experiential learning includes various activities such as internships, case studies, long-term projects, or extra-curricular activities, a particularly valuable, and often life-changing experience for students includes studying abroad. In study abroad experiences, students are fully immersed within cultural learning experiences, without the distractions of day-to-day life on their university campus. The wide range of student benefits, including experiencing a new culture, gaining a competitive edge in the job-market by developing employable skills, and learning new academic knowledge (Berquist & Moore, 2019; Twombly et al., 2012) is fueling the increased offering of study abroad experiences within academic institutions (Ogden et al., 2020). Importantly, study abroad experiences also help orientate students to their professional careers which include global components, i.e., career sectors situated in a global context and/or includes elements of intercultural interactions (Potts & Kim, 2023), which is particularly true within the retail, hospitality, and tourism sectors.

While some research has identified the link between study abroad and career outlook (e.g., Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Orahod et al., 2004; Potts & Kim, 2023), there is still a lack of deeper understanding of students' perspective of their career outlook over the course of the study abroad experience. Previous research within the study abroad context has been interested in understanding more about students' perspectives on career interests (Kimberly, 2010; Orahod et al., 2004; Potts & Kim, 2023), but what is still missing is an in-depth perspective of the students' thoughts and ideas

related to their careers over the course of their study abroad experience. That is, there is an absence of direct insight into students' career ideas and perspectives while in the midst of being abroad. Additionally, considering reflection is a core component within the experiential learning process (Boud et al., 1993), obtaining students' reflections on the experiential learning activities is meaningful to recall learning outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify common meanings and experiences of students regarding their career outlook within the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors who had the opportunity to engage in study abroad as an experiential learning activity. This research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding through qualitative research using focus groups (immediately prior and following study abroad) and students' daily reflections. Specifically, the research question that guided this study was: What outcomes do students perceive regarding their career outlook based on their experiential learning study abroad activities?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Student Experiences with Study Abroad

Sample In the U.S., study abroad is broadly defined as off-campus study that takes place outside the student's home country which "results in progress toward an academic degree at a student's home institution" while "excludes the pursuit of a full academic degree at a foreign institution" (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011, p. 12). Hence, it includes a variety of program types allowing students to gain international experiences in different ways. For example, students can participate in semester or year-long exchanges (student enrolling in a foreign university), internships (international work experience), volunteering (community service and development projects), research (collaborate with local institutions to conduct research) and faculty-led programs (short term programs led by professors). Among all the different options, short-term experiences, such as faculty-led programs have been the most popular option in the past 20 years nationwide according to the Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education, 2023). This research was conducted over the course of a faculty-led program which focused on a specific subject which includes group travel with fellow students from their home institution. In the academic year of 2021/2022, 64.8% of the study abroad students chose a short-term program. Zhang et al. (2024) surveyed the study alumni between 2012 and 2022 from two large public universities in the U.S. and found 60.9% of the alumni participated in a faculty-led program. Not

surprisingly, short-term programs tend to be faculty-led during which the students are guided by faculty from their home university throughout the program and participate in tours and experiential learning activities as a group. While there are debates on the effectiveness of short-term programs, Strange and Gibson (2017) found that programs longer than 18 days showed a significantly higher chance for students to achieve transformative learning.

Although faculty-led programs are short, students engage in well-designed learning activities every day. Meaningful learning outcomes can yield from such programs. The most widely examined learning outcome of study abroad arguably is intercultural competence. For example, Anderson et al. (2006) used pre- and post-tests to examine changes in students' intercultural sensitivity after participating in a four-week study abroad program in England and Ireland. They found significant improvement in students' overall intercultural sensitivity measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer et al., 2003) score. Beyond intercultural competence, attention on the development of global perspective and global citizenship were increasing (Fisher et al., 2023). Tarrant et al. (2014, 2015) examined a series of short-term faculty-led programs themed around sustainability and the effectiveness of these programs in fostering global citizens. They used a quasi-experimental design comparing pre- and post-program results as well as results of study abroad students versus residential peers. They found that study abroad programs with a theme on sustainability were the most effective in improving students' global citizenship.

