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## Flipping the Script in Study Abroad Participation: The Influence of Popular Culture and Social Networks

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### Abstract

*This study explores primary perceptions of and motivations to study abroad for adult and higher education learners. A large Hispanic-serving Southwestern university serves as the context of this study where undergraduate students and one graduate student were enrolled in an Italian urbanism study abroad program. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 47, with six males and 11 females (N = 17) for an average age of 25. Participants self-identified as Caucasian (35%), Asian (6%), Latino/a (24%), Middle-Eastern (6%), and Mexican-American (52) %. Semi-structured interviews assessed formative and influential messages impacting perceptions of and motivations to study abroad. Findings lend special importance to popular culture, peer networks within and outside the institution and socially constructed meaning made about study abroad. Limitations of this study are highlighted, along with implications and directions for future research.*

**Keywords:** study abroad; flip the script; higher education; adult higher education (AHE) learner

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Study abroad and international education sit at the forefront of recent conversation in academia as continued interest in the global economy evolves, and more value is placed on international learning for college students. Prevalent themes in research attending to study abroad participation focus on (a) social, (b) institutional, (c) academic, (d) personal, and (e) financial reasons that explain participation in international programs (BailyShea, 2009; Miller, 2004; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009; Stroud, 2010). However, much of this research fails to explain why participation across diverse groups (including males, non-Caucasian students, and community college students) is unequal (BailyShea, 2009; Brux & Fry, 2010; Stroud, 2010).

This qualitative research study is unique to the history of efforts measuring study abroad participation using quantitative methods. Fairly homogenous efforts to understand and encourage study abroad participation create need for novel research that ‘flips the script,’ or breaks away from the pervasive patterns. Thus, this research incorporates scholarship concerned with study abroad participation including new interdisciplinary literature, adult education theory, and learner-centered approaches. Roberts, Bell and Murphy (2008) refer to ‘flipping the script’ as taking antiquated perspectives to generate new understanding and insights. Applying this lens to study abroad not only encourages new understandings about perceptions of and motivations to participate in study abroad courses, but also offers advocates/international educators meaningful ways to transform the 3% (mostly

female Caucasian) U.S. national average participation rate and encourage study abroad for AHE learners (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2013).

### **Review of Related Literature**

Perceptions of and motivations to study abroad with special attention to sociocultural influences are the main focus of the review of literature. The previously mentioned categories of influence (social, institutional, academic, personal, and financial factors) offer insight into study abroad participation and have traditionally employed quantitative methods to students who are in their first and second year of study at the university (BailyShea, 2009; Stroud, 2010). However, the literature rarely offers insight into individual issues of participation inequality (Stroud, 2010). Perhaps one reason is that previous research concerned with study abroad participation has mainly been conducted at large public universities and included a majority of Caucasian females in the learners' first year or two years of study (BailyShea, 2009; Miller, 2004; Peterson, 2003; Salisbury et al., 2009; Stroud, 2010). As a result, the contexts, procedures, and samples across the literature are not diverse and do not assess the full range of students reflected in the general landscape of higher education (Burr, 2005). Brux and Fry's (2010) use of focus groups revealed that students' internalized meaning about study abroad is based on interactions with peers, family, and friends, as well as their access to social and cultural capital. Perceptions about course credit, cost, and peers' experiences all factor into a student's decision to participate in a study abroad course. Additional research suggests that peer networks (Dolby, 2004; Paus & Robinson, 2008) and the academic institution (Paus & Robinson, 2008; Salisbury et al., 2009) also influence perception formation about studying abroad.

Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, and Pascarella's (2009) influential research posited that the intention to study abroad is multi-faceted and influenced by social and cultural capital. Cultural capital can be related to a family's ethnic background and includes knowledge related to culture, proficiencies in language, educational level, and knowledge gained regarding education (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital refers to an individual's "access to information, resources and support, acquired through participation, or interactions with others who participate, in social networks or structures" (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 123). According to Bourdieu (1986), both cultural and social capital can be used to overcome socio-economic obstacles in the attainment of education. As well, the decision to participate in educational opportunities is not just a financial issue; instead participation must be evaluated in terms of an individual's perceptions, knowledge, and ability to navigate information related to that opportunity. As such, Salisbury et al.'s (2009) research suggests that individuals negotiate a range of influences related to financial concerns, interest, social mobility, and cultural exposure when making the decision to participate in study abroad programs. Further, authors contended, "the process of deciding whether or not to study abroad is virtually identical to the process described by college choice theory" (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 123), which makes broad (and perhaps questionable) assumptions that students make choices about whether to study in a foreign locale, for long or short term periods, as the same process they use in deciding which college to attend for four years or more. Since Salisbury et al.'s research does not identify the actual messages and sources of social and cultural capital bearing influence on a diverse sample of AHE learners' perceptions of and motivations to participate in a study abroad course, we believe there may be more nuanced understandings about these decision-making processes to be gained.

