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Study Abroad for Climate Justice: a critical discourse analysis of sustainability engagement in international education

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Abstract

This study examines discourses of sustainability (dis)engagement across 22 US higher education study abroad websites. Using Study Abroad for Climate Justice (SACJ), a deductive analytical framework developed from existing literature, alongside Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Kress, 2010), it analyzes how textual and visual representations of study abroad support and/or belie climate justice. SACJ identifies four discourse categories: Status Quo, Awareness, Leadership, and Reconstruction. Most websites fall under Status Quo, promoting touristic and ego-centric narratives with no mention of sustainability. Awareness discourses show emerging yet superficial engagement with sustainability, emphasizing individual over systemic responsibility. A minority of websites espouse Leadership discourses, signaling more proactive and institutionalized approaches to sustainability engagement. However, no websites reflect Reconstruction, which would require reimagination of study abroad as eco-centric. Based on the findings, SACJ is refined as a practical tool to guide dialogue and action toward ecologically just futures of mobility.

Keywords

Climate change, sustainability, social justice, critical discourse analysis, outbound student mobility

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1. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, awareness of humanity's shared vulnerabilities has intensified, renewing calls for solidarity across borders (Mak et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2020). Climate change, once viewed as a distant threat, now demands attention across the global community, as its gravest impacts fall disproportionately on marginalized groups, including low-income populations, people of color, the Global South, people with disabilities, rural residents, women, and youth (Berberian et al., 2022; Sanson et al., 2019). This (re)framing of climate change is captured by the concept of climate justice, which emphasizes the unequal burdens of climate consequences and presses for systemic solutions informed by those most affected (Newell, 2022).

Nevertheless, existing alongside climate change is a sustained interest in study abroad among college students seeking success in a globalizing world (Ch'ng et al., 2022; Kishino & Takahashi, 2019; Stebleton et al., 2013). Research links study abroad to significant academic, professional, intercultural, and personal growth (Dolby, 2007; Hadis, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Roy et al., 2019). At the same time, the field of international education has been criticized for its reliance on carbon-intensive air travel and neoliberal rationales that prioritize individual fulfillment over ecological responsibility (Baer, 2023; Rumbley, 2020). These tensions are further complicated by rising climate anxiety among college-aged youth and practitioners, many of whom report psychological distress over the perceived environmental doom and the dissonance between their values and actions (Campbell et al., 2023; El Zoghbi & El Ansari, 2014; Kelly, 2017; Nikula et al., 2023; Plautz, 2020; Verlie, 2019).

International education thus faces an ethical dilemma in the era of polycrisis and polarization. This dilemma revolves around whether study abroad– historically accessible to racially and socio-economically privileged students (Olcon, 2020; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012)– should continue at the cost of a significant environmental footprint that harms vulnerable communities worldwide. The field now stands at a crossroads: evolve into a transformative force for sustainable development or remain an exclusionary system that perpetuates injustices.

1.1. Context and Purpose of Study

The prolonged travel shutdown caused by COVID-19 in 2020 prompted the international education community to rethink mobility amid heightened global interdependence and uncertainties. There has been a growing movement to interrogate the privilege-related and climate implications of internationalization activities (i.e., Climate Action Network for International Educators [CANIE], 2022; McBride & Nikula, 2023). Yet moving beyond 'business-as-usual' remains difficult, as efforts to create change are constrained by differing ideological beliefs and competing daily operational priorities (Campbell & Nguyen, 2023). Climate skepticisms persist across many higher education institutions (HEIs) and among the American public (Filho et al., 2019; Pasquini et al., 2023). Dominant study abroad narratives remain grounded in market-driven, short-sighted institutional goals, such as enrollment numbers, program variety, and profit, rather than commitments to the public good, ecological responsibility included (McCowan, 2023; Shields & Lu, 2023). Furthermore, the US government's attacks on environmental policies have fostered a hostile political context for this work (Copley, 2025; Galles et al., 2025).

This study argues that bridging the divide between international education and climate issues should begin with a critical reflection on sustainability engagement discourses in study abroad. To this end, it seeks to unearth and name the manners in which study abroad offices demonstrate discursive engagement– or lack thereof– with sustainability. Utilizing "Study Abroad for Climate Justice" (SACJ), an analytical framework developed from a literature review, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study examines images and texts from websites across 22 institutional study abroad offices in the US, consisting of those with highest pre-COVID outbound mobility and those that have published dedicated sustainability content. The research question guiding this study is: In what ways, and to what extent, do the textual and visual representations within US study abroad support and/or belie climate justice?

2. Literature Review

International mobility in higher education expands worldviews, builds cross-border partnerships, facilitates groundbreaking research, and can leave lifelong impacts on those involved, thereby contributing to the betterment of society (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Ironically, little attention has been given to how

mobility interacts with the broader ecosystem on which all livelihoods depend (Rumbley, 2020). Scholarship on international education has only recently begun to grapple with this disconnect and envision possibilities for change. This review examines three bodies of literature, situating US study abroad within its underlying power structures, its environmental footprint, and emerging pathways toward greater alignment with ecological priorities. Each body of literature will then inform the construction of the study's analytical framework.

The review also engages two key terms: sustainability and climate justice. Sustainability refers to the interdependence of all beings and systems on the planet (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010; Purvis et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2026). Climate justice reframes climate change from a technocratic focus on greenhouse gas emissions to a justice-oriented one that highlights the structural violence of climate challenges (Kinol et al., 2023).

2.1. Power Structures of Study Abroad

The early development of US study abroad can be traced back to the "Grand Tour of Europe" (Contreras Jr., 2015) in the 18th and 19th century, a coming-of-age tradition embraced by wealthy, predominantly White college students who traveled to Europe to study art and architecture and to network with elites. During the two World Wars and Cold War, government- and university-funded immersion programs emerged rapidly, sending tens of thousands of students abroad, often with peace-building or national security goals embedded (Contreras Jr., 2015; Ogden & Brewer, 2018). By the late Cold War period, study abroad became popularized, constantly expanding to include more destinations and experience types (Nguyen, 2023).

As a sector, US study abroad is influenced by Western institutional values. The expansion of opportunities for students to travel for educational and professional enrichment aligns with ideals of individualism and free-market competition (Bista, 2018; Choudaha, 2017; Shkoler et al., 2020). Students are encouraged to study abroad to acquire forms of capital such as foreign language proficiency, overseas professional networks, and adaptability, all of which constitute labor-market advantages (Salisbury et al., 2009). Yet marketization also raises equity concerns. In the US, study abroad participation has long depended on socioeconomic resources, family support, and access to enabling community networks (Acevedo, 2022; Murray Brux & Fry, 2010; Simon &

Ainsworth, 2012). Consequently, US study abroad is disproportionately represented by middle- and upper-class White students, while low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color remain underrepresented (Acevedo, 2022; Trentman, 2019). Despite increased efforts to diversify participation in recent years, White students still make up around 70 percent of outbound participants (Institute on International Education [IIE], 2023), despite representing only 41 percent of US college enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2024). Moreover, students of color regularly report experiences with discrimination, exclusion, and violence abroad (Johnstone et al., 2020; Phillip, 2018; Shen, 2015), while White students are less likely to face such challenges (Ming, 2022).

Mobility justice scholarship further attests to the power asymmetries that shape mobility patterns between the Global North and the Global South. While students from the Global South often migrate to the Global North as a costly long-term strategy for educational and professional advancement (Chen, 2017; de Haas et al., 2020; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), students from the Global North typically view mobility to the Global South through the lens of short-term charitable service or hedonistic tourism (Namakkal, 2013; Sharpe, 2015; Zuchowski et al., 2017). In the US, promotional materials of study abroad programs and international academic partnerships frequently encode narratives of saviorism and Orientalism, reifying the global hierarchy that privileges Western hegemony (Fahmi & Liska, 2024; Onyenekwu et al., 2017; Trentman & Diao, 2017; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015).

Given these dynamics, it can be argued that the market-driven logics and colonial foundations of US study abroad construct a troubling representational system, positioning Western (read: White) individuals as the default "main characters" and alienating those who do not fit into that image (Acevedo, 2022; Blake et al., 2020). This critique is central for understanding how these power structures may inhibit the sector's alignment with sustainability and climate justice. Progress would require all stakeholders to confront such imbalance through expanding access to underrepresented students, co-creating curricula with host communities, and supporting long-term, community-driven investments. These efforts can help reorient programs away from extractive practices and toward reciprocal ones that more directly support engagement with climate issues.

2.2. Environmental Footprint of Study Abroad

Globally, more than 6 million students pursue tertiary education outside their country of citizenship (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). Shields (2019) estimates that student mobility activities generate roughly 40 megatons of greenhouse gas emissions annually, comparable to the emissions of Jamaica, Tunisia, and Croatia combined. In the US, before COVID-19, over 350,000 college students studied abroad (IIE, 2023a). Of all the flights taken by US students in the 2018-2019 academic year, 67.4 percent were to Europe and Asia, which required long-distance, highly carbon-intensive air travel (IIE, 2023b). Total emissions from these flights in a single year are estimated at 2.5 million tons– greater than those of the 65 lowest-emitting countries in 2014 (Hale, 2019). Not to mention, 62.2 percent of experiences undertaken by US students that year lasted eight weeks or less (IIE, 2023c). These statistics raise questions about whether the benefits of predominantly long-haul, short-term study abroad justify their implied environmental costs.

Recent advocacy movements by NAFSA, Forum on Education Abroad, and Climate Action Networks for International Educators (CANIE) have motivated practitioners to start implementing sustainable travel practices. These include carbon tracking, offsets, lower-carbon learning activities, recycling, and guidance on eco-friendly habits for students (see Bound International, 2022; Gallagher, 2022; Green Passport Program, 2016; Redden, 2019; Robinson et al., 2023). However, these interventions remain ad-hoc, conservationist in emphasis, and mostly confined to individual responsibility– rather than confronting institutional accountability and the systemic nature of ecological harm.

Past studies also show that the siloed structures of HEIs stifle interdisciplinary conversations, leaving practitioners isolated and frustrated in attempts to integrate sustainability into day-to-day work (Campbell et al., 2023; Gale et al., 2015; Nikula et al., 2023; Robinson, 2011). Campbell and Nguyen (2023) found that many practitioners strived to set a good example to students, adopting habits such as recycling, taking public transportation, buying from local businesses, and consuming less meat. Yet they reported lacking the technical knowledge, confidence, time, and institutional support needed to push for deeper organizational and sectoral change.