Merely proving the benefits of short-term faculty-led study abroad programs is not enough to help educators to improve program design. Therefore, Whatley et al. (2021) examined the relationship between specific program characteristics (duration, number of students, housing, language, home institution faculty-led activities, reflection, travel etc.) and student development (global perspective: cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal). They found that traveling with faculty from home institutes was positively associated with cognitive aspect of global perspective. Reflection activities were positively associated with the intrapersonal aspect of global perspective. They found students benefited from participating in internships and in-country independent travel. Luxton et al. (2022) also argued that it is program design rather than length that determines student learning outcomes. They showcased that by carefully integrating applied learning, project-based learning, and cultural learning, the students deepened their understanding of sustainability

and improved cultural awareness through a 12-day program in Costa Rica. In conclusion, the study abroad literature has shown that short-term faculty-led study abroad programs can be beneficial when carefully designed. However, fewer studies have explored the design of short-term faculty-led programs and students' career development. The next section will review existing literature on the impact of studying abroad on career progression.

2.2. Study Abroad and Career Progression

Existing studies have confirmed the positive impact of studying abroad on career development using self-reported surveys. In the 2000s, two nationwide retrospective longitudinal surveys were conducted with study abroad alumni across a span of 50 years. The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) conducted a survey with their study abroad alumni from 1950 to 1999 ($N= 3,723$) (Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Mohajeri Norris and Gillespie found that 77% of all the participants reported that they “acquired skills sets that influenced my career path,” and 62% reported that “my IES experience ignited interest in a career direction pursued” (p. 386). Similarly, the Beyond Immediate Impact: Study Abroad for Global Engagement (SAGE) research project conducted a large-scale survey which included 20 U.S. higher education institutions and two education abroad providers. A total of 6,391 responses were collected representing study abroad alumni from 1960 to 2005. The survey found that 35.2% of their participants indicated that study abroad has helped their career to a large degree (Paige et al., 2009). Such postponed surveys benefited from allowing students enough time, even decades, to mature and advance their career as well as reflecting on their study abroad experience before responding to the survey. Besides surveying students upon returning, pre- and post-tests have also been applied to confirm the impact of study abroad on student career choice. For example, Kronholz and Osborn (2016) found that students' vocational identity, i.e., a stable picture of personal goals, interests, and talents, was significantly improved after studying abroad. These studies provided clear evidence that study abroad experiences have a positive effect on career development.

The next question researchers explored was in what way study abroad experiences affected students' career development. A consistent finding was that studying abroad provides students with a better understanding of the self and career opportunities. Kronholz and Osborn (2016) found that students' career decision-making abilities were improved through studying abroad as the

experiences allow students to gain self-knowledge regarding interests, values, and skills; the ability to analyze how these traits relate to their career choice; and a more positive outlook on their career opportunities. Used qualitative methods, Jon et al. (2020) also found that new observation and hands-on experiences gained through study abroad allow students to crystalize their interests and career goals. A unique impact of studying abroad on careers is that the students are more likely to choose a career that is internationally oriented (Jon et al., 2020; Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Furthermore, study abroad experiences enhance students' global citizenship such as a better understanding of global interconnectivity and global responsibilities which inspire them to engage in careers that contribute to the public good and community impact as well as volunteering and civic engagement (DeGraaf et al., 2013; Jon et al., 2020; Zhang & Gibson, 2021).

While these studies reviewed above showed the positive impact of studying abroad on career development and the different ways study abroad can direct career choices, they did not focus on specific learning activities occurred during study abroad and link them with student career development. Another change in the landscape of study abroad is that short-term faculty-led programs have gained more popularity in recent years. The earlier studies could not represent this trend. Therefore, the current study focuses on students' experiences with company visits and immediate reflection.

