Evaluating Student Preparations for Their Study Abroad Destination: A Case Study of France Through Surveys and Content Analysis

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Abstract in English

This article explores pre-departure resources and student preparations for study abroad in France. It does so through a mixed-method investigation of university and program provider resources as well as social media content. Both university and program provider resources confirm a common adherence to established topics according to international education best practices. Much of the content centers on students' identities and lifestyles as they exist in the U.S. rather than the host country cultures. The social media content revealed possibly better engagement practices but identified concerning trends of homogenization, monetization, and some inaccuracies in study abroad information. From multiple surveys assessing how staff in France, those in the U.S., and students perceive student preparation and resources, the research further identified that U.S. staff and students' perception of preparedness was higher than that by staff in France. Staff in the U.S. and those in France overestimated students' use of Instagram and Tiktok for study abroad information.

Abstract in French

Cet article explore les ressources dont disposent les étudiants afin de se préparer à étudier à l'étranger, en France. Pour ce faire, l'étude se base sur une méthode mixte : enquêtes sur les ressources offertes par les universités de départ, les pourvoyeurs de programmes et les contenus des médias sociaux. Ces ressources confirment une adhésion commune aux sujets établis selon les meilleures

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pratiques en matière d'éducation internationale. Une grande partie du contenu est centrée sur les identités et les modes de vie des étudiants tels qu'ils existent aux États-Unis plutôt que sur les cultures du pays d'accueil. L'analyse des contenus des médias sociaux a révélé des degrés de participation, peut-être meilleurs, mais a identifié des tendances préoccupantes d'homogénéisation, de profits monétaires et certaines inexactitudes dans les informations sur les études à l'étranger. À partir de plusieurs enquêtes évaluant la façon dont le personnel en France, aux Etats-Unis et les étudiants perçoivent la préparation et les ressources communiquées aux étudiants, l'étude a en outre identifié que la perception du niveau de préparation par le staff et les étudiants aux États-Unis était supérieure à celle du personnel en France. Le staff aux États-Unis et en France a surestimé l'utilisation d'Instagram et de Tiktok par les étudiants pour obtenir des informations sur leurs études à l'étranger.

Keywords

Best practices; cultural immersion; on-site staff perspectives; pre-departure orientation; social media; social networks; student preparedness; study abroad resources

1. Introduction

Students have access to seemingly unlimited information through Internet searches and extensive resources from both home universities and study abroad institutions, all formatted to be viewed on smartphones. Yet, on-site staff in France can still ask if students are arriving prepared for the practical aspects of their program as well as the challenges they may face while studying abroad. Together with our colleagues across the field of international education, we believe that pre-departure and on-site orientations are at the core of creating a successful study abroad experience where students continuously seek and find connection with their host culture and host country. The information provided to students by their home universities and host institutions, as well as the information students seek out on their own, must be more thoroughly understood in order to design tools and resources that create stronger, more meaningful engagement with a host country and host culture during study abroad.

We consider that the bumps and bruises that students experience during their initial adjustment and, hopefully, their later immersion are key to triggering the "intercultural wonderment" (Engberg & Jourian, 2015) that allows them to avoid the "neither here nor there" realm. As on-site staff in France, we are interested in whether current education abroad preparation resources may be effective in helping students navigate the discomfort of study abroad to achieve "intercultural wonderment" and adjust to their new host country and

host culture. We also want to better understand the current state of study abroad information in English found on social networks, specifically Instagram and TikTok.

While undertaking this investigation, we guided our research by the following questions: What international education resources are made available to students today? What topics are represented in pre-departure resources and on-site orientations and how are these sessions organized? Since social media serves more and more as a source for students, what types of information exist related to international education and going abroad (both in general and in regard to France) on popular networks like TikTok and Instagram? We address these questions in our article, starting first with a literature review to document what works informed our research questions and design. We then describe the data and methods used in developing response to our research questions. In the fourth section, we present the findings we developed through this research related to the current state of pre-departure resources provided by universities and program providers plus information related to study abroad found on certain social networks. The results of surveys about student preparation completed by study abroad students, U.S.-based education abroad staff, and on-site staff in France are also presented. We dedicate the last two sections to discussing our research limitations, directions for future research, and implications for practice.

2. Literature Review

Cross-cultural communication theories of study abroad curriculum (Kim, 2001; Bennett, 1993; Engberg & Jourian, 2015) and the impact of studying abroad on students' intercultural competences (Kinginger, 2008; Sobkowiak, 2019) remain relevant starting points for research on student preparedness for study abroad. While an ideal education abroad experience is more a myth than a reality (Woolf, 2007), Kinginger and Zhuang (2023), Engberg and Jourian (2015), Berardo and Deardorff (2012) and Braskamp et al.'s (2009) research demonstrates that immersion experiences continue to have positive impacts on students' cultural humility and intercultural communication skills. Hanson (2017) presents a holistic approach that combines pre-departure resources with program activities to encourage reflection around differences and cultural imbalances to promote stronger levels of intercultural communication. We took stock of these research insights as well as of the concrete examples identified in Jones et al. (2017) and Dunlap and Mapp's (2017) works. For example, Jones et al. (2017) designed an Intercultural Learning Module (ICLM) where students have to critically engage with concepts such as "culture, cultural difference, imperialism, racism and privilege" and have to write responses while engaging with each other through online forums. Dunlap and Mapp (2017) explain how

to encourage students to articulate their cultural backgrounds in order to better recognize and confront their already differing views on their own supposedly similar cultural backgrounds as a way to avoid stereotyping and homogenizing their host culture. These research insights and illustrations enabled us to hone our pre-departure and on-site orientation research.

We also consulted best practices in international education materials integrated into this research. The primary source that outlines best practices is NAFSA's *Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* (Wiedenhoeft & Henke, 2022). In Chapter 13 of this volume, Nota (2022) delved into pre-departure orientations as informational meetings or sessions designed to present relevant topics to students about their education abroad experience before they arrive. Topics in Nota's chapter include, but are not limited to: health and safety, finances abroad, diversity, housing, academics, and packing. They are not intended to replace other valuable pre-departure preparations that institution and program providers offer in addition, such as advising, webinars, peer advising, prepared resources and materials. The chapter describes the goals of this orientation as including, "regardless of the organizing institution": "(1) providing comprehensive, practical, and accurate information to students and (2) distributing the information in a thoughtful, well-designed manner to the intended audience" (Nota, 2022, p. 197). In the same NAFSA volume, Robinson (2022) presents guidelines, recommendations, and best practice guidance for on-site orientation programming to supplement the pre-departure material. Surprisingly, outside of the NAFSA best practice guides for international educators, there is little in the body of literature on pre-departure orientations for education abroad students.

The Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange was also consulted in order to present data and an overview of U.S. study abroad in France (Institute of International Education, 2024).

With the use of social media being a focal point in our investigations, we delved into research linked to their effects on international students' well/low being (Billedo et al., 2020; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Roberts & David, 2023Verduyn et al., 2017) to understand the impact of "fear of missing out" or FOMO (Godard & Holtzman, 2023; Hetz et al., 2015; Mao et al., 2023) and on students' lack of "intercultural wonderment" while on education abroad programs (Compiegne 2021; Hetz et al., 2015; Junco, 2012; Kinginger, 2008). However, the positive utility of social media in cross-cultural adaptation should not be overlooked and the personal and learning benefits they offer should not be underestimated (Godwin-Jones, 2016; Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017; Jayadeva, 2023). Social networks can facilitate relationships with host nationals who are also connected and engaged on social media, increase the understanding of the host's

communication styles, and allow for both learning and application of the host language, for example. Study abroad influencers can also share their expertise and mediate students' mobility.

Social media content related to international education is not immune to misinformation (Ahmed et al., 2023; Bahl et al., 2021). We also took into account the development of considering both the definition of misinformation as misleading and/or inaccurate information, as well as the intention of misinformation. The intention being "for people to maintain their beliefs in face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary" (Caulfield, 2024). Our research contemplates how social media content related to international education could be responsible for the creation of education abroad myths, unrealistic displays of life abroad and fake expectations that lead to disappointment and disillusionment upon arrival.

Billedo et al. (2020) found that positive outcomes emerged from increased feelings of social support and reduced feelings of loneliness while abroad when interacting with host nationals using Facebook, though such use could also introduce potential dependence on the platform to avoid further feelings of loneliness. Higher amounts of time spent on Facebook also saw increased participation in co-curricular activities but simultaneously lower levels in overall student engagement (Junco, 2012). Because of the changing social network climate and reduced popularity of Facebook with current students, this research was not included in our analysis. We looked into media literacy solutions (Jones-Jan & Mortensen, 2019) that could possibly address some of social media's misinformation issues, including understanding the role of and the host countries' media system and how students could be guided in using social media adequately (Godwin-Jones, 2016). Questions surrounding social media use are frequently the subject of presentations at professional conferences. The authors of this paper explored this topic concurrently with the research team of Bohan et al. (2025).

3. Materials and Methods

To address our questions, we applied a mixed-method approach. We performed content analysis of pre-departure materials (also called pre-arrival materials) provided to students by both college and university education abroad webpages and a panel of third-party program providers' webpages. The content analysis of the pre-departure resources aimed to identify recurring and uncommon topics and themes, as well as such modes of conveying this information as text, video, or reference to other websites. This data is important due both to the stressed significance of pre-departure resources in setting the

foundation for a fruitful education abroad experience and to the question of whether established best practices (Wiedenhoeft & Henke, 2022) are followed.

