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# All Roads Leave from Florence? Exploring What Priority Students in a Florentine STSA Place on Academics?

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## Abstract

This study, a survey of participants of a summer STSA in Italy, now the most common study abroad programs in the most popular geographical area, complemented with five in-depth interviews, sought to understand how students see their experiences and most specifically the importance of out-of-class traveling every weekend. Data revealed that students mainly intended to study abroad to travel to other European cities and use Florence as a home base independently of how many times students had previously traveled abroad. The main motivation to select the program had been to be to visit other places rather than focusing on course credits and worry about academics.

## Abstract in French

Cette étude présente les conclusions de l'évaluation d'un programme académique de courte durée basé en Italie, pays désormais le plus prisé pour les études internationales. Une étude d'opinion complétée par des entretiens avec des élèves a servi à comprendre comment les étudiants perçoivent leur expériences, et surtout quelle importance ils donnent aux voyages qu'ils peuvent faire les weekends. Les résultats ont révélé que les étudiants souhaitent étudier à l'étranger pour pouvoir voyager dans d'autres villes européennes et ainsi utiliser Florence comme leur base principale. Leur principale motivation de

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choisir le programme académique en question fut de visiter d'autres lieux plutôt que de se concentrer sur les demandes académiques et de s'inquiéter pour leur progrès.

## Keywords

In-depth interviews; Italy; perception; short-term study abroad; survey

## 1. Introduction

On March 9, 2023, *Business Insider* published an opinion piece from Stacia Datskovska, a journalism and international relations major student at NYU, that immediately went viral and sparked backlash for overtly criticizing her study abroad experience in Florence, Italy. In her note, the undergraduate student explained how, along with the feeling that Florentines acted rudely towards her, she despised the American style of living and taking advantage of a younger drinking age, the multitude of trips her roommates took around Europe thus the lack of interactions with her classmates in Florence, and her perception that she was the sole person concerned about her GPA and homework when everybody prioritized fun. Many readers, irked by the essay, rushed online commenting on her entitlement, her naivety, and even blaming a romanticized view of Europe promoted by shows such as “Emily in Paris” (Clark, 2023; Datskovska, 2023).

Yet, what if the picture painted by this undergraduate student somehow depicts the reality? What if in fact college students in a post-COVID19 period now chose study abroad programs most specifically with the strong intent to have fun and travel across the old continent rather than focus on academics and intercultural gains?

The claim that short-term study abroad (STSA) programs lack rigor and are not sufficiently educative is not novel (Stronkhorst, 2005; Varela, 2017). Ten years ago, a survey conducted for the Association of American College and University programs in Italy, had revealed that cities like Florence and Rome were attractive to students for two leading reasons: (a) the ability to have faster connections to most national and international destinations; and (b) the ability to book low-cost flights to multiple European cities for weekend trips (Schneider,

2017). No mentions were made of the plethora of world-renowned art works, culinary exposures, and intercultural exchanges in the Renaissance capital.

The idea that a STSA program may constitute a break from studying, an extended vacation (Forsey et al., 2012), and results in superficiality (Chang et al., 2013) is particularly concerning considering such programs now represent a fundamental marketing tool and the dominant offer from US higher education institutions (Brady & Iskhakova, 2022; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Goldstein, 2022; Fisher et al., 2023). The latest data from the Institute of International Education shows both summer programs and Italy as the top choices for US students (Open Doors, 2022).

A growing body of literature documents STSA benefits (Brady & Iskhakova, 2022; Iskhakova et al., 2023) but limited works known to date in a post-COVID19 era have questioned whether fun and travel now take precedence over purely academic outcomes from students' perspectives. This study, a survey with participants in a summer short term study abroad (STSA) program in Florence, Italy complemented by in-depth interviews with former students of such a program, seeks to understand whether STSA should be really presented as experience abroad as once author put it back in 1979 (Abrams, 1979). Additionally, this analysis answers a call from previous research to provide a mixed-methods approach to examine the value of STSA programs (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2021).