2.3. Journaling, Reflection and Learning

Journaling and reflection as a learning activity has been demonstrated in literature to provide positive effects for students (Epp, 2008). The journal and reflection process (also referred to as keeping a diary, logging, or dialoguing) is a writing act where students are able to create written documents while thinking about concepts and events from previous exposure, with the purpose of gaining personal insight into the learning process (Thorpe, 2004). During the writing and reflection process, students build their own conceptual framework of the topic at hand, which stimulates deep thought and deep levels of learning (Bulman & Schulz, 2008; Callister, 1993). This type of deeper reflection allows students to become more effective at interpreting what they have learned, thus, they are able to make stronger connections between what they just learned with what they already know (Haigh, 2001). Thus, journaling and reflection can allow students to more effectively learn concepts (Burrows et al., 2001), which also

improves their critical thinking skills (Fakude & Bruce, 2003), as well as communication and leadership skills (Loo & Thorpe, 2002).

Journaling and reflection have also been used to help students with career guidance (Lengelle et al., 2013). These narrative approaches can aid students in addressing complex thoughts and ideas, and even insecurities, about one's individualized career journey (Meijers & Lengelle, 2015). While the activity of journaling and reflection has not been examined with respect to career outlook while students are studying abroad, the research derived from other disciplines indicates that journaling and reflection may be a useful tool for students to engage with their ideas about their career while also being exposed to different career options through experiential learning.

2.4. Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning, where students are involved and engaged in activities that are considered productive that are intended to mimic real-world work scenarios, but taking place outside the classroom (Sweitzer & King, 2004), has been shown to provide successful outcomes to students (Ortiz et al., 2015). Seminal research on experiential learning indicates that true learning cannot take place without experience (Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb (1984), learning that is based on memorization and subsequent regurgitation of such information lacks conscious activities, and thus, the groundwork for the holistic natures of experiential learning. While there is not a single way to learn and acquire new information, researchers indicate the importance of taking a 360-degree approach to more deeply understand new concepts. That is, concepts and ideas are needed to be shown and showcased in different ways multiple times, and within various settings in order to more fully understand the true meaning behind ideas (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning encourages students to explore concepts and new ideas in multiple ways, which allows for the conscious and subconscious benefits of experiential learning to be elicited.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory adopts a constructivist view of learning and emphasizes that learning is a process through which learners interact with their environment and continuously form their own understanding of the environment. Therefore, Kolb explained experiential learning as a cycle with four steps: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As Stone and Petrick (2013) argued, the experiential learning model provides a framework for understanding travel learning. The travel and site visits activities that occur

during studying abroad allow students to gain concrete experience which is oftentimes hard to achieve while learning in a residential classroom setting. Differ from traditional learning theories, experiential learning theory also emphasizes the role of reflection in learning. Passarelli and Kolb (2012) suggested faculty to guide students through reflection during studying abroad which create a safe learning space for students to explore on their own.

Within the retail, hospitality and tourism disciplines, experiential learning can often take the place of internships, case studies, long-term projects, or extra-curricular activities such as study abroad. These students are likely to experience in their industries fast-paced learning and on-the-go self-study before completing tasks, and are thus, likely to highly benefit from experiential learning activities (Green & du Plessis, 2023; Lai & Hui, 2018; Ogle et al., 2018). Thus, experiential learning, such as study abroad, can help to better equip students within these industries for career-related outcomes (Bradberry & De Maio, 2019). However, despite the clear benefits outlined through previous research, there is not a clear understanding of how these types of activities can help students think further about their own career options and endeavors. Previous research has primarily been focused on the relationship between experiential learning and actual career outcomes. Based on the conceptual understanding of experiential learning and established gaps within previous research, this study uses this theory as a lens to understand how students may explore their career-related endeavors while studying abroad.

3. Methods

3.1. Data Collection

Sample An in-depth interpretive inquiry and analysis was deemed the most appropriate for this research, given the lack of understanding on the research topic (Rashid et al., 2016). Thirteen students from a large Southeastern university enrollment in a three-week study abroad faculty-led program in Dublin, Ireland over the summer months. The program focused on a specific topic (retail, hospitality, and tourism management) and included group travel with fellow students from their home institution. In total, there were 12 female students (1 male), all studying within a retail, hospitality, and tourism department. Of the students, nine were in their third year of study, two were in their last year of study, and one student had completed their first year of study. Students enrolled were interested in careers related to retail, hospitality and

tourism management and the course was restructured with experiential learning objectives. Experiential learning is when students are involved and engaged in activities that mimic real-world scenarios outside the classroom (Ortiz et al., 2015). That is, student curriculum consisted of tours of facilities and talks, where students heard first-hand from directors, managers, owners, and/or operators of companies related to retail, hospitality, and tourism management. These talks were focused on career domains and industry speakers emphasized the competencies of success in their respective roles and their professional journey thus far. In this sense, students were exposed first-hand to various career opportunities across the retail, hospitality, and tourism sectors. The course included 10 tours and talks across the programs' three-week period.