Only four-year colleges and universities were included in the content analysis, making the U.S. study abroad students considered primarily undergraduate students studying abroad for a portion of their degree. For the purposes of this research, a third-party program provider is defined as a private company that can both organize and facilitate education abroad programs ranging from one week to one academic year. These providers offer programs fully developed by their staff that include accommodation, on-site help, faculty, and coursework. They can also provide specific services to facilitate certain aspects of an education abroad program in conjunction with a U.S.-based college or university. In some cases, however, U.S. based faculty arrive on-site from their home institution and are responsible for creating coursework, supported locally by the third-party provider.

We used content analysis to collect and review data from TikTok and Instagram accounts managed by U.S.-based students abroad, international students, and recent graduates that posted content related to study abroad in France. Personal blogs that were linked in the TikTok or Instagram bio, or the descriptive information given under the photo handle of the account, were included in the review. Hashtags and keywords related to study abroad and France were used to locate accounts.[1] The objectives of analyzing social media accounts are to gain insights into the state of information shared about study abroad and to discover similarities and differences between the pre-departure resources supplied by colleges, universities, and third-party providers, and to investigate the various ways this information was communicated.

We conducted three anonymous surveys to three populations: students, on-site staff, and U.S-based education abroad staff, with parallel questions to allow for comparative analysis. Our objective was to gather data about the methods used to cultivate student preparations (format, content, length, outside sources offered) in order to measure the level of preparedness, or perceived level of preparedness. The surveys required approximately six to seven minutes to complete, were completely voluntary, and did not ask sensitive questions.

The student survey for current students (undergraduate and graduate) and recent alumni asked questions about their perception of their level of preparedness; the means and methods they encountered for preparing their study abroad experience, including their patterns and use of social media; their

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[1] #exchangestudentaix, #exchangestudentfrance, #exchangestudentlyon, #exchangestudentrennes, #studyabroadaix, #studyabroadfrance, #studyabroadlyon, #studyabroadrennes, #studyabroadparis, #studentinfrance, #tipsparis, #tapiffrance

involvement in their host country's daily realities; and the means and methods they used to adjust (or not) and integrate (or not) into their host country. Student responses totaled 88 (n = 88).

The second survey targeted on-site staff in France working in international education, and the survey was open to all colleagues working with students from U.S.-based colleges and universities. No distinction was made between university-sponsored programs and third-party providers. The survey design focused on how staff viewed pre-departure resources provided by their program and students' home institutions, how staff configured on-site orientations, how they gauged student preparedness upon arrival, and how they evaluated student adjustment and integration into their host country. On-site staff responses totaled 38 (n = 38).

The third survey was designed for international education staff in the U.S. whose institutions send students to study abroad in France. The second and third surveys included similar questions to measure student preparedness, except the third survey did not examine U.S-based staff's perceptions of student preparedness upon arrival or integration into their host country. U.S. staff responses totaled 29 (n = 29).

A mixed-method approach offers the possibility of more expansive findings than a single method approach (Vivek & Nanthagopan, 2021). The resulting quantitative data from the surveys allowed for comparative analysis between three poles of international education: U.S. staff responsible for sending students to France, the on-site staff responsible for receiving students in France, and the students on programs abroad. Our mixed-method approach allowed us to confront the different materials and varying perceptions connected to student education abroad preparedness to better discern the efficacy and accuracy of preparatory resources used by students studying abroad in France on U.S. programs.

The content analysis sample included pre-departure resources readily available without login credentials on the public webpages of 60 U.S. colleges and universities, 39 of which were public institutions and 21 private institutions with enrollment rates ranging from under 5,000 to over 40,000. The sample included randomly selected colleges and universities with centers in France. The types of resources considered included information sessions, advising (one-on-one advising, groups, and workshops), handbooks, identity abroad information, country-specific guides, mandatory work and/or orientations, ambassador/mentor programs, student blogs, photo contests, and if students were assessed on any specific information. The 10 third-party providers included in the sample were American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS),

Academic Programs International (API), Academic Studies Abroad (ASA), Cultural Experiences Abroad (CEA CAPA), Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), Institute for Field Education (IFE), International Studies Abroad (ISA), International Student Exchange Program (ISEP), Knowledge Exchange Institution Abroad (KEI Abroad), and University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC). These providers were selected purposefully because their programs were the most commonly presented as options to students by 73% of the 60 aforementioned universities and colleges. These providers, according to their webpages, offer programs in Paris as well as in large, mid-sized, and smaller cities across France. The same content analysis was performed on the provider webpages to investigate the pre-departure resources provided, if any resources were mandatory and whether students were assessed on pre-departure resources. The sample was compiled from public websites that did not require a password to access pre-departure information.

We conducted a content analysis of 14 Instagram accounts, 23 TikTok accounts, and eight blogs that posted content in English related to studying and living abroad in France. These accounts were managed either by students living abroad or recent graduates in France. This focus was selected based on data that cites 78% of Americans aged 18-29 reported using Instagram and 62% of Americans aged 18-29 reported using TikTok in 2023 (Gottfried, 2024). Further research could investigate other social media (e.g., Discord, Facebook, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, etc).

The content creators were selected based on their Instagram and TikTok bios, or the information they provide to describe themselves under their photo handle. Both platforms include public comment sections that allow for direct communication between content creators, viewers, and followers. Information, including questions and answers, shared in this space was included in the review. These accounts sometimes included links to more detailed content, including information relevant to pre-departure and on-site orientation. These blogs were also included in the review.

It should be specified that education abroad statistics and students included in this research refer primarily to students enrolled at a U.S.-based colleges or universities studying abroad in France for a determined length of program, but they do not exclude degree-seeking students enrolled in a diploma program in France, faculty-led students accompanied by staff, or faculty from their home institution in the U.S. The sample does not include students enrolled in independent or non-credit programs outside of the context of their university studies.

Study abroad settings in France include degree-granting colleges and universities (bachelor's and master's degrees), semester study abroad programs at U.S-based universities, study centers, faculty-led programs, language schools, and partner university programs.

We collected responses from on-site programs in France and made no distinction between for-profit and non-profit nor between public and private institutions. The authors distributed the surveys for this study through the mailing list of APUAF (Association des Programmes Universitaires Américains en France), a non-profit, professional network for U.S. education abroad programs in France. The Association's 68 full members were asked to share the surveys with colleagues and partners at U.S.-based colleges and universities, as well as with current students abroad (2023-2024 academic year) and recent alumni (from the past three years). The survey was also sent directly to U.S.-based staff from colleges and universities, private and public, that send students on study abroad programs to Paris and/or cities outside of the capital city in Frace.

The relevance of France as a case study is supported by the 2022-23 Open Doors Report on U.S. Study Abroad Data (published in 2024) that ranks France as the fourth most popular study abroad destination for study abroad students. Of the 280,716 students from U.S. colleges and universities who chose to pursue international educational opportunities for credit in the 2022-23 academic year (which was still affected by COVID-19 measures), 64% chose European destinations and 17,096 studied on a program in France. Analysis of Open Doors data starting in 2000 demonstrates that France has consistently maintained a ranking among the top destinations (Institute of International Education, 2024).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Content Analysis of U.S. College and Universities Webpages and Pre-Departure Resources

The majority of college and university education abroad webpages outline a series of initial steps for prospective education abroad students. These steps typically include a non-country specific introductory information session presented in various different formats (often referred to as 'Study Abroad 101') where program search methods, requirements (GPA, forms, credits, courses) are covered as well as housing, visas, health insurance and financing education abroad.

Formats vary in delivery (online vs. in person) and frequency (daily or weekly) and are offered at themed events (e.g., study abroad fairs and International Education Week) or as pre-recorded webinars and self-guided

online sessions. It is unclear whether these options were introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and then maintained due to students' habituation to online and self-scheduled options. Some institutions clearly differentiated between a general information session about study abroad and site-specific pre-departure orientations while others did not.

Out of the 60 institutions reviewed, 30% list either a general information session, a general pre-departure orientation or a program-specific pre-departure orientation as 'mandatory'; 19% list them as 'mandatory' and 'interactive' and include assessments on the content; and only 6.6% offer an education abroad course(s) for credit that is mandatory or strongly encouraged. One example is 'Exploring Global Citizenship' or a three-credit online asynchronous course divided into pre-departure, while-abroad and upon-return sections. The syllabi for the pre-departure and upon-return sections were provided and included readings and videos related to stereotypes, country myths and cross-cultural competency skills and understanding.

Some institutions link pre-departure handbooks for students to download, as well as handbooks for their parents or guardians. The handbooks averaged 20 pages, focused on general themes, and were not country-specific (see Table 1 on the following page). Anecdotal information collected from on-site staff colleagues supports the prevalence that parents/guardians often speak for or act in place of the student on a multitude of issues. One program description approached this matter facetiously, describing 'ownership' as a learning outcome where "students spend 6 weeks in Paris, away from parent(s)/guardian (as long as said parent/guardian does not constantly text/phone their child)" (University of Georgia Office of Global Engagement., n.d.). The parent/guardian handbooks were not explored for this article but further research is recommended as on-site staff often notice that parents/guardians involve themselves more heavily into their student's abroad experience, including calling and emailing on-site staff on behalf of their student for housing, immigration, health, academic and safety/security matters.

