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# A Retrospective Inquiry into the Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Study Abroad Program

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## Abstract

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Millions of students in school, on educational breaks, and study abroad programs were left uncertain of their next steps. This study aimed to examine the impact of COVID-19 on college-aged students' study abroad experiences in the United Kingdom. Four students participated in interviews, asking them about their study abroad. Thematic and poetic analysis were used to analyze the data, and five themes emerged from the former: (1) thoughts before travel, (2) teaching abroad, (3) traveling abroad, (4) quarantine, and (5) the total experience. Based on the analysis, we recommend that professors consider incorporating reflection activities into study abroad programs and that professors and students alike take time to learn about the culture beforehand. Future research should consider examining how COVID-19 impacted individuals', communities', and universities' views of travel abroad.

## Keywords

Experiential learning; international travel; pandemic; poetic analysis; reflection

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## 1. Introduction

Original cases of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) were first discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. By the end of January 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a “public health emergency of concern” (Kennedy, 2020). By March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 to be a global pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; World Health Organization, 2020). At the time, millions of students of all ages in various educational settings were either in school, on educational breaks, or studying abroad. Following this pronouncement from the WHO, educators, students, families, and other individuals alike were on edge, uncertain of their next steps (Kennedy, 2020).

Two days after the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, President Donald Trump issued travel restrictions for Americans to either (1) avoid international travel or (2) return immediately to the United States (US) (Fanari & Segrin, 2021). Students on study abroad courses were to adhere to these restrictions; consequently, universities across the states worked to return their students home as soon as possible (Connors, n.d.). Students were welcomed home by the stress of the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, such as its pathophysiology, implications for education, and long-term health effects (Fanari & Segrin, 2021). This study focused on the experiences of students partaking in a short-term study abroad that took place during this tumultuous period.

### Contextualizing the Study

The study abroad course examined in this study was titled *Scotland: Youth Engagement in Agriculture* and took place from March 6<sup>th</sup> to March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020. During the course, students spent time in London, England, and Dumfries, Scotland. As a result of a partnership with Dumfries schools and the University of Glasgow Dumfries Campus faculty, during the students' time in Dumfries, they were actively engaged in teaching primary students in a local school and working on a service-learning project. Specifically, the students focused on implementing lessons in agriculture. This study abroad program fulfills the University of Georgia's requirement that undergraduate students must complete an experiential learning-focused course. Generally, undergraduate students comprise the course enrollees, although graduate students can take the course for graduate credit. This arrangement is made between the Program Director, the graduate student, and the Graduate School at the University of Georgia.

In the middle of the study abroad experience, on Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, students became aware of the quickly evolving situation and newly implemented travel restrictions from other University of Georgia students studying abroad in Spain and/or from the local news media. Due to the distance between Dumfries, Scotland, and London Heathrow Airport, students were advised to remain engaged in the study abroad program and to remain on the already booked flight departing on Saturday, March 14<sup>th</sup>.

## **2. Literature Review**

Important to understanding study abroad is first identifying how they are organized. This literature review thus first briefly introduces and defines a study abroad program. Given that the study abroad program examined in this paper is one of several options students have to fulfill their experiential learning credit at the University of Georgia, a particular emphasis is placed on defining experiential learning. After, we introduce the salience of reflection for study abroad programs before reviewing how these courses operated in the face of the ongoing pandemic. Please note that program and course are used interchangeably.

### **2.1. Study Abroad Programs**

Study abroad programs are acknowledged to have a beneficial impact on students' educational programs (Roberson, 2018; Sharp & Roberts, 2013; Stone & Petrick, 2013). Primarily, these experiences root themselves in the foundations of experiential learning, a concept initiated by Dewey (1938) and expanded upon by Kolb (1984), which states that more impactful learning will have hands-on and real-life components. Regarding study abroad, the instance of travel provides students with an opportunity to be flexible, reflect, and learn, specifically because of its intent to immerse students in new cultures (Roberson, 2018; Stone & Petrick, 2013). Study abroad courses thus often introduce students to other cultures, social norms, and attitudes. Bletscher et al. (2022) found that undergraduate students had low knowledge about global agriculture issues and policy; in this study, the students who identified as majoring in an agriculture-related major had lower average knowledge scores than non-agriculture majors. When examining the impact of global experiences in agricultural education, study abroad programs have been seen as an effective activity to engage students in impactful experiences and stimulate the globalization of the classroom lessons they will teach (Sharp & Roberts, 2013).