### **Individual Perceptions and Motivations**

*Perception* is "a student's localized interpretation," that is individually framed from a first-person perspective in order to determine how a student thinks and makes meaning about study abroad courses (Walker, Bukenya, & Thomas, 2010, p. 3). *Motivations* are reasons why a student expresses desire to study abroad. The literature on the topic of study abroad participation reveals social and cultural influences from an array of interacting/intermediating factors that shape perceptions of and motivations to study abroad. In an overview of these influences, financial, gender, cultural background,

institutional, personal, and academic considerations are at the forefront of conversations (BailyShea, 2009; Brux & Fry, 2010; Burr, 2005; Stroud, 2010).

Reinhart and Gruzweig (2002) found that students often perceived studying abroad as a novel and unique experience specific to learning about the language and culture of their destination, and Dolby (2004) noted that Caucasian female students believed study abroad experiences would offer fun opportunities to socialize and see new sites. However, globalization and internationalization of higher education has exponentially increased interest in study abroad programs and widened the scope of course options and learning opportunities (Varghese, 2008). In fact, in 2012, less than 6% of U.S. students abroad took courses within the field of foreign languages (IIE, 2013). Currently, the most common fields of study/courses available in study abroad programs include those for students in the social sciences, business management, humanities, fine or applied arts and physical life sciences (IIE, 2013).

Indeed, the face and context of study abroad and international education itself may be changing. Grunzweig and Rinehart (2002) contend that perceptions of studying abroad may be shifting to include a break from the “familiar pervasive effects of global, economic, social, and technological homogenization” (p. 25). Engle and Engle (2002) suggested homogenization is evident with “cybercafés in every neighborhood, Disneyland an easy trip, the swoosh (Nike) everywhere you look...a Gap on the corner and golden arches in lieu of produce fresh from the countryside” (p. 25). It may be true that fading borders and increased mobility are fueling the business of study abroad creating new trends and perceptions about international education experiences (Varghese, 2008).

Yet, research indicates that students who do not participate still often perceive study abroad as reserved for the wealthy elite (Jackson, 2005; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Walker et al., 2010). Unfortunately, much of the literature fails to explain the individual perceptions or motivations of the few non-Caucasian and male students who do enroll in study abroad programs (Brux & Fry, 2010; Dolby, 2004; Stroud, 2010). As such, we believe literature on popular culture as pedagogy offers new ways to consider participation choices which may be based on how international education and study abroad are portrayed in media, television, films, tourism marketing, and/or popular culture portrayals of study abroad.

### **Including New Scripts: Popular Culture and Self-directed Learning**

Cultural theorists, media scholars, historians, critical theorists, and adult educators do not unanimously agree on a single definition of popular culture (Parker, 2011), but Parker suggested, “popular culture is like pornography—in, oh, so many ways: we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it” (2011; p. 147). Tisdell and Thompson (2007) define popular culture as “entertainment media, which serve(s) as a medium for knowledge construction about [one’s] own and others’ identities” (p. 652). Indeed, what we hear and see in our daily lives is accessed through popular culture outlets like television, film, Internet, books, music, etc. Westgate (2010) discussed that popular culture serves as evidence of “commercial goods and services of the media industries,” but conversely, it also emerges from the interests and issues of “the people, rather than the commercial establishment” (p. 1). Collectively, researchers recognize that the images and messages from popular culture are widely accessed tools used in perception formation (Giroux, 2012; Parker, 2011; Tisdell & Thompson; 2007; Westgate, 2010).

Giroux (1991) considered popular culture as pedagogy through his analysis of the United Colors of Benetton apparel marketing campaign. His findings concluded that company slogans and marketing campaigns cultivated a ‘fad label’ on multicultural appreciation and encouraged consumers to equate buying Benetton’s apparel with celebrating diversity and social equity. Catch phrases like “Diversity is good...your culture (whoever you are) is as important as our culture (whoever we are)”, promote inclusion through purchasing clothes (United Colors Catalog, Fall-Winter, 1991). Giroux (2012) contended that popular culture messages and narrative themes could mold values, morals, attitudes, and conscience dramatically impacting a social perception of ability, opportunity, and sense of responsibility.

Recognizing popular culture as pedagogy led us to consider the vast spectrum of messages that potentially shape and mold perceptions of and motivations to study abroad for AHE learners. Researchers indicate that popular culture, like movies, television, Internet, magazines, and books, contains possible sources contributing to perception formation and ultimate motivation for continued learning and participation (Giroux, 2012; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Storey, 2009). Giroux (2004) explained that media serves as an “expansive teaching machine” designated to “rewrite public memory and offer people an increasingly privatized and commercialized notion of citizenship” (p. 68). Giroux’s (2004, 2012) position implies active perception formation happens every time an individual encounters media. Further, he contends that not only do people use media as a way to construct their identities, media is also used to affirm those identities over time (2012). However, the potential places and spaces where perceptions are formed about study abroad through popular culture is limited in the research.