Almost all home institutions share resources related to identity abroad, including racial, religious, sexual, gender, national, heritage seeker and first-generation identities. However, the vast majority of content did not address the types of identities and lifestyles in the host country/countries. Instead they centered a student's identity and lifestyle in the U.S. while stressing the adversity and struggles that may be experienced abroad. This study is not denying the importance of such information; however, the confrontations students experience with their host culture when ideals and values differ are important in achieving intercultural wonderment. Such confrontations should be addressed and students be encouraged to examine both their own identity

and how it intersects with the identities they will encounter in their host culture. Introducing these ideas during pre-departure so they can be continued on-site is recommended. It would be intriguing to analyze pre-departure resources given to international students studying in the U.S. and whether they are warned about possible adversity and struggles in the same manner.

TABLE (1)

GENERAL THEMES AND TOPICS COVERED IN PRE-DEPARTURE RESOURCES PROVIDED BY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Study Abroad Myths	Culture Shock	Academics	Packing & Fashion	Safety & Security
Language requirements, costs, delaying graduation, does not boost CV	Stages: Honeymoon, Frustration, Adjustment, Acceptance	Speak with academic advisor at home institution about transferring credits	Suggest not bringing too many items from home country	24/7 emergency number accessible to students
Debunking myths: English-language programs, scholarships, transfer credits, professional development	Accept that cultural shock is normal, and it is OK to ask for help	Host country's student habits and approach to education different from home country	Anticipate fashion looking different; less casual dress in classes and on campus	Understand alcohol and drug laws in host country; drinking habits in host country may differ from home country

Health	Staying Connected	Banking & Finances	Getting Around	Reverse Culture Shock Upon Return
Bring medications/ prescriptions from home to host country	Apps to stay connected to family and friends back home	Bring a debit/credit card from home country; keep track of spending habits	Anticipate different methods of transportation, such as public transportation	Anticipate having different relationship to home country and people back home
Anticipate not finding identical medications between home country and host country	Obtaining a cell phone number in the host country	Anticipate using ATMs in host country; understand the currency exchange rate(s)	Download apps for ride-sharing services	Suggestions for reintegration: language clubs, study abroad fairs, student ambassador programs, meet international students

While a small minority of these resources were prepared by the home institution, the majority are links to resources from third-party providers, the U.S. State Department, student blogs, newspaper articles, commercial non-profit websites, and lastly, other colleges and universities. Links were sometimes

broken, and student blogs were at times ~~often~~ several years old. Certain unique elements discovered during the content analysis could serve as a model for expanding and updating pre-departure preparations to respond to current student needs. One institution provided a guide on ethical photography designed to help students reflect on their photos. Student photos are an essential element for social media response, and 56% of students surveyed listed photography as one of their activities abroad. Staff could integrate intercultural learning into an activity that demonstrates ways students' photography can connect them (e.g., sharing memories, friendships, travel, etc. with friends and family back home) and disconnect them (cliché depictions of highly touristic destinations that frustrate and separate them from the host culture, creating jealousy and FOMO for friends and family back home) during their study abroad experience. Another example, from the University of Michigan (n.d.), was a 'Resilient Traveling' webpage built in collaboration with the Psychological Clinic staff with resources and student testimonials to center the student in their host country; it spotlights skills like assertiveness, cognitive defusion, mindfulness and values-based actions in the face of both small and large struggles experienced while abroad. With the majority of documents available presenting similar information, these exceptions stood out during the analysis as relevant and contributing effectively to fill more nuanced needs in the canon of pre-departure resources.

4.2. Content Analysis of Third-Party Provider Webpages and Pre-Departure Resources

Whereas certain colleges and universities have academic centers maintained in France directly connected to the home campus and for study abroad students from those institutions, the vast majority of colleges and universities included in the content analysis are either entirely reliant on a program provider (the provider and its staff in the U.S. and in France are responsible for creating the program including providing local faculty to teach) or partially (the provider and its staff are responsible for offering supplementary services not offered by the home or host institution such as help with applying for visas or 24/7 emergency support). We mention this to emphasize the prominent importance of third-party providers, their staff in the U.S. and in France, and their resources, on education abroad programs. N.B. Many college and university "center" programs in France also double as "providers" and welcome students from other institutions.

All the providers included in this study stated on their webpages that they supply pre-departure resources and host on-site orientations. While some resources were available to download, others, including detailed descriptions of on-site orientation content, were password-protected and only accessible to

participants which aligns with the proprietary practices previously mentioned. Providers offered more country-specific information compared to the webpages of colleges and universities. This is understandable as their staff is likely welcoming, orienting and overseeing education abroad students more often than staff from the home university (Table 2). One provider included a disclaimer on their site that any linked content had not been verified for accuracy by the provider.

TABLE (2)

GENERAL THEMES AND TOPICS COVERED IN PRE-DEPARTURE RESOURCES PROVIDED BY THIRD-PARTY PROVIDERS

Education System	Different styles and approach to education in France	Less grades, stricter grading, less access to professors inside and outside the classroom
Monuments & Sites	Popular destinations to visit in and around the study abroad city	Destinations to visit during weekends and school breaks
History	Brief histories of certain common study abroad locations in France	Historical events, historical individuals relevant to the study abroad city
Culture & Values	The significance of fashion and food in France	Anticipate strikes and protests that could disrupt transportation, travel, and courses
Cultural Differences	Relationship to alcohol in France and difference in drinking habits compared to the U.S.	Small sized apartments and houses, rarity of certain amenities like air conditioning

Four providers made reference to activities they claimed helped students better connect to their education abroad experience, specifically photo contests, writing for the provider's blog, a micro-credential program and an 'influencer' program (ISA, n.d.). One photo contest had a cash prize. The micro-credential program included meeting certain conditions in order to earn a badge for "wayfinder", "interculturalist", "global professional", or "choose Earth". The badge could be added to the student's social networks or LinkedIn accounts and commented on by the provider. The 'influencer' program is a joint venture between an education abroad student with a larger social media following and one of the providers. A student could apply into the program and become a paid 'influencer' for the provider, creating content for the provider and tagging them in certain posts. By including this information on their websites, the aforementioned providers are creating a link between materials to prepare students for their education abroad experience and social media, thus creating a bridge between the two elements.

The commercial purposes and branding efforts of providers with these extra activities should be considered within the scope and purpose of education abroad. It is not new for providers to use photos and testimonies of former

students to promote their programs. But if students become more directly implicated in those marketing goals, how does that blur the line between a student *sharing* about their experience abroad to give prospective students a clearer picture of what to expect, and a student *selling* their experience abroad to promote the provider's brand and the student's brand? Can representations of study abroad experiences created for marketing purposes accurately communicate the challenging parts of being abroad? These experiences, which are partially authentic but might be filtered through a marketing light, could contribute to the rose-colored glasses expectations reported by students (Bohan et al., 2025). Additional considerations are the reputation of the provider, their core values and contributions to the field of international education, and the extent to which the provider is then shifting expectations of what study abroad resources should be provided.

4.3. Content Analysis of Social Media Accounts

The content analysis of Instagram and TikTok accounts uncovered content revolving primarily around travel, food and beverages, sites and landmarks, and fashion in France. There was also content related to applications, applying for visas, finding housing, learning French, and in remaining in or returning to France on a non-student visa. There were some mentions of going to class or academic study; however, this area is not the primary focus of the accounts analyzed (Table 3). The content was related to France and to Europe and was presented in photos, geotagged photos (when the location shown in the photo is linked in the content allowing a reader to click and arrive to the account of the specific location or to other content that geotagged the same destination), videos, lists, and itineraries. We identified that content creators considerably favored language like "unknown," "hidden," "secret," "biggest," "top," "don't waste your time planning," and "don't miss this spot" in their posts.

The authors found this language striking because the suggestions implied as 'hidden' or 'secret,' such as visiting the Buttes-Chaumont Park in Paris or the Loire Valley, could be found in many print and online guidebooks readily available or familiar to on-site staff in France. This undermines the content creators' claims that this information was concealed in any way. The content creators' use of superlatives and the allure of receiving privileged information from a knowledgeable, fashionable insider attract viewers' attention. However, it also introduced a sense of blaring and forced urgency that students needed to rely only on these creators for study abroad insights and that so many destinations must be visited lest a student not make the most of their time abroad (Bohan et al., 2025).

TABLE (3)

GENERAL THEMES AND TOPICS COVERED BY SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS POSTING CONTENT RELATED TO STUDYING AND LIVING ABROAD

Food & Beverage	Coffee shops, bars, restaurants in the study abroad location	Trendy locations, student hangouts, cheaper prices, student discounts
Fashion & Beauty (GRWM, OOTD[2])	What the student is wearing for school, going out, traveling; What people around them are wearing	Shopping, skincare & make up
Friends & School	Daily activities & nighttime events with their study abroad friends	"Spend a day with me / come along with me" as I…attend my first day of class, study abroad, etc.
Destinations & Travel	Photos & videos of locations they travel to, including travel itself (on trains, planes, etc.)	Recommendations for food & beverage & sites in these locations
Tips & Advice	Application requirements, university courses, language tests, visas, housing, how to find jobs / sponsored jobs	Itineraries for French locations, top # of bakeries/vintage shops/etc

Influencer marketing, or when content creators promote a discount code to their followers and receive a commission or some sort of compensation each time the code is used, was also observed. For example, certain posts related to how students could improve their French include discount codes for a language-learning company. Another post was content on how to avoid being pick-pocketed in Paris where the creator demonstrated techniques with a specific purse, highlighting the multiple pockets and crossbody strap. In another post, the same creator encouraged followers to purchase the same bag using their discount code.

