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Managing risk or managing fear? A discourse analysis of study abroad safety training

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Abstract

Risk management is a defining feature of higher education, particularly in study abroad programs, where institutions seek to safeguard students, staff, and faculty. Yet little research has examined the unintended effects of risk management. This study applies discourse analysis to a mandatory risk management training curriculum used at more than 400 universities. The analysis identifies five themes: (1) training fosters hypervigilance; (2) safety is framed in militaristic terms; (3) participants are encouraged to assert superiority over local contexts; (4) narrow modes of response are prioritized; and (5) public safety concerns are reframed as individual or privatized obligations. These findings suggest that the curricula may not simply mitigate threats but also heighten fear, reshape international engagement, and reinforce asymmetries between universities and host communities. The article concludes with implications for university policy, training design, and research, such as defining safety through the lens of local leaders rather than objective insurance underwriters.

Abstract in Spanish

La gestión de riesgos es una característica definitoria de la educación superior, especialmente en los programas de estudios en el extranjero, donde las instituciones buscan proteger a los estudiantes, al personal y a la facultad. Sin embargo, se ha investigado poco sobre los efectos no deseados de la gestión de

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riesgos. Este estudio aplica un análisis del discurso a un plan de formación obligatoria en gestión de riesgos utilizado en más de 400 universidades. El análisis identifica cinco temas: (1) la capacitación fomenta la hipervigilancia; (2) la seguridad se presenta en términos militaristas; (3) se anima a los participantes a afirmar superioridad sobre los contextos locales; (4) se priorizan modos de respuesta estrechos; y (5) las preocupaciones de seguridad pública se reinterpretan como obligaciones individuales o privatizadas. Estos hallazgos sugieren que los programas de capacitación pueden no solo mitigar amenazas, sino también aumentar el miedo, remodelar el compromiso internacional y reforzar las asimetrías entre las universidades y las comunidades anfitrionas. El artículo concluye con implicaciones para la política universitaria, el diseño de la formación y la investigación, como definir la seguridad desde la perspectiva de los líderes locales en lugar de los aseguradores objetivos.

Keywords

Discourse analysis; higher education; risk management; study abroad

1. Introduction

Risk management in the context of study abroad is a set of standard operating procedures to identify, assess, and mitigate threats to students' safety (Khaw & Teoh, 2023). Risks, such as those related to health, are typically identified and mitigated through third-party providers (e.g., insurance underwriters) and the US State Department's Travel Warnings. Often, universities employ training programs to control for various risks, ensuring students are aware of and avoid unnecessary exposures (Boudinot et al., 2024). The intent from third-party providers and universities is ultimately to keep people safe and healthy. But, can risk management in higher education create unintended consequences that increase, rather than reduce, the potential for harm? Can measures designed to protect students introduce new forms of vulnerability or limit the quality of the educational experience? With growing scrutiny around student safety and liability, it is important to consider the long-term effects of policies and practices meant to safeguard students in the present.

Administrators must complete a range of tasks to promote student safety, including training on cross-cultural adjustment, orienting students to the local context, promoting health, and steering participants away from high-crime areas (Bradley et al., 2025; Malveaux, 2016; Martin, 2017; Miller & Sorochty, 2014). At the institutional level, universities often maintain insurance policies to

cover students and faculty abroad and may contract with security agencies to provide evacuation services during political unrest or medical emergencies (Yokoyama, 2018a, 2018b). At the individual level, students and faculty are required to comply with safety procedures, report on their health, and cooperate with staff oversight (Akiba et al., 2024; Lucas & Banks, 2022; Malveaux, 2016). These practices derive from multiple sources: professional bodies like the Forum on Education Abroad that publish best practices, insurance agencies that mandate requirements, and lessons learned through litigation involving students and institutions (Savicki & Brewer, 2015; The Forum on Education Abroad, 2022). Whether through institutional policies, insurance contracts, legal outcomes, or training curricula, risk management has become deeply embedded in higher education (Priebe, 2023).