Two methods of data collection took place to capture students' career outlook while studying abroad. First, two focus groups took place at (i) the initial class meeting with the 13 students while abroad, as well as at (ii) the final class meeting while abroad. Prior to conducting the focus groups, students were explained of research objectives and were informed that conversations were being recorded. All students were willing to participate and read and signed an informed consent document that thoroughly explained the research objects as well as the data collection and storage procedures. Given the exploratory nature of this research, the same size for focus groups for establishing reliability is in line with recommendations, and the findings reached theoretical saturation (Hodges, 2011). Focus groups are effective because discussions in groups bring to light not only what the participants think, but the way they think and why they think what they did (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Focus groups also allow participants to interact and bounce ideas off of one another. The focus groups in this study were around one hour in length each and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Each focus group started with an introduction, an overview of research objectives and informed consent. A semi-structured interview approach was utilized, starting with a grand tour question related to their travel experiences "Tell me about your international travel experiences"; (McCracken, 1988) and proceeded to more detailed questions related to travel and their career outlook, including "Tell me a bit about your current career goal", "Tell me a bit about how you think study abroad relates to your career goals and interests". Following, students were asked additional prompts such as "what motivated you to study abroad," and "please share a bit about what you anticipate (did) learn while study abroad as it relates to your career goals and interests."

The second method for data collection included a reflection response following each of the ten industry tours and talks. The purpose of reflection is to learn from and synthesize information and take time to reflect on how this new information relates to their career progression. For each reflection exercise, students were provided prompts that included directions to think further about their ideas for their career post-graduation and were encouraged to think about their own personal careers. Exposure to careers abroad allowed students to reflect and compare different career opportunities abroad and in the US. Over the 13 students with 10 reflections each, there were 130 data collection points for analysis.

3.2. Interpretive Data Analysis

Audio recordings from focus groups were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of participants. Following the directions recommended by McCracken (1998), we incorporated both focus group data and journal reflections for data analysis. According to McCracken (1988), the purpose of interpretive research using thematic analysis is to determine categories, relationships and assumptions based on the participants' view related to the topic. Using Rubin and Rubin's (1995) recommendations, data was read and reread by researchers to identify words and ideas that were frequent, pairs and opposites as well as possible relationships. This process occurred several times through a back-and-forth process until there were distinctive themes that emerged from the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997). To increase the validity of the data analysis, triangulation occurred among the researchers (Denzin, 1978) and any discrepancies that were found were discussed among the researchers until achieved agreement (Johnson et al., 2002). Following this systematic process from the particular to the general also increased the reliability of the data analysis (McCracken, 1988).

3.2. Student Study Abroad Experiences

Students participated in a three-week study abroad experience in Dublin, Ireland. For most students, this was their inaugural out-of-country trip, where they would be exposed to a new country and culture. During this experience, students were immersed into professional life in Ireland through a series of tours and talks with company owners/managers within the retail, hospitality, and tourism sectors. In total, students visited and heard from seven executives, with each tour and talk lasting around an hour and a half.

4. Interpretation

Based on the interpretation of the data, there are three major themes identified in the data: (i) Experiences enhance engagement with careers, (ii) Progression from career apprehension to appreciation, and (iii) Culture, passion and lifestyle took precedence.

4.1. Experience Enhances Engagement with Careers

Notably, students repeatedly expressed their career outlook enhancement based on hearing directly through their experience with owners/managers about their career progression and outlook. This expression took place in students' solidification of career choices, as expressed by Ida: "I would love to hold a management position in my future career and hearing this [company] speech heavily influenced me to continue that career goal." It was also echoed by Chloe: "Career-wise I have known for a long time that I wanted to go into a leadership managerial position. This company tour and talk really solidified it for me."