Collective expertise as presented on social media through content creators has been shown to be considered a superior alternative to official consultants (Jayadeva, 2023). If education abroad students do use social media for research on their host country before and upon arrival, the fact that content creators can be compensated for promoting – essentially marketing – housing sites, language-learning applications, food and beverage recommendations, fashion and shopping recommendations, should be significantly considered. This evolution from social capital (Verduyn et al., 2017)[3] for content creators to literal capital, or receiving compensation for posts, is a meaningful development. The authenticity of the suggestion, as sincere advice, could be called into question.

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[2] GRWM stands for 'get ready with me' and OOTD for 'outfit of the day.' Both are popular social media trends at the time this research was conducted.

[3] Having popularity on social networks as demonstrated through the number of people following the account, and engagement activity (how many likes, comments and reposts).

Social media/social networks are also used by students to stay connected to their friends, family and followers back home and to connect to new friends and followers they meet abroad (Bohan et al., 2025; Godard & Holtzman, 2023; Hofhuis et al., 2023). Some content creators acknowledge that social media is "basically like a bragging site… [a] competition of who can get the most likes" and they "strategically determine what photos to post to best promote themselves" (Hetz et al., 2015, p. 265). This peer pressure can have a large impact on a student's well-being (Roberts & David, 2023; Junco, 2012) and contribute to misinformation (Ahmed et al., 2023). Social media content designed for study abroad is not immune to the same misinformation and disinformation plaguing other types of news and information. Information overload tends to lead to misinformation and hence students need to be helped to identify this misinformation (Bahl et al., 2021; Jones-Jang et al., 2019).

A more evident advantage of social media is its greater interactivity than more traditional methods of communication like slideshow presentations, handbooks, and email. A content creator can literally speak to a follower, through videos, captions, direct messages, and in the comment section of a post. This can also happen 'live' if both the content creator and follower check their accounts simultaneously. Plus, captions and comments can be translated into other languages, creating a feeling of a global forum with real-time dialogue. It is reasonable that students who have grown up with social media would be attracted to and prefer this sphere over downloadable handbooks and webpages. Research on social media fostering and hindering students' ability to connect with a host country and achieve intercultural wonderment (Compiegne, 2021; Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017) needs to continue to identify how these spaces should be considered within the purview of best practices in international education pre-departure resources and on-site orientations.

4.4. Survey Results and Interpretation

From the informational data collected (location, length of program, number of students), we identified without surprise that most U.S.-based education abroad offices (n = 38) reported approved programs in Paris (80%), followed by Aix-en-Provence (62%) and then Grenoble (24%), Lyon (24%), Reims (24%), Strasbourg (23%), Nantes (10.3%), Bordeaux (7%), and Montpellier (7%), as well as multi-city programs. U.S.-based offices, 11 programs or 38%, listed having only one to three approved programs in France, three programs or 10% listed having four to five approved programs, and 15 programs or 52% reported having six or more approved programs. On-site programs surveyed offered both semester and short-term programs, and enrollment figures ranged from smaller programs with under 50 students per year (15 programs or 40%), to medium-sized programs with 50-100 students (seven programs or 18%), to large

programs with over 200 students (16 programs or 42%). These responses confirmed a diversity of participation from the small number of completed surveys. The following sections present five themes developed from comparative analysis of our survey results (rather than analysis of each survey data).

4.4.1. Predeparture Preparation

We investigated common topics included in the pre-departure phase (see Figure (1), Topics covered at pre-departure orientations). There were some inconsistencies between student and staff responses to the questions about whether or not essential topics were covered in the pre-departure orientation. Two significant topics are cross-cultural challenges (CCC) and integrating into the host culture (IHC). Much higher percentages of U.S.-based staff declared having covered these two subjects in pre-departure preparations (86% for CCC and 79% for IHC) than students (56% for CCC and 49% for IHC). Perhaps the content for those two areas needs to be more clearly explained and connected by on-site staff. Only 47% of on-site staff said they included CCC content and 40% said they included IHC content in their pre-departure resources (see Figure 1). These two essential subject areas underscore cross-cultural communication and permit critical insights into home and host cultures (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012).

Several colleges and universities in the content analysis had staff specializing in specific countries in their education abroad offices. However, it was unclear if their specialization focused on more administrative factors like program advising or cultural factors like cross-cultural challenges and integration advice, or both. Student responses highlight the prevalence of 'practical information' shared during the pre-departure orientations (academics, housing, visas) and subject matter around cultural integration and diversity were less often covered/discussed (see Figure 1).

As Hanson (2017, p. 24) contends, "discussing cross-cultural confrontation during the pre-departure orientation is pertinent." These discussions, Hanson adds, are "informative and important, with most international educators agreeing that teaching the students how to learn is much more effective than trying to give the students all the information that is appropriate prior to departure." Pre-departure resources should strike a holistic balance between academic, cultural, and practical information and more in-depth information regarding cultural adaptation. However, it is surprising to learn that on-site staff did not prioritize these subjects in their pre-departure orientation preparations, particularly since students who study abroad demonstrate higher levels of intercultural communication skill than their counterparts who remained on campus (Williams, 2005). We acknowledge that on-site staff may assume such information to have already been covered and

that students may not have retained the information. Greater awareness and examples of relevant content could be shared through professional networks on-site to increase participation in these areas.

On-site staff were invited to include comments in the survey. One respondent said, "I'd love to work more closely with our French department to create some online modules that help students dig into France more intentionally before they head abroad, while they are there, and help them unpack their experiences upon return!" And another shared "I think there is more that we can do during pre-departures, but it requires time and staffing." Collaborations between departments and the international education offices at colleges and universities could strengthen students' level of preparation before arrival. There may be stronger interest from staff in the U.S. than is currently recognized based on the quote above. Collaborations between U.S.-based staff and on-site staff is seriously needed but both sectors express feeling constrained by timing and staff limitations.

FIGURE (1)

TOPICS COVERED DURING PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION
STUDENT RESPONSES, *N* = 88; ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38; U.S. STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 29
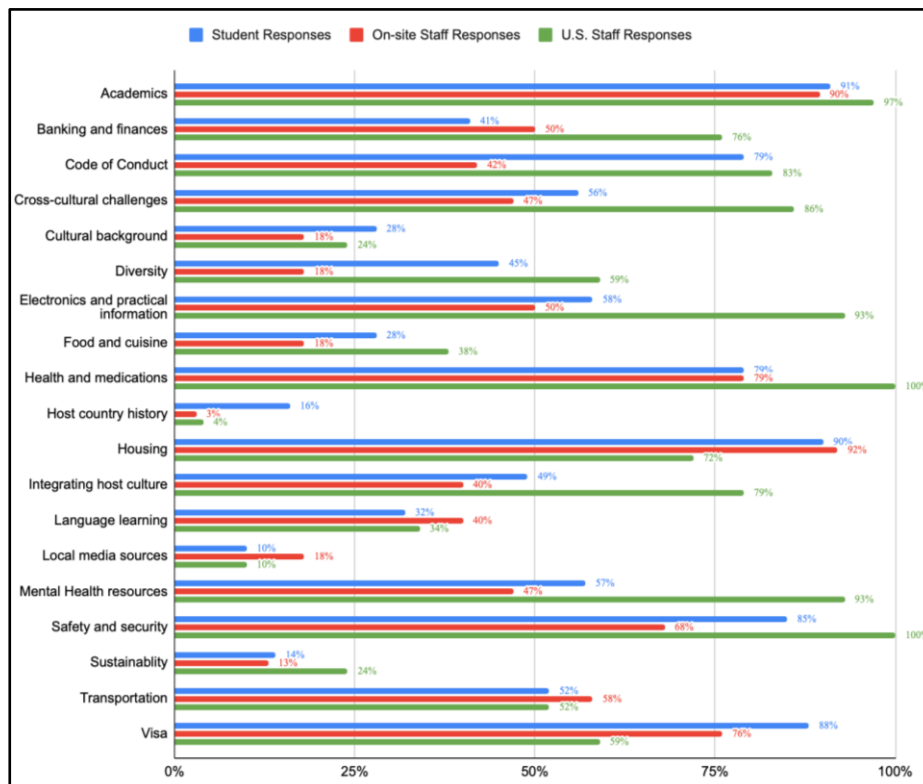
4.4.2. On-site Orientations

Robinson (2022) advocates that on-site orientations should include a presentation of roles and responsibilities of on-site staff, physical and mental

health resources available to students, emergency networks, and independent travel information. These elements should be combined with location specific information (such as geography, history, language, local transportation, cultural norms, and traditions), diversity abroad information, and alerting students to sexual misconduct, or Title IX, policies while abroad (Robinson, 2022). In addition, the guide recommends presentations and small group work to discuss cultural adjustment and coping mechanisms, goal setting for the study abroad program, and setting students' expectations for their experience abroad. In regard to orientation at the start of their academic studies at a U.S. college or university, student expectations are to feel prepared, build community, and to feel supported (Flaherty, 2023).