Though generally touted as advantageous for learning, study abroad courses may negatively affect students' lives when other stressors, such as the onset of a pandemic, occur (Garbóczy et al., 2021; Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020). Being away from home during these periods of increased stress, too, may contribute to health anxiety, which is defined as "worries and anxiety due to a perceived threat to health" (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020, p. 2). In terms of what was, at the time, a growing but unknowable pandemic situation, health anxiety could have been further triggered by the media. During outbreaks, news stories can be ever-changing, yet those with health anxiety may be turning to these exact sources to learn "what is next" (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020). For study abroad students seeking information about symptoms, number of cases, and travel home, the media could intensify their health anxiety.

## 2.2. The Case for Reflection

Understanding the students' study abroad experience has become more important, especially considering the pandemic. These courses can range in length from a full semester or longer to a shorter term, such as a week-long experience. Though shorter-term courses allow for less immersion than courses that last upwards of a semester, students may choose the former because of the length of time and lower costs (Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015). Because of the reduced time spent on short-term study abroad programs, it is important to ascertain if and how students are (or are not) making meaning of their experiences. Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) indicated that by focusing on students' participation and reflection on their experiences, they were able to develop an understanding with the students about the meaning of their experiences. However, students need opportunities during their time abroad and upon returning home to engage in meaning-making. Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) reported that during interviews, students "seemed to, at times, struggle with articulating and explaining what they learned from their experiences" and "often relied on conventional catch phrases such as 'more globally aware' or 'more cultured' without articulating fully what those terms meant to them" (p. 825). Indeed, though experiential learning-focused activities, such as study abroad programs, may elicit critical thinking and meaning-making of the world, students may often need simultaneous and extrinsic opportunities to engage in reflection about their learning (Baxter et al., 2008; Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015).

The specific study abroad program examined in this study was situated in an Agricultural Education-focused department. Traditionally, experiential

learning is the core of any agriculture education program (Croom, 2008). Dewey (1938) said,

Learning from experience [experiential learning]... involves: (1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify (cited in Roberts, 2006, p. 19).

Regarding these principles, study abroad can be a form of experiential learning precisely because students are expected to engage in observation of the differences surrounding them (e.g., culture, food habits, mannerisms, etc.). In terms of reflection, students should dedicate time to analyzing how and why the differences occur; this time for reflection and analysis allows for learning (Kolb, 1984).

## 2.3. Differences in Study Abroad Because of the Pandemic

### 2.3.1. During and Immediately After Program Cancellation

In the early days of the pandemic, many students were given the opportunity to remain on their travel abroad (e.g., the students on the trip being studied) or return home at their discretion (e.g., Heinzmann et al., 2022). Yet despite this initial autonomy in decision-making, as news about and incidence of COVID-19 spread, this independence was quickly replaced with canceled programs on the organization's behalf, leaving many students feeling hurt and confused (Heinzmann et al., 2022).

Many study abroad programs remained canceled well after the outbreak of COVID-19 across the world in 2020. With little guidance about proper protocol and procedures, Gibbs (2022) offers some considerations, especially for universities, to prepare for possible future world health concerns. First, universities must be prepared with a quarantine plan, especially for students residing on an international university or college campus. Universities must also consider what their cancellation policies will be. Second, parents and students alike must recognize that they must comply with international rules and policies when abroad. Finally, program coordinators must create plans for managing student-planned travel, whether to and from the study abroad or for leisure time while traveling. Program coordinators should also plan to stay abreast of current information regarding U.S. travel advisories.

### 2.3.2. Reinstalling Study Abroad

Virtual learning experiences offered an avenue for students to participate in study abroad, especially when COVID-19 prevented universities from hosting their study abroad programs. For example, Liu and Shirley (2021) examined how two professors from the United States and Germany redesigned a study abroad course to be offered fully online. The course had updated learning objectives, introduced a virtual reality experience that allowed students to learn about the other culture, offered synchronous lectures and asynchronous activities, and featured a reduced course fee. Although Liu and Shirley (2021) found that students generally enjoyed the course, online experiences will not replace the full in-person experience. Indeed, Basterretxea and Sanz (2022) found that even with the virtual experiences offered, students generally prefer the in-person experiences.

Despite the rapidity with which COVID-19 impacted students' ability to participate and complete the study abroad, Basterretxea and Sanz (2022) show that COVID-19 has not necessarily changed why students want to participate in study abroad programs. Lingering and potential new health concerns increasingly impact students' considerations for participating in study abroad; however, their initial reasons for wanting to participate remain unchanged. These reasons for participating in study abroad include career development, language skills, personal growth, and world enlightenment, where health emerges as a new factor for considering participating (Basterretxea & Sanz).