We do know that popular culture portrayals of study abroad may promote identification for affluent Caucasian females, but they can alienate minority students and males (Jackson, 2005). Jackson’s findings explained that minority students often lack models in terms of characters in media in general, as well as in their immediate social contexts within the academic institution. As well, the messages and narratives within much of popular culture do not encourage associations between characters, plot, experiences and overall life situations for minority students. As such, Jackson (2005) offered an alternative perspective and possible reasons based in the messages of popular culture to explain disparities in participation in study abroad,

The significance of media influence [is apparent] by listing a number of movies that depict the study abroad or travel abroad experiences of young Caucasian women: *Sabrina* (1954), *Gidget Goes to Rome* (1963), *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (2003), and the Mary-Kate and Ashley movies. Similar movies featuring minority students and students of color are almost impossible to find. As a result of both historical exclusion and media influence... a “not for people like me” syndrome; minority students don’t think of study abroad as right for them and they then filter out or ignore information about study abroad (p. 1).

Unfortunately, Burr (2005) found that many minority students felt studying abroad was not something that applied to their lives or identities. And in 2012, Simon and Ainsworth’s participants reported that “Black people just don’t engage in that kind of stuff. We’re kind of like, that’s a white thing to study abroad” (p. 11). Finally, since study abroad participation is typically limited to affluent Caucasian females, minority students often do not have access to ethnic/cultural peers within their institutions who have studied abroad who can act as models of that experience. As a result, minority student participation in study abroad programs continues to go “unnoticed and unaddressed in academia” (p. 9).

Finally, as popular cultural messages both about identity and studying abroad influence many students’ educational choices, we posit the relevance of the adult education theory of self-directed learning. Self-direction, according to Malcolm Knowles (1975) refers to a process “...in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18). For example, Lee’s (2011) research found that students who studied abroad often fostered sources of self-directedness including the ability to make plans, take initiatives, make commitments, and assess their own progress. Individuals who commit to participating in study abroad programs likewise may need to engage in a complex process involving self-questioning and reflection, educational planning and goal-setting, risk-taking, and completing scholarship and funding applications.

## Research Method

To investigate individual frames of study abroad from the students' perspectives, we believed a focus should be placed on the sociocultural influences at play when students make the decision to participate in such a learning experience. As such, our approach included interdisciplinary inquiry, which encourages using "the resources of highest value" pertinent to the individual when investigating complex phenomena (Lindeman, 1961, p. 6).

In this research, we were interested in ascertaining the sources of social and cultural capital that AHE learners who had chosen to participate in a study abroad course accessed via popular culture and their social networks, and the distinctive messages that contributed to their perceptions of and motivations to enroll in the course. We hoped that identifying these sociocultural influences on perception and motivation formation (the antecedents to their enrollment choices) would serve to broaden the existing scope of what we currently understand about study abroad participation. Ultimately, it is difficult to isolate the total sum of cultural and social influences for any one individual and to identify how all of these influences contributed to perceptions of and motivations to participate in study abroad.

We ascribe to and utilized Vygotsky's (1962) sociocultural learning theory as the investigative framework through which to conduct the study. Like Vygotsky, we believe that individuals co-construct knowledge in their own minds and together with the world in which they live. Sociocultural learning acknowledges human consciousness as the self-regulatory means required for problem-solving. These processes include planning, attention, logical memory, and evaluation (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). We utilize sociocultural theory in the current research to help us to explain how individuals make meaning and learn about their own world through social interaction – through symbolic and concrete activity – connecting humans with other humans and humans with their physical and representational worlds.

We conducted an exploratory investigation about what influenced diverse AHE learners' motivations and perceptions of study abroad programs at a minority-serving institution. Specifically, our research questions included: (1) what particular messages served to underpin participants' perspectives about what study abroad is?, (2) what roles did popular culture play in forming these perceptions? And, (3) what role did popular culture serve as an informal learning source?

**Table 1**  
**Participant Demographic Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Age	M/F	Self-Identified Ethnicity	Major
Pat	20	M	Asian(Vietnamese)	International Business
Linda	22	F	Mexican-American	Art
Candace	29	F	Latina	Art
John	26	M	Latino	Business Administration
Erica	20	F	Caucasian	Accounting
Kate	23	F	Caucasian	Accounting
George	25	M	Caucasian	Psychology
Martha	47	F	Caucasian	Education
Sally	20	F	Caucasian	Business Management
Meagan	21	F	Mexican-American	International Business
Tom	23	M	Mexican-American	Psychology
Monica	21	F	Mexican-American	Philosophy
Tania	21	F	Latina	Marketing
Robin	20	F	Latina	Business Management
Pamela	25	F	Caucasian	Psychology
Mark	22	M	Middle-Eastern (Arab)	Accounting
Andrew	31	M	Mexican-American	Engineering