On-site education abroad staff in France responded unanimously that they design and present mandatory orientation to their students upon arrival; students surveys reported experiencing on-site orientations of varying lengths (see Table 4). The divergences in length of orientations between students and staff answers may be due to misperceptions of certain activities not being part of orientation (students may not consider excursions and activities as part of their orientation program), and because the on-site staff and students who responded to the survey do not necessarily originate from the same programs. It is noteworthy that on-site staff consider excursion events during orientation a priority, as 81% reported including such an activity. Types of activities included walking tours, cultural visits, group meals and boat tours.

TABLE (4)

LENGTH OF ON-SITE ORIENTATIONS, ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38; STUDENT RESPONSES, *N* = 88

Length of On-site Orientation(s)		
Length of Time	On-site Staff Responses	Student Responses
3+ days	42%	52%
3 days	29%	10%
2 days	8%	14%
5-8 hours total	11%	10%
1-4 hours total	11%	14%
No orientation	0%	0%

We compared the topics covered during on-site orientations as reported by students and on-site staff (Figure 2). Both groups reported similar findings for the majority of the topics, except for, again, the country-specific information. Students (*n* = 88) reported hearing less about cross-cultural challenges (73%) and

diversity (39%) during orientation, while 90% of on-site staff (*n* = 38) reported cross-cultural challenges were covered and 55% reported including diversity topics during orientation. It was the reverse for information related to cultural backgrounds, food and cuisine, and host country history, with higher numbers of students reporting learning about the following topics than on-site staff reporting these topics were covered. These differences may stem from varying definitions and interpretations of what is considered a cross-cultural challenge, diversity, or other difficult-to-clearly-define topics. However, it shows that on-site staff need to be clearer about how the information is presented during orientation.

FIGURE (2)

TOPICS COVERED DURING ON-SITE ORIENTATIONS. STUDENT RESPONSES, *N* = 88; ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38.
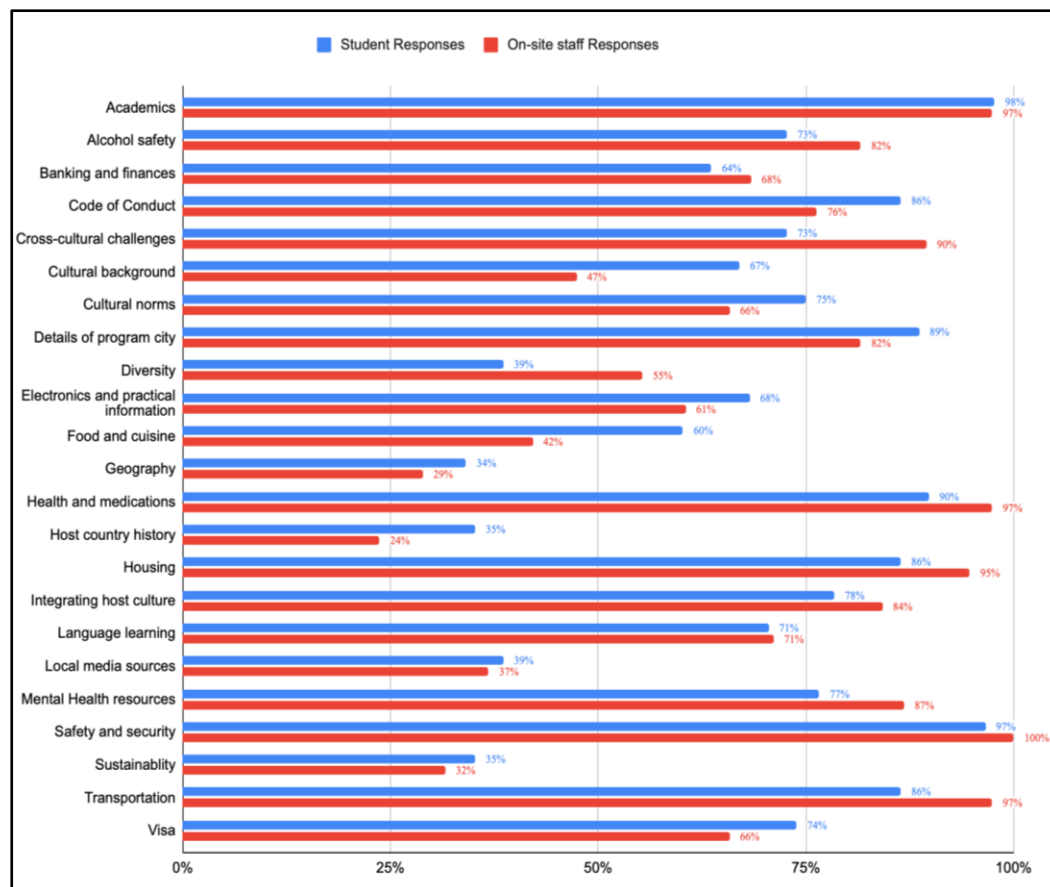

We also spotlight these topics because we asked U.S.-based staff (*n* = 29) what they hoped their abroad students were learning about during on-site orientations (Figure 3). Ninety-seven percent did indicate cross-cultural challenges, but lower percentages were reported for cultural background information (72%) and diversity (76%), and only one-third (35%) requested that host country history be included in orientation. Perhaps U.S-based staff are

relying on on-site staff to cover these cultural elements, especially since they have more direct access to the students during on-site orientation.

All of the U.S.-based staff respondents (100%) declared they wanted students to receive information on the code(s) of conduct and safety and security. These latter two categories might be at the highest level because of the ever-present litigious culture in the U.S. in general and on college and university campuses. U.S.-based staff are encouraged to accept how topics like the host country's history, geography and local media sources are sure to shape their students' experience abroad and they should see them as more important topics to be covered during on-site orientations. They should also introduce these topics in pre-departure resources.

FIGURE (3)

TOPICS U.S.-BASED STAFF HOPE WILL BE COVERED DURING ON-SITE ORIENTATIONS, *N* = 29
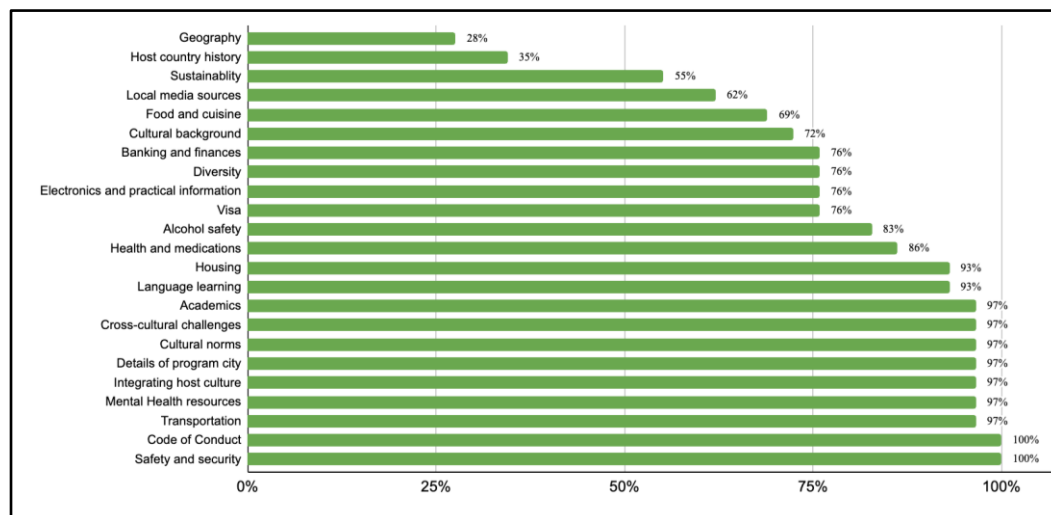

4.4.3. How Students Prepare Themselves

Student responses were for a majority of topics reported consistently lower than either on-site staff or U.S.-based staff in regard to what topics were covered in pre-departure resources and on-site orientations (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This may be due to the types of resources being given to students by staff not being engaging enough for students to retain the information, delivered in methods that allow for passive involvement and interaction, e.g., virtual sessions where cameras are not turned on, or possibly too much information being given at once (see Figure 4 on the following page).