## 2. Literature Review

The Institute of International Education (IIE) defines a Short-Term Study Abroad (STSA) as a program taking place outside of the USA and lasting two to eight weeks (Nguyen, 2017). STSA has been the fastest growing mode of experiential learning in higher education for several years (Bradly & Iskhakova, 2022; Goldstein, 2022; Iskhakova & Brady, 2022; Lokkesmoe et al., 2016). In fact, according to the latest IIE data, STSA now represents more than 40% of programs in the summer, the highest proportion since 2010 for US institutions. STSA of eight weeks or less in duration have accounted for the majority of the growth (103%) in education abroad experiences over the last fifteen years (Fisher et al., 2023; Open Doors, 2022.)

Furthermore, in 2021, Italy became the leading international destination for US study abroad programs (Open Doors, 2022). As of 2023, the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy (AACUPI), a non-profit founded in 1978, counts more than 150 institutions with reportedly 57 members present in Florence, including Harvard University, New York University, and Stanford University. It is reported that more than 15,000 American students flock to Florence every year, and it was estimated that 18,000 would be traveling to the Tuscan capital in 2023 (Paloscia, 2022).

This constant growth of STSA over the last ten years has generated increased interest in the academy, and several authors are now trying to understand the benefits of such programs to better inform higher education institutions.

## 2.1. Benefits of STSA

Multiple systematic reviews of STSA programs outcomes revealed the value of such learning practices (Bradly & Iskhakova, 2022; Goldstein, 2022; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022, Roy et al., 2019). For instance, studies have documented personal and professional benefits for nurses (Dedee & Stewart 2003; Green et al., 2008), and hospitality students (Van Hoof, 2006). Data has shown how such programs can broaden visions of career trajectories (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016; Orahod et al., 2004;) and provide an overall significant positive professional impact, specifically on the employability of US and international graduates (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Bryla, 2015; DeGraaf et al., 2013; Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Teichler & Janson, 2007). Such experiences are also reported to heighten global business competence, confidence, and expertise (Hallows et al., 2011), as well as have a positive relationship on wages after graduation (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017; Kratz & Netz, 2016). Others have revealed how STSA positively impacts self-perceived intercultural competencies (Nguyen, 2017) cross-cultural communication skills (Orahod et al., 2004), and cognitive skills (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012).

In sum, whether studies have targeted specific outcomes or a more general understanding of the value of study abroad programs, a large body of scholarship now clearly show how undertaking a STSA can be cognitively engaging and advantageous at enhancing global awareness (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), understanding the interconnectedness of cultures and societies (Drake et

al., 2015, Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Fisher et al., 2023; Geyer et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2022; Roy et al., 2019) and providing overall meaningful experiences leading to personal growth (Iskhakova et al., 2023, Papastiba, 2004).

## 2.2. Fun and Tourism Over Academics?

Despite a plethora of empirical and qualitative evidence from US and international samples documenting the benefits of STSA programs (Goldstein, 2022; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022, Roy et al., 2019), a few studies still question the true value of such programs (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004, Chiocca, 2021; Chwialkowska, 2020; Dwyer, 2004; Varela, 2017).

Authors have underlined the inconclusive nature of scholarship on the real effectiveness of study abroad programs in developing cultural competences, arguing that most studies rely on self-reports (i.e., a qualitative interpretation of journals entries) (Chwialkowska, 2020). Some have also pinpointed the relative weakness of results due to analyses of small samples (Varela, 2017). Indeed, data from a meta-analysis revealed that more than 80% of studies relied on a sample of less than 30, hence the hesitancy in results acceptance (Varela (2017)). Others expressed some skepticism on the possible benefits of STSA simply considering the shorter duration of international exposure (Dwyer, 2004).

Results from a review of two Dutch programs showed for instance that three to four months of study and even work abroad might be too short to notice any type of progress in international and intercultural learnings for many people (Stronkhorst, 2005), so STSA of less than eight weeks, a typical duration for a summer program, might yield even lesser positive changes.