## **Participants**

Previous research investigations have mostly been limited to large research universities with predominantly Caucasian students. Thus, this research pushed to include a more inclusive view that involved students who had registered to participate in a study abroad program and who self-identified within multiple races/ethnicities, gender, and age. Participants were enrolled in a large, urban, Hispanic-serving institution where 51% of the undergraduate students are 23 years or older, and 64% of the undergraduate students identify as a non-White minority (UTSA website, 2012). Participants were primarily undergraduate students, as well as one graduate student, enrolled in an Italian urbanism course for a short-term summer study abroad program lasting approximately 3.5 weeks. Ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 47, with six males and 11 females ( $N = 17$ ) for an average age of 25. Participants were from a variety of majors including education, business, art, psychology, engineering, and accounting. Participants self-identified as Caucasian (35%), Asian (6%), Latino/a (24%), Middle-Eastern (6%), and Mexican-American (52%). Table 1 shows participants' pseudonym and corresponding demographic information.

## **Data Collection**

Students who were enrolled in the 2011 summer course received an email invitation to participate in the study. Those who were interested in participating in the research were briefed as to the purpose of the study and were informed that no identifying information would be linked between them and their interviews. Interviews took place in the three months preceding the course. Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following nine questions aimed at helping to identify the symbolic and concrete interactions that influenced their perceptions of and motivations to engage in a study abroad program:

1. What made you decide to study abroad?
2. When you think about study abroad, what particular messages in popular culture (television, movies for example) help to illustrate what it means to study abroad?
3. What sources of information have added to your knowledge of study abroad in general, and what sources of information have added to your knowledge of the destination that you are preparing to travel to (Italy) [for the purposes of study abroad]
4. Share what you know about the culture and people of the country that you will be visiting including knowledge both outside and inside the classroom
5. What is your own perception of study abroad with reference to popular culture?
6. What do you hope to get out of the study abroad experience?

Participants were encouraged to share their stories and personal feelings about each of the topics. Interviews lasted 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded. Interviews were then transcribed and sent out for participants' review as a member check.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

Recorded interviews were transcribed and comprised 62 single-spaced pages of data for analysis. Individual transcripts were coded and analyzed for emergent themes using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A coding schema was created in order to facilitate the constant comparative technique "to group answers...to the common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). Afterwards, cross-case analysis was employed systematically to take an individual interview and compare it to other interviews in order to assess the convergence and divergence across the data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additional categories and overarching themes then emerged from the cross-case analysis.

Participants reported using social networks and popular culture to learn more about study abroad in their learning choices. Further, participants indicated popular culture and social network sources may have also increased their motivation to embark on a particular study abroad experience.

## Self-direction and Study Abroad Participation Choices

While an array of responses was offered about motivations, *every* participant reported an implicit desire to learn and identified aspects of self-direction in their educational journeys. Studying abroad in another country became a way to satisfy the participants' interest in learning experientially about another country and in developing intercultural knowledge. Students demonstrated self-directed qualities in identifying a study abroad experience that could increase their employability or create opportunities for advancement/promotion in their careers. Pat noted:

...to see how they do business and, ya' know, grasp Europe as opposed to America ...and I think that it has always been really important for me to have that perspective, and I think that it will have tremendous value when I go back into the work force.

Other participants echoed similar feelings about how studying abroad offered international travel experiences and exposure to international perspectives that might otherwise not be possible for them. They were concerned that they had deficits in their own intercultural awareness, and they felt studying abroad would help to address these issues. John shared:

Knowing about cultures is always good in the business sense aspect. As a participant in study abroad it makes it easier to interact and makes you more qualified for jobs, especially since most companies are going global...its not just the United States.

Responses indicated that students had preconceived notions about personal and professional benefits of a study abroad experience. As such, these participants took charge of their own learning by identifying a specific course, engaging in the lengthy application and enrollment process for participation, and researching their own financial supports and possible university funding sources.