Yet social theorists have long cautioned that the use of risk as a framework for ensuring safety can have unintended consequences (Beck, 1992; Ewald, 1991; Foucault et al., 1978; Foucault, 1982; Giddens, 1990; Knight, 1964). Douglas (1992), Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), and Green (1997) remind us that risk perceptions are socially constructed, reflecting cultural norms and boundaries. In particular, discourses, such as those about risk and danger, not only describe, but also delimit what can be known (Foucault, 1972). The problem addressed in this study is therefore both practical and theoretical (Hacking, 1986, 1990, 2003): existing higher education research on student safety has not engaged the broader social science literature that examines how risk discourses constrain how safety abroad is conceived. As Bialostok (2015) argues, risk imaginaries may reinforce inequality under the guise of protection. This study seeks to fill that gap by asking: How do study abroad risk management curricula in higher education frame safety and risk, and what implicit assumptions are embedded in that framing? In addressing this question, I aim to situate risk management in study abroad within wider debates on risk and university-community engagement.

2. Materials and methods

This study examines the following research question: How do study abroad risk management curricula in higher education frame safety and risk, and what implicit assumptions are embedded in that framing? This research question shaped the study's empirical methodological approach, which is discourse analysis (DA). Discourse analysis examines how language, texts, and communicative practices shape social realities (Fairclough, 2013). Traditional

research designs within this methodological framework collect and analyze linguistic features (e.g., modality, vocabulary, and transitivity) to understand how meaning, such as the meaning of risk, is negotiated in society (Fairclough, 2013), interpreting discursive strategies linked to patterns in textual features. The purpose of DA in the case of this study is thus not to make conclusions or interpretations about the broader field of risk management, but to understand how patterns in linguistic features about safety shape discourses and the meaning of risk.

The research design of this study follows established DA procedures (Gee, 2011), beginning with the recognition that documents and visual materials are imbued with meaning—values and beliefs that are often found between the lines (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The observable, manifest content may reinforce or obscure deeper, latent assumptions (Fairclough, 2013), and the task of the social scientist is to identify textual patterns that reflect discursive strategies and therefore meaning. This study draws on Samimian-Darash and Rabinow's (2015) call to analyze uncertainty, and on work on language ideologies (Schieffelin et al., 1998) to consider how safety discourse normalizes particular worldviews. The task of DA, therefore, is to examine both manifest and latent values in texts, policies, practices, and images (Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

2.1. Data sources

The primary dataset for this project derives from a proprietary program pseudonymously called *RiskWatch*. RiskWatch functions as an independent, international consultant to universities, providing campus readiness assessments, emergency services, risk management training, and on-ground support for students, staff, and faculty traveling abroad. As such, the company uses proprietary methods of underwriting to define and discern risks for educational institutions. Global intelligence decisions about levels of risk are made based on geopolitical stability, terrorism indices, crime rates, public health indicators, and other proprietary methods to determine likelihood and severity of danger. Then, they develop training curriculum for study abroad participants to become aware of and avoid certain risks. Its intent is to help organizations avoid liability and to keep students safe. The dataset used for this study consisted of RiskWatch's training curriculum, which provided rich linguistic features sufficient for saturation, a necessary component of DA. The curriculum was collected and analyzed in 2025 and consists of 18 hours of online training materials, including 493 images across a dozen modules. Students at participating universities must log in to the online portal, view

videos, and read various texts while also taking quizzes to demonstrate knowledge at a self-study pace. The texts cover various topics regarding study abroad. This curriculum was transcribed manually and the text placed alongside the associated images. Section quizzes embedded within the training were also analyzed with DA. In addition, RiskWatch's risk rating scales and images that inform university practices abroad were collected and incorporated into the dataset.

2.2. Trustworthiness and analysis

Analysis followed standard DA procedures. Waitt (2005) recommends several strategies: suspending pre-existing categories, immersing oneself in the texts, identifying embedded themes, investigating claims of truth, noting inconsistencies, recognizing silences, and paying attention to detail. To suspend pre-existing categories, I recognized my positionality as a qualitative researcher of immense privilege, that is, in terms of my ethnicity, nationality, and race, and first documented pre-existing categories of safety to ensure objectivity, including Euro-centric norms of safety and danger. Because the dataset included both visual and textual material, I allowed the content itself to guide the precise analytic process while following Waitt's overall trajectory. Specifically, I watched the training modules four times, reviewed the 493 images more than twelve times, and read the transcribed script more than twelve times. I also examined the risk rating scale three times. Throughout this process, I noted emerging formulations of patterns of safety and meanings of risk in the curriculum while aiming to withhold preconceived interpretations, as the categories presented in the Results reflect. As in other qualitative methods, a coding scheme was used to discern emergent themes. The coding scheme's early formulations focused on verbatim features in the text. Additional reflection on coding notes formed memos, and continued reflection ensured that findings were documented iteratively. Once all themes were identified and organized, I reviewed the data a final time to ensure saturation and consistency, concluding that five major coded themes emerged, which are the five core patterns in the text documented in the following section.