A more attentive review of the literature indicates that students who participated in programs described their experiences as fun rather than by emphasizing the academic and intercultural gains. A comparative study showed for example that for US students, pleasure and liberty are positively related to the intention to study abroad and that studying abroad creates opportunities to engage in adventures (Sánchez et al., 2006). Additionally, the analysis of comments from Australian students revealed an identical phenomenon. Forsey et al. (2012) wrote that when students were asked what they had learned during their study abroad, most interviewees used generalizations about how much they had learnt but were not clearly able to detail what they learnt precisely. A quote from a participant is particularly pertinent and illustrative of their

finding: “Study was not my main aim—I wanted a break from study,’ (Forsey et al., 2012). The authors went on to divulge that half of their sample explicitly said their priority was to have fun, travel, and make new friends. They had in fact seen their time abroad as a break from academics (Forsey et al., 2012). Academic growth was hardly mentioned in such accounts.

So, what about specifically for Italy, the most prevalent destination today for STSA? What type of evidence exists to determine a possible trend? Data from a survey commissioned in 2012-13 by the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy revealed that program directors believed Rome and Florence were attractive to US students for two dominant reasons: (a) it provided faster connections to most national and international destinations; and (b) it offered faster connections to low-cost flights destinations allowing weekend trips within Europe.

Beyond the emphasis on travels rather than academics, the report shed additional lights on what students coming to Italy may seek. Indeed, an administrative director for a program in Rome had shared a specific concern (Schneider, 2017):

Weekends are already booked before students’ arrival and the cheap airfares seduce the students to travel almost all weekend.

Students have no time to recollect to concentrate and focus on the course work. Thus, the study abroad semester risks becoming a fast and superficial consumption of entertaining trips, rather than a profound learning experience.

While certainly the prominence of low-cost flights and the availability of euro rail passes seduce many students, the remarks inherently point to a more general discussion about the focus of study abroad programs from a student’s perspective.

It was previously argued that even though being abroad represents an opportunity, it does not guarantee any learning at all (Varela, 2017) and to truly gain from immersion in a new culture, a deeper engagement was necessary (Chang et al., 2013).

Yet, one must question the nature of such an engagement if students travel three to four days out of seven every week. Maybe summer STSA in Italy

have transitioned to being just pure tourism? Existing scholarship noted before that study abroad and tourism are both based on the foundation of traveling (Stone & Petrick, 2013) and that travelling does add personal value to individuals as an out-of-class experience (Laubscher, 1993). Ogden (2006) underlined the benefits of free time for a more holistic learning experience in STSA, praising the absence of boundaries inherent to planned excursions. The analysis of feedback from 184 students who had taken part in study abroad programs over a 10-year period revealed that a strong majority felt out-of-class experiences had been the most impactful (Lamet & Lamet, 1982).

The complication here comes from the fact that most STSA have planned travels embedded in their structures. Summer STSA particularly are known to be carefully structured by the faculty. But as Stacia Datskovska (2023) alluded to in her *Business Insider* column and Schneider (2017) in her review of American programs in Italy, maybe students prefer the idea of fun tourism determined by a cursory review of google flights? And maybe, as Abrams (1979) explained several years ago, study abroad programs should really be described as “experience abroad” considering the limiting nature of studying taking place?

A previous study, based on the examination of a three-week study in Italy described the city as a classroom for such students. The author evoked the fundamental value of free time so students could learn from the “sights, sounds, smells, physical sensations, cultural practices, and foreign peoples and languages” (p. 10). Yet again, do they really do that, or simply rush to popular sites made famous by social media influencers on Tik Tok accounts?

### 2.3. Research Questions

In light of such scholarship, this study, exploratory in nature, sought to get initial answers to the following questions:

- **RQ1:** What were students’ motivations for taking part in the STSA Florence program?
- **RQ2:** What role did travel play as part of their study abroad program?
- **RQ3:** How did participants perceive the academic value of the program?
- **RQ4:** Does the intent to take part in a STSA vary as a result of prior international travels?