## 3. Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of COVID-19 on college-aged students' study abroad programs to the United Kingdom (UK). The study was guided by the three following research questions: How do students describe their overall experiences throughout the United Kingdom? What were participants' overall knowledge, thoughts, and experiences with COVID-19 prior to, during, and upon completion of the study abroad experience? What proactive, reactive, and latent expectations, reactions, and actions were expressed either because of or despite what we now know was a looming pandemic?

## 4. Methods

Qualitative research demands that the researcher consider the world around them and their reasoning for conducting research. Specifically, as we examined the impact of COVID-19 on study abroad experiences, it was important that we consider how the students viewed their situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, social constructionism, which asserts that meaning is co-constructed (Bhattacharya, 2017), was the epistemological framework that guided this study. This framework asserts that individuals navigate knowledge construction through intra- and interpersonal relationships to understand a phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2017; Lincoln et al., 2011). Additionally, this framework asserts that personal interpretation of events directs how individuals move through life (Lincoln et al., 2011). As such, this framework allowed researchers to discern how the students navigated this experience together and how their classmates, professors, and media interactions shaped their viewpoints of experiencing study abroad at the beginning of a global pandemic.

### 4.1. Participant Sampling

Twelve students in total participated in the study abroad experience. Each student was recruited by the Program Director to participate in the interview process; however, only four of the twelve students agreed and were available to participate in the study. Each participant differed in their experiences of study abroad and international travel, which increased the researchers' opportunity to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on the students' experiences: One student had previously traveled abroad, one had previously participated in a study abroad, and two had never traveled internationally or studied abroad. Though the sample size was arguably small, the researchers decided that because no other individuals were willing to participate, and because the intent was to engage in qualitative analysis, the sample size was sufficient. However, researchers acknowledge that generalizations and impact are likewise confined. Table (1) provides a description of the four participants, including their assigned pseudonyms, their college rank at the time of the interview, their major while enrolled in the study abroad, and their experiences abroad prior to engaging with this study abroad course. Note that during the study abroad course, all students were undergraduate students.

TABLE (1)

## PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Pseudonym	College Rank (at time of interview)	Major While Enrolled in Study Abroad	Prior Travel Abroad
Andrew	Senior	Agriculture Education	No prior study abroad courses
Jamie	First-year graduate student	Biological Sciences	One prior study abroad course (Costa Rica)
Katherine	Senior	Agricultural Communications	No prior study abroad courses
Stella	First-year graduate student	Agriculture Education	No prior study abroad courses, but has international travel experience

## 4.2. Data Collection

To determine the more lasting impact that COVID-19 had on students' study abroad experiences, researchers conducted individual interviews with participants 18 to 20 months after their study abroad course. We developed a semi-structured interview protocol that asked participants to consider their knowledge of COVID-19, thoughts while traveling abroad, and experiences returning to the United States. More specifically, students were asked questions regarding their knowledge and thoughts of COVID-19 prior to leaving for the study abroad program; their attempts to seek out information while preparing to travel; their description of which parts of the program were impacted by COVID-19; their experience learning about policies being implemented in the United States; and their thoughts and experiences prior to and upon returning to the United States. The interview guide was reviewed and confirmed by an expert in qualitative analysis.

Each interview was conducted via Zoom with lengths ranging between 60 and 80 minutes. Each interview was transcribed by Rev transcription software and reviewed by the researchers for accuracy. To uphold trustworthiness and rigor, researchers assigned unique pseudonyms to each participant, utilized member checking and peer debriefing, and referred to interview memo notes.

### 4.3. Data Analysis

Given that only four individuals participated in the study, the researchers employed thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). Briefly, this entailed familiarizing ourselves with the data by first reading the interview transcripts. We then independently generated initial codes and themes. In reviewing themes, we referenced our memos and conversed with each other until an agreement was reached. We then defined the themes and began to produce the report. In producing the report, we recognized that our sample size hindered us in the analytic process. We thus engaged in poetic analysis and representation to allow ourselves to construct further meaning from our initial findings.

Poetic analysis is a method warranted in and of itself, yet because of the small sample size in this study, poetic analysis was employed adjacent to thematic analysis as a means of theoretical triangulation. Specifically, theoretical triangulation means the researcher examines a conclusion from more than one viewpoint to prevent conforming to one theory of thinking. As a result, we felt we bolstered our findings because of this approach.