While some students felt inspired to continue with their career vision, the experiences students gained from company visits and hearing executives talk directly about their business also inspired students to explore career options they had not previously considered. The influence of these experiential learning tours and talks while studying abroad were especially helpful for students considering careers across the retail and hospitality sectors. For example, while students may have been interested in one area (e.g., retail), exposure through experiential learning within other areas in the service industry (e.g., restaurants, hotels, tourism), opened their eyes to additional possibilities for related careers and eased any previous concerns about selecting a narrow career path. This is expressed further by Amelia:

[This tour and talk] were important because it shows how in a career, you do not need to stay in the same job realm, you can branch off and try something else. Sometimes it may be scary picking a career because you may be worried that what you choose is what you have to stay in for a long time, but it was nice to see that is not the case, and you can have a successful career in all fields that you choose, as long as you do your job well.

The scheduled experiential learning tours and talks while studying abroad also opened students minds about career opportunities they have not

previously considered, stating phrases such as, “haven’t thought about [career choice] before” (Amelia), “This experience made me want to look into owning or working for a small business” (Harper), or that they “got a whole new perspective on jobs and working” (Rachel), or even “was inspired to hopefully own my own business one day” (Julie). Kate further expresses this idea of how experiential learning company tours and talks can both open students’ minds on career ideas, but also help them focus on career outcomes:

I’ve got a year to graduate and I am still trying to figure out just where I want to go in the industry. This [company tour and talk] is yet another example of something I hadn’t thought about that seemed super interesting to consider. Going into [career idea] sounds very appealing to me, but I didn’t really consider how I would get there with the degree I’ve chosen. This opened my eyes and reminded me how heavily [career idea] focuses on my degree.

Clearly, by participating in experiential learning tours and talks while studying abroad, students became engaged with their career opportunities, extending beyond their original career ideas. Their study abroad experience was observed as transformational, changing their worldview on what may be possible for their career opportunities. This dedicated time to process and reflect on different career options was critical to expand their career outlook.

4.2. Career Apprehension to Appreciation

Interestingly, students started their study abroad experience with a stark apprehension regarding their career ideas, regardless of their industry experience or educational levels. When first sharing their ideas about career ideas, students at the beginning of their study abroad experience were hesitant to talk about career goals and ideas, and instead, as a group, they wanted to avoid the topic of career outlook. Many stated that they held confusion around which direction they should go in for their career and did not have clear ideas of where they should start their career post-graduation. However, over the course of their study abroad experience, students became more open to talking about their career ideas, often expressing their excitement for the discovery of a new career option. Students often made comments that expressed their appreciation for hearing directly from a variety of companies, such as “I’m so glad we got to meet with [owner] and get a glimpse into what their career has held for them” (Sophia). This exposure to new companies and various company cultures encouraged more appreciation for career ideas, and it contributed to easing some of the students’ fears regarding their career opportunities and

interests. Additionally, being exposed to another culture encouraged students to think differently about their appreciation for career options, namely careers that could accommodate their appreciation for a work-life balance that includes their love of traveling. Students saw first-hand that many company owners/managers were effectively balancing their work with their passion for travel; an endeavor that many students expressed wanting to emulate when they enter the workforce. Sophia best expresses these ideas:

[Company owner's] prioritization of travel and time off is something I really hope for in a future career, either with who I am working for or having the ability to make those decisions myself. I think travel is one of the most important things you can do for yourself in terms of education and life experience.

While it was clear that students may have begun their study abroad journey with an apprehension regarding their career outlook, their first-hand experiences hearing from various company owners/managers of various businesses allowed for greater ease of their career concerns, even opening their minds on an appreciation for career options that lend themselves to a particular desirable lifestyle.