A central feature of this study's analysis is triangulation. To strengthen trustworthiness, the themes identified in the training materials are compared in the Discussion section with published best practices, court cases, and the broader literature. This approach helps situate the findings within both practical and scholarly contexts.

3. Results

RiskWatch is used by more than 400 universities, including the majority of the top 200 ranked institutions, to train students, staff, and faculty before international travel (Anonymous source, confidential report, 2026). Examination of this curriculum shows how certain narratives about safety and risk are built into the training; this does not suggest that students themselves have these perceptions about risk, but that the textual features themselves are imbued with meaning about safety and risk. RiskWatch identifies six key principles of personal security: Preparation, Awareness, Low Profile, Varied Routine, Communications, and Layered Protection. Analysis of the wording and imagery associated with these principles revealed five recurring scripts. Together, these scripts shape what may be called a “risk imagination” for higher education travel.

3.1. Hypervigilance

First, the training encourages a state of hypervigilance in which individuals are expected to continually monitor their environment and interactions. For example, in the Preparation stage, participants are advised to “explore this building to discover potential areas of risk” (#278), “choose rooms near elevators – it is a more ‘live’ part of the building” (#279), and “select a room away from the lobby if possible (these numbers and the following ones refer to the coding scheme utilized in this empirical analysis). While terrorist attacks are uncommon, car or truck bombs are more likely to damage the front of a building... so rooms toward the rear of the building are usually safest” (#280). These instructions frame ordinary accommodations as potential targets and reinforce the need to report “unattended bags or suspicious behavior” (#317).

Further evidence in the RiskWatch curriculum of creating hypervigilance includes instructions to:

Research your destination before you go.

- Check travel security information online and download [the RiskWatch] app (see resource). Understand the risk level for where you are going.
- Get advice from family or friends with experience of your destination and read guide books. Speak to your University, College or school.
- Call [RiskWatch] Assistance Center for the latest security information at your destination. (#236)

3.2. Militarism

Second, RiskWatch frames travelers as needing to operate much like soldiers in unfamiliar territory. One of the central recommendations is to “be a hard target,” a phrase that conveys militaristic preparation as part of the “Low Profile” principle from RiskWatch. Women, in particular, are advised that upon arrival they should “familiarize yourself with the layout of the airport and its location relative to your accommodation” (#211), effectively instructing participants to create a map, mental or physical, as part of their planning.

The use of martial language continues in instructions that one’s phone is a “key weapon in the battle for personal security” (#214). This guidance, under the Communications principle, is followed by recommendations to download the RiskWatch app and to record key phone numbers, suggesting that students, staff, and faculty should constantly consider what information to reveal or withhold.

A case study in the training illustrates this negotiation. A female expatriate at a hotel introduces herself by name and shares her room number within earshot of others. A “criminal” overhears and later assaults her (#220). The curriculum concludes that she made three errors: revealing her name, being inattentive to her surroundings, and disclosing her room number. The takeaway is that concealing information about identity is essential to maintaining safety.

The curriculum also uses the language of conflict to describe political spaces, advising travelers to avoid “hot spots,” such as “government buildings, foreign embassies or other locations associated with protest, such as Tahrir Square in Egypt” (#313). The guidance portrays protest sites primarily as threats to be avoided, with safety achieved by steering clear of public demonstrations. While the rationale is to reduce exposure to unrest, this practice also distances students and faculty from civic spaces that could otherwise be sites of learning (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014).