2.3. Pathways to Climate Justice

Regarding pathways forward, scholars diverge into two major perspectives. One focuses on opportunities for incremental change through pedagogical, programmatic, and operational reforms within existing structures (Bell et al., 2016; Shannon et al., 2023). The other calls for more radical change, envisioning a departure from dominant capitalist systems toward ecologically just alternatives (see Baer, 2023; McCowan, 2023).

Numerous scholars in the first group argue that study abroad programs can cultivate appreciation toward low-consumption lifestyles in other cultures and foster long-lasting pro-environmental behavior (Beck & Pires, 2023; Bell et al., 2016; Buckley et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2023; McLaughlin, 2020; Shannon et al., 2023; Zhang & Gibson, 2021). Some others advocate for the incorporation of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) into program design (Martin & Roe, 2023; Lucas et al., 2023). Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner (2015) suggest encouraging students to take sustainability courses abroad, as they can significantly enhance global competencies. Other proposed interventions include investing in destinations with opportunities for sustainability learning, selecting partners with shared sustainability goals, making carbon monitoring a part of program evaluation, and training study abroad personnel to lead discussions with students on how mobility intersects with social justice (Dvorak et al., 2011).

However, Hale (2019) cautions that educational travel may still harm local cultures and landscapes even when it produces pro-environmental learning outcomes. Responsibilities owed to the host communities must be prioritized throughout the curriculum, so that students, faculty, and staff can critically examine their identities– as privileged visitors, as humble learners, and as accountable, compassionate change agents. Ficarra and Long (2023) similarly connect sustainability efforts with the ongoing need in study abroad to adopt decolonial approaches that center local knowledge.

Hale's argument bridges into the radical visions shared by scholars in the second group. These scholars push the field to proactively respond to the catastrophic consequences of Western capitalism and the existential threat of a faltering planet. McCowan (2023) calls for a climate change-driven pedagogical renewal, emphasizing the danger of conformity to existing systems of

production and how diverse epistemologies, cultural critique, and regenerative learning must redefine higher education amid the climate crisis. Baer (2023) puts forth an eco-socialist model to reshape internationalization activities beyond capitalist parameters. Baer highlights local scholarship and slow scholarship, encouraging academics to detach from the 'rapid productivity' narratives of the neoliberal university. This pushback would include avoiding excessive overseas travel for career purposes and spending more time connecting at home.

Related "slow mobility" proponents argue that the fast-paced and busy schedules of many short-term study abroad programs create little room for authentic connection, thereby fostering an environment conducive to exploitative dynamics. They propose slower-paced and longer programs to deepen immersion, to honor the full journey– not just the destinations, and to strengthen students' ties with local communities (DIS Study Abroad, n.d.; Erasmus Student Network, 2023; IES Abroad, 2024; Resnevic, 2023). Additionally, scholars have identified several 'Internationalization at Home' (IaH) initiatives– including COIL, multicultural service-learning, study away, and virtual conferences– as more carbon-friendly and accessible alternatives to traditional study abroad (Campbell et al., 2023; Chasi & Heleta, 2023; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Havemann & Arochi-Zendejas, 2023; Martin & Roe, 2023).

As discussed, US study abroad carries many capitalist and colonial tendencies that enable extractive and uncritical approaches to learning (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Acevedo, 2022; Sharpe, 2015; Sweeney, 2013). These tendencies can be understood partly as legacies of Western industrialization– historically characterized by institutional racism, human-nature separation, individualistic ambition, and large-scale resource acquisition and consumption (Parvanova, 2017). Over time, this trajectory has deepened humanity's detachment from the land and propagated ideologies of supremacy, devastating communities around the world and contributing to a global order rooted in race, class, and geopolitics (Komatsu et al., 2019; Williams, 2021). Current efforts– be it to lower the carbon footprint of programs or to identify opportunities for sustainability advancement within existing structures– remain largely fragmented and experimental, leaving practitioners constrained in their ability to learn, grow, and meaningfully collaborate in this work (Campbell et al., 2023).

Climate justice therefore offers a powerful conceptual lens that underscores humanity's shared duty to dismantle the structural inequities entrenched in ecological destruction and to amplify the voices of climate-vulnerable groups (Kinol et al., 2023). Applied to study abroad, this concept can transform programs from a self-centered ("ego") paradigm, which prioritizes individual gain, to one rooted in critical reflection, mutual respect, and co-construction for collective well-being ("eco") (Scharmer, 2022). The SACJ framework, introduced next, is developed to dissect how discursive practices in US study abroad interact with broader power relations governing mobility and the uneven uptake of ecological responsibility within the sector.

3. Analytical Framework

Drawing from the three bodies of literature and the conceptual grounding of climate justice, the first version of "Study Abroad for Climate Justice" (SACJ) was drafted. This framework seeks to theorize categories of sustainability (dis)engagement discourses in study abroad, with each category corresponding to a strand of literature discussed above. Following Fairclough (2001), "discourse" refers to language as a social practice through which meanings are produced, and relations of power are replicated or contested. SACJ is not intended as an evaluation rubric, but as a tool to surface key dynamics between contemporary mobility narratives and climate justice in the data. The findings will ultimately inform a refinement of SACJ into a professional development tool. The first draft of SACJ appears in Table 1 and is elaborated in the sub-sections that follow.

TABLE (1)
FIRST DRAFT OF SACJ

Category 1: Status Quo	Category 2: Awareness	Category 3: Leadership	Category 4: Reconstruction
Organizational discourses do not demonstrate sustainability engagement.	Organizational discourses have recognized the environmental footprint of study abroad but lack confidence and vision to lead sustainability efforts.	Organizational discourses demonstrate proactive engagement with sustainability, highlighting concrete action steps and strategies to lead sustainability efforts.	Organizational discourses disrupt the ideological, structural, and procedural constructions of study abroad to center authentic connection, reciprocity, ecological consciousness, and transformative impact.
Corresponds to *2.1, Power Structures of US Study Abroad.*	Corresponds to *2.2, Environmental Footprint of Study Abroad.*	Corresponds to first perspective under *2.3, Pathways to Climate Justice*	Corresponds to second perspective under *2.3, Pathways to Climate Justice*

3.1. Category 1 – Status Quo

Category 1 describes organizations whose discourses reproduce the touristic narratives of study abroad, emphasizing consumption-oriented features such as cultural immersion, personal growth, and global adventure, without reference to ecological impact or responsibility. Category 1 aligns with the discursive patterns identified in the first body of literature. It underlines the compelling need among US study abroad offices to address the power structures that shape the mobility landscape and pose barriers to climate justice.

3.2. Category 2 – Awareness

Category 2 represents an initial step toward change. Its organizational discourses acknowledge the environmental impact of study abroad and the importance of sustainable travel. However, they mostly focus on managing carbon consumption through air-travel offsets and individualized resource conservation practices. Category 2 aligns with the second body of literature, which discusses, (1) the estimated carbon costs of study abroad, (2) practitioners' strenuous effort to lower that footprint in any way possible, and (3) systemic

constraints limiting shared sustainability leadership within organizations and across the sector.

3.3. Category 3 – Leadership

Category 3 describes discourses that demonstrate proactive sustainability engagement. Unlike Category 2, these discourses embody more cohesive, intentional leadership. They may include evidence of sustainable program operations and curricular topics that signal the presence of high-impact dialogues on the relationship between global learning and ecological well-being. Category 3 aligns most closely with pathways to climate justice supported by the first perspective in the third body of literature.

3.4. Category 4 – Reconstruction

Lastly, Category 4 describes organizational discourses that pursue a bold reimagining of ideological, structural, and procedural constructions of study abroad. Here, the role, ethics, and long-term relevance of study abroad amid the climate crisis become sites of ever-evolving ideation. Centering climate justice, Category 4 organizations would diligently draw on the histories, cultural contexts, lived experiences, and needs of host communities to determine the goals, format, curricular content, evaluation mechanisms, and future developments of programs. Instead of privileging market-driven metrics, such as student demand, profit, credits, and activity volume, the foundational blueprint of all experiences would be based on deliberate dialogue, deep relationality, knowledge co-construction, and a commitment to long-lasting, mutual transformation. Category 4 aligns with the visionary proposals put forth by the second perspective in the third body of literature. It calls for a systemic change of international education from predominantly transactional models to eco-centric paradigms.

4. Method

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design, while also offering exploratory insight into an underexamined phenomenon (Stebbins, 2001; Thorne, 2016). It employs climate justice as a conceptual lens, SACJ as an analytical framework, and CDA as an analytical strategy to interpret data from 22 US institutional study abroad websites. Given that CDA relies heavily on the analyst's positionality (Fairclough, 2001), I, the researcher, acknowledge the

influence of my lived experience on this work. I am a first-generation immigrant who was raised in Vietnam and came of age in the US. During my undergraduate education, I learned about study abroad through the dominant representations of mobility in US higher education that often felt disconnected from my own migration story. Having left home at 15, I long perceived study abroad as a milestone adventure designed for privileged US students who would never need to move continents away for a better future. This personal dissonance informs the critical lens through which I approach the study.

4.1. Data Collection

A total of 102 textual and visual artifacts were collected from 22 study abroad websites affiliated with US HEIs between early 2023 and late 2024. Artifacts consisted of screen-captured excerpts from publicly available content used to promote and educate students on study abroad, namely homepages, landing pages, program descriptions, featured photos, official statements, testimonials, and resource pages. Because this study sought to illustrate discourses of sustainability (dis)engagement across websites as theorized by SACJ, artifacts were strategically selected based on their analytical relevance to institutional messaging about mobility and sustainability. Inclusion criteria favored materials that communicated the purpose, expectations and outcomes of study abroad, and those that referenced environmental topics or ecological responsibility. Excluded were materials with limited relevance, such as purely logistical or administrative content (i.e., application instructions and office hours).

Representing HEIs were selected through purposive sampling. The initial sample was generated from IIE's (2023d) outbound mobility data, focusing on 10 HEIs with highest study abroad participation rates between 2015 and 2019, as these institutions help shape dominant mobility narratives in the field. Early analysis revealed that only two out of the 10 websites featured sustainability content beyond discipline-specific program descriptions. This observation suggested limited discursive engagement with sustainability among high-volume senders of outbound students, warranting the subsequent expansion of the sample.