4.3. Company Culture, Passion, and Lifestyle Took Precedence

Interestingly, while students expressed interest in the roles and responsibilities of various career opportunities, students were more concerned about seeking a desirable company culture, maintaining a passion for their line of work, and providing the ability to balance their life outside of work with their career. Whenever an owner/manager emphasized their devotedness to ensuring employees are well looked after in terms of job satisfaction and career progression, students commented on how they desire to work for a company with such values and company culture. When hearing from managers with this employee focus, it caught students' attention who made comments such as, "This is the kind of company I would like to work at or even the manager I would like to work for because it is obvious that this is a caring atmosphere where you want to grow as a person" (Rachel). Amelia further emphasized this thought:

Sometimes with careers it is scary to think that your employer may not have your best interests in mind, and just want you to do your job. Seeing how these managers actually want to help their employees and not only want them to do their assigned job but learn about other positions to

work their way up, showed me that people do want to help you and do want to see you succeed.

Students also were drawn toward owners/managers who displayed a deep passion for their field of work, regardless of how long they have worked within the industry. Students repeatedly showed interest in company tours and talks in which the owner/manager was enthusiastically passionate about their industry, often commenting that they were drawn toward career opportunities where they would be mentored by such passionate managers and that they hoped to keep the same level of passion for their industry years into their career.

5. Discussion

Overall, the main contribution of the current study is twofold. First, from a methodological perspective, it collected qualitative data and compared the results from before and after the program which better revealed the impact of the program activities on students' development compared to most studies which collect data post-program retrospectively or merely quantitative data before and after programs. Second, retail, hospitality, and tourism are industries that are highly intertwined with the experience of studying abroad. This study is the first to focus on how study abroad can benefit students majoring in these areas, and the industry-specific competencies gained through such programs.

When students are able to immerse themselves in real-world activities that mirror industry practices, it provides an opportunity to think further about their own career opportunities (Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Orahod et al., 2004; Potts & Kim, 2023). This active engagement allows students to participate in real-world activities that showcase professional practice (Kolb, 1984). These types of experiences for students are particularly important for students studying for careers within the retail, hospitality, and tourism sectors, which are practically focused careers. Study abroad as an experiential learning activity can be particularly valuable for students in these majors because these industry sectors are situated in a global context and often include elements of intercultural interactions. While there has been some focus within research on connecting students' study abroad experiences with their career outlooks (Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Orahod et al., 2004; Potts & Kim, 2023), research has focused on post-experience career actions, rather than any changes that may occur within students' perspective regarding their careers during the time of the study

abroad experience. Therefore, this research sought to identify common meanings and experiences of students regarding their career outlook within the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors who had the opportunity to engage in study abroad as an experiential learning activity. Through this investigation, this research was able to capture whether the study abroad experience itself was responsible for any changes in thoughts or ideas regarding students' career outlook, providing some implications for both theory and practice.

Given the method employed and sample size, research findings cannot be generalized. Despite this, important findings can shed light on program implementation and impact. The findings of this study showed that for this group of students, a study abroad experience added value to their career outlook. In essence, the study abroad experience allowed for focused time, away from other academic or personal distractions, in which students could fully immerse themselves in learning about different career opportunities. This is particularly helpful for students within the retail, hospitality, and tourism fields, which are highly practical and industry-focused. It was clear from the data that for these students, the experiential learning activities of visiting several different businesses across the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors allowed for students to feel inspired to continue with their career vision and also to think further about career options less considered. As a valuable aspect of participation in these experiential learning activities, students were exposed to all areas across the services industry (i.e., retail, hospitality and tourism management) and this exposure encouraged students in this group to consider career opportunities across sectors, which they otherwise may not have considered.

Interestingly, in the short period of time while studying abroad, several students in this group found themselves going from career apprehension (e.g., I am not sure what I would like to do as a career), to career appreciation. That is, at the beginning of the study abroad experience several students expressed their dismay for not knowing what they would like to do for their career, however, over time, several students started to showcase their excitement for the discovery of new career options and ideas. This concentrated exposure to company visits and managerial talks allowed for more open discussion about students' career opportunities, and it encouraged greater thought about the lifestyle that students want to live while pursuing their career. Namely, students in this group began to appreciate careers that encouraged an active lifestyle outside of their jobs.