### 4.4. Poetic Analysis

Poetic analysis allows the reader the opportunity to reflect and feel the data through their own senses because the words are represented in everyday language rather than that of the researcher (Cahnmann, 2003; Glesne, 1997). Poetic analysis also allows the researcher to stay in touch with the words of the participants in the study, which affords the reader a greater possibility for meaning-making to understand what is being conveyed (Glesne, 1997; Sanders & Lamm, 2022). Glesne (1997) offers a few rules for using poetry in research: the words used should be that of the participant; the words should maintain the cadence of the participant; and the words do not need to be ordered in the way they were spoken, that is, they can be layered and juxtaposed. In poetic analysis, too, it is important to note that the basics of coding are not forgotten; rather, using methods (e.g., thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)) to help sort the data can also help the researcher determine exactly what phrases of text would best suit the poetic representation.

By using poetry to play with the data, we believe we were able to conceive a more credible and authentic representation of how the participants experienced COVID-19 in an unfamiliar environment. Researchers thus

reanalyzed the transcripts and compared final themes from thematic analysis. The findings and results were produced via a compilation of both analytic methods. Since neither researcher attended the study abroad program themselves, the poems presented in the results rely solely on the participants' words. Epistemologically, this was important because we wanted to pay heed to how the participants constructed and shared their experiences with us.

#### 4.5. Reflexivity Statement

We are two doctoral students in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication at the University of Georgia. We work adjacent to and under the supervision of the third author, who was the Program Director for this study abroad program. Neither of us (authors one and two) was present on this specific program; however, we participated in the study abroad program in a later year. Our familiarity with this context and these students came from each having previously traveled abroad and teaching these students in our home department at the University of Georgia. Although not having attended this specific program limited our understanding of the immensity of this experience, we were nonetheless prepared to analyze and narrate the occurrences because of our training in qualitative research. The Program Director, or third author, has led this study abroad numerous times and is responsible for developing the partnership abroad, so they served as a resource to confirm, challenge, or expand our findings.

### 5. Results

Upon engaging in thematic analysis, researchers constructed several overarching themes, including (1) thoughts before travel, (2) the pandemic's impact on teaching abroad, (3) the pandemic's impact on traveling abroad, (4) the experience of quarantine upon returning to the United States, and (5) the total experience. Relevant sub-themes for each central theme, respectively, included (1) reasons for participating in study abroad, expressions of excitement before leaving, and precursory awareness of COVID-19; (2) changes to the first day of teaching and the children's excitement surrounding the mystery of COVID-19; (3) traveling as a group, noticing publicly posted information, and general naivete; (4) the final night, the anxiety of going through the airport, and learning how to navigate quarantine and its related changes; and (5) reflections on the professors, differences in culture, and

general lessons learned. Table (2) displays the theme schema the researchers developed, which lists each theme with corresponding subthemes.

**TABLE (2)**

RELEVANT THEMES AND SUBTHEMES RELATED TO STUDYING ABROAD AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC

<b>Thoughts before travel</b>
Reasons for participating
Initial excitement
Precursory awareness of COVID-19
<b>Pandemic's impact on teaching abroad</b>
First day changes
Students' excitement about the mysterious pandemic
<b>Pandemic's impact on traveling abroad</b>
Group travel
Publicly posted information
General naivete
<b>Quarantine experience upon returning home</b>
The final night
The airport
Reacting to changes because of quarantine
<b>The experience itself</b>
The professors
Cultural differences
Lessons learned

*Note.* The bolded text represents the central themes as presented in the results while the subtext represents the sub-themes.

## 5.1. The Full Poem

The poem presented in its entirety here includes statements and perspectives of each of the four participants describing their overall experiences from the study abroad program. After the representation of the full poem, we present the adjacent findings from our thematic analysis.

### *Navigating*

I think I was aware of it -

I was worried about COVID-19

We talked about it-

it was starting to get on social media

Infecting us with fear.

It's a virus,  
in China right now.

But before we left,  
it was like,  
"COVID, who's that?"

Oh, yeah, COVID's a thing.  
We were naive.

I expected it to be a normal trip, but,  
we didn't know what was coming.

I guess,  
There were some nerves, a bit nerve-racking.  
But,  
I can't think  
of any instance we thought about not getting in crowds.

I wanted to try everything-  
Haggis, Shepherd's pie, scones, coffee.

I planned to just kind of  
experience new cultures,  
and new ways of life.

I was excited,  
to interact with youth,  
to see the difference in the different teaching styles abroad.

We had to pivot -  
that was a word that we threw around a lot

I remember  
Using a lot more hand sanitizer than I normally would have.

I remember  
Sobbing my eyes out.  
I didn't know what was going on

Okay, COVID's becoming real.