To ensure sufficient representation of sustainability engagement discourses, a second round of sampling focused exclusively on institutional

offices that had published dedicated language on sustainability. Twelve additional websites were identified through targeted searches and collegial recommendations. The final sample (n = 22) included public four-year (n = 8), private four-year (n = 8), and private liberal arts institutions (n = 6).

4.2. Data Analysis

Analysis was implemented through an iterative combination of deductive and inductive tools. Specifically, SACJ (see Table 1) served as an initial deductive lens to guide first-order attention to patterns of sustainability (dis)engagement across the sample. Meanwhile, CDA guided an inductive interpretation of artifacts' discursive features.

Textual analysis drew on Fairclough's (2001) 'discourse as a social practice' approach, examining texts across three dimensions: discourse as text, which highlights the descriptive linguistic details (i.e., grammatical structure, word choice, and rhetorical organization), discourse as interaction, which concerns the analyst's interpretation of the text, and discourse as context, which involves broader historical and societal conditions influencing the interpretive process. Visual analysis was grounded in Kress' (2010) multimodal social semiotic approach, which emphasizes how meaning-making is directed through various elements beyond texts, such as imagery, gesture, composition, gaze, layout, color, and navigational design.

In practice, textual and visual analyses were conducted in tandem, with insights from each enriching the other. This complementary integration of Fairclough's (2001) and Kress' (2010) approaches allowed for a holistic analysis of both textual and visual dimensions of the data. It was particularly well-suited for unearthing the ideological assumptions that shape study abroad offices' relationships– or lack thereof– with climate justice.

4.3. Data Organization

As inductive analysis progressed, artifacts were classified into distinct discursive characteristics, each aligning with a category outlined in SACJ. To maintain analytical clarity and avoid redundancy, two to four representative examples were selected for each characteristic. Together, these examples illustrate the salient manners in which sustainability (dis)engagement manifested in the dataset. In the final reporting, all examples were de-identified

through redaction to protect institutional anonymity and to center findings on discursive trends, rather than on specific offices' practices.

4.4. Limitations

Most artifacts used for this study were collected from January to March 2023. Since then, many websites have likely undergone substantial changes. However, the study's analytical aim was not to shame or endorse any particular office, but to document moments in time that still constitutes a highly pertinent conversation in US study abroad today. Besides, the findings should not be treated as normative assessments, but rather as consultative input for offices looking to connect more deeply with climate justice.

The sample also did not include sustainability content from internal strategy documents and collegial discussions. Nevertheless, websites remain a powerful norm-shaping force, as outbound students often model expectations and behaviors after the stories marketed to them on day one (Ponce-Taylor et al., 2025). For example, if a website celebrates jet-setting across Europe during weekends, students may internalize that lifestyle as crucial to making the most out of their experience. Even if internal conversations about sustainability exist, public-facing language may undermine that work by continuing to legitimize a culture of uncritical decision-making. Ultimately, organizations' progress toward equity and justice cannot fully take hold until its discursive disparities– along with other dimensions of disparities– are addressed (Woods et al., 2021).

Finally, this study is situated in the US, a multiracial Western country with long histories of colonialism and imperialism that continue to permeate its higher education system today. As such, the findings may resonate more directly with readers working in similar or comparable contexts, while holding less immediate transferability elsewhere.

5. Findings

This section presents the discursive characteristics that emerged during analysis, demonstrating how sustainability is both engaged with and overlooked across 22 study abroad websites. These characteristics are sorted into four categories of SACJ. Each is illustrated through a critical analysis of two to four examples.

5.1. Category 1: Status Quo

'Status Quo' discourses showed up as images and texts that upheld a conventional approach to portraying study abroad: rose-colored, ego-centric, and without dedicated sustainability content. In the original sample, which contained 10 study abroad websites from US HEIs with highest pre-COVID outbound mobility rates, eight fell under this category.

5.1.1. Study abroad – a grand adventure to be seized and made your own

Many artifacts glorified study abroad as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The imaginaries constructed highlighted the beauty and glamour of life at the host destinations. There was also a strong emphasis on the benefits that students should expect to gain: memorable visits to wonders of the world, enhanced cross-cultural communication skills, a greater understanding of one's field of study in a different context, and an overall enriched worldview. However, the visibility and benefits of host communities were not included. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 display four representative examples.

FIGURE (1)
LANDING PAGE 1

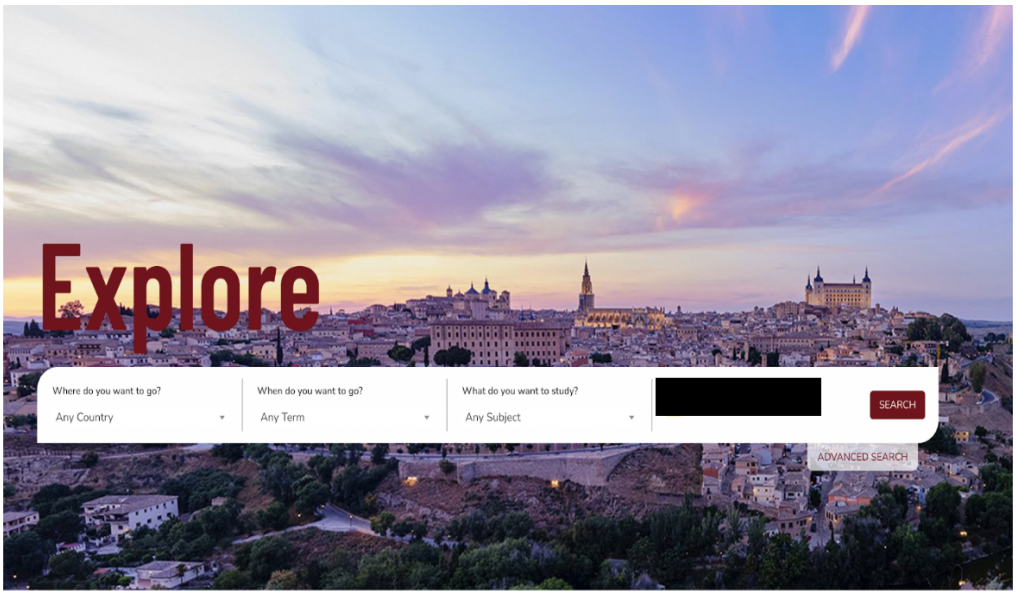


FIGURE (2)
LANDING PAGE 2



Figures 1 and 2 contain screen-captures of two landing pages from two different institutional websites. Figure 1 shows a landing page with the verb "Explore" in big, bold letters, positioned as the first thing that the viewer encounters. The word "explore," semantically, compels the viewer to adopt the role of an adventuring investigator, eager to acquire new experiences. The drop-down menu under the headline allows the viewer to start picking destinations, indicate their areas of study, and customize their search before all else. This combination of multimodal features imparts a strong sentiment of unbounded individual freedom. Additionally, the background photo shows a bird's eye-view of Toledo, Spain, positioning the viewer as a distant spectator removed from the ground-level affairs at the location. This visual framing enhances the scenic value and destination allure of study abroad over engagement with everyday realities. The choice to use a photo of a European city– albeit a less globally iconic one– also plays into the 'Grand Tours of Europe' fantasy. Overall, Figure 1 conveys a representation of study abroad that is (1) all about the viewing student, (2) aesthetically pleasing yet removed from real life, and (3) responsive to the mobility imaginaries associated with middle- and upper-class White students.

Similarly, Figure 2 shows another landing page that glamorizes life abroad through a high-angle, aesthetically enhanced shot of the Palace of Fine Arts, an iconic landmark in Mexico City. The capitalized tagline "START HERE, GO ANYWHERE!" is accompanied by text stating that study abroad is an experience that "every college student should pursue" and that "thousands choose to study abroad each year." This language imposes pressure on the viewing student to explore the abundant program options available and join thousands of peers who have done the right thing. The call to "Apply Today" and the placement of a deadline on top of the featured photo exude a sense of urgency, calling on students to act quickly to secure the limited-time opportunity. In this instance, study abroad is being "sold" to students, the target consumers, as a highly desirable product with an expiration date. This strategic framing capitalizes on fear of missing out, thereby emboldening opportunistic, self-serving decision-making.

FIGURE (3)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION 1

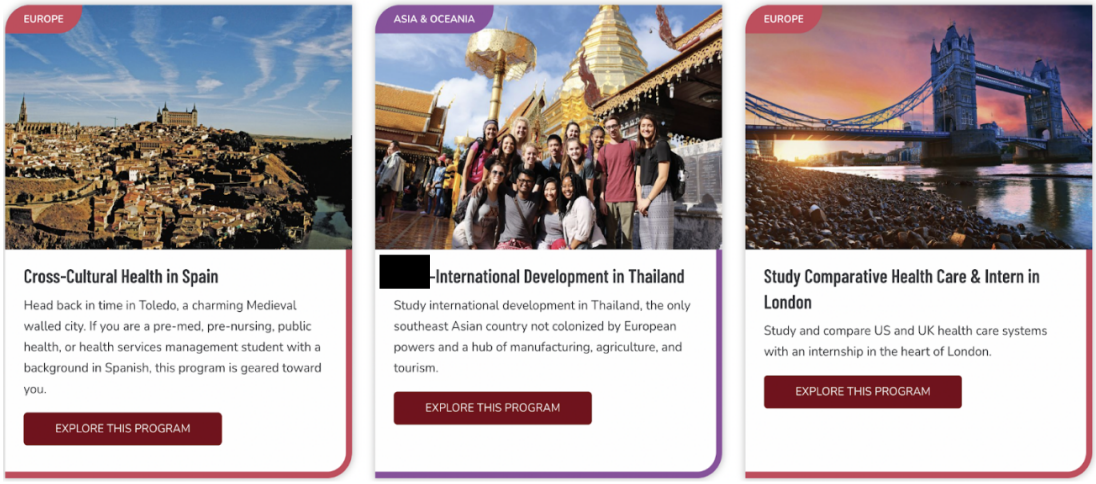


FIGURE (4)
PROGRAM DESCRIPTION 2

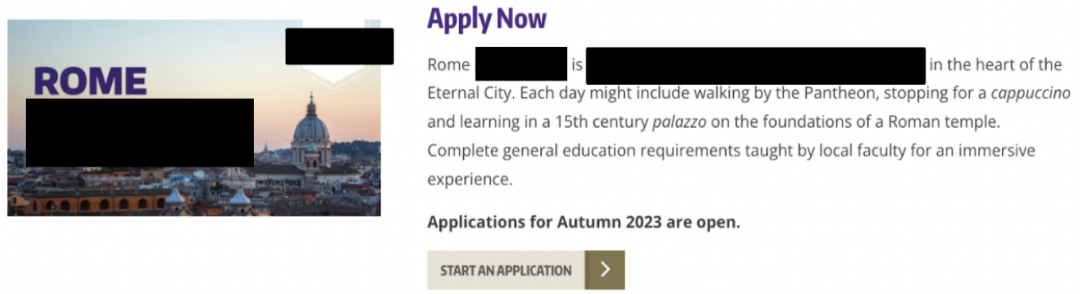


Figure 3 contains several program descriptions. The cover photos on the left and the right show scenic views of Toledo and the Tower Bridge respectively. The photo in the middle shows a group of students, predominantly White-presenting, posing in front of a Buddhist temple in Thailand. At first glance, these images center study abroad around touristic landmarks rather than relationships with host communities, an element vital to climate justice.