FIGURE (4)

TYPES OF EVERYDAY RESOURCES PROVIDED TO STUDENTS. ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38; U.S. STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 29.
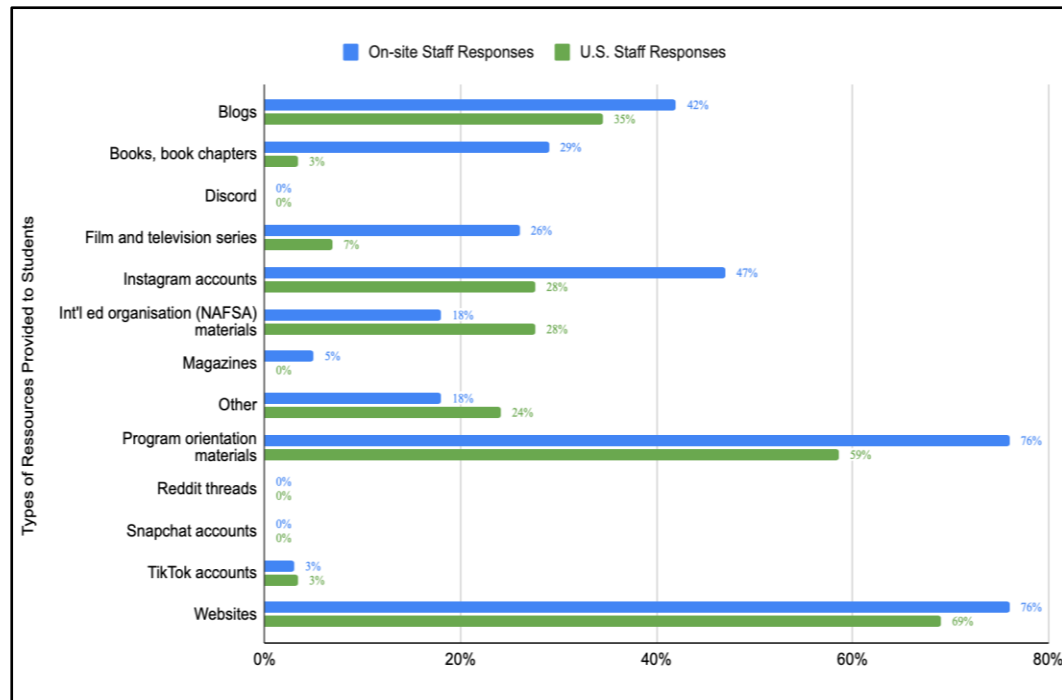

Additionally, both on-site staff and U.S.-based staff overwhelmingly reported low employment of assessments on pre-departure resources – 24% from U.S.-based staff and 5% from on-site staff. Assessment would allow staff to have a deeper understanding of student retention of topics covered and data gathered could inform future orientation sessions. Mandatory assessments do not necessarily need to take the form of a test but an approach more light-hearted could potentially lead to students remembering and retaining all the content offered to them during the pre-departure phase.

How students prepare themselves and where they look for study abroad information about their host country could provide some insight on where on-site staff and U.S.-based staff could locate and better engage with them (Figure 5). The authors were surprised at the overestimation by both on-site staff (*n* = 38) and U.S.-based staff (*n* = 29) concerning students using Instagram (on-site said 95%, U.S.-based said 83%) and TikTok (on-site said 71%, U.S-based said 75%), as an information source. Comparatively, only 53% of students (*n* = 88) reported using Instagram and 46% using TikTok. The most unforeseen data point was students reporting using travel websites at 75% and travel blogs at 58%, both media sources severely underestimated by staff members. Staff should inquire with students to identify what they consider to be travel websites and blogs in case students consider social media accounts that share itineraries to be 'travel websites' and 'travel blogs' even though they are on social media.

Perhaps content will be identified that can be included in pre-departure resources and on-site orientations. However, staff must make sure they are not seen as promoting and marketing these sites and would need to check for accuracy. These results would need to be followed up with a larger student sample before researchers could predict any changes to social media use.

FIGURE (5)

MEDIA SOURCES STUDENTS CONSULTED COMPARED TO STAFF PRESUMED USE. STUDENT RESPONSES, *N* = 88, ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38, U.S. STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 29
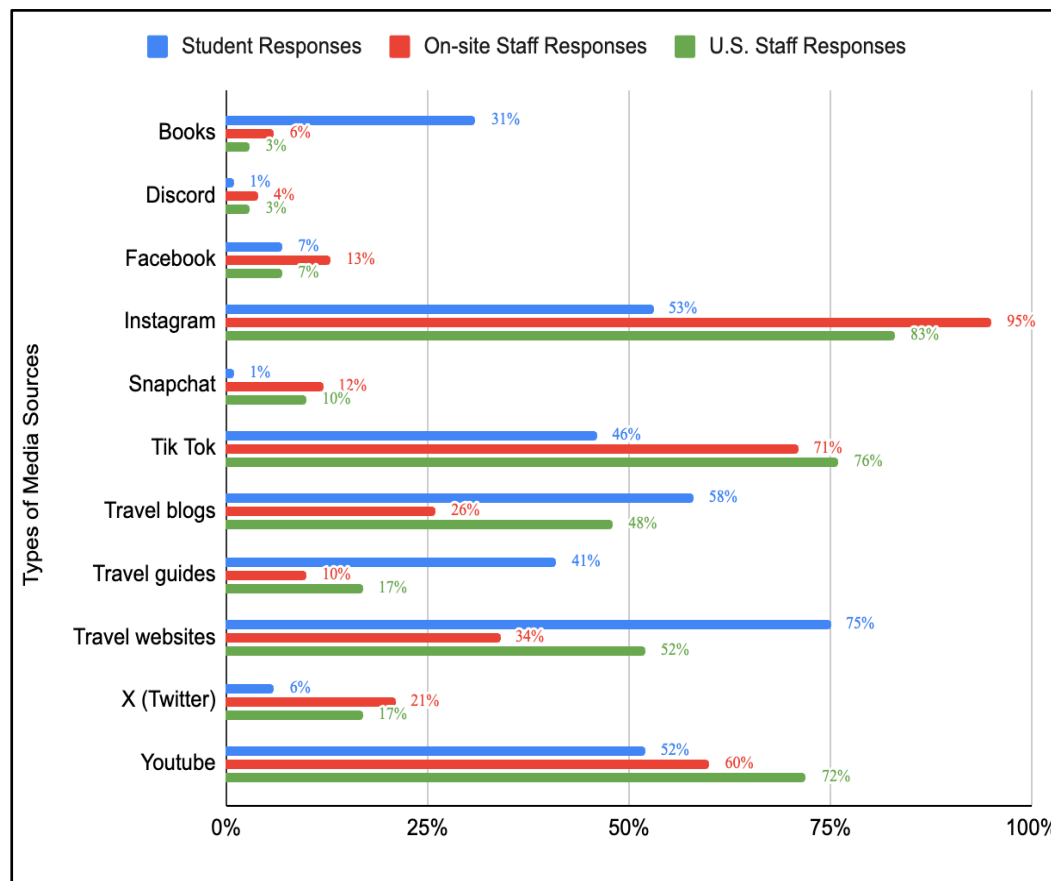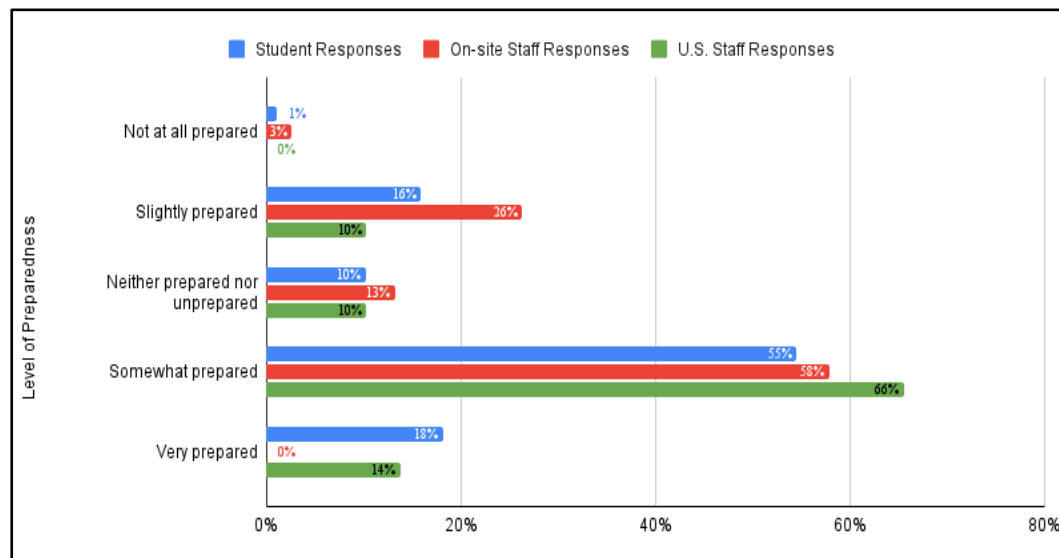

4.4.4. Levels of Preparedness

By inquiring about how students prepare and the materials available, we obtained a more comprehensive understanding about students' level of preparedness (Figure 6). Responders were able to rate their perception on a 5-point Likert scale including 'not at all prepared', 'slightly prepared', 'neither prepared nor unprepared, 'somewhat prepared and 'very prepared'. Students' responses were individual responses and staff responses grouped their students together for an overall impression. The category for 'very prepared' produced the largest gap. No on-site staff reported students as 'very prepared' while 14% of U.S.-based staff and 18% of students self-reported this level.

If we group the lower level of preparedness responses – 'not at all prepared', 'slightly prepared', 'neither prepared nor unprepared' – and the higher level of preparedness responses – 'somewhat prepared', 'very prepared' – we find another large disparity between students' self-reported levels and U.S.-based staff responses, and responses from on-site staff.

