# The Psychological Impacts of Travel on Students:

# Benefits of Study Abroad

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**Abstract**

Study abroad has become an increasingly common piece of US undergraduate education. This writing serves to investigate the current literature on study abroad and its impacts on students' mental health, identity development, and intercultural outcomes through learning and living in international locations. Prior research showcases that international travel fosters an environment for growth and stress during the experience. This allows study abroad a unique opportunity to examine students' wellbeing and developmental changes over this period. This project analyzes current literature on the psychological impacts of study abroad with a focus on mental health outcomes, identity development, and intercultural learning. Reviewing and synthesizing peer-reviewed empirical studies from the past decade with related findings to this focus. Experiential Learning Theory, Intercultural Development Theory, and Stress and Coping Theory are then drawn upon to back up research findings showcasing the links to gains in resilience, coping skills, cultural humility, empathy, and global awareness, along with shifts in self and American identity. The literature also documents common significant stressors such as pre-departure anxiety, cultural adjustment challenges, and difficulty with re-entry, and how they help to shape the overall psychological development trajectory of study abroad students. Although this covers various insights, current research is limited by small sample sizes, short program durations, and a lack of longitudinal and demographically diverse studies. Understanding these patterns is key to highlight for researchers and practitioners. These works underline the transformative potential of study abroad experiences, while these unstudied topics highlight a need for international programs designed to support well-being and be more purposeful about addressing research on developmental and intercultural impact.

*Keywords*: Study Abroad, International Travel, Mental Health, Psychological Growth, Learning, Intercultural Development, Resilience, Self-Identity, Cultural Humility

Have you ever wanted to travel the world? Live somewhere new? Experience unique cultures? U.S. College students have shown a rise in interest in study abroad programs, and research helps speak to why this is so valuable for psychological growth. According to research from 2018, “nearly one in 10 U.S. students studied abroad” (Bell et al., 2023). It seems this number is only increasing. Once I completed my study abroad, I felt a difference in my mental growth and was inspired to look into psychological patterns through this experience. This piece should help to synthesize findings on international travel and its outcomes on mental health, identity, and personal development. Along with this, I hope to inform hesitant individuals, bring together various literatures on the topic, and propose directions for future research. All of this is to attempt to answer the question: How does international travel impact mental health outcomes such as resilience, stress, coping, and self-efficacy? And, what identity shifts occur for American students studying abroad?

**Theories Supporting International Travel**

Experiential Learning Theory by Kolb and the Experimental Learning Cycle dives into the idea that “experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting, seeks to actively disrupt the traditional transmission of knowledge and support the development of critical praxis skills by integrating personal reflection, feedback, and action” (McBride, 2025). In terms of study abroad, travel would be considered a form of immersive experiential learning. Similarly, Stone and Petrick (2013) dive into the idea that “Because many students take advantage of touristic experiences while abroad, it may be difficult to determine to what extent learning occurs as a

result of either the travel or the study portions of their experiences,“ (Stone & Petrick, 2013), but show positive results supporting the experience due to the common benefits of “ a search for new experiences; a good opportunity to travel; to live in or learn about another culture; the desire to be somewhere different; and exposure to a different culture/language” (Stone & Petrick). There are so many varying ways positive results can be found for different people in study abroad, as the environment fosters these forms of growth, exploration, and exposure.

Another theory supporting study abroad is the Intercultural Development Theory, which says that we gain cultural humility, empathy, and intercultural maturity when we go experience new cultures. This theory supports that “Development of intercultural skills is recognized as an essential outcome of a college education” (Shaw et al., 2015). Boulware’s writing on Strangers in a Strange Land highlights the addition of “more engaged in civic activities and behaviors, had greater empathy and a trend towards greater civility towards others, and had greater epistemic humility than did students who were interested in studying abroad or had no interest in this experience” (Boulware et al., 2023). Study abroad supports the individual's “global perspectives and American identity” (Smart, 2016).

Stress and Coping theory supports that studying abroad, as well as travel, can be seen as both a stressor and a resilience builder and strengthening experience. Overall, there are many theories and much research supporting the base ideas and stressors of study abroad. An added bonus is that exposure to new cultures can also help reshape self-concept and national identity. Sell’s shares, “increases were observed in self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, interest in international affairs, attention given to international affairs, attention given to international affairs, and career aspirations involving an international orientation and the use of French [or language spoken in the place of the study abroad]” (Sell, 1983).