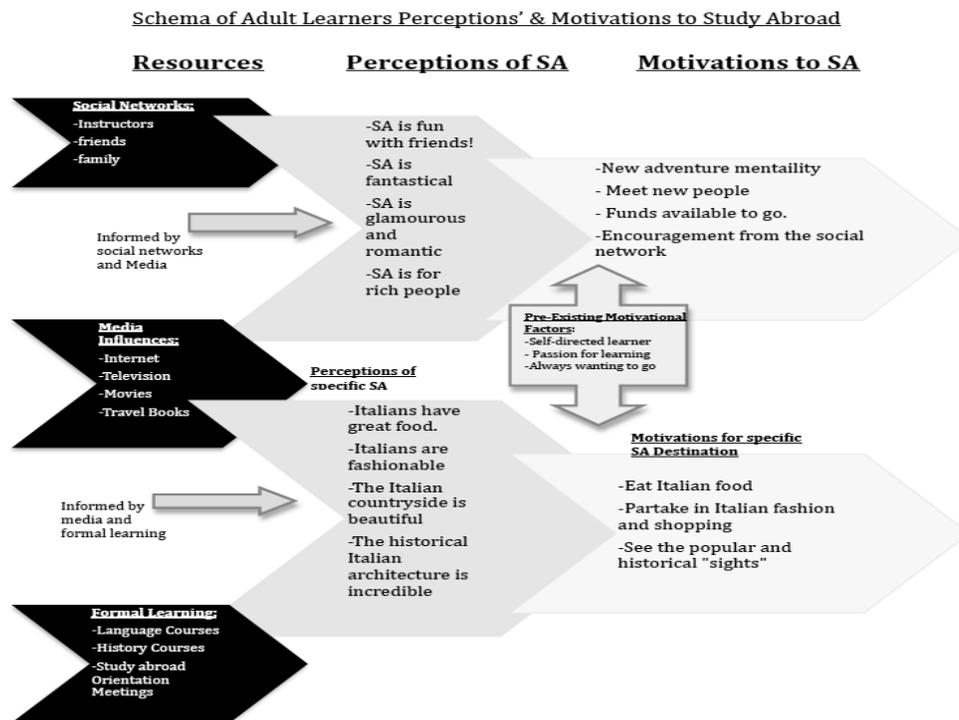


FIGURE 1. Illustration of how the concepts and codes work together to inform AHE learners' perceptions and motivations to engage in a short term study abroad program.

**Motivations: Should I Stay or Should I Go Now?**

Participants also indicated that their motives to enroll in the study abroad program were influenced by learning they could financially afford to enroll, by the encouragement of peers, and by a need for escape. Of the 17 participants, 14 reported that funding was a significant factor contributing to his/her ability to commit to the study abroad course in Italy. Linda shared, "I heard that scholarships were available this summer and not a lot of people had applied...so this might actually be my chance to go!" Sally, Tania and Erica suggested that study abroad had seemed unattainable because they, themselves, were not "rich." Sally commented, "International travel is really glamorous. They always tell you what celebrities have vacations houses where, ya know... not necessarily why I wanted to go, but [the cost] would influence my decision." Sally and other learners revealed perceptions that study abroad was very costly and not available to "just anyone." Students who get to participate are usually "well off" or are part of the wealthy elite. So, finding funding sources and researching other ways to afford the program became important in their ultimate choices to participate.

Having peers who studied abroad before, and/or instructors with study abroad experience were sources that aided in de-mystifying the possibility and the process. Kate shared the advice a friend offered, "I went up [to the study abroad office] after she convinced me to do this ...". This particular participant noted that her friend both encouraged her and gave her details about scholarship information about which she had not previously known despite having expressed interest and done research about study abroad on her own. Interactions within social networks became especially important in that these conversations helped learners to overcome beliefs that study abroad was "too expensive" or simply "not for me." Six of the participants suggested that having someone in their social network offer information about study abroad not only motivated them, but this information also changed the way that they had previously perceived study abroad participation. For these participants, real or perceived perceptions about study abroad discouraged a desire and ultimate motivation to study abroad. However, because these perceptions were modified through specific conversations with a friend, family member, and/or faculty member, students could re-frame their perceptions and were more motivated to participate after the social interactions.

Finally, participants indicated they were motivated to study abroad because of the promise of escape from personal, professional or academic stress. Monica commented, "I guess it's just that I have never done anything on my own before, and I just want to be able to escape from this every day and be able to make my own decisions." Sally and other participants similarly shared that taking a break from the "everyday" and going on a "new adventure" where there were no "everyday worries," and "having fun" was important for them to commit to this particular study abroad course. John and other participants' responses regarding motivation stemmed from the perception that study abroad would offer "different experiences from the everyday life in the United States."

**Perceptions: Fun, Fantasy, Food, and Fashion!**

A connection between respondents' motivations to "escape" and "have fun" can be made with some of the perceptions participants had of study abroad. When asked to share their perceptions of study abroad in general, and on the specific destination (Italy), George and other participants shared that study abroad would be interactive and "fun with friends." Tom extended, "yeah, when I think of study abroad I definitely think of having a good time somewhere else." Further, Sally, Kate, Tom and John noted general impressions about study abroad revealing associations made between "greenery," "forests," "historical landscape," "nature," "architecture," and "exploration." Female participants like Tania, Martha and Megan described the study abroad experience in terms of learning about the history of the country and destination itself, which they believed to be "beautiful," "magical," and "magnificent."