I think I was definitely worried,  
about coming back to the US.  
"oh, we got out. We got out just in time."

If we were going to have to be tested,  
if we were going to have our temperature taken.

The CDC literally came onto the airplane.  
I didn't really know what to expect.

I'm glad I went on that trip.  
I look back on it really fondly.  
I probably would have been more worried.  
Obviously, a little stressful at the end.

If we could do it all over again,  
We should place an emphasis on -  
Preparation,  
Loving each other,  
How we're supposed to treat each other.

## 5.2. Thematic Analysis

### 5.2.1. Before Leaving the United States

The first main theme revolved around students' thoughts before travel and included subthemes of reasons for participating, initial excitement, and precursory awareness of COVID-19. Each student expressed that the program was somehow related to their major, and they knew of the professors or would enroll in classes with them in the future. Katherine, who wants to be a 4-H Extension agent when she graduates, specifically was interested in the youth development aspect of the program. She stated, "I thought that going on this trip would give me a really good opportunity to kind of see how teaching is in other

areas of the world so that I could implement those skills when I become a 4-H agent.”

Each participant also expressed excitement about traveling abroad. Both Stella and Jamie expounded on this idea, citing the diverse cultural aspects of the United Kingdom as the reason for their eagerness. Jamie, too, commented that she felt her whole life she had been told not to settle for being a teacher, for education. Attending this study abroad program was a way to prove them wrong:

Why did I choose Scotland? I was kind of in this environment where I wanted to go to Europe, but I didn't really have the finances. But, also, my whole life, people told me to not be a teacher. I was “better than that” and “Don't, you dare settle for education.” And so, I think a lot of that is – I don't want to say, like, fueled that passion – but it was like, “I can get through this and go to Scotland and see if this is really something that I want to do.”

Two of the participants initially stated they did not know much about the looming pandemic, although Stella recalled that not much information even existed to be prepared. Andrew, who indicated he did not know much beforehand, laughed during the interview, stating that a friend had joked with him preemptively about the pandemic, but he did not pay much heed. Jamie, in contrast to the other participants, mentioned she was aware of COVID-19 because of her statistics professor, who often discussed current events to increase the relevancy of the subject.

...

*I think I was aware of it -  
I was worried about COVID-19  
We talked about it-  
it was starting to get on social media  
Infecting us with fear.*

*It's a virus,  
in China right now.*

*But before we left,  
it was like,  
"COVID, who's that?"*

*Oh, yeah, COVID's a thing.*

*We were naive.*

*I expected it to be a normal trip, but,*

*we didn't know what was coming.*

### 5.2.2. Teaching and Traveling Abroad in an Impending Pandemic

The second and third main themes revolved around the pandemic's impact on teaching and traveling abroad. The subthemes, respectively, included changes to the first day of teaching and the children's whispers of excitement about the mysterious pandemic and traveling as a group, noticing publicly posted information, and general naivete about COVID-19. The participants noted their disappointment when they did not teach on the first day. Each participant talked about how they visited a castle and dairy instead. Andrew also noted that children would whisper about the pandemic as if it were the next big and exciting thing. A couple of the participants lamented that they were not allowed to hug or touch the children. Jamie found this challenging because she enjoyed playing with the schoolchildren and learning about their culture.

Regarding traveling abroad, each discussed the premise of "pivoting" and relayed that alternative plans were important if COVID-19 was to impact any day on the program. Jamie continuously mentioned the idea of "pivot," which best summarized part of their experiences. Relaying the changes on the first day, she explained:

So we went to the castle, we went and saw a dairy. So, I got to see how cows were born and well, not born, but, like, raised. And then it was also lambing season. We got to see baby lambs. And so, we were able to pivot, but I also think it was hard because a lot of what we were doing was playing with them [the children] at recess, which was great, but it's like, "I came to teach them."

Katherine and Stella talked about the public signage they noticed in Scotland but had not seen prior to leaving the United States or upon arriving at London Heathrow. Katherine recalled a particular moment she experienced when the group arrived in Scotland:

But once we got to Scotland, on the front door of our hotel, they had signs talking about COVID and "Don't enter if you have these symptoms" and things like that. And we all stopped. And I mean, I still have the pictures

on my phone where we were like, “Oh, ha ha ha, this is such a joke. Like, they're taking this so seriously here.” And so, we were all taking pictures of it, almost like it was a touristy thing.

Stella, too, recalled the signage, telling us that although the group was still allowed to attend a show at the Sondheim Theatre in London on one of their last nights abroad, a sign out front asked people not to enter if they had symptoms of COVID-19.