### 3. Method

An online survey approved by the institutional review board of a large southeastern American research university was administered during the final two weeks of a 5-week-long summer short term study abroad in Florence, Italy in 2023. After giving their consent, participants accessed the online survey through a secure link sent to their school email accounts. They were asked to answer a series of items featuring open-ended, close-ended, and text-based response options. Six to ten weeks after their return to their home country, five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with some participants of the STSA.

#### 3.1. Participants

After deleting partial completions, a total of 110 responses ( $N = 110$ ) were analyzed. The response rate was 37.1%. Data showed that 85% were between the age of 19 and 21 (38% were 19 years-old, 27% were 20, and 20% indicated being 21 years of age). 75.5% identified as female, 13.6% as male, and 1.8% as non-binary and third gender. 34.5% reported not knowing another language while 16% admitted being able to speak one additional and 13.6% said they could speak two foreign languages. Data also showed that most participants (52.7%) did not have any family members as foreign relatives. Results also revealed that 77% had never studied abroad before.

#### 3.2. Measures

The following measures were included in the survey instrument.

**Intended behavior:** Participants were asked to report their level of agreements on a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7 strongly agree) to six statements. A sample item was: "I intend to travel within Europe every single weekend." A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation saw two factors, item 4 (My experience through travels is less important than my studies in Florence) and item 6 (I will use my free time to study rather than traveling), loading on a second component. Reliability analysis for the four remaining items yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of .69 ( $M = 18.2$ ;  $SD = 2.2$ ). A composite score was computed for that variable omitting the two items that did not load.



**Impact of living in Florence:** Participants rated their level of agreements to six statements on a 7-point Likert scale. Sample items included: “Maintaining a high GPA is a main priority even when studying abroad,” and “I find it more difficult to concentrate on assignments while abroad.”

**Cultural exploration** (Cronbach’s Alpha = .69;  $M = 23.05$ ;  $SD = 1.9$ ), **travel and tourism** (Cronbach’s Alpha = .72;  $M = 21.65$ ;  $SD = 4.6$ ), **academic enrichment** (Cronbach’s Alpha = .66;  $M = 15.5$ ;  $SD = 4.1$ ), and **personal escape** (Cronbach’s Alpha = .80;  $M = 17.05$ ;  $SD = 5.7$ ) were all adapted from Haisley et al. (2021). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreements to statements for each factor on a 5-point Likert scale.

**Foreign travel experience:** Participants reported how many times they had previously studied and traveled abroad by answering a nominal item.

**Media consumption:** Participants were asked to report their consumption of social media based on the most prevalent platforms and to which extent they use certain platforms to inform their travel decisions.

**Demographics.** Participants reported their age, the gender they most identify with, the total number of foreign languages they can speak, and whether they have relatives who are foreign natives.

For the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to comment on the dominant reasons for their participation in the study abroad program, what they believe they learned the most, what they enjoyed the most, and what role travel played in their enjoyment of the experience.

## 4. Results

RQ1 was addressed through the analysis of descriptive statistics from several survey items as well as a review of answers to an open-ended question specifically asking why students enrolled in the STSA Florence program. Findings were additionally complemented with in-depth interviews data.

Comments provided were both expected and general with an evident lack of specificity. The dominant themes that emerged were the appeal of arts, food, and the Italian culture and history overall. Several participants also stated that they had chosen to study in Florence because their relatives were Italians,

and they wanted to connect to the culture of their ancestors. Understanding their heritage had been a key motivator for them.

The second dominant theme pertains to traveling. Indeed, multiple students indicated the desire to travel in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. "I could easily travel to other countries in Europe while here," one participant wrote. "The central location made it easy to travel to both Western and Eastern Europe," another one answered.

No students mentioned in-class experiences, the courses they were taking, or the academic curriculum they had chosen.