3.3. Superiority

Third, RiskWatch cultivates habits of engagement that implicitly prioritize the traveler’s life and decisions over those of local residents. The curriculum directs students, staff, and faculty to vary their routines in order to promote safety: “A predictable routine makes you vulnerable – the more you vary your routine, the better” (#247). Suggested practices include altering arrival and departure times, changing pick-up and drop-off points, varying

modes of transport, traveling in large groups, and choosing different times and places to socialize with friends. Such guidance emphasizes controlling one's environment and movements to maximize personal safety (#318).

This emphasis is reinforced in an explicit instruction to “control your driver” (#268): “Know the local speed limits and ask your driver to slow down if they are going too fast and driving unsafely.” Here, students and faculty are not only encouraged to monitor local professionals but also to assert authority over them. While intended to reduce transportation accidents, the framing positions university travelers as having superior judgment over locals who may have greater contextual knowledge. The curriculum thus elevates the traveler's perspective as the standard for safety.

3.4. Safety or docility?

Fourth, RiskWatch promotes a narrow set of acceptable responses in moments of insecurity. In one case study, a woman walking home late at night in London is followed by an unknown individual. The curriculum presents multiple response options, then asks participants to identify the best practices. The quiz indicates that “assertiveness” and “calmness” are the correct answers. The explanation notes: “By staying calm and thinking rationally, Natasha deescalated a dangerous situation by going into a safe location and walking instead of panicking and going down an unlit street” (#374). The training further instructs participants to walk with confidence, trust instincts, and project assertiveness (#375). At the same time, it recommends a different posture for “serious incidents”: “try and remain calm and adopt a docile posture. Move slowly and deliberately. You never know the attacker's state of mind. Comply with the attacker's demands. It is better to lose your wallet than be physically harmed” (#377).

Together, these scenarios establish three prioritized postures: confidence, assertiveness, and compliance. The goal is to manage one's psychological reactions to minimize harm. While the guidance is pragmatic, it casts safety as primarily an individual performance of discipline and self-control.

RiskWatch also dramatizes risk through case studies and apocalyptic scenarios. These staged events heighten the perception of danger, reinforcing a sense that students are constantly vulnerable abroad. As Orr (2006) observes, such techniques of simulation are a way of managing the possibility of catastrophe, but they can also foster fear and anxiety. Witte (1992) classically

observed that when a threat is perceived, a behavior change may occur, which begs the question whether this script's imbued meanings of danger prompt behavioral change. The training thus channels participants toward specific behavioral scripts while cultivating a broader imagination of insecurity.

3.5. Public or private safety?

Finally, RiskWatch's curriculum develops a script that shapes how universities and students understand the geography of safety. The conclusion of the training reassures participants: "And remember, while this course has provided advice and guidance on potential security risks you may face, the vast majority of study abroad trips are successful and safe. It is good to be prepared but recognize that the trip will be an excellent learning and positive life experience" (#377). At the same time, it cautions that "it is unlikely a study abroad program would be arranged to a high-risk area..." (#316). These statements suggest that universities pre-select destinations to minimize exposure to risk. The effect is a kind of global mapping in which certain regions are considered off-limits for educational engagement. Andersson (2016) notes that such practices reinforce patterns in which elite students avoid areas deemed unsafe or unstable, thereby limiting the range of international experiences.

RiskWatch categorizes each major city and country into five security or travel levels: Insignificant, Low, Medium, High, and Extreme. Each category carries recommendations for living and working in those locations, designed to help institutions mitigate threats. The data illustrate how these ratings shape perceptions of risk. With specific reference to Africa, nearly the entire continent was classified as High or Extreme risk, either in terms of security or health. Only three nations—Cape Verde, Mauritius, and Morocco—received a lower classification. By contrast, countries such as the United States, Spain, Portugal, Canada, and the United Kingdom were consistently ranked as Low. Such categorizations, while intended to provide clear guidance, also highlight the uneven distribution of perceived safety worldwide. These distinctions raise questions about how macro-level factors such as economic development, governance, or international reputation may influence the ratings, alongside measurable security data.