**Psychological Benefits of International Travel**

International travel has a range of psychological benefits, from emotional resilience to educational support. Individuals gain increased flexibility, openness, emotional resilience, and overall positive mental health outcomes through international travel. According to Mapp, "short-term study abroad trips resulted in enhanced cultural adaptability, including increased emotional resilience and flexibility/openness, even after controlling for trip length and whether students traveled to an English-speaking country" (Mapp, 2012). This is due to the high likelihood of new and different experiences while traveling in places of differing cultures. Another researcher expressed the value of "a student mobility programme [as it] is confirmed as a powerful tool in developing the personalities of students" (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). International travel has a way of supporting individuals' self-efficacy and coping skills through the experience. Learning to be independently strong and confident in one's own decisions, because you are so far from a home that feels safe, and yet you are able to make a home and thrive in this new location.

Being around new cultures in new places also helps to support cultural understanding and reduce biases among students. Seeing and understanding similarities, differences, and cultural values helps create a clearer picture of lifestyles and allows a fuller picture understanding. Along with this, building connections with different people of different cultures helps humanize the cultures, giving real-life connections to students from different lifestyles. Research by Gearing found, "It is possible that this group of students with greater exposure to other cultures, systems, and policies may be a bit more in tune with 'knowing what they don't know' due to their prior international exposure to diversity and their ability to communicate in multiple languages" (Gearing et al., 2020). Other studies showed that, "being an outsider in a foreign country, may

strengthen kinship with others whose habits, experiences, and views are very different from one's own but it also provides an opportunity for perspective taking, contemplation, and reflection on what it means to be considered 'other' and what it might take to develop community" (Boulware et al., 2023). These different skills built throughout one's time abroad make such a difference in creating understanding to reduce bias in day-to-day life.

Another substantial development found due to studying abroad is the development of self-identity. Commonly, Americans have some serious and significant shifts in their identity after seeing more of the world. Smart's article highlights how American identity "is shaped by our understandings of cultural difference" (Smart, 2016) and can be key to increasing global perspective. This is reflected in the growing exposure to diverse languages and cultures. Gaining this perspective on the world allows us citizens to appreciate cultural differences in different places and, in turn, be a catalyst for self-awareness in one's own culture and how it differs from others. Along with this, it allows for serious self-transformation in a sense of stepping out of the American culture bubble and seeing how one can self-express, grow, and become more deeply involved in yours/others' cultures.

Along with all these various benefits, educational and cognitive benefits can be found from studying abroad. Travel is considered an extension of academic learning, allowing for a further, more immersive level of education. This can be seen as impactful, especially for studies on history, language, and DEI. Stone & Petrick help highlight that "Throughout time, travel has been considered to be educational. Travelers have undertaken journeys in order to learn, and people still refer anecdotally to the educational benefits of travel. Yet there is a belief among many that education happens primarily in the classroom, even though learning can occur in many contexts, including travel. Study abroad, defined as educational travel overseas, is one travel

experience where learning is expected to, and has been found to, occur."(Stone & Petrick, 2013). Living in these places helps to motivate individual passion for learning languages and history, as being more informed helps to make the experience even more enjoyable and educational.

**Challenges, Stressors, and Re-Entry Adjustment**

When traveling abroad, students encounter a range of challenges. It's common for them to feel anxious as they anticipate the many challenges of the study abroad process. Pre-departure anxiety is one of the initial causes of stress that people normally encounter. How are they gonna live in a new place? What if something goes wrong, and they are in a totally unfamiliar place? It's very normal for individuals to have anticipatory stress about this drastic change when traveling around. Along with this, people commonly experience stress while traveling. Adjusting to new cultures and navigating unfamiliar systems can be very stressful. But using the opportunities to build resiliency, students learn so much in their study abroad experiences. At the end of the day, things work out okay, you learn, explore, and make it home having learned so much.

"Reverse Culture Shock" is another process we see from study abroad students after the process, which can be a source of concern. There is commonly some emotional difficulty returning home. This can come from a loss of novelty in day-to-day life and a decrease in stimulation from the change in lifestyle. This can cause some confusion in identity mismatch when going to a new home environment. Limited research can be found in this department, though we know that reverse culture shock "does explain a significant amount of variance in mental depression, anxiety, and psychological well‐being of returnees" (Akhtar et al., 2022). This can be such an impactful piece of study abroad, which students can find stressful, and it is important to understand this further to help support students' stressors throughout this process.

One can use this stress as a gift, as studying abroad is able to be interesting and explorative enough to cause a sense of missing after.