At this time, little information was available about the pandemic. Andrew mentioned he would check the case count information sometimes and was worried if someone coughed near him but did not change his behavior. Katherine also recalled trying to access information and video links that family from the United States had sent her but found that some sites were blocked due to country regulations.

...

*I guess,  
There were some nerves, a bit nerve-racking.  
But,  
I can't think  
of any instance we thought about not getting in crowds.*

*I wanted to try everything-  
Haggis, Shepherd's pie, scones, coffee.*

*I planned to just kind of  
experience new cultures,  
and new ways of life.*

*I was excited,  
to interact with youth,  
to see the difference in the different teaching styles abroad.*

*We had to pivot -  
that was a word that we threw around a lot*

*I remember  
Using a lot more hand sanitizer than I normally would have.*

### 5.2.3. Returning Home

The fourth main theme revolved around students' experiences traveling home, related to learning about quarantine procedures. Relevant subthemes included stories about the final night, traveling in and to the airports both abroad and in the United States, and reacting to changes because of quarantine restrictions.

Each participant recalled the slew of emotions experienced while at dinner on the final night, primarily due to receiving an alarming email from the University about its closing due to the pandemic. Andrew described the event, stating,

Looking back, I think a lot of things were shutting down that I wasn't even aware of. On our last day in Scotland, as we were eating dinner, we all got an email on our phones from the university saying that school...was going to be closed for a few weeks. That had us all just looking at each other, "Did you get this email?" We were confused and obviously worried, as well as being excited. And that was the conversation, a lot of our conversations that evening were about COVID-19 and school shutting down.

Jamie was a bit more frantic, stating that she had 21 credit hours and her MCAT applications to worry about. She mentioned trying desperately to call home over WhatsApp, trying to connect her parents with her dorm so they could retrieve her things.

Finishing the semester was not the only worry on the participants' minds; each was anxious to fly home, and questioned whether they would even be allowed to enter the United States. Stella laughed a bit at the irony of travel, though, saying, "They packed us in really tight on that plane. There were no free seats, and we all kind of were talking about it. I'm like, 'Wow, there's a pandemic, and they're really packing us in here.'" Despite the small laughs, the situation was indeed profoundly serious. Katherine and Andrew both remembered reacting to hearing that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) would be entering the plane upon their return to the United States. Katherine, who had initially planned to extend her trip but ended up canceling the extension, recalled the emotions coursing through her during that time:

I remember I just looked around on the plane – and I wasn't seated with my group, of course, because I again had to change my flight last minute

to that flight – and I just got up and I walked over to my group and I was like, “Guys, we were one of the last flights out of the UK. Like, this is insane.”

And as you looked around at all the people on the plane – it was all students and professors and people who had been there on mission trips – and it wasn't- No one was a tourist. Like, everyone was devastated to be leaving. People were crying, people were laughing. And so, I remember I just stood up on the plane and I looked at all the people around me and I told them what had just happened and what my dad had just sent me and the emotion that went through that plane. Everybody was just like, “Wow, like what? What's going on?”

...And then I remember when we landed in America, as we were landing, the flight attendant came over the speaker and said, “No one, get out of your seats, the CDC is going to storm the plane.” And I remember thinking, “The CDC is going to storm the plane. What the heck does that mean?” And the flight attendant, like, you could tell they had no idea what was going on.

Participants furthermore spoke about the impacts of quarantine upon returning to the US. Andrew said, “...Before we got off of the airplane in [City], they told us we would need to quarantine for two weeks. They gave us a packet of information, told us to monitor symptoms, what to do if you get sick.” Jamie, too, stated that she was overwhelmed and stressed, enunciating that everything was developing so suddenly, and she felt so powerless: “I'm having to figure out a lot of factors all of a sudden, and I can't do anything about it because I've got to quarantine for two weeks.” Despite the chaos and fear of returning to the United States, the participants and the rest of their group stuck together during quarantine. Though not physically together, the participants stated that they checked in on each other and connected over Zoom, too.

...

*I remember*

*Sobbing my eyes out.*

*I didn't know what was going on*

*Okay, COVID's becoming real.*

*I think I was definitely worried,*

*about coming back to the US.  
"oh, we got out. We got out just in time."*

*If we were going to have to be tested,  
if we were going to have our temperature taken.*

*The CDC literally came onto the airplane.  
I didn't really know what to expect*

#### 5.2.4. The Total Experience

The final theme coalesces around the study abroad program as a whole and included subthemes of the participants' reflections on the professors, the differences in culture, and general lessons learned. Overwhelmingly, the participants expressed their desire to participate in a study abroad again, despite experiencing COVID-19 during its inception. They also shared their gratitude for the professors, especially for how they helped the students navigate the stress of such an unexpected event. Jamie especially highlighted how the professors held nightly reflections, which she found helped her think through the experience. She and Katherine were roommates, too, and both noted that they were able to talk with each other about the events of each day. Finally, the participants stressed that studying abroad is what you make of it. Especially in relation to the notion of "pivoting," Jamie said she was always trying to make the most of the experience because she did not want to miss anything. Stella, too, commented that despite everything, she still had a great time and continues to communicate with some of the individuals she met while abroad.