3.6. Scripts, scenarios, and the risk apparatus

Taken together, RiskWatch's curriculum demonstrates how safety is framed through recurring scripts that structure the "risk imagination" for study

abroad. While the images and case studies feature a relatively diverse set of actors—avoiding older stereotypes such as consistently portraying Black men as criminals or White women as victims—the broader framing remains consistent. Across its modules, RiskWatch emphasizes vigilance, militarized preparation, traveler authority, prescribed behavioral responses, and restricted geographies of engagement. These themes appear in scripts of monitoring security, militarizing safety, manufacturing superiority, making certain modes of safety a priority, and metamorphosing public safety from a passive stance into a proactive practice. Although diversity of representation in images is notable, it does not alter the underlying message: participants are trained to see international environments as potentially dangerous and to manage that danger through heightened control, rational planning, and prioritization of personal security. The following section explores the implications of this framing in greater depth.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the RiskWatch risk management curriculum identified several empirical patterns in how risk and safety are presented to students, staff, and faculty participating in higher education abroad programs. Importantly, the curriculum and training modules are designed to promote self-awareness and protection; it emphasizes careful preparation, adherence to protocols, and awareness of potential hazards. However, further discussion of these empirical findings when placed in conversation with social theories indicates how linguistic patterns in the curriculum reflect the meaning of risk and safety. This does not suggest that students on site necessarily operate with nefarious motives, but the following discussion does suggest that discourses of risk embedded in the text indicate some power asymmetries. In what follows, I apply five subfields of social theory vis-a-vis safety and danger to the textual findings of the study.

4.1. Governmentality

Governmentality theory provides a useful lens for understanding how the RiskWatch curriculum shapes participant behavior and decision-making (Foucault, 1991). As Dean (2010) emphasizes, governmentality extends beyond a nation's or government's protocol to organizational and professional practices, a pattern clearly visible in RiskWatch's prescriptive curricula. Applying governmentality to the text would suggest that it does more than provide safety instructions; it structures how students, staff, and faculty

interpret and respond to risk, effectively creating a hierarchy of authority around knowledge, expertise, and decision-making. While RiskWatch operates internationally and is not tied to a single government, it establishes clear expectations for how participants should act, effectively positioning institutional guidance as the authoritative standard. This helps ensure consistent application of safety practices, but it may also limit individual judgment or flexibility in novel situations.

Higher education literature emphasizes the increasing importance of risk management in study abroad programs (Huber, 2009; Martin, 2017; Novak & Lee, 2007; Rhodes, 2014; The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011, 2015, 2018a-c; Wiedenhoef et al., 2014). Legal scholars note that universities' liability concerns shape administrative decision-making (Alexander & Alexander, 2017; Kaplin & Lee, 2013; Lake, 2013), further institutionalizing risk protocols. Standards and certifications, particularly from The Forum on Education Abroad, instruct institutions to conduct risk assessments, maintain emergency protocols, and coordinate with relevant authorities (Hoffa, 2007; Hoffa & DePaul, 2010; Vande Berg et al., 2009, 2012; The Forum on Education Abroad, 2022). By following these standards, institutions and participants are guided toward a shared understanding of what constitutes safe behavior, establishing the institution and its experts as central arbiters of risk. Following these standards creates a shared understanding of safe behavior and emphasizes the role of experts, though participants may rely heavily on guidance and engage less with situational judgment than they might in less structured environments.

These paradigms raise practical questions about power and influence in risk management: Who decides what is safe—the home institution, the host institution, or an independent agency such as RiskWatch? Whose assessments carry more weight in emergencies? Who is considered an authoritative source—local experts or international organizations? The curriculum implicitly positions U.S. institutions and associated risk management companies as primary decision-makers, influencing the scope of action for students, staff, and faculty.

The curriculum also emphasizes self-regulation and composure, training participants to manage their behavior in potentially stressful situations (Lemov, 2015; Power, 1997, 2008). Terms like “exposure,” “protection,” and “culture shock” reinforce the authority of outside expert guidance in shaping individual responses to risk (Lupton, 2006). As Caduff (2014, p. 109) observes,

It is not just rationalities of risk and danger but also fantasies of mass death and mass survival that are at the heart of biosecurity. These are fantasies of the state; they have been essential for the formation of national communities and the kinds of sacrifices that modern states demand in the name of the nation.

In other words, risk is not only an objective measure of danger but carries with it latent assumptions of fear and danger (Heimer, 1985; Jaeger et al., 2001). In sum, the curriculum defines expected behaviors, structures decision-making, and clarifies authority, enhancing safety and consistency, while at the same time shaping how participants engage with the environment and make independent judgments.