Additionally, it became clear that students in this group observed and appreciated careers which were situated in a desirable company culture. Students were eager to show passion for their line of work, but they also sought the opportunity to maintain their life outside of work through a balanced work/life approach. Students in this group were drawn toward owners/managers which openly talked about their lifestyle and work/life balance and students expressed their hope that they would be able to maintain the same level of industry passion and lifestyle.

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The design of the site visit paired with guest speakers and reflection follows the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). Our findings showed that such a design is effective in helping students learn from program activities and shape their career decisions. Also, such designs equip students to be better learners. At the activity level, each site visit follows the cycle of experiential learning in that the students engage in concrete experience by touring the facility and interacting with the owner or director. Because they are asked to write reflection journals, the students actively engage in reflective observation during their visit. They would take notes, photos, and ask questions. Immediately after the visit, they write a reflection journal that consolidates their understanding of the experience and construct their own “abstract conceptualization” about the business strategies and career opportunities they learn that day. The students then move on to their next site visit and start comparing the different visits. In short, each visit itself follows the cycle of experiential learning. At the program level, the entire trip can be viewed as one experience as part of the students’ college experience. The group discussion at the beginning and at the end of the program once again helps the students to analyze their experiences as well as the changes in the self. Previous studies have found that these travel and learning experiences can provide students with a rich source on which they reflect years later and continuously shape their self-understanding as well as worldview (Dukes, 2006). In other words, practicing reflections during studying abroad not only helps students with self-understanding and career decisions, but also allows students to improve their learning skills. Not all students know how to reflect without guidance. With multiple site visits compacted in a three-week span, they became better learners and took ownership of learning (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

College students are fully aware and feel pressured by the idea that they need to decide their career direction before they graduate. While having freedom and agency to make life decisions for oneself is welcomed and highly valued by young adults, such decisions cannot be made without understanding the self as well as knowledge of potential opportunities. Multiple site visits and interactions with different business leaders in a short-term study abroad program is an efficient way for students to gain knowledge about potential opportunities. Pairing such interaction with reflection journals and group discussions helps students to evaluate their own career outlook. It is important to select a variety of different businesses to open the students' minds while keeping the businesses related to the students' major so they see the connections between what they are learning in school and careers they may pursue.

Kronholz and Osborn (2016) found that students became more positive about their career outlook after studying abroad. Our study showed that it is the speakers' successful stories, especially how they dealt with hardship, which inspired the students. While business-specific operational knowledge is important, we suggest speakers to intentionally share their life experiences and how they get through difficulties. It is clearly helpful for students to see an individual being successful in an area that they are interested in. More often, even if the industry the speaker is in does not perfectly match the students' interest, they also get inspired by the speakers' resilience and adaptability.

It might be because jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors tend to have long hours and involve emotional labor, our students pay special attention to employee well-being and work-life balance when making career decisions. This aspect of career decision has not been largely discussed in previous literature on study abroad and career development. We encourage study abroad instructors and speakers to include this dimension when discussing career development in retail and hospitality with the students.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of this research was to identify common meanings and experiences of students regarding their career outlook within the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors who had the opportunity to engage in a 3-week study abroad as an experiential learning activity. Given the methodology employed and sample size, results of this study are not generalizable. Additional research is needed to add to the external validity of findings. Additionally, it may be possible that similar outcomes may occur if students were highly

engaged over a period of time with employers in their home country. While authors believe that being abroad allows students to shed other obligations and distractions that they may otherwise have had in their home country which allows them to be fully immersed in and benefit from the experiential learning activities, further empirical study is needed to confirm (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). It is recommended that additional research be conducted that compares short-term intense engagement with employers in a study abroad and non-study abroad context.

While our research investigated career progression over the course of a three-week study abroad faculty-led program, it would be interesting to compare students' career perceptions and interests over different study abroad lengths (short term, e.g., three-week study abroad faculty-led program, vs longer-term, e.g., semester-long study abroad), and experiences (e.g., coursework related vs internship experiences). These comparisons will add value to both theory and practice by advancing our understanding of student career progressions.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 07488-XM). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Tennessee and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have no conflicts of interest, including affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access to the data may be subject to confidentiality agreements or institutional policies.

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