...

*I'm glad I went on that trip.  
I look back on it really fondly.  
I probably would have been more worried.  
Obviously, a little stressful at the end.*

*If we could do it all over again,  
We should place an emphasis on -  
Preparation,  
Loving each other,  
How we're supposed to treat each other.*

### 5.3. The Full Poem (Reprinted)

The full poem is re-represented so readers can review it for newfound understanding.

*Navigating*

I think I was aware of it -  
I was worried about COVID-19  
We talked about it-  
it was starting to get on social media  
Infecting us with fear.

It's a virus,  
in China right now.

But before we left,  
it was like,  
"COVID, who's that?"

Oh, yeah, COVID's a thing.  
We were naive.

I expected it to be a normal trip, but,  
we didn't know what was coming.

I guess,  
There were some nerves, a bit nerve-racking.  
But,  
I can't think  
of any instance we thought about not getting in crowds.

I wanted to try everything-  
Haggis, Shepherd's pie, scones, coffee.

I planned to just kind of  
experience new cultures,  
and new ways of life.

I was excited,

to interact with youth,  
to see the difference in the different teaching styles abroad.

We had to pivot -  
that was a word that we threw around a lot

I remember  
Using a lot more hand sanitizer than I normally would have.

I remember  
Sobbing my eyes out.  
I didn't know what was going on

Okay, COVID's becoming real.

I think I was definitely worried,  
about coming back to the US.  
"oh, we got out. We got out just in time."

If we were going to have to be tested,  
if we were going to have our temperature taken.

The CDC literally came onto the airplane.  
I didn't really know what to expect.

I'm glad I went on that trip.  
I look back on it really fondly.  
I probably would have been more worried.  
Obviously, a little stressful at the end.

If we could do it all over again,  
We should place an emphasis on -  
Preparation,  
Loving each other,  
How we're supposed to treat each other.

## 6. Conclusions

This study generally sought to examine the impact COVID-19 had on one specific study abroad program to Scotland and the United Kingdom. Because we interviewed the students 18-20 months after the incidence of COVID-19, we were able to distinguish what specific parts of the program had a lasting impact. We also recognize the limitations that the delayed data collection has on the data and participants' recollections of the events. To do so, we presented three questions:

1. How do students describe their overall experiences in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom?
2. What were participants' overall knowledge, thoughts, and experiences with COVID-19 prior to, during, and upon completion of the study abroad experience?
3. What proactive, reactive, and latent expectations, reactions, and actions were expressed either because of or despite what we now know was a looming pandemic?

We first discuss the findings based on each question before providing recommendations and implications for future research.

### 6.1. Discussion

#### 6.1.1. Overall Student Experiences

Students described their study abroad courses to be both positive and impactful. One of the main themes constructed from the data was the experience in general, and as stated in the findings, participants were overwhelmingly glad they participated, despite the development of the pandemic while they were abroad. Literature by Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) indicated that at times, students might have trouble fully enunciating lessons learned from their time abroad. Yet, Magolda and King (2008) proposed that for students to see the benefit of uncomfortable, new, or novel situations, they must be given ample opportunity to reflect. The participants noted they had nightly reflection sessions and overall seemed to be a cohesive group, which could have aided their ability to reflect on their experiences. Additionally, Jamie, Katherine, and Stella talked at length about the emotional and physical ranges of their experiences; little prompting was needed by the researchers to uncover more details. Andrew's responses were not as elucidating and seemed more in line with what Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) presented in their research.

### 6.1.2. Participants' Relation to COVID-19 Throughout the Program

Each participant noted that there was very little information for them to be concerned about regarding COVID-19 prior to leaving on their study abroad program. While students such as Andrew and Jamie were a bit more proactive – looking up information online or learning about the pandemic classes – Stella noted that there simply was not enough information to even know to be concerned. However, these interviews took place 18 to 20 months after the study abroad experience, and therefore, 18 to 20 months after first learning about COVID-19. You can see the progression of fear in the participants' accounts as COVID-19 went from being unknown to knocking on their airplane door:

*Okay, COVID's becoming real.*

*I think I was definitely worried,  
about coming back to the US.  
"oh, we got out. We got out just in time."*

*If we were going to have to be tested,  
if we were going to have our temperature taken.*

*The CDC literally came onto the airplane.  
I didn't really know what to expect.*

By the end of quarantine, and certainly by the time of the interview, the participants were more knowledgeable about the pandemic, but prior to leaving and even during the study abroad experience, there was little time or information to learn more.