Additional findings revealed that 78% of students had chosen to study abroad to go to famous geographical sites, 79% did so to go to famous cultural sites; 80% to go to famous historical sites, 51% to travel with friends, and 64% to travel independently without family.

Data from in-depth interviews corroborated initial findings as the same topics surfaced, the interest in arts and history as well as the obvious advantage of traveling every weekend to new destinations. "Traveling every weekend was a wonderful aspect of my experience," said Victoria V. "I wanted to explore other cities within Italy and outside of the country," admitted Isabella O. "I wanted to do the most I could because studying abroad with your friends is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

RQ2 examined how students approached travel during their programs. Results showed that 93% agreed that they had intended to travel within Italy or Europe every single weekend and 95% said they would make the most of their summer through end of week personal trips. Additional data showed that 61% agreed that the main purpose of studying abroad had been to take advantage of long weekends to travel. In fact, 47% indicated that their experiences through travel were more important than their studies in Florence, and a majority revealed that they preferred to travel whenever they could to other countries rather than staying in the same city.

Furthermore, 60% of students explained that they had chosen to study abroad to escape day-to-day life. The majority of students said they had not registered for the Florence program to learn more about their major nor to earn academic credits.

Data from interviews also showed the importance of traveling for students. “It’s important to recognize that getting to Europe is quite expensive and many people prefer to visit multiple countries once they make the flight over to Europe,” said Rachel C.

Findings indicate also a certain behavior related to media use. Data showed that 46% of participants admitted always thinking of their social media posts when traveling. Moreover, 56% reported informing their decision on where to go and what to do based on Tik Tok.

As it relates to RQ3 and the academic value, 90% said that maintaining a high GPA was a main priority even when studying abroad. Yet, 57.4% reported finding it more difficult to concentrate on assignments while abroad and 61% stated they would not use their free time to study but travel instead. Additionally, data showed that 67% said they wanted to learn from experts.

Comments from in-depth interviews underlined that students review the academic workload in direct comparison with their semester on their main campus. “it’s a different type of studying as the workload wasn’t a copious amount and there were fewer classes than from a typical semester,” explained Isabella O. Rachel C agreed. “I found that taking two courses in the six-week program was not overwhelming although the last week required a higher level of focus, time and energy to finalize project deliverables,” she said. One student proposed a summary of her academic experience as education tourism. “Education tourism is an apt definition for this study abroad experience,” said McKinnon B. “From my interactions, some students were much more focused on becoming immersed in the culture through their creative projects, while others treated it as a vacation where they did not dig deeper in the culture around them,” she added.

RQ4 was addressed first through an ANOVA. 22.7% of respondents had never traveled abroad, 23.6 did so 1 to 2 times, 24.5% 3 to 5 times and 29.1% 6 times or more. The analysis conducted with the Intent composite score did not yield a significant difference between groups,  $F(3, 101) = .341, p = .79$ . Additional analyses with single items also revealed that the motivation for selecting this study abroad program in Florence was the same independently of the number of times a student had previously traveled abroad. An ANOVA with Personal Escape as the dependent variable showed no significant differences,  $F(3, 96)$

= .241,  $p = .87$ . Similarly, no significant differences were found for Travel Tourism as the dependent variable,  $F(3, 96) = .77$ ,  $p = .26$  nor Academic Enrichment,  $F(3, 96) = .851$ ,  $p = .28$ .

## 5. Discussion

The New York University student Stacia Datskovska directly criticized her program in Florence, alluding to weekend trips taken by her roommates, a lack of focus on academics, and ultimately a superficial and limited immersion in the Tuscan capital. She immediately received a large wave of attacks. But, what if in fact, she had described something currently happening with summer STSA abroad, specifically in Florence, Italy?

This study, which sought to explore whether American students are treating Florence as a home base for European getaways, revealed that travelling is the dominant priority that may limit their true immersion in the Florentine culture as well as impactful intercultural competencies gains. The data, both quantitative and qualitative, paints a clear picture: undergraduate students who participated in a summer STSA in Florence prioritized non-academics activities over their coursework. While committed to their educational experience and eager to maintain a high GPA, they admitted that traveling every weekend was part of the experience, and they had intended to make the most out of their free time.