4.2. Numbers, structure, and power

A central feature of the RiskWatch curriculum is its emphasis on quantitative assessment and structured planning. Participants are guided to follow checklists, complete risk assessments, and consider worst-case scenarios for each program site and activity. This systematic approach reflects the belief that measurable data can inform better decision-making and reduce the likelihood of harm (Masco, 2014). By providing protocols and standards, the curriculum effectively channels attention toward specific hazards, establishing a shared framework for anticipating and responding to risk. At the same time, strict reliance on metrics and protocols can create rigid patterns of behavior, leaving little room for flexibility when conditions deviate from expectations. The reliance on predictive models reflects what Armstrong (2002) terms a “forecasting” logic, where future dangers are extrapolated from hypothetical scenarios.

This structured guidance also highlights practical power dynamics. University representatives and administrators, operating with RiskWatch tools, hold authority in shaping participants’ behavior and movement. For example, decisions about what areas are safe or risky, what procedures to follow, and which contingencies to prepare for are largely guided by institutional expertise. Andersson (2016) notes that in high-risk or unfamiliar environments, individuals often operate from a controlled, remote perspective, prioritizing institutional recommendations over personal judgment. The curriculum reinforces this approach, providing participants with tools to manage their environment indirectly through careful adherence to protocols.

The curriculum's emphasis on preparation and monitoring creates a hierarchy of knowledge and decision-making. Evidence-based risk assessments, scenario planning, and documentation place responsibility in the hands of those designing and overseeing the program, rather than the individual participant. This allows participants to engage in international experiences safely, while relying on institutional expertise to interpret complex or unfamiliar conditions. Yet by emphasizing compliance with predetermined procedures, the curriculum can inadvertently constrain critical thinking or reduce participants' confidence in responding outside the protocol. As Caduff (2014, p. 114) suggests, "Power's task, in the mimetic theater of collapse, is to learn how to use the terror of terror as effectively as possible and reach an optimal level of public anxiety."

In practice, the curriculum balances raising awareness of risk with ensuring participants are not overwhelmed. Structured preparation fosters confidence, situational awareness, and adherence to safety protocols. It also ensures consistency across programs, allowing institutions to manage multiple sites effectively. By emphasizing evidence, metrics, and procedural guidance, the curriculum shapes both perception and behavior. It highlights the distribution of authority in risk management: administrators interpret data, define expectations, and guide participants' actions. This raises several questions about operational implications: Which risks receive the most attention, and which may be overlooked? How does reliance on structured data shape participant decision-making in real time? Are participants empowered to act independently, or primarily guided by institutional instructions? The emphasis on metrics and ratings underscore practical concerns about reliance on standardized metrics, the potential for overlooking context-specific nuances, and the balance between institutional guidance and participant autonomy.

4.3. Knowledge, borders, distance

Another key feature of the RiskWatch curriculum is the way it organizes knowledge to guide participant behavior. By clearly marking areas as safe or risky, the program shapes how students, staff, and faculty perceive and navigate their environment (Andersson, 2016). In many cases, this creates a predictable framework that can reduce confusion and increase confidence. At the same time, relying primarily on centralized guidance may limit participants' ability to respond to nuances or unexpected circumstances on the ground. This raises several practical questions: Whose knowledge is prioritized—the local experts on the ground, or the data and guidelines provided by RiskWatch? How does reliance on centralized information affect participants' ability to respond to

unexpected or context-specific challenges? Do participants defer to institutional guidance even in situations where local knowledge might provide additional insights? When participants depend on remote data, they gain a consistent standard for decision-making, though they may also miss insights that only come from direct engagement. As Strydom (2002) argues, risk imaginaries are inseparable from broader environmental and societal contexts, shaping how institutions map danger across geographies. As Rushton (2013) shows, categorizing people and places as “dangerous” is not neutral but historically rooted, shaping how institutions define safety today. By drawing clear geographic boundaries around knowledge and risk, the curriculum helps participants understand where caution is warranted, but it also introduces a certain distance from the local environment, shaping their experience in subtle ways. Local knowledges seem to be less meaningful than seemingly objective, independent ones.