The accompanying texts connote a sole prioritization of students' interests, wrapped in a veneer of magic and grandeur. Specifically, the description on the left begins with a daydreamer's lure: "Head back in time in Toledo, a Medieval walled city" and concludes by centering the student: "this program is geared toward you." The description on the right highlights the opportunity to "study and compare US and UK health systems with an internship in the heart of London," which, once again, foregrounds a self-advancement agenda and a rosy vision of life in the UK. Most problematically, the middle description portrays Thailand as "the only Southeast Asian country not colonized by European powers," which signifies European colonialism as the central reference point through which students are invited to understand the world. It flattens Thailand's rich history into a single narrative that privileges the settler-colonizer's gaze. From another angle, this framing also encourages escapism, encouraging students to "consume" Thailand as an exceptional refuge existing outside of Europe's dark past. In doing so, it distracts students from local sustainability issues critical to their growth into justice-minded leaders, including tourism-driven disparities and climate vulnerabilities. Taken together, Figure 3 exemplifies how US study abroad often reduces the rest of the world to a mere backdrop for students' self-actualization and academic exploration, instead of a sovereign space of relational and reciprocal learning.

Figure 4 employs similar communication techniques. The cover photo shows a panoramic view of the sunset in Rome, accompanied by in-action descriptors, such as "walking by the Pantheon," "stopping for a cappuccino," and "learning in a 15th century palazzo." This juxtaposition evokes a cinematic imagination of life in Italy, centering self-fulfillment while erasing local realities. Even the passing mention of "local faculty" is tied to the mobile student's gain, namely their need to "complete general education requirements" and have an "immersive experience."

Like earlier examples, Figure 4 vividly illustrates how US study abroad turns host destinations into aesthetic and intellectual commodities tailored to the target consumer's skewed worldview– a tendency also reinforced by the abundance of curated travel content on social media (see Bohan et al., 2025). This construction of study abroad conflicts with climate justice by obscuring the structural consequences of inconsiderate capital accumulation, a dynamic tied to the climate crisis (see Moore, 2015). Moving beyond such norms would require offices to undertake the inconvenient task of marketing study abroad through alternative imaginaries that no longer rely on the easy appeal of the Grand Tour but instead reckon honestly with contemporary ecological realities.

5.1.2. Exoticization of local communities

While the first Status Quo characteristic shows how mobility narratives in US study abroad often exclude or trivialize local community presence, the second one reveals an equally problematic tendency: the exoticization of local communities, especially in content promoting travel to the Global South. Figures 5, 6, and 7 present three examples.

FIGURE (5)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION 3

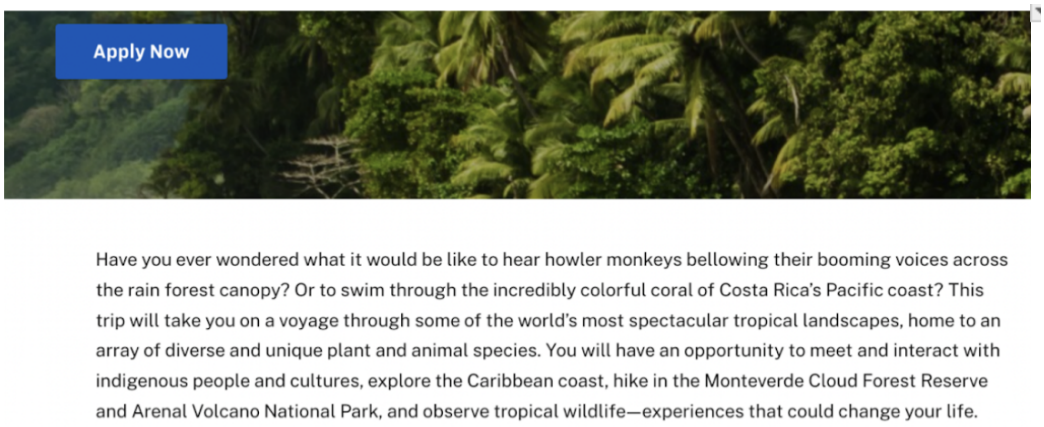


FIGURE (6)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION 4

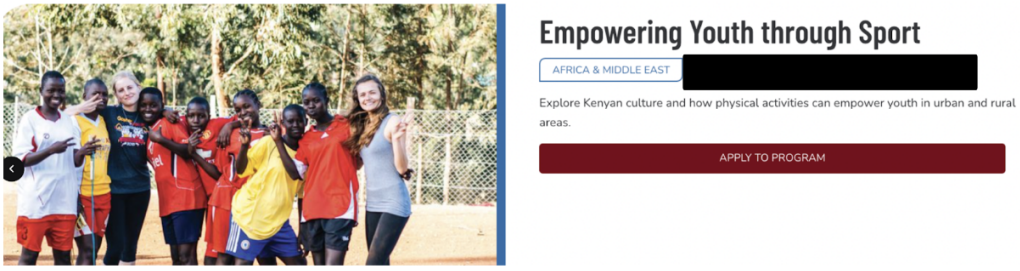


FIGURE (7)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION 5

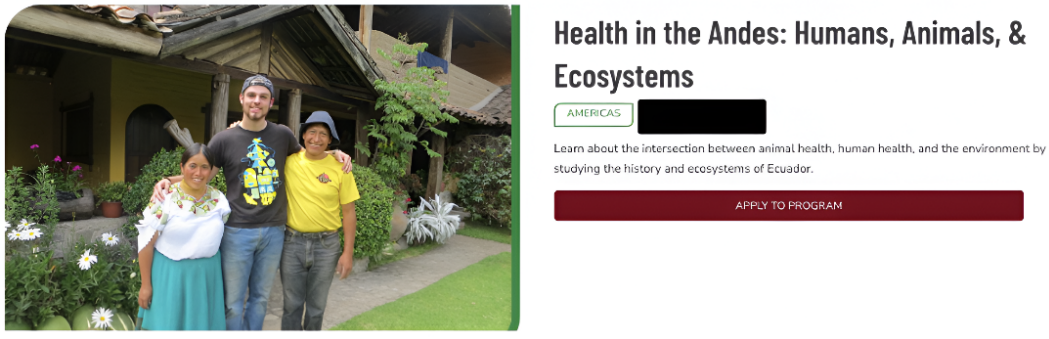


Figure 5 shows a description of a program focused on plant and wildlife sciences in Costa Rica. It opens with sensational phrases, such as, "hear howler monkeys bellowing their booming voices," "swim through incredibly colorful coral", and "spectacular tropical landscapes," constructing Costa Rica as a lush,

wild paradise designed to awe and entertain US students. Crucially, the phrase "indigenous peoples" is written as a passive subject– individuals for students to "meet and interact with." This positioning is followed by a series of touristic activities to be performed by students, the active agents of the story: "explore the Caribbean coast," "hike in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve and Arenal National Park," and "observe tropical wildlife." Altogether, this narrative commodifies the identities and ancestral land of Indigenous people in Costa Rica into a cultural spectacle meant for students' self-enriching pursuits, thereby steering them away from considering the dignity and agency of local communities. Figure 5 captures what Hale (2019) cautions: educational travel that values environmental learning– and may be experienced by students as life-changing– can still reproduce oppressive tropes that belie climate justice.

Figure 6 presents another compelling example of exoticization. The cover photo features two White women (presumably college-aged US students), standing among a group of seven Kenyan youth who appear younger and dressed in similar athletic wear. While the matching attire may indicate teamwork in a sporting context, the composition consolidates the Kenyan youth into one homogeneous collective while granting visual prominence to the two distinctly dressed US students, drawing the viewer's attention to them as the focal figures. The program title begins with "empowering," a strong, positively connoted active verb assigned to the US students, while "youth," a term representing the local community, is cast as a passive subject. This linguistic structure, alongside the visual grouping of Kenyan youth in the photo, plays into White saviorism, framing the two White students as good-willed providers of "empowerment" and the local community members as passive, grateful recipients. Further reinforcing this power imbalance, the program's caption reads "explore Kenyan culture and how physical activities can empower youth in urban and rural areas." This phrasing reduces a potentially transformative experience of immersion and collaboration to a one-dimensional mission of fixing a perceived lack. Consequently, the whole narrative risks turning Kenyan community members into a development project– individuals to be helped or "improved" by outsiders– instead of equal partners with their own stories and capacities for leadership.

Likewise, Figure 7 places the White male student in the center of the featured photo, towering over two Ecuadorian individuals, one of whom is in

traditional attire. Visually, the positioning of the two local residents on either side of the student relegates them to the role of supporting characters and elevates the student to the role of 'leading man'– someone who has ostensibly "discovered" the local culture. Stated another way, in this photo, the local community is portrayed as static symbolic elements to authenticate the journey of the mobile student. Additionally, the caption conveys an over-simplified narrative– "learn about the intersection of human health, animal health, and the environment"– without acknowledging the gravity of colonial histories, the richness of Ecuadorian knowledge systems, and the potential for impactful partnerships. This preference for touristic depiction of relationship-building over representations of genuine exchanges and collaborations reflects a broader culture of transactional engagement in US study abroad: Students are oriented to become consumers of limited-time experiences, rather than active participants in historically accountable, long-term community-led efforts. This dynamic can persist despite programs' claims that learner socialization is the primary objective (see Tiessen & Huish, 2014).