Only 27% of students report lower levels of preparedness, compared to 73% reporting higher levels; U.S.-based staff report 21% of lower levels of preparedness amongst students, compared to the substantial 79% reporting higher levels; finally, on-site staff was more balanced, with 42% reporting lower levels of preparedness amongst students and only 58% reporting higher levels. On-site staff know and understand the daily realities of living in and integrating into the host country as residents and citizens themselves, and having lived abroad is often a desired qualification for on-site staff positions. This overconfidence from both students and U.S.-based staff could be creating struggles for on-site staff who are not able to convince certain students that they still have knowledge to learn, room to grow, and that on-site staff are a valuable resource. In addition, on-site staff and U.S.-based staff should (re)evaluate the effectiveness of pre-departure resources as well as their benchmarks to measure preparedness.

FIGURE (6)

STUDENTS' LEVEL OF PREPAREDNESS TO STUDY ABROAD IN FRANCE. STUDENT RESPONSES, *N* = 88; ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38; U.S. STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 29


To determine more precise levels of preparedness, we also asked survey respondents to rank students' knowledge about France before arriving (Figure 7). Divergences between student and U.S-based staff responses and those of on-site staff appeared again. The largest number of student responses, 28%, ranked

themselves at six (out of 10) for preparedness. U.S-based staff generally agreed with students, with their largest number of responses, 40%, also ranking students at six for preparedness. On-site staff ranked students lower, with the largest number of responses ranking students' preparedness at five.

If we look more generally and group responses that ranked level of preparedness from 1-5 and then 6-10 we see that students and U.S.-based staff reported the same results with 45% saying students were prepared anywhere from the lowest level of preparedness (1) to somewhat adequately prepared (5), and 55% saying students were prepared adequately (6) to the highest level of preparedness (10). For on-site staff, however, 74% reported students between 1-5 levels of preparedness, and only 26% ranked students from 6-10 levels of preparedness. It appears that U.S.-based staff and students believe significantly to be more prepared to study abroad than their on-site staff counterparts. On-site staff may need to increase collaboration with U.S.-based staff to update materials and refine pre-departure resources to better hone the topics they believe will improve students' preparedness. On-site staff should consistently be included in pre-departure meetings with U.S.-based staff to learn what and how information is given to students. These changes may lessen the divide between perceived preparedness amongst the three groups surveyed in this study.

FIGURE (7)

RATE OF STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FRANCE (HOST COUNTRY). STUDENT RESPONSES, N = 88; ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, N = 38; U.S. STAFF RESPONSES, N = 29
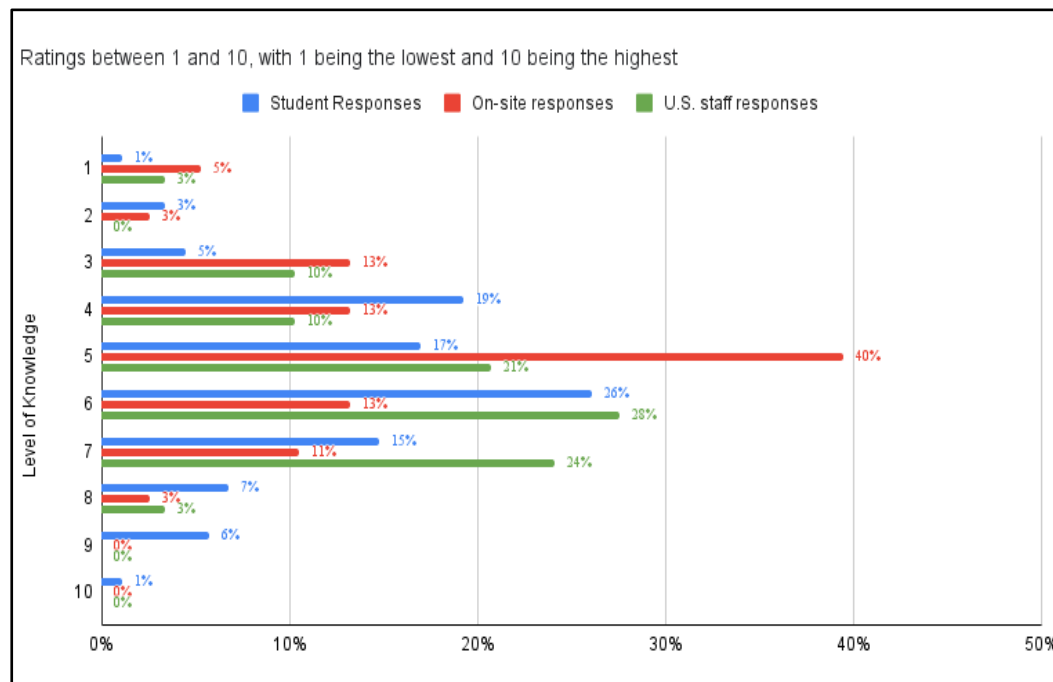
It is recognized that assessing degrees of preparedness is inherently subjective. In all the surveys respondents were allowed to give elaborations. Several are given below.

> I believe that knowledge is power. I think an honest and accurate pre-departure program would be invaluable for their journey here. They will feel a sense of ownership or connection. Sometimes, this need could potentially be in opposition or conflict with the admissions push from our university. Admissions don't want to draw attention to anything that could be perceived as difficult. I also believe that the complete lack of language knowledge is a burden on our students. They can't even order a coffee! I think having access to French language resources beforehand would be really valuable. (On-site staff response)

> I need to get the colleges to communicate correct info to students. They are selling what I don't have. (On-site staff response)

> Students coming from the U.S. especially could be better prepared to understand that norms they take for granted especially those related to DEI do not necessarily apply in the same way abroad. (On-site staff response)

> It is very important to the students to feel like they are doing study abroad the "right" way, which means doing what they've seen their peers do and travel every weekend (despite our office telling them what they can get out of really integrating into the host city/country). (U.S.-based staff response)

> I feel no amount of advising can stop students from romanticizing Paris. (U.S.-based staff response)

> Studying abroad is much more like a job and you have to commit yourself to work. You also are thrown into adulthood without realizing it. (Student response)

> I think there should be more teaching about accepting a culture that is foreign to oneself. I am a very accepting person generally but there are still many cultural/ historical norms I disagree with in France. A key example might be French racial "blindness". I wish I had been taught more about 1) the existence of this way of thinking 2) its historical context post WWII 3) those who agree 4) and those who disagree (and the dynamics of power that go into agreeing/disagreeing). (Student response)

These responses remind us of the importance of managing students' expectations and being honest about the host country's daily realities. Not only should pre-departure resources and on-site orientations continue sharing practical information to the students but also dig into more sensitive issues such as what constitutes diversity in France, demographic statistics, and social justice history. Collaboration between on-site staff, language departments and international education departments to update pre-departure and on-site

orientation resources is needed. We must focus on giving students the tools for continuous learning and overcoming adversity during their abroad experience. These resources should not be designed to be conclusive but to start the conversation on preparing for the unexpected.

4.4.5. Social Media

The surveys continued with questions about social media use. Surprisingly, only 82% of students (*n* = 88) reported that they posted about their study abroad experience on social media, whereas 100% of U.S.-based education abroad offices and 84% of on-site staff report students posting on social media. Similar student responses about social media use were found elsewhere (Bohan et al., 2025). To conclude the surveys, researchers asked students and staff to compare how accurate the image of France pre-arrival corresponds to the reality and to respond in levels of agreement (Figure 8). Participants were prompted to consider whether they "feel the image of France before studying abroad is different from the reality." The three lower levels of agreement, 'not at all,' 'slightly agree,' and 'neither agree nor disagree' all increased for students following their arrival on-site. 'Not at all agree' jumped from 0% before arrival to 6% since arriving, showing that students did see how content could misrepresent the host country. The two higher levels of agreement both decreased after students arrived and their imagined experience could have been disrupted by the reality. 'Strongly agree' also fell from 18% to only 8% since arriving, and 'somewhat agree' went from 61% to 49%.