### 6.1.3. Expectations, Reactions, and Actions Because of the Pandemic

Almost every participant said they wished they had done more to prepare before leaving. Jamie, for example, who was worried about having her parents rescue her study materials and laptop, lamented that she would have taken better care to pack up her room before leaving on the study abroad program. In this instance, one could see how studying abroad would play a negative role in students' lives (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020). Each participant also recalled during their interview instances of coughing or sneezing and worrying that either themselves or others around them were sick. With so little information available about the pandemic, it is easy to see how being abroad and general ignorance could cause health anxieties (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020).

Furthermore, being on the plane the CDC stormed upon returning home would likely only exacerbate any impending stress and anxiety.

## 6.2. Recommendations

The pandemic was an unprecedented thing in our past and continues to be in our present. Though no one likely could have prepared enough, we present recommendations related to study abroad programming in general. First, we recommend that professors consider incorporating more intentional reflection time, journals, or activities into all study abroad programs. Jamie indicated throughout her interview that she actively reflected throughout the whole experience, but not all students will review this activity with as much due diligence. Though our study was small, the participants seemed to enjoy and appreciate this reflection time to synthesize what they were learning about each other, themselves, another culture, and the pandemic. Though a simple reflection journal cannot cure all anxieties health or otherwise, it may help students prone to general anxiety and homesickness to sort through their experiences as they encounter new situations. Like Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015), we recommend that professors take time to provide students with active reflection prompts to guide student understanding and learning.

We also recommend that professors and students alike take time to learn about the culture beforehand. None of the students reflected on the individual learning they did to prepare for their travel to the United Kingdom. Perhaps this preparation would mitigate some of the gaps discussed in Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) while also providing students such as Andrew more opportunities to talk about things they learned. Though this is not a novel recommendation, we believe renewed attention could be paid to examining other cultures health systems and beliefs. For example, Basterretxea & Sanz (2022) found that health is now a contributing factor to whether students participate in study abroad. Additionally, Gibbs (2022) reminds us that programs abroad must comply with that country's policies and procedures. Therefore, professors and students alike should take care to learn about the health and medicine system of where they are traveling.

Finally, we recommend that all professors develop a contingency plan prior to leaving (Gibbs, 2022). Though likely already part of most study abroad programs, this recommendation becomes even more pertinent due to the unexpected nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that some universities and professors have experienced being abroad during a pandemic, these individuals

should enhance study abroad policies and procedures to reflect what to do if this occurrence takes place again.

Universities should play an active role in helping professors develop these contingency plans. For example, they could initiate focus groups or action committees to discuss what proper protocol should entail. Specifically, the professors that were abroad during the outbreak of the pandemic should be invited to participate. Given our study, topics up for discussion could include communication with parents, support offered by professors, counseling services available while abroad and upon return, and mechanisms for coping with the unexpected. Though anticipating another pandemic is not a reasonable task, a reasonable ask is for universities to have more resources and support in place.

### 6.3. Future Research

Beyond recommendations for practitioners and professors leading study abroad programs, we also provide a few recommendations regarding future research. First, as noted, this study was limited by its number of participants. This study abroad program was also limited by its length; it took place over a week-long university spring break period. As such, it would be interesting to conduct this study at a larger scale to perhaps develop a grander or grounded theory of the COVID-19 experience from the multiple perspectives of students, professors, and families. Gaining an understanding of each of these groups' witnesses to the event would also provide case studies toward understanding health anxiety.

Future research should consider examining how COVID-19 impacted individuals', communities', and universities' views of travel abroad. Additionally, research should examine if some universities fared better than others. For example, did the university have clearer policies in place, were the professors provided with more training to support students, were more mental health services offered upon return, and how long after the incidence of the pandemic did they resume study abroad courses? Moreover, though our participants were still eager to participate in another study abroad, examining the mindset toward international travel several years after the start of the pandemic would contribute to a more longitudinal understanding of the pandemic's overarching impacts.

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## Ethical Approval

This study was approved the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board, PROJECT00004568.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no competing financial or other conflicts of interest to disclose.

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