In summary, the exoticization of local communities is both ethically fraught and anti-climate. By viewing community members through settler-colonial tropes and encouraging students to "practice" development using host countries' assets without meaningful reciprocity, these narratives fuel ideological and institutional structures that normalize carbon-intensive mobility (especially among those with greater mobility privilege), the objectification of destinations, the dehumanization of people, and the subordination of local histories to Western educational and recreational desires (see Andreotti, 2011; Sheller, 2018). Taken together, they uphold the exploitation of human and non-human nature that accelerates climate breakdown (see Moore, 2015).

5.2. Category 2: Awareness

The 'Awareness' discourses were exemplified by artifacts from websites reflecting an early stage of sustainability engagement. The textual and visual representations on these sites often still resembled those under 'Status Quo.' However, these sites included dedicated modules or tabs addressing the environmental footprint of study abroad. While this addition may suggest offices' emerging interest in this work, a strong organizational vision and strategy– in which sustainability is meaningfully integrated into the foundation

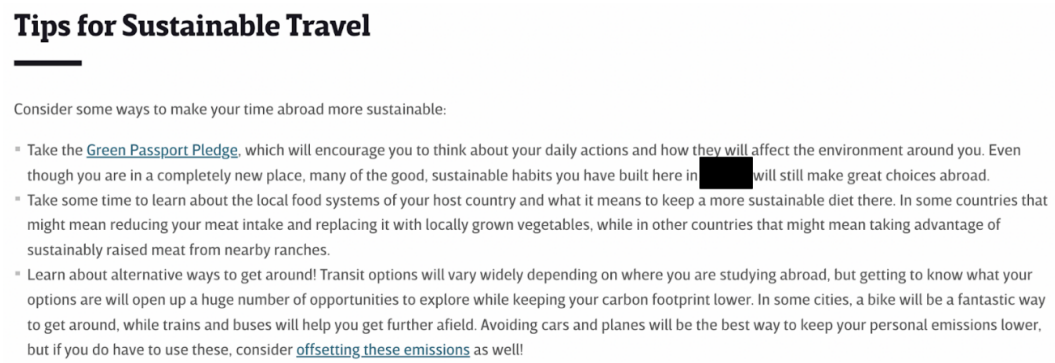
of all programs– remained absent. Of the 14 websites in the sample containing sustainability engagement content, nine fell under this category.

5.2.1. Sustainability as an obligatory checklist

The first notable characteristic among Category 2 artifacts was the "checklist discourse." Here, sustainability is presented as to-do lists following statements about the environmental impact of study abroad and the importance of sustainable practices. These lists typically offer general lifestyle suggestions for students to lower their carbon consumption but fail to center sustainability as a collective responsibility, rather than a personal responsibility. Figures 8 and 9 show two examples.

FIGURE (8)

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL TIPS 1



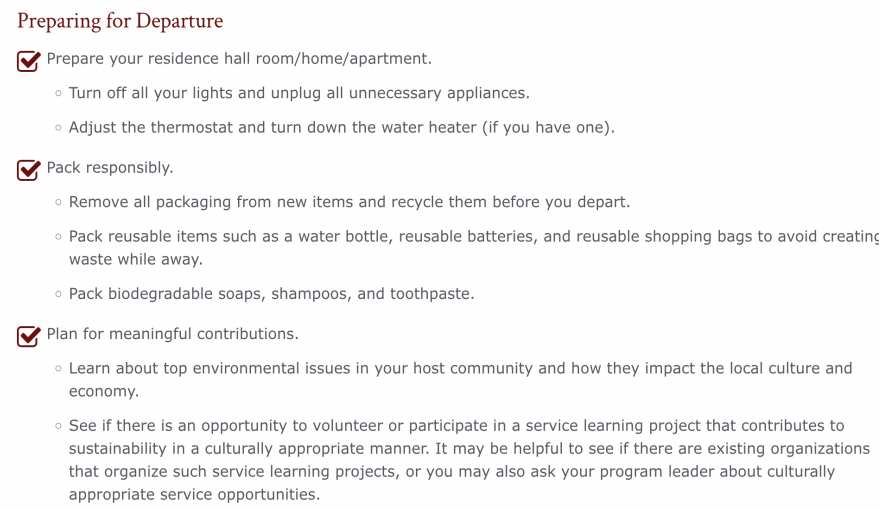
Tips for Sustainable Travel

Consider some ways to make your time abroad more sustainable:

- Take the Green Passport Pledge, which will encourage you to think about your daily actions and how they will affect the environment around you. Even though you are in a completely new place, many of the good, sustainable habits you have built here in [redacted] will still make great choices abroad.
- Take some time to learn about the local food systems of your host country and what it means to keep a more sustainable diet there. In some countries that might mean reducing your meat intake and replacing it with locally grown vegetables, while in other countries that might mean taking advantage of sustainably raised meat from nearby ranches.
- Learn about alternative ways to get around! Transit options will vary widely depending on where you are studying abroad, but getting to know what your options are will open up a huge number of opportunities to explore while keeping your carbon footprint lower. In some cities, a bike will be a fantastic way to get around, while trains and buses will help you get further afield. Avoiding cars and planes will be the best way to keep your personal emissions lower, but if you do have to use these, consider offsetting these emissions as well!

FIGURE (9)

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL TIPS 2



Preparing for Departure

- ☑ Prepare your residence hall room/home/apartment.
  - Turn off all your lights and unplug all unnecessary appliances.
  - Adjust the thermostat and turn down the water heater (if you have one).
- ☑ Pack responsibly.
  - Remove all packaging from new items and recycle them before you depart.
  - Pack reusable items such as a water bottle, reusable batteries, and reusable shopping bags to avoid creating waste while away.
  - Pack biodegradable soaps, shampoos, and toothpaste.
- ☑ Plan for meaningful contributions.
  - Learn about top environmental issues in your host community and how they impact the local culture and economy.
  - See if there is an opportunity to volunteer or participate in a service learning project that contributes to sustainability in a culturally appropriate manner. It may be helpful to see if there are existing organizations that organize such service learning projects, or you may also ask your program leader about culturally appropriate service opportunities.

The sustainable travel tips in Figure 8 are presented in three bullet points, advising students to take the Green Passport Pledge, source food locally, bike more, and take public transportation. This layout frames sustainability as a neat set of individual choices. Although change in personal behavior matters, such efforts carry limited impact when the central narrative remains removed from systems of power, thereby constraining dialogues on climate justice.

Similarly, Figure 9 reinforces individualization of responsibility through a checklist of pre-departure tasks, such as unplugging appliances before leaving, packing reusable and biodegradable products, and researching service opportunities in the host country that contribute to sustainability. While phrases like "meaningful contributions" and "culturally appropriate service opportunities" gesture at ethical participation, it is unclear how students and staff may determine if an activity is "meaningful" or "culturally appropriate." This vague language shifts the focus onto students demonstrating good intentions and doing what they could to 'cover their part,' instead of building a shared understanding of what it means to interact respectfully with local communities.

Taken together, these two examples reflect a broader engagement pattern within US study abroad that treats sustainability as a display of personal virtue or procedural add-ons, rather than substantive forms of collective transformation. Sustainability, framed this way, falls short of climate justice because it channels responsibility into isolated individual choices while diffusing accountability away from systemic actors (Anjum & Aziz, 2026). Shifting from individual to collective action would require collaborating across disciplines, teams, and leadership levels to redesign programs around sustainability, to strengthen reciprocal community partnerships, and to translate carbon footprint commitments into concrete, cross-cutting operational policies.

5.2.2. Extensive use of external resources

Many Category 2 artifacts showed offices' tendency to 'outsource' sustainability engagement through referrals to external sites. Instead of assuming agency over the process of educating students, many offices deferred to content from UN SDGs or articles on sustainable tourism. While these resources are valuable, their inclusion, amid the absence of in-house language, can be interpreted as a mere placeholder for deeper engagement. The lack of

clear organizational action also suggests insufficient capacity and leadership support for more substantive efforts (see Campbell et al., 2023; Nikula et al., 2023). Within these limitations, this discursive practice puts the burden on students to conduct their own research and independently connect all the materials to their study abroad experience. In doing so, it once again perpetuates the individualization of responsibility that runs counter to climate justice. Figures 10 and 11 show two examples.

FIGURE (10)