Recent research emphasizes that participants navigate risk both physically and conceptually, balancing freedom of action with adherence to institutional guidance (Tsing, 2005, 2015). Tsing (2015) highlights how quantification and measurement can shape perceptions of freedom and autonomy; in the context of study abroad, the curriculum guides participants through structured frameworks that influence their movement, attention, and priorities, but they may also constrain personal judgment in unforeseen situations and deem local knowledge negatively.

In practice, the curriculum mediates participants’ engagement with risk through forms, checklists, and scenario planning. This creates a controlled distance, where participants compliantly rely on institutional interpretation of risk rather than solely on direct experience. Weber’s (2001) classic insight—that risk and responsibility are entangled with moralized rationality—helps explain why compliance and self-discipline are central in study abroad training. This promotes consistency and reduces exposure to unforeseen hazards, but it can also limit experiential learning or diminish the development of situational awareness that comes from navigating challenges directly. Nixon’s (2011) concept of “slow violence” here resonates, as institutional avoidance of certain regions perpetuates structural neglect rather than immediate physical harm.

The curriculum also highlights the interaction between authority and experience. Participants’ knowledge of local conditions may be indirect or mediated through risk assessments, mapping tools, and institutional guidance. This raises operational questions: How does mediated knowledge shape

participants' decisions? Are there situations where indirect knowledge could limit responsiveness or adaptability? How do participants balance reliance on structured information with situational judgment? Following structured guidance may help prevent errors, but it may also inadvertently restrict experiential learning or engagement with local contexts.

Overall, the curriculum demonstrates how knowledge and distance function as mechanisms for managing risk. By emphasizing centralized expertise, structured guidance, and controlled engagement, it shapes both understanding and behavior, but also prompts reflection on how these practices balance preparation, autonomy, situational awareness, and trust in locals.

4.4. Risk and surveillance

Surveillance is a central component of the RiskWatch curriculum, shaping how participants perceive and respond to external risks. The curriculum ensures that students, staff, and administrators all monitor their surroundings diligently. Technology, structured reporting, and checklists support continuous observation, helping ensure that potential hazards are identified and addressed promptly. Participants are trained to remain vigilant in locations or situations flagged as potentially risky. This emphasis reinforces adherence to safety protocols and creates a shared standard for recognizing hazards. Being alert helps prevent incidents and maintain safety, but it can also lead participants to approach unfamiliar contexts with heightened caution, even when cultural differences themselves are not inherently dangerous. Agamben's (2005) notion of the "state of exception" is useful here: risk management discourses legitimize extraordinary measures as routine, normalizing heightened surveillance in everyday student life.

Several practical questions arise: Which activities or locations are considered risky, and on what basis? How should participants navigate situations when institutional risk assessments conflict with on-the-ground observations? Does assigning monitoring responsibility to participants improve safety, or could it constrain engagement with the local environment (Goldstein, 2010)? While structured monitoring, following procedures, and reporting deviations may reduce exposure to risks, it may also lead to overly cautious behavior, limiting immersion in local contexts or experience that are entirely safe but unfamiliar. By emphasizing vigilance toward external hazards rather than cultural differences, the curriculum fails to lean into the tension between ensuring safety and allowing participants to interact confidently with diverse communities and environments.

4.5. Managing risk and participant engagement

The RiskWatch curriculum shapes how students, staff, and faculty interact with environments considered potentially hazardous. By avoiding high-risk areas or relying on institutional assessments, participants often gain knowledge indirectly—through procedures, reports, and mediated observation—rather than through direct experience (Andersson & Weigand, 2015). Completing risk assessments, filling out forms, attending security meetings, following safety procedures, using private security services, and reporting through apps all make abstract risks tangible. These measures help ensure safety and accountability, but they may also limit hands-on experience and direct understanding of local conditions. As Shih (2016) demonstrates in a different context, well-meaning interventions can reinscribe unequal power relations, a dynamic mirrored in the framing of “risky” regions within the curriculum.

Risk management determines where and how participants can move (Orta, 2013). Low-risk areas allow freedom of action and decision-making, while high-risk zones require additional oversight or restrictions. This structure clarifies responsibilities and expectations, yet it also shapes participant experience by limiting access to certain environments and influencing how individuals engage with complex situations. The curriculum emphasizes structured observation and mitigation strategies, enabling safe engagement while highlighting the importance of situational awareness. At the same time, portraying environments or people as risky can influence participants’ engagement, making them more cautious and less likely to interact freely in unfamiliar contexts.