Participants often indicated their perceptions about the foreign locale were elicited from movies they had seen. For example, respondents mentioned movies and television shows like *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *Gladiator*, *Letters to Juliet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *When in Rome*, *The Godfather*, *The Sopranos*, and *Princess Grace of Monaco* provoked romanticized imagery that helped construct their perceptions of what the study abroad experience might be like. For example, Candace explained, "Movies like *Under*

*the Tuscan Sun* portray it as a very kind of romantic place... where like dreams can happen and stuff like that.” Findings revealed that many of the female participants readily identified with romantic themes present in Italian movies about “love” and “fairytale.” Based on Tisdell and Thompson’s (2007) research, these identifications are made possible because female participants often connect with storyline, plots, and dilemmas of the characters present in much of these popular portrayals. Male participants’ identifications with popular culture were also found, yet they manifested somewhat differently from those of the female participants. *The Godfather*, *The Sopranos*, and other popular culture references to the prevalent Italian Mafia storyline were noted indicating a connection with a more mysterious and action-oriented perception of Italy and the Italian culture.

Additionally, participants alluded to public portrayals of Italian culture from across a variety of media may have indirectly influenced their perceptions of study abroad in Italy. Richard suggested, “Well I know that they dress well, and they are fashionable, and I think it would just be cool to be a part of that culture.” Students’ responses revealed that popular culture messages, at least in some part, influenced how their perceptions of the foreign locale were formed.

### **Self-Directed Learning and Study Abroad: “I Saw It on *The Travel Channel!*”**

New insights suggest participants accessed a wide range of informal learning resources like social networks and popular culture when they made meaning about participation in a study abroad course. Not only were participants actively forming general perceptions about international travel, but they were also forming perceptions about the specific culture, people, and values of that culture. George, Candace, and Kate indicated having a limited knowledge base about Italian culture and people. They suggested that *The Travel Channel* was an important informational resource they used to learn about foreign locales and peoples. Others additionally cited *MTV’s Road Rules*, *The History Channel*, *The Food Network* and other popular network programming as influential sources of learning. John and Tom also discussed the ways these television shows provided insight about daily interactions and details relevant to Italian culture that they had not previously known. Participants also identified images of historical tourist attractions from the popular television programming they consumed. Robin shared: “Michelangelo, all the Da Vinci stuff is there...it is cool to see it on like *The Travel Channel* or *The Discovery Channel*, but to actually see it, that is just another thing.”

*The Travel Channel* and *The Discovery Channel* programming piqued their interest and attracted them to the study abroad course in Italy. Further, Pamela and other students indicated that getting to see things that they had only seen on television or in the movies was a “once in a lifetime opportunity” of which they needed to take advantage.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Social networks and popular culture created avenues of understanding for participants to identify and construct meaning about the logistics, expectations, and benefits of participating in a particular study abroad experience. It is clear that the participants exhibited adult learner qualities in self-directing their own learning – through research, planning, and use of resources like popular culture and social networks to make sense of and navigate their own participation in a study abroad opportunity. Their learning resources were stories and testimonies from peers, faculty, family, and friends, as well as narratives within popular television and movies. These resources helped to persuade AHE learners to socially construct and modify their thinking about what study abroad may mean for their own personal, professional, and academic lives.

### **Study Abroad Participants as Self-Directed Adult Learners**

Findings from this study suggest that higher education students who study abroad can be characterized as making adult learning decisions; they are self-directed, intentional, and motivated to engage in learning experiences that directly connect with their own personal and professional development (Knowles, 1975). As such, framing study abroad within adult education theory and practice on self-directedness creates new opportunities to consider recruitment, marketing, course

offerings, instructional formats, and assessment for international education. It is possible that current discussions surrounding study abroad, in terms of awareness and even perceptions, are framed in a way that exclude the kind of adult learner that is most likely to engage in this type of learning. Dolby (2004) indicates a vast majority of students are simply motivated by meeting new people and engaging in novel experiences. Although many of our participants included these same motivations, this study found that diverse study abroad participants were additionally motivated by the promise of deeper and more complex life learning that could take place while studying abroad. Generating messages about study abroad that align with the goals of self-directed adult learners (personal growth through enhanced perspectives, economic security, and long term professional marketability) through the institutional and public sphere could expand thinking and meaning made about study abroad.

### **Interconnectivity of Perceptions and Motivations**

Research in the last decade has identified various social influences on perceptions of and motivation to participate in study abroad programming (Booker, 2001; Miller, 2004; Peterson, 2003). However, the message exchanges within students' social interactions are largely missing from research concerned with study abroad participation. Social network messages influenced both perceptions of and motivations to participate in study abroad for learners in this study. Participants who never thought about studying abroad, because of real or perceived monetary restrictions, reported accessing social networks as a source of information.

This research also illuminates a new side to study abroad participation with reference to perception and motivation in education. Firstly, research presented here investigates motivation and perception as two separate entities. However, through an analysis of these findings, the two concepts appear to have a great deal of interdependence. Data from this study not only reveal perceptions are formed through popular culture, but also perception itself contributes to the desire for students to want to study abroad (motivation). This finding additionally supports the notion that popular culture can be a powerful resource for learners when they make meaning about study abroad. Further, public messages serve as a resource motivating students to engage in a particular study abroad experience based on the type of popular culture they consume. For learners in this study, popular culture showcasing Italian life and peoples/characters was a mediating motivator to encourage participation in this short term study abroad to Italy.