FIGURE (8)

THE PERCEPTION OF FRANCE BEFORE STUDYING ABROAD IS DIFFERENT FROM THE REALITY. STUDENT RESPONSES, *N* = 88; ON-SITE STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 38; U.S. STAFF RESPONSES, *N* = 29.
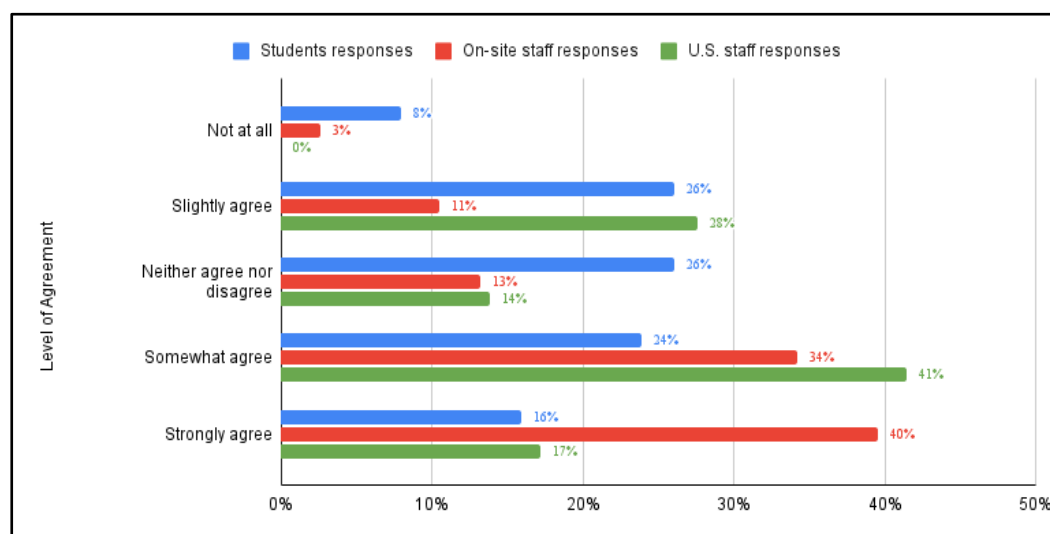
Some students elaborated more in the survey:

I mostly viewed content from influencers who glamorized the lifestyle abroad. Parts of it are true, but there are obviously lots of difficult adjustment periods too. (Student response)

Social networks definitely contain stereotypes about France (i.e. Parisians not being very welcoming, or that people immediately switch to English if they hear you speaking French with an accent). While I have experienced some of these stereotypes, they are obviously not always the case and I have encountered many French people who do not fit the traditional model that appears on social media. (Student response)

France is routinely made fun of for being rude and stuck up. This is somewhat true, but far less than social networks would make it seem. (Student response)

These results demonstrate that students are already beginning the learning process on their own that social media can be exaggerated, distorted or even untrue, in both negative and positive ways and correspond to Bohan et al.'s (2025) research. On-site staff and U.S.-based staff should join students in these spaces and possibly reduce some of the text-heavier content given to students in pre-departure and on-site orientations to prioritize more social media content. It could also serve as a gateway to introduce students to local media sources, including local content creators they may not know about.

Finally, incorporating social media into techniques to encourage intercultural wonderment and cultural humility could increase student interest and engagement with preparation materials. Students could prepare testimonials before arrival and upon arrival that include social media content they engaged with. Subsequently, they could revisit those testimonials at later designated times during the program and explore how the content aligned with or diverged from their lived experiences. They could evaluate whether the content prepared and guided them in building resilience while abroad or if it was idealized, creating larger challenges than anticipated.

5. Research Limitations and Areas of Growth

Whereas a majority of students on education abroad programs in France would identify as 'American', it is important to note that students could have multiple national identities, including international students from outside the U.S. studying at a U.S. college or university; but almost all U.S study abroad students are coming to study in France with a shared educational background informed by higher education and popular culture from the United States. No demographic or identity data was collected as we prefer to follow research practices in France (Légifrance, 2018). Researchers in other locations could view this as a limitation but this study preferred to adhere to French research standards.

We encountered several limitations in our research pursuits. The researchers did not have student log-in credentials and were unable to access certain password protected resources during the content analysis of U.S. college and universities webpages and pre-departure resources. This study recognizes that students are most likely given supplementary resources and information that could not be included for proprietary reasons, and therefore research scope may be limited. The content analysis performed in this study is seen as a jumping-off point into additional research on updating the information and communication methods of pre-departure resources.

The authors were reliant on social media content creators to self-identify as students living abroad and recent graduates in France. Additionally, the review was carried out on personal devices, leading to possible influence of previous search history, cookies, and algorithms on the search results. Furthermore, social network algorithms prioritize content based on user engagement metrics such as clicks, likes, and comments. This led to certain content creators repeatedly appearing in search results, even if their posts were not directly related to the searched hashtags.

We also recognize the significant need for more research into social media and other popular culture fields' (i.e., television, film, and video games) impact on students' choice of study abroad location, education abroad goals and objectives, and feelings of growth and satisfaction during and after education abroad. The overlap between media literacy and study abroad should be a central focus as younger generations report that social media is becoming their primary source of news and information, and, simultaneously, report higher levels of news avoidance and news fatigue (Newman et al., 2023). The importance of this research increases when coupled with news publishers indicating their distribution methods will rely more heavily on social media than traditional methods of print and online newspapers (Newman, 2024).

Participation in the surveys was lower than anticipated by the authors at the time of publication. The authors relied on professional networks to share the survey with students as the researchers did not have direct access to student contact information. This lower-than-anticipated level of participation may be due to the over-solicitation of both students and staff by email, multiple requests to complete surveys, or perhaps lack of time. We shared posters with QR codes to hopefully increase the number of student participants, but this format had no effect on the responses from program and university staff. We gathered data on variables that were not included in the survey analysis, including data on housing while abroad, students' travel habits while abroad, and students' more routine activities in their host city. This data could not be included in the

parameters of this study, but further statistical analysis is proposed to see if certain variables have statistically significant levels of correlation.

The survey was delivered for both on-site students and alumni but did not necessarily include summer or short-term program students, although Open Doors statistics show half of students studying abroad (49%) do so on short-term summer programs 2-8 weeks in length (Institute of International Education, 2024) and thus more research is recommended for summer, short-term, and internship programs under three months. Given the parameters of the research project, further research on summer students was not possible at the time of publication. In addition, feedback could be collected through student focus groups that discuss pre-departure resources from multiple sources to provide recommendations on enhancing and refining materials for students.

After examining the content of pre-departure resources and on-site orientations, as well as evaluating if this content effectively prepared students for international education experiences, we concluded our surveys by asking questions related to students' levels of integration into their host country and to rank students' level of integration. This study will not examine these results, and the authors hope to continue further research in this area.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations for practice

As we work as part of a Transatlantic team to prepare students for studying in France, the authors reflect on how to best inform students of not only the important practical matters, but also the philosophical subjects that will push students to engage fully in their semester abroad. How can we collectively foster curiosity for new experiences during study abroad, engagement in the host culture, and the ability and willingness to deal with discomfort so that students achieve the desired outcome of 'intercultural wonderment' (Engberg & Jourian, 2015)?

Students' goals for education abroad today are shifting. Pre-departure and on-site orientations may need to be reworked to better account for this effect, thus hopefully leading to a more successful immersion for students in daily realities. Currently, the abundance of information presented pre-departure phase and on-site orientations, often designed to help students to avoid stress and anxiety, might be preventing them from engaging with the material and even hindering their personal development while abroad. International educators based in the U.S. must consider how to accurately portray the study abroad experience in ways that translate to on-site success for students. Currently, the authors feel the focus is often to reduce student (and

parent/guardian) stress and to avoid as much discomfort as possible instead of embracing the true difficulties of cultural adjustment.

Education abroad courses offered the most comprehensive preparations with both content and opportunities to process and synthesize the positive *and* negative aspects of the study abroad experience, as well as assignments to more concretely recognize improvement in cross-cultural competency skills (valuable skills on the job market). Pre-departure courses rather than free access to resources set a more robust foundation for critical reflection of concepts like home culture versus a host culture and to cultivate cultural humility. The latter enhances the capacity of building a critical consciousness and developing self-reflection and self-awareness towards a mutual empowerment between varying cultures (Jones et al., 2017; Dunlap & Mapp, 2017; Hanson, 2017). We understand the possible constraints of offering a three-credit course, however, incorporating similar elements of learning, reflection, and assessment into both pre-departure and on-site orientations would deepen student exposure to resources. The current format of pre-departure followed by on-site orientation does not allow for the time necessary to process and develop the skills that students have the potential to achieve during their study abroad program. This is not to say that students do not complete the process, but without the additional end-of-program conclusion sessions, on-site staff remain potentially unaware of the level of intercultural skill(s) that students (hopefully) accomplish.

International educators in both the U.S. and on-site must also ask themselves how to design fruitful and engaging orientations when attention spans have grown shorter, when most pre-departure orientations may be increasingly held online and may not be site-specific, and as more subjects jockey for adequate time in the orientation including safety and security, academics, visas, housing, intercultural communication, student disability services, mental and emotional health, banking and finances, excursions and activities, language-learning, and more.

The more specific the pre-departure resources are, the more they will need to be maintained and updated. If this workload falls on the shoulders of mid-level on-site staff who are already responsible for planning and executing on-site orientation, facilitating integration into the host culture, assisting students with mental health and emotional well-being, assisting with and mediating housing issues and visa confusion, while also on call for 24/7 emergency support, it is likely these more specific resources have the potential to fall out of date.

Moreover, content produced by education abroad staff is competing with current social media content that is shorter and more colorful, engaging, and immediate. It requires less work from the student to engage in the subject, and students may feel a more 'personal' connection to content creators than with staff in orientation presentations and activities. Content creators present the pre-departure information as privileged 'secrets' when most of it is equally available through the on-site staff in France.

Why are students turning to social media for study abroad preparation when international education staff in the U.S. and on-site provide access to and present an exhaustive list of topics in the pre-departure and arrival stages? This begs the question as to whether young people are relying more on other people their age as information sources, and so advice and knowledge coming from on-site staff is secondary, unsought and/or disregarded, and if the social media format of virtually engaging the viewer is preferable to the current orientation format. As on-site staff in France, we have a personal connection to our students and a desire to see them succeed in these important areas that fall outside of their academic pursuits. For this reason, we continue to create, present, analyze and update our orientation materials, hoping to be the more impactful "influencer" in our students' study abroad experience.

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