Patterns within the curriculum reveal how risk management interacts with perception, knowledge, space, culture, and operational procedures. Protocols provide guidance for identifying hazards, assessing risk, and implementing preventive measures, but aspects such as ecological, legal, or religious considerations are less explicitly addressed. This raises questions about how these factors could influence decision-making, program design, and participant engagement.

Overall, the curriculum demonstrates how risk is formalized and operationalized, shaping behavior, knowledge, and interaction with the environment. While participants benefit from clear guidance and structured safety mechanisms, the approach also highlights the balance between following

protocols and developing practical, on-the-ground judgment in dynamic contexts.

5. Implications

This study highlights the practical consequences of using risk management curricula in U.S. higher education. While designed to protect students, faculty, and staff, such systems can shape how individuals engage with unfamiliar environments and partners abroad. For this reason, higher education professionals may consider the following implications.

First, scholars and practitioners should critically evaluate how risk is used to promote safety. From insurance policies to standard practices, trainings, and operational protocols, this study demonstrates how institutional approaches to risk embed assumptions about what is hazardous, where attention is focused, and whose safety is prioritized. Leaders would benefit from applying this kind of analysis to their own policies and procedures to ensure that operational decisions are evidence-based and contextually appropriate. As Swadener and Lubeck (1995) classically argue, unpacking the discourse of “risk” in education reveals how institutional practices construct vulnerability in ways that may not align with lived realities.

Second, universities should actively engage with local partners to understand how safety is conceived in different contexts (Lough & Toms, 2018). Risk management often centers on the priorities of the home institution, but considering the perspectives and practices of local collaborators can enhance both safety and relationship-building. Collaborative approaches to identifying and mitigating hazards can generate practical solutions while maintaining trust and mutual understanding. Incorporating principles like Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2016) may help rebalance risk management frameworks to center local voices.

Third, professionals implementing risk systems should recognize how policies and procedures shape participant perception (Rahayu et al., 2024). Similar to domestic discourses that conflate “at-risk” with minority status (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012), RiskWatch implicitly codes entire regions as risky, reinforcing deficit narratives. Decisions intended to protect some constituents can unintentionally limit opportunities for direct engagement, reduce situational understanding, or narrow the scope of practical knowledge. Awareness of these dynamics can help calibrate protocols so they protect safety without unnecessarily constraining learning and exploration.

Finally, students, faculty, and staff traveling abroad should approach risk frameworks with awareness. While policies and procedures should be followed, participants can benefit from actively engaging with environments and communities beyond what is prescribed. Astute observers would be aware that RiskWatch, and companies like them, have a major conflict of interest: Their business is built on fear and danger, and so only profit when fear and danger are perpetuated (Adams, 2013; Pain & Smith, 2008). Observing local conditions, questioning assumptions, and reflecting on institutional guidance can deepen understanding of complex contexts.

Questions for further research remain. This study sought to understand how certain textual patterns in a study abroad risk management training curriculum reflect certain discourses about safety and danger. However, the study makes no conclusions about whether students actually operate with power asymmetries once on the ground. Additional research with alternative methodologies would discern whether that is the case. Further, gender dynamics within the curriculum warrant attention. Some scenarios assign particular vulnerabilities to women, which raises questions about how risk perception is constructed in relation to different groups. Similarly, geographic and contextual ratings—such as assigning high risk to regions of Africa—invite investigation into how perceptions of risk intersect with historical, economic, and political factors. Additionally, tracing the evolution of risk from maritime commerce to institutionalized safety could reveal how risk practices have historically shaped behavior, knowledge, and operational norms. Extending such analysis to domestic applications, including campus safety and public security, could further illuminate the effects of risk systems. On the surface, the intent of risk management is to protect; yet, as this study demonstrates, the codification of risk also carries power in shaping decisions, perceptions, and actions.

Ethical approval

This study did not involve human or animal subjects requiring ethical approval.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that he has no known financial or personal interests that could appear to influence the research in this article.

Data availability statement

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