Such findings parallel what Forsey et al. (2012) discovered in their analysis of Australian students. Academics was not their priorities, instead, taking a break from their studies was. American students surveyed for this work reported a similar behavior that what program directors had told Schneider (2017). Students are using Florence as the starting point to fly out of Tuscany to the rest of Europe every weekend. The observation of such a pattern gives strength to previous literature that identified two weaknesses of STSA: (a) the sole exposure to a foreign country due to a study abroad is not a guarantee of any learning at all (Varela, 2017); and (b) the superficiality of students' engagement with the local culture is not allowing them to gain from immersion.

So, where does this leave STSA programs like the one reviewed for this study?

Scholars have explained before that students need to have some free time to use the foreign city where they study as a classroom as it positively impacts their learning (Coryell, 2011) and they can also learn from out-of-class experiences (Laubscher, 1993). One issue here, however, is that students may never really have had enough time in the Tuscan capital to take it all in and may have been consistently in transition between destination to really reflect on their experiences. As revealed by the qualitative data collected, participants did gain some confidence, and admitted to an overall enjoyment of their study abroad experience, which support prior literature (Iskhakova et al., 2023, Papastiba, 2004), but the indirect fear of missing out may have led them to really rush to a multitude of places rather than really try to immerse themselves in some cultures.

Yet, does this mean that their educational experience was limited because of a higher priority placed on non-academic activities? The review of students' feedback indicates that their experience should be evaluated holistically as this is how they perceived it themselves. Several students emphasized how studying abroad enabled them to gain a global perspective they could not experience on their home campus, thus echoing previous literature on the benefits of STSA (Fisher et al., 2023; Goldstein, 2022). Further, students explained how the simple observation of other habits had given them an understanding and appreciation of other cultural norms and provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their own. Iskhakova et al. (2023) previously noted how participating in study abroad programs are meaningful experiences leading to rewarding personal growth.

Compared to a full course schedule on their home campus, this Florence STSA may have always appeared as a break from studying, but does it necessarily mean the value of that educational experience was lower?

Maybe this study may in fact open another interrogation focused on the intent to create immersive experience and what constitutes a valuable immersion. Can a cultural immersion exist in a 4 to 5-week long program in the middle of a summer in a city that is now flooded by tourists and where speaking Italian is no longer a necessity?

## 6. Limitations and Further Research

The study presented here contributes to the scholarship on STSA by answering calls by previous scholars on the necessity to use a larger sample and to further examine why students enroll in such programs now. Nevertheless, this work despite a high response rate from participants, data dominantly emanated from self-report measures, a criticism previously underlined in the literature. It also drew conclusions from just one STSA program in one city, Florence.

Considering such shortcomings and the exploratory nature of this study, further research is encouraged to examine if a trend is now strongly in place and if studying abroad now really means traveling abroad and taking a break from academics for American students. It would be beneficial to investigate more precisely whether students plan their European getaways in advance and whether their participation in set out-of-class activities by study abroad study centers has been declining as a result of their independent escapades every weekend. A deeper review of the question of immersion and language and cultural gains is also warranted, especially as participants admitted being connected to platforms such as Tik Tok and selecting their cultural and historical visits from popular trendy posts rather than recommendations from locals.

Additionally, it would be important to examine whether prospective students have certain expectations based on the communication from international programs at home campuses (website materials, classroom announcements, flyers) and from previous participants (word-of-mouth, blogs, social media posts). Experimental work testing such modes of communication would yield interesting findings. Further research could also investigate the relationship with environmental consciousness considering the extensive frequency of students' trips and therefore the impact on the carbon footprint.

Finally, as is often the case with emerging subfields, it becomes inevitable to understand if it would be beneficial to review the phenomenon with a more thorough methodological and theoretical approach.

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