Adult and higher education learners, who believed study abroad was not very accessible and reserved for the wealthy, mentioned popular culture in perception formation. While students did not reference a specific medium or message within popular culture, most noted how frequently their understanding of study abroad came from resources like *MTV's Road Rules*, *The Travel Channel*, *The Discovery Channel* and *The History Channel*, as well as their personal social networks. Findings indicate that although students began with the perception that studying abroad may be too expensive, their social networks provided a personally tailored source of information on possibilities for participation regardless of economic class, and thus, were powerful in motivating students to participate in study abroad.

### **Social Net Worth of the Social Network**

Further, social network support influenced both perception and motivation. Social networks included members from the familial, peer, and institutional (instructors, faculty or staff at the university) networks. Each of these resources served as a medium of social interaction that contributed to the students' motivation to participate in a study abroad program. Participants acknowledged they were more motivated to study abroad once they knew about and had access to interactions with someone who had experienced it first-hand. Students who lack peers, family members and instructors to encourage or offer similar stories and experiences may miss out on vital resources of social and cultural capital regarding study abroad.

Literature advocating social network benefits in higher education suggests social support strategies that sustain the preparation and success of all students are critical to improving academic

achievement, raising expectations, and increasing college-going rates of underserved students” (Pathwaystocollege.net, 2012, p. 1). Underscoring the importance of various peer networks may encourage participation for students who do not perceive studying abroad as accessible or conceivable. Despite scholarships reserved for study abroad participation, learners are sometimes unaware and uninformed about financial support that is available to them. Our research reveals that encouragement and motivation from learners’ social networks may offer resources about information that could otherwise be overlooked. Oftentimes students are encouraged to consult an institutionally centralized office or center (i.e. office of international programs, study abroad office, centers for learning abroad, departments in charge of the course abroad) to learn more about any given study abroad course or scholarship opportunity. However, changing the emphasis from institutional formal offices to informal conversations within social networks could breakdown surface perceptions and initial obstacles a learner is likely to encounter. Stressing the importance of informal resources that learner should access, like conversations with peers, family members, and faculty who have first-hand knowledge about a particular course abroad/program, may also encourage study abroad participation across historically underrepresented students who may have typically dismissed it as an option.

### **Popular Culture as Pedagogy**

Participants indicated that travelling abroad and studying abroad are synonymous in offering opportunities to see notable destinations and tour popular sites with friends to enjoy novel and exciting experiences. Shows like *MTV’s Road Rules*, *The Travel Channel*, *The Discovery Channel* and *The History Channel* were resources participants credited when offering general impressions about studying abroad. Nearly 75% of the participants suggested perception formation was, in part, influenced by popular culture (television, movie, travel books, or internet, or other mass media outlets). Further, specific places and spaces where students’ knowledge about study abroad is constructed were identified using specific television networks and television shows. These connections occurred in different ways for both males and females indicating messages about Italian culture, and study abroad in general, may be internalized uniquely, and thus, impact perceptions and motivations in individual ways. Tisdell and Thompson (2007) explain:

Whether or not we consciously think about it, the entertainment media teach us something about ourselves as we map new meaning onto our own experience based on what we see; it also ‘teaches’ us a lot about ‘others’, often in unconscious ways. (p. 1)

Likewise, this study’s findings indicate today’s entertainment media can teach viewers about places and peoples unknown, while it also offers pathways of motivation for higher education students to learn more about study abroad programs and perhaps perceive themselves as international students.

Data yielded in this study lend strength to Tisdell and Thompson’s (2007) suggestions in that students personally negotiated their study abroad experience based on themes, stories, and representations from popular culture. Because the data reveal an interconnection between perceptions/motivations of study abroad and popular culture, it also becomes important to note that these perceptions and motivations could be subject to change over time as popular culture messages change. This is especially paramount when considering the fact that primarily females study abroad (Dolby, 2004). In our research, many of the females identified personally with some part of the romantic fairytale plot lines evident in popular culture about Italy, which provided them at least partial impetus, both in perception and motivation, to enroll in their study abroad programs. Personal identifications with characters and story within popular culture, while present in both males and females, emerged differently, however. The males in the current study identified with the adventure storylines or single characters that helped shape their perceptions of the country, but they did not designate how these identifications influenced their motivations to study abroad specifically.

### **Implications for Practice**

Perception formation and influence of perceptions on participation in study abroad programs are largely devalued and underestimated in the research literature. The power of perception plays a primary function in meaning made about study abroad for AHE learners. Responding to lower participation rates across the US means developing strategies and tactics that address this issue. The current study proposes interconnections between perceptions of and motivations to study abroad with popular culture and a diverse set of learners' social networks with peers, family, and the institution. Two suggestions are offered to provide academic institutions, proponents, and facilitators of study abroad programs strategies to encourage equitable participation for AHE learners.