EXAMPLE OF EXTERNALIZATION OF RESOURCES 1

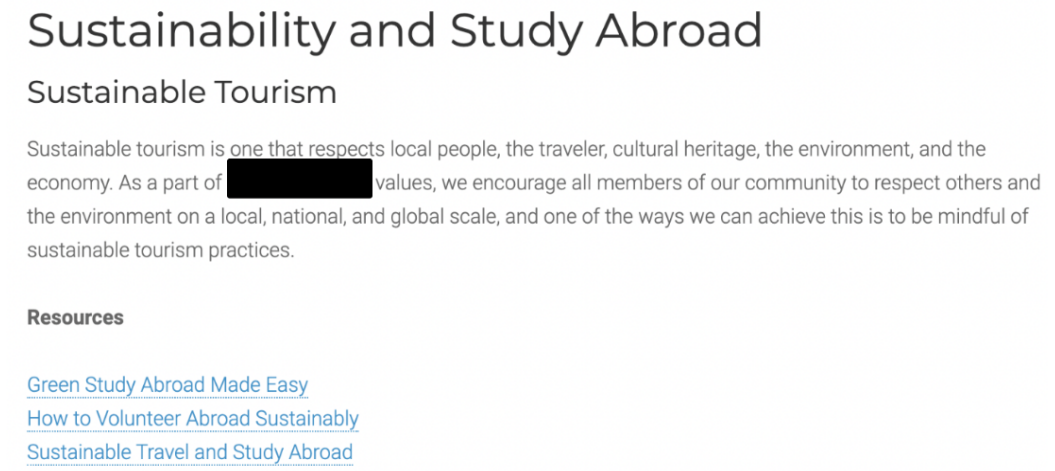
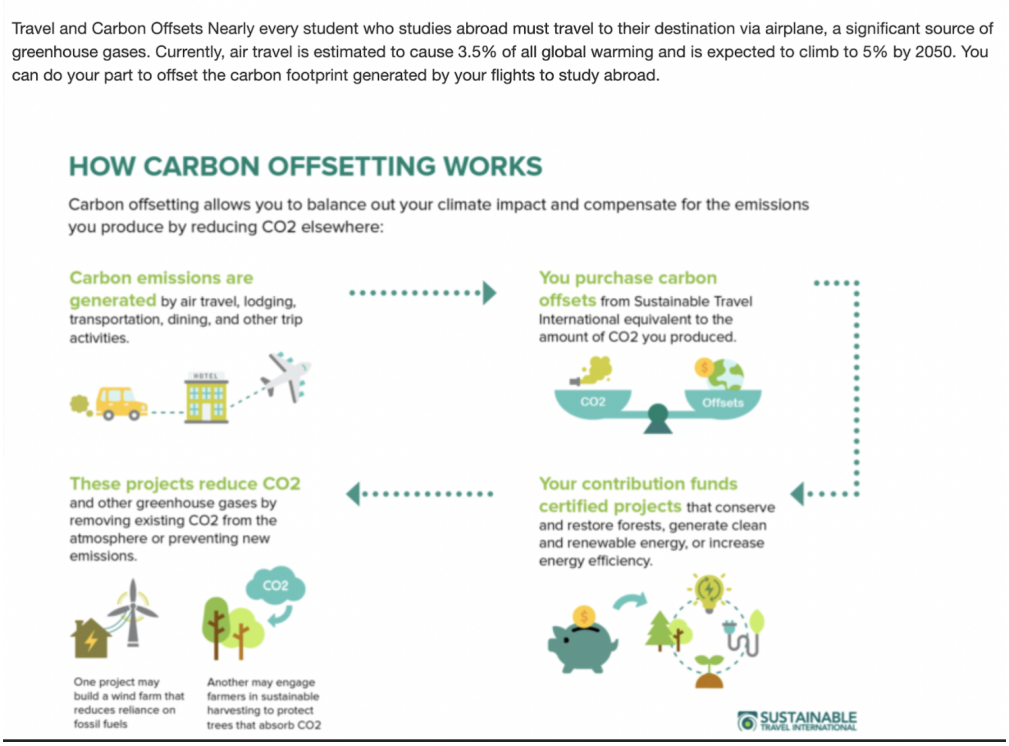


FIGURE (11)

EXAMPLE OF EXTERNALIZATION OF RESOURCES 2



In Figure 10, the importance of sustainability is addressed in a short paragraph. The text gestures toward the idea of common respect, calling on students to show respect toward the "local people, the traveler, cultural heritage, the environment, and the economy." It also links this idea to the institution's core values. However, it stops short of contextualizing how common respect can be enacted through institutional policy or program design, especially as it relates to "[being] mindful of sustainable tourism practices." Instead, a separate section labeled "Resources" follows, listing three hyperlinks to relevant blog posts. This layout positions sustainability as a self-directed learning task delegated to the viewing student. From another angle, the links can be read as symbolic 'exit routes' from institutional responsibility when it comes to how sustainability can be concretely applied. Moreover, the light blue color of the links visually stands apart from the black main text, and as user-activated content, signals that any further engagement with sustainability is optional and supplementary, not required by or integrated into institutional expectations.

Similarly, Figure 11 begins with recognizing the damaging greenhouse gases generated by study abroad, only to end with a vague suggestion that students should simply "do [their] part" to offset them. Below the paragraph, an infographic borrowed from Sustainable Travel International explains how carbon offsets work but does not come with framing specific to the student perspective or the institution's context. The whole narrative, while well-intentioned, reads more like a promotional plug for the external provider's services than a thoughtfully designed educational tool. Furthermore, as critics have noted, conventional carbon offsetting often can justify continuing emissions by absolving emitters of guilt. Without "active carbon offsetting," which emphasizes deliberate multi-stakeholder planning and embedded resource coordination to pursue climate action (see Robinson et al., 2025), such messaging risks perpetuating the illusion of quick, fix-all solutions.

From these two examples, it can be inferred that the over-reliance on students to navigate outside sources on their own, and on outside sources to carry the instructional burden, represents sustainability as a peripheral issue rather than a built-in duty. Whether shaped by limited internal capacity or digital space constraints, the resulting discourse offers little evidence of an articulated, shared purpose around sustainability or an internal strategy to deepen engagement.

5.3. Category 3: Leadership

The 'Leadership' discourses were exemplified by artifacts from websites that demonstrated proactive– rather than reactive– engagement with sustainability. Unlike Category 2, where offices largely relay tips and resources, Category 3 artifacts showed that some offices had adopted a more agentic role in embedding sustainability into the fabric of study abroad. These sites typically featured concrete plans, initiatives, and anecdotes that aligned sustainability efforts with students' global learning outcomes and existing institutional capacity. Of the 14 websites that included sustainability engagement content, five fell under this category.

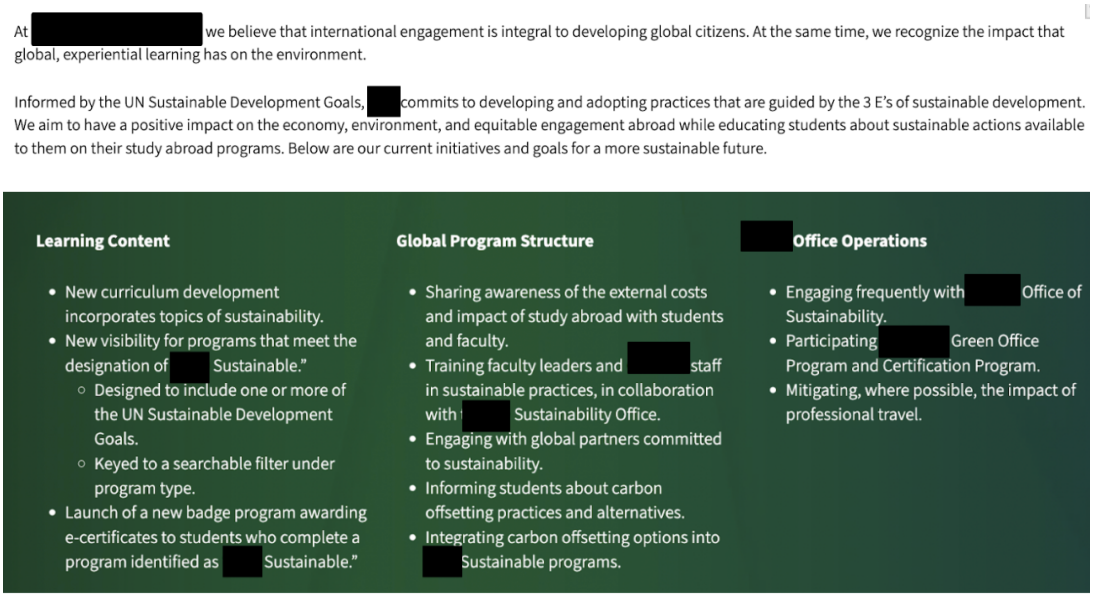
5.3.1. Intentional integration of sustainability into global learning mission

One discursive characteristic that set Category 3 artifacts apart was the intentional integration of sustainability into the mission of global learning.

Several websites featured "green mission statements," signaling a deliberate investment of research and internal dialogue on this topic. Others cultivated shared language with students around sustainability. Rather than offering checklists of eco-friendly behaviors, some Category 3 artifacts provided guidance on what ethical factors to consider when evaluating a program. This shift, over time, can help students become more justice-minded participants of global learning. Figures 12 and 13 show two examples.

FIGURE (12)

EXAMPLE OF INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION 1



At [redacted] we believe that international engagement is integral to developing global citizens. At the same time, we recognize the impact that global, experiential learning has on the environment.

Informed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, [redacted] commits to developing and adopting practices that are guided by the 3 E's of sustainable development. We aim to have a positive impact on the economy, environment, and equitable engagement abroad while educating students about sustainable actions available to them on their study abroad programs. Below are our current initiatives and goals for a more sustainable future.

Learning Content

- New curriculum development incorporates topics of sustainability.
- New visibility for programs that meet the designation of [redacted] Sustainable."
  - Designed to include one or more of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
  - Keyed to a searchable filter under program type.
- Launch of a new badge program awarding e-certificates to students who complete a program identified as [redacted] Sustainable."

Global Program Structure

- Sharing awareness of the external costs and impact of study abroad with students and faculty.
- Training faculty leaders and [redacted] staff in sustainable practices, in collaboration with [redacted] Sustainability Office.
- Engaging with global partners committed to sustainability.
- Informing students about carbon offsetting practices and alternatives.
- Integrating carbon offsetting options into [redacted] Sustainable programs.

[redacted] Office Operations

- Engaging frequently with [redacted] Office of Sustainability.
- Participating [redacted] Green Office Program and Certification Program.
- Mitigating, where possible, the impact of professional travel.

FIGURE (13)
EXAMPLE OF INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION 2

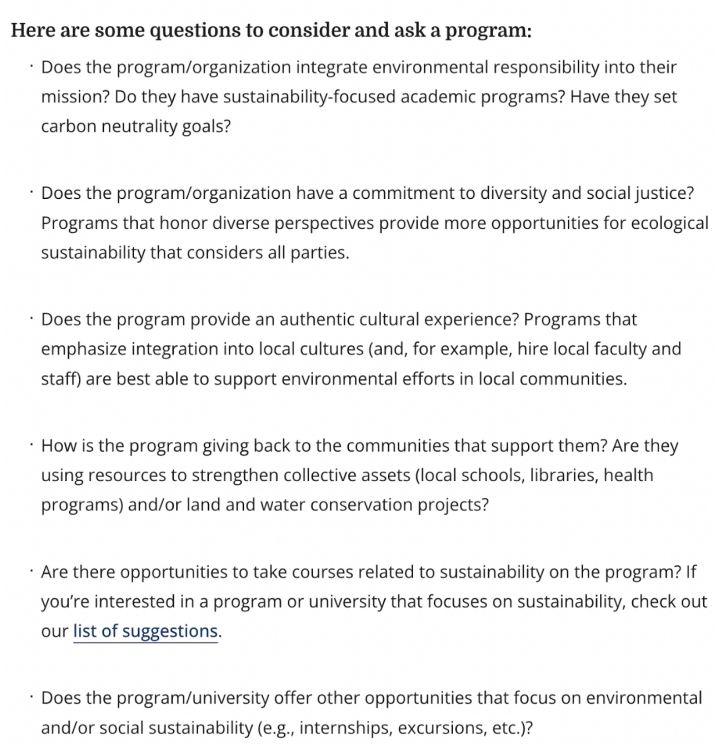


Figure 12 features a green mission statement followed by an infographic that outlines three pillars of sustainability, all framed within the administrative context of the overseeing office. In the mission statement, the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we," paired with assertive action verbs, such as "believe," "recognize," "commit," "develop," "aim," and "educate," conveys a tone of collective, purposeful, and resourceful leadership. Additionally, by highlighting UN SDGs as the guiding framework, the statement establishes a philosophical grounding rooted in positive impact on the economy, environment, and social equity, setting up a promising discursive space for climate justice.