**Limitations in the Literature**

There are many ways to research studying abroad, but the literature is limited. Surveys, questionnaires, and self-report measures could be used pre- and post-program to help provide input assessing changes due to study abroad, but there is a lack of studies. Stone, along with almost every researcher touched on in this reading, believes that "further study is needed to determine in which ways travel is educational" (Stone & Petrick, 2013). Studies are too loose and inconsistent due to varying study abroad experiences vs travels. Not a lot of research has been done over time. Along with this, there isnt much comparison between the benefits of travel and studying abroad or comparing study abroad courses in different environments. There have been many limitations to the research covered in this writing. This includes small sample sizes, lack of longitudinal data, along with over-representation of specific demographics (white, female, higher SES), and limited research on mental health-specific outcomes. Along with this, challenges occur in verifying self-reported growth, which needs to be considered when reading and expanded upon with future research. There are many gaps in study abroad literature, with a need for studies on long-term mental health effects, re-entry stress, differences in program length, and how this experience impacts marginalized students in comparison to current overrepresented demographics.

**Implications for Universities and Study Abroad Programs**

There are a few implications for universities when considering their study abroad programs and their benefits. One of these is the designing of programs. How might schools take advantage of study abroad to truly maximize these psychological benefits?

Some suggestions to help include encouraging homestays to allow for more cultural immersion. We see a large piece of international travel benefits in cultural immersion which can be implemented in day-to-day through homestays. Another big way programs can maximize psychological benefits is through training for pre-departure coping and cultural humility. These support programs can help students meet others going, know what to expect, and how they might prepare to make the transitions less uncomfortable. This could also be impactful during post-return as well. These program additions and suggestions make such a big difference and are a huge upside to college study abroad programs.

Another way to support the psychological benefits of studying abroad is through research awareness. There is lots of research (some covered today) which highlights the benefits of studying abroad, discussing increased resilience, empathy, and identity growth. There is also research covering the fears and misconceptions that often occur before study abroad, and helping students to learn that they aren't alone, and it's normal to stress. On top of these benefits of research, it can be a motivation for making studying abroad more accessible for students across universities. The final step in getting this research into the hands of the students and universities is turning that research into outreach material. What from these studies is worth being on a poster or in a writing to share the value of these travels? Over the recent generations, we have seen a need in increase for visual communication for students, the main info comes from the media.

In conclusion, there are various benefits of studying abroad. There is a range of theories supporting this experience in terms of benefits and stressors. Many studies have researched these benefits and serve to back up these statements. This can be seen from a range of texts and research through the benefits, stressors, trends, and limitations of these sources, along with how this might be applied to universities more effectively. This paper works to highlight the

transformational potential of study abroad and reiterate why this process should be so supported for students. Along with this, this paper is a call for more rigorous research on the topic. It highlights the lack of content and hopefully supports a drive for further research on the topic. I've personally seen many benefits from the process of studying abroad and hope that doing further research to share these insights with others can help others to experience the great joys and growth found in studying abroad.

## Appendix

### Personal Statement

This paper was written in the spirit of my travels abroad, and it hopes to help inspire others to go forth with their travel/study abroad adventures because it really did make such a huge impact on me. Going abroad was something my mom had always encouraged, though she didn't get in college, she had hoped I would. I went in very nervous and stressed, would I be able to communicate with people, what if something goes wrong, and I'm so far from home, how will I get around and live in a new place? Through study abroad, I interacted with different cultures, languages, and challenges. This helped me to become resilient to stressors and see value in the world around me and different human experiences. I took Spanish abroad with a lovely aubela, but she only spoke Spanish, and I didn't know any Spanish. I ended up learning a lot of Spanish, more than I thought I could, and have continued to practice and be interested in new languages since I left. But nothing compares to the practice of speaking to baristas in the morning or the clerk getting fruit on your block. And nothing is as motivating as them smiling, appreciating your efforts to be a part of their culture, while also correcting you to make sure you can be even more confident the next time. Studying abroad was one of the greatest decisions of my life and truly altered who I am and my confidence in myself and my abilities in the world. I truly feel my

study abroad experience changed me in many ways, as these studies expressed, and I hope this paper can bring some of you the push to go for it. At the end of my journey, I found I had truly done things I never thought I could, and the world isn't so scary. I learned to build resilience in new cities and understand perspectives of differing experiences as I met new people in my travels. It taught me how to be open and interested in different cultures from standard styles, tastes, and lifestyles.

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