First, a refocusing of efforts to encourage study abroad participation that leverages how AHE and minority learners make sense of study abroad is imperative. This research indicates resources influencing student perceptions are accessed within the higher education institution, conversations with peers, and certain popular culture programming. Thus, a synthesized resource creating spaces for dialogue fueled by specific popular culture message(s) could create a forum for discussion where students are able to get practical information about academic credit, costs, logistics, and resources to facilitate participation. For example, universities across the US host biannual, monthly or even weekly 'movie nights.' Rice University's "Starlight Movie Night," for example, advertises free snacks and drinks to encourage socializing and community while showing a film on their outdoor screen (Events at Rice, 2008). At an event of this nature, all three resources of influence (peer networks, institutional networks, and popular culture) come together simultaneously. To be explicit in creating positive perceptions about international education opportunities, popular culture screenings with characters that are identifiable by ALL students (not just Caucasian females) coupled with information and conversation about a specific study abroad program could prove effective in generating interest and motives to study abroad. Popular culture serves as a conductor to the conversation in an already social environment, and being selective about the media that is shown could make all the difference for students who have never considered studying abroad as an option.

Second and more generally, study abroad fairs are commonly used as a tool for creating awareness and advertising about specific study abroad programs. These often do not create a space to 'just talk' about the experience of study abroad. These also can be pressurized with a pitch that is meant to 'sell' the course as a commodity or good rather than an objective discussion about best-fit, goals, academics, costs, and logistics. Capitalizing on strategic marketing and recruitment with specific attention to information and resources students are already accessing, like their own social networks and narratives within popular culture, creates opportunities that are not obligatory and maximizes chances for diverse AHE learners to create positive connections/identifications about participating in study abroad programs. These events could offer prospective participants the opportunity to talk faculty who have studied abroad or facilitated international programs in previous years. As well, event coordinators could provide testimonies/narratives from previous study abroad participants, including those from typically under-represented groups (minority groups, males, community college students, non-traditionally aged students, or students with disabilities) to generate a non-pressurized environment to seek information and confront any negative perceptions that may have deterred participation in the past. Third-party facilitators, universities, and faculty who honorably desire to flip the script to encourage equitable study abroad participation must meet challenges head on. A purposeful and novel re-writing of the stories/narratives/messages that AHE learners encounter can occur only when calculated and meaningful efforts are put forth.

### **Future Research**

While this research identifies some of the explicit messages from the media and social networks, research is warranted in identifying additional messages from popular culture and their collective influence on study abroad participation. Peer, familial, and institutional networks function in dynamic ways and offer a wealth of information, but a comparison among social network messages could also

reveal which specific messages from each of these networks offer the most influence. Further studies are needed to continue to identify the implications of these messages for minority students, adult students, and males who are largely underrepresented in the research.

Minority presence and research context add novelty to previous investigations concerned with study abroad participation, but focus groups comprised of only male participants in one and only females in another may offer future research nuances not possible within the one-on-one semi-structured interview. In order to gauge effectively socially-constructed knowledge, it is often useful to create a space where social interaction is natural and authentic. One-on-one interviews may lack a degree of social interaction and could limit what may be uncovered in the research.

When considering popular culture, media agendas, and the collective influence on perceptions and motivations, the question becomes: who is selling what? A content analysis of recent popular culture movies and television from the inception of thinking about study abroad may also aid in identifying perception formation and ultimate motivations. Analyses may then illuminate what particular messages in popular culture are more influential and what meaning is made from those messages. Not only are content analyses valuable for perception formation in general, but they could also serve as an essential piece in identifying what sorts of learners - (non)traditional, minority, female, or male- identify with which characters and what story lines. Additionally, the same could be argued for social networks. Pinpointing the specific agents within the various social networks (peer, institutional, familial) could reveal who most influences students' motives and ideas about participating in a study abroad experience. Future research should also include programs and participants who choose to study abroad in non-Western cultures to identify the ways in which social networks and popular media influence their perceptions of and motivations to engage in international education programs. Equally important will be studies that investigate the ways in which males and females are influenced/motivated by certain messages within those contexts.

There is still much to uncover about how AHE learners make meaning about and become motivated to study abroad. Socio-cultural learning theory reinforces that meaning made about study abroad is continuously modified and shaped based on an individual's social interactions with others and popular culture. Thus, meaning about study abroad participation will always be subject to change and evolve over time for the learner. In order to meet challenges in continually low participation rates across AHE in the US, more individual, qualitative, learner-centered approaches should be incorporated into the seminal literature related to study abroad participation. We believe that research that focuses on socially-constructed perceptions of and motivations to study abroad in more breadth and depth holds promise to continue to flip the script and transform participation rates for AHE learners in the US.

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