This philosophical grounding carries over into the accompanying infographic, which outlines an action plan. The visual segmentation of focal areas– "learning content," "global program structure," and "office operations" – shows strategic delegation and intentional direction in the narrative. The action items, which include development of a sustainability-focused

curriculum, sustainability training for staff and faculty, and introduction of badge certifications for sustainable programs, signify aspiration toward eco-conscious decision-making at all levels of leadership, extending far beyond surface-level awareness. Notably, the repeated mention of collaboration (i.e., with the Sustainability Office, global partners, and certification programs) suggests a shift from individual responsibility toward a more collective framing, echoing the SDGs' broader ethos of situating transformation within an interdependent ecosystem of stakeholders. Power verbs, such as "launch," "design," "train," "engage," "inform," and "mitigate," further solidify the office's role as a confident and dynamic driver of change, not an idle messenger of information.

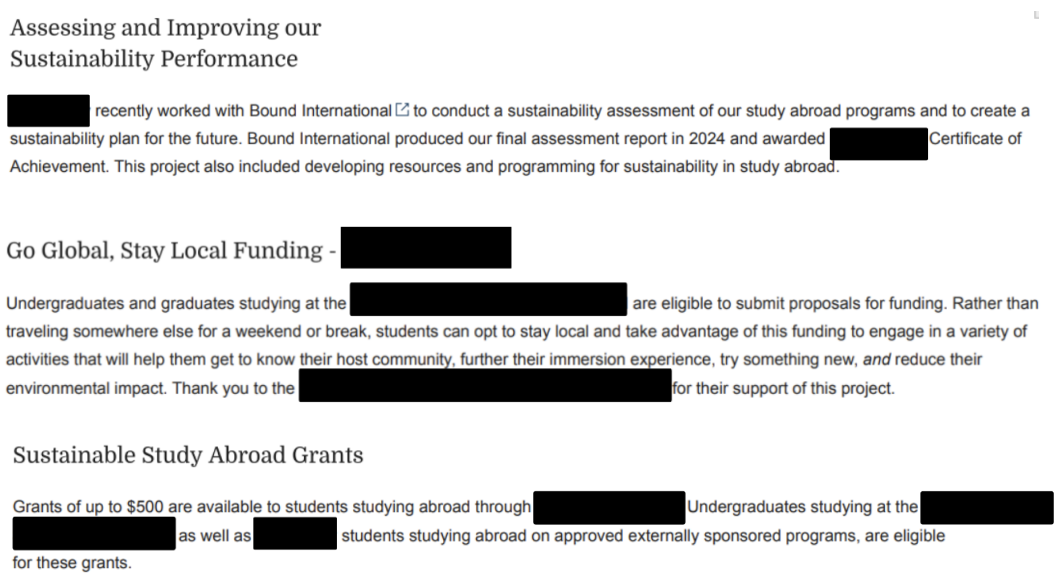
Figure 13 offers another example that illustrates how an office has gone from spreading awareness to urging students to think critically about what kind of experience they should pursue. The artifact shows a series of guiding questions for students, prompting them to identify values, practices, and activities in a program that would allow them to engage productively with sustainability. Rather than prescribing tasks or leaving students to learn on their own, the artifact compels inquiry into different systemic dimensions of study abroad: the commitment to reducing environmental harm, the inclusion of diverse perspectives, the integration of local expertise, the long-term community impact, and opportunities for further education and professional growth around sustainability. The question-based format also empowers students to assess and critique existing programs, and to prioritize those that center ecological considerations. Moreover, it frames sustainability as an ongoing endeavor shared between students and institutions, contributing to a culture of mutual accountability central to climate justice.

5.3.2. Tangible action and impact

Aside from integrating sustainability narratives into the mission of global learning, many Category 3 artifacts demonstrated evidence of tangible action and impact in fostering sustainable systems, mindsets, and practices. These artifacts highlighted initiatives to monitor sustainability progress of programs, to support faculty and staff as role models, and to incentivize students abroad to take part in low-carbon endeavors centered on relationality and reciprocity. Some also included testimonials to honor student-community collaborations. Figures 14, 15 and 16 show three examples.

FIGURE (14)

EXAMPLE OF ACTION AND IMPACT 1



Assessing and Improving our Sustainability Performance

[redacted] recently worked with Bound International to conduct a sustainability assessment of our study abroad programs and to create a sustainability plan for the future. Bound International produced our final assessment report in 2024 and awarded [redacted] Certificate of Achievement. This project also included developing resources and programming for sustainability in study abroad.

Go Global, Stay Local Funding - [redacted]

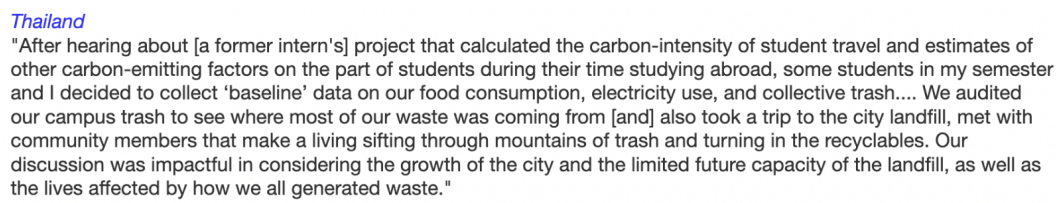
Undergraduates and graduates studying at the [redacted] are eligible to submit proposals for funding. Rather than traveling somewhere else for a weekend or break, students can opt to stay local and take advantage of this funding to engage in a variety of activities that will help them get to know their host community, further their immersion experience, try something new, *and* reduce their environmental impact. Thank you to the [redacted] for their support of this project.

Sustainable Study Abroad Grants

Grants of up to $500 are available to students studying abroad through [redacted] Undergraduates studying at the [redacted] as well as [redacted] students studying abroad on approved externally sponsored programs, are eligible for these grants.

FIGURE (15)

EXAMPLE OF ACTION AND IMPACT 2



Thailand

"After hearing about [a former intern's] project that calculated the carbon-intensity of student travel and estimates of other carbon-emitting factors on the part of students during their time studying abroad, some students in my semester and I decided to collect 'baseline' data on our food consumption, electricity use, and collective trash.... We audited our campus trash to see where most of our waste was coming from [and] also took a trip to the city landfill, met with community members that make a living sifting through mountains of trash and turning in the recyclables. Our discussion was impactful in considering the growth of the city and the limited future capacity of the landfill, as well as the lives affected by how we all generated waste."

FIGURE (16)

EXAMPLE OF ACTION AND IMPACT 3



This semester, I've had the privilege of interning at CESFAM Rodelillo, a primary health care center in Valparaíso, Chile, where I've been engaged in promoting community health and connection. As part of my internship, I'm leading a project that brings together older adults from the community and preschoolers from a nearby center to paint a mural at a prominent viewpoint in Rodelillo. This collaborative effort not only aims to beautify the space but also serves as a means to strengthen intergenerational bonds and promote a sense of unity within the community. Importantly, this viewpoint, adorned with our collective artwork, will serve as the starting point for a safe walk that I'll lead with the older adults through the neighborhood. This walk is more than just physical activity—it's a chance for us to care for one another, build meaningful connections, and foster a sense of belonging among participants. Together, through the act of painting and walking, I hope to not only enhance the physical landscape but also help nurture the social fabric of this community

Figure 14 shows several institutional resources designed for students studying abroad to engage more deeply with sustainability. The first section, "Assessing and Improving our Sustainability Performance," conveys a clear sense of institutional accountability. The partnership with Bound International

is communicated to students with specific goals: to "conduct sustainability assessments of [their] study abroad programs," to "create a sustainability plan for the future," and to "develop resources and programming for sustainability in study abroad." This is followed by a declared accomplishment– the Certificate of Achievement in 2024– which adds a layer of credibility to the narrative. Overall, this section exudes the office's genuine commitment to goal setting, systematic evaluation, and trackable progress.

The second section, "Go Global, Stay Local Funding," features funding opportunities for students abroad to engage in community-based activities during breaks and weekends instead of traveling. The third section highlights grants to support students' sustainability projects abroad. Together, these initiatives not only help reduce financial burdens of study abroad participation, but also encourage deep, place-based connections and normalize sustainability work as an integral part of mobility. Ultimately, Figure 14 further reflects a sustainability engagement trend that has shifted from lip service to embedded action.

Figures 15 and 16 feature two testimonials, in which students share their experiences working on sustainability projects with host communities. In Figure 15, students in a Thailand-based program, inspired by a former intern's carbon-intensity project, conducted an audit of consumption behaviors and campus trash. Their work extended to discussions with city landfill workers, which deepened their understanding of the collective action needed to protect livelihoods affected by waste generation. This account signals a growing legacy of student-led sustainability efforts abroad– one that not only emphasizes field experience but also strives to bring in knowledge from marginalized community members.

Figure 16 homes in on a healthcare project in Chile, where the interning student partnered with older adults and preschoolers to paint a neighborhood mural, with the goal of promoting intergenerational bonds and community safety. This testimonial amplifies the visibility of local life and the significance of co-creation, positioning the student more as a facilitator of people-to-people connection than a traditional leader. This is evident in phrases like "bring together," "collective artwork," "sense of belonging among participants," and "help to nurture." Overall, both artifacts foreground a much-needed message: Study abroad should never be about extracting from or

"fixing" local communities. It should be about embracing humility and partaking in relational change-making– an approach vital to climate justice.

Despite these thoughtful student perspectives, both artifacts noticeably lack input from community members themselves. There are no anecdotes or direct quotes from these stakeholders about how their collaborations with the students unfolded and what impacts they hope to see in their respective communities in future years. This imbalance risks upholding the very hierarchies that the programs may aim to disrupt. Put differently, even programs that move beyond ego-centric narratives can still reproduce systemic inequities– or remain climate-taxing– if they fail to interrogate whose voices are centered, who primarily benefits, whether invisible ecological trade-offs still exist, and what long-term, community-defined outcomes are generated. To further advance climate justice, programs must carefully consider these power dynamics in both practice and representation (see Mitchell et al., 2012).

5.4. Category 4: Reconstruction

No artifacts in the sample fully aligned with Category 4 of SACJ. As explained, 'Reconstruction' discourses represent efforts to fundamentally rethink the ideological, structural, and procedural construction of mobility amid the climate crisis. Such discourses would center host communities as genuine co-creators of the curriculum, prioritize slow-paced study abroad, and compel students to examine their mobility privilege and relationship with place both at home and abroad. They would also leverage IaH initiatives as alternative modes of global learning that can reduce carbon emissions, lower financial barriers to mobility, and foster intentionality around global issues rooted in domestic contexts. The absence of Category 4 is quite telling: it reveals that when it comes to sustainability engagement, US study abroad is still primarily anchored in reforms rather than radical transformation.

6. Discussion

In this study, the application of SACJ effectively teased out the discursive trends that characterize how US study abroad (dis)engages with sustainability. These trends ranged from conventional mobility narratives with no mention of sustainability to incremental shifts toward proactive sustainability leadership.

Overall, the findings build up to one key takeaway: Sustainability (dis)engagement discourses in US study abroad are deeply intertwined with the global political economy of international education. Recruitment, branding, competition, and student-consumer satisfaction drive organizational priorities, frequently at the expense of ecologically just considerations that are foundational to the idea of education as a public and social good (see Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024).

Category 1 (Status Quo) emerged as the most dominant in the original sample. Artifacts in this category framed host communities and landscapes as scenic backdrops and passive agents, implicitly devaluing them as expendable resources (see Moore, 2015), while mobile students– predominantly White– were positioned as protagonists or primary beneficiaries of the experience. Such representations legitimize ego-centric mobility imaginaries in the name of high-impact education. When students, especially those raised in the West, internalize these narratives, they may adopt supremacist, saviorist, or insulated ways of thinking, which can lead to problematic interactions and undermine the transformative purpose of global learning (Andreotti, 2014; Simpson, 2004; Tiessen & Huish, 2014). At the same time, the dominance of Category 1 suggests that conformity and complacency remain useful, as these narratives are politically non-threatening, marketable, and, most importantly, compatible with neoliberal imperatives and colonial gaze underpinning international education (Moreno, 2021).

Category 2 (Awareness) consisted of discourses that signaled concern for sustainability. Yet this concern appeared superficial. By shifting responsibility onto students to make more eco-friendly choices, Category 2 artifacts bypassed opportunities to facilitate collective dialogue, institutional accountability-taking, and deep structural change. Sustainability was reduced to individualized conservationist habits, while the larger drivers of climate change, such as productivity- and profit-maximization models, remained untouched (see Maniates, 2001; Shove, 2010; Fletcher, 2010). In this sense, the findings reflect a familiar neoliberal phenomenon: Systems preserve themselves by compelling individuals to compensate for structural problems, thus keeping them distracted from recognizing the root causes of injustice, developing caring relationships, and organizing against the establishment (see Ball, 2016; Giroux, 2009).

Category 3 (Leadership) provided promising signs of progress toward climate justice. A minority of artifacts demonstrated intentional efforts to engage with sustainability through mission statements, curricular goals, partnerships, operations, and encouragement for students to cultivate ethical relationships with place. However, examples in this category still privileged perspectives of mobile students and institutions while sidelining host community voices. This reveals an imbalance in the mobility landscape regarding who defines sustainability and whose interests it serves. As such, while Category 3 signals substantive progress, its discourses stay palatable to the existing system, where institutions retain ideological and managerial control, and student-consumers retain representational prominence. It mirrors, in part, the common tendency of HEIs to adopt reformist, liberal-sounding internationalization agendas without thoroughly interrogating and redistributing power, thereby leaving intact the fundamental dynamics that perpetuate global inequalities (see Buckner & Stein, 2020; Stein, 2021).

Notably, Category 4 (Reconstruction) was absent from the data. None of the collected artifacts showed evidence of deep cultural critique and genuine reimagination of mobility in pursuit of climate justice. While discourses centering Reconstruction-oriented ethos do exist– particularly among small third-party providers like CELEI Regenerative Education and Intercultural Outreach Initiative (IOI)– their work operates outside traditional institutional infrastructures and remains difficult to scale to the volume of participation typical of mainstream study abroad. In this sense, the absence of Category 4 artifacts illuminates another consequence of institutional incentives that reward scale, speed, reputational visibility, and managerial predictability more than reflexivity, deliberation, disruption, and embrace of uncertainty (see Stein, 2021; Sterling, 2004; Strathern, 2000). Conventional and reformist approaches– the safer routes– are therefore favored over radical alternatives.

Yet, Category 4 of SACJ remains essential: It represents– not so much a fixed, aspirational endpoint– but a space of contestation and visioning. It invites practitioners to ask boundary-pushing questions: Who holds power and benefits most in the mobility landscape? Who absorbs the ecological costs? Should the purpose of mobility be reframed to center planetary limits and the stability of our social foundations? Should carbon-intensive, touristic travel remain a default of global learning amid the climate crisis, or are there better modes? The

journey to find answers to these questions demands a courageous willingness to decenter the old stories of study abroad– stories that keep students' aspirations separated from the well-being of the land. Alongside students, the sector must cultivate and circulate new stories that build toward an eco-conscious, altruistic, and justice-driven future of internationalization.

Table 2 presents the revised SACJ framework, inductively developed from the findings. It offers a summary of the findings along with 'food for thought' questions to guide sustainability-related discussions among study abroad practitioners. It also serves as a tool for examining how and to what extent public-facing discourses in the field reproduce or resist governing logics of the global political economy.

TABLE (2)
REVISED SACJ FRAMEWORK

Category	Definition	Examples and Questions	Strengths	Limitations
Status Quo	No engagement with sustainability; promotes conventional, touristic narratives	**Examples**: glamorized representations of life abroad; centers students' needs and desires; limited visibility of host communities **Ask:** Does this content prioritize individual gain over ecological well-being?	Prompts reflection on dominant discursive practices of study abroad	Reinforces neoliberal imperatives and neocolonial relations; ignores voices and agency of host communities
Awareness	Surface-level, reactive engagement with sustainability; focused on individual responsibility	**Examples**: general lists of sustainable travel tips; numerous links to external resources; limited institution- and context-specific guidance **Ask**: Is sustainability portrayed as personal choices	Reflects initial recognition of ecological harm caused by study abroad	Lacks emphasis on institutional integration and collective duty; shifts problem-solving burdens on individuals

		without systemic considerations?		
Leadership	Proactive engagement with sustainability; emphasizes institutional action, shared responsibility, and clear impact	**Examples:** sustainability integrated into curriculum, training, partnerships, evaluations, and funding initiatives; testimonials showing impact **Ask:** How are sustainability values enacted and nurtured within current institutional structures?	Helps to foster systems thinking and more relational change-making efforts	Student and institutional perspectives may still dominate sustainability narratives, thereby perpetuating power imbalance
Reconstruction	Radical engagement with sustainability; reimagines study abroad with local knowledge and ecological well-being at the core	**Examples**: Not found in sample **Ask**: What alternative systems can facilitate truly reciprocal, co-constructive, and transformative global learning?	Inspires institutional visioning toward an ecologically just future of mobility	Great departure of the norm; requires deep structural change and far-reaching support

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study spotlight both a pressing need and a significant opportunity for US study abroad to transform its discursive system amid the climate crisis. Websites communicate key values to students

seeking to expand their horizons, making them an important starting point for fostering engagement with ecological implications of mobility. Fundamentally, the study interrogates the dominant framing of study abroad as a consumptive product centered on individual fulfillment. The SACJ framework presents not only a deconstruction of existing discursive patterns of sustainability (dis)engagement, but also an inspiration for actionable strategies in pursuit of greater climate justice.

Specifically, for Category 1 (Status Quo), organizations should replace content that exoticizes and instrumentalizes host communities with messaging that: (1) avoids overemphasis on the student traveler's individual development, (2) shows diverse participation visually, and (3) uplifts community partnerships, local voices, and equitable exchanges. For Category 2 (Awareness), organizations should move beyond general eco-friendly tips and referrals by communicating institutionally-grounded sustainability commitments, strategic plans, student-responsive guidelines, and evidence of impact. For Category 3 (Leadership), organizations can strengthen existing efforts by ensuring fair representation of host partners' epistemic and relational contributions to programs' sustainability goals, curricula, and evaluations. Lastly, enacting Category 4 (Reconstruction) may involve prioritizing "slow mobility" formats, virtual participation options, regional travel whenever feasible, and governance structures that center long-term, transformative collaboration from the outset. Institutional offices could also work with select third-party providers– the innovative "small players"– to gradually expand the reach of Reconstruction-oriented discourses within mainstream study abroad.

That said, this study is limited by its focus on a small sample of web-based artifacts. Future research could apply SACJ to systematically analyze policy documents, accreditation standards, and interviews with practitioners and students to better understand how these discourses manifest across the sector at scale and over time. Above all, SACJ compels the international education community to see climate justice– not as a constraint on the existence of the field– but as a wake-up call to care, more deeply and bravely, across borders. In rising to this call, study abroad can become a bold catalyst for a climate-resilient world, where global solidarity, shared power, and collective prosperity are at the forefront of education for all.

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Ethical Approval

This study utilized publicly available content from institutional websites for analysis and therefore did not require review by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no competing interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study consist of publicly available materials obtained from institutional websites between 2023 and 2024. Information about the data sources and sampling procedures is provided in the manuscript. Additional information about the materials analyzed may be available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to the study's approach to preserving institutional anonymity.

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