

The Impacts of Relationships on The Mental Well-Being of Unaccompanied Study Abroad High School Students

I. Introduction

The phenomenon of studying abroad has become increasingly widespread, with international student mobility predicted to reach 8 million annually by 2025 (OECD). Yet, this number only accounts for students pursuing higher education and lacks information about younger students such as high schoolers. Amid the increase of globalization and competition, it has become commonplace for families to send their children abroad at progressively younger ages. According to the Institute of International Education, the number of international students in the United States, the most popular destination for study abroad, pursuing high school diplomas increased by 22% from 2013 to 2016.

The decision to study abroad can be informed by a multitude of factors. For one, it presents an opportunity to gain intercultural insights and “the desire amongst youth to engage in such a practice has increased” (Hernandez). This is reflected in the rise of adolescent international students, as noted previously. While some groups view study abroad as an avenue for social and cultural capital, others may not always have the privilege of choice. Competitive education landscapes, in contexts such as South Korea, can often prompt families to send their young children abroad to an environment that can better ensure their children’s academic and future socio-economic success (Kim), hence, portraying the obligatory aspects that may be involved in some study abroad experiences.

Moving to an unfamiliar environment can undoubtedly have impacts on mental well-being. As noted by Poyrazli and Mitchell, 40% of the undergraduate study abroad students they studied reported minimal depression, along with generally lower thresholds for psychological stress; this finding is deeply troubling. Despite the normalization of study abroad amongst younger students

in recent years, much of the existing literature relating to mental well-being focuses on undergraduate or graduate students. The lack of research for younger demographics poses concern, given the heightened vulnerability to mental health issues adolescents face during this developmental period of their lives (World Health Organization).

As a student who studied overseas alone for the last two years of high school, and encountered peers in similar circumstances, my knowledge of these experiences can attest to the profound impacts such experiences can have on mental health. During my first few months of living abroad alone, I felt a strong longing for the home my parents nurtured. I was constantly torn between striving for a better education or staying within the comfort of my support system; a dilemma many young students grapple with but should not have to. This brought about a great deal of stress and anxiety, which only exacerbated my disconsolate state at the time, illustrating the drawbacks study abroad can have on student mental health.

Fortunately, I met students who were in comparable situations, and we were able to establish a sense of community through honest discussions, quality time, and shared advice. Being able to lean on each other during moments of adversity improved my mental well-being. In addition, it enabled me to become more self-aware of my values and behaviors, which I draw upon to navigate obstacles to this day. Though I undoubtedly experienced many struggles while studying abroad, it has taught me so much about myself, other people, and the world around me. Hence, this demonstrates that studying abroad can also have positive mental health impacts.

Based on these lived experiences, I became curious what nuances could exist within this matter. Therefore, I wanted to investigate the mental health experiences of high school students studying abroad alone with an emphasis on the influence of relationships. More specifically, I intend to explore the dual implications relationships can have on students' well-being and how this can ultimately impact their study abroad outcomes. By consolidating first-hand perspectives with

formal academic research, I hope to provide a nuanced understanding about the importance of social interactions in shaping mental health experiences and offer insight into the experiences of high school students who are studying abroad independently. Moreover, with the ever-changing state of our modern world, it is crucial to reassess trends as pertinent as international education to ensure temporal validity.

II. Literature Review

Adolescent Study Abroad and Mental Well-Being

Studying abroad presents a stimulating opportunity for cultural exploration and personal growth. Experiencing such significant changes during adolescence, a fundamental period for development, can have differing effects on the mental well-being of students. Using fifty-three hours of interview recordings with German high school students who studied abroad, Hernandez's findings indicated that students generally reported positive experiences, noting their growth in individual aspects such as openness and self-awareness, as well as socio-cultural competencies (51). This was prominent for students in host countries with contexts that greatly juxtaposed the one in their home country, as they could freely navigate their identity in new ways (52).

In a similar manner, mental well-being seems to be related to professional and academic capacities. According to Alami, informed by interviews with international students studying in the United States from a range of countries, many students found academic relief in their new environment. With less parental pressure and curriculum rigor than back home, students were able to focus on developing their personality and interpersonal skills (80). This contributes to their social network, helping build confidence and support, which are crucial to the mental well-being of adolescents studying abroad.

While this type of novelty can be a beneficial learning experience for some students, others may face more difficulty amidst this process. Through a detailed and systematic literature review, Ulukök and Ufuk found that 44% of foreign students experienced emotional distress, leading to unfavorable impacts on their academic performance (354). Social and academic capability seem to have a reciprocal relationship with the mental well-being of high schoolers studying abroad. Furthermore, the researchers presented a myriad of factors that can impede a student's mental health such as language barriers, cultural differences, or poor eating habits (355-356).

The impact of such adversities on student's mental health is reinforced by Wannebo and Wichstrøm, both who have conducted research within the fields of developmental psychology. Their 2010 study suggested that high school students living separately from their parents are at a higher risk of stress and mental health issues, likely resulting from being "uprooted from the stability of home and friends" (445). Perhaps at times the challenges of a new setting can outweigh the potential well-being benefits that students can derive from it. Presumably, the experience of studying abroad can impose both positive and negative effects on the mental well-being of adolescent students, illustrating its subjectivity and dependence on varying contextual elements.

The Influence of Social Relationships

The social relationships adolescent students create in their host country can have dual impacts on their mental health. This is apparent in Jon et al., which suggested that the nationalities of peers can influence a student's success of integration in their new environment. Through analyzing surveys and qualitative interviews, the researchers indicated that undergraduate students who were more willing to establish relationships with locals were more likely to report positive outcomes of studying abroad, in contrast to those who exclusively maintain relationships with students from the same country as them. It seems that students with more local relationships are

more likely to have a support network that allows them to gain socio-cultural insights about their host country. As a result, improving other aspects of their time abroad and producing positive experiences (148).

Although different peer relationships can contribute to a student's integration, some students express their struggles of being able to form any at all. User Sage_777107 on the online subreddit forum entitled r/studyAbroad– a community where members can post content about a specific topic– shared their social difficulties studying abroad in Taiwan: “Everyday I post in class/school group chats asking if anyone wants to grab dinner or go sightseeing. It's rare that I even get a “no” response–just silence.” As the user depicts the coldness from their peers, they add on by sharing “the sadness is just crushing.” This illustrates that the absence of social relationships can be harmful to one's mental health as there is a lack of emotional support to cushion the changes of an unfamiliar environment. Moreover, it conveys the challenges of social integration, even when students are motivated and attempt to initiate bonds. Consequently, students can be more vulnerable to isolation, which can negatively influence their mental health.

The Role of Language in Socialization

Being in a new country invites new ways students must interact with their surrounding socio-cultural environment. Alami's research illustrates that language can be integral to fostering positive study abroad experiences. European teenage students who were developing English as a second language during their study abroad viewed it as a “tool for social integration and social survival” (141). Alami found that language can be used as a medium for students to gain cultural insights, helping them assimilate and build support systems to cope with acculturative stress (47). Moreover, all students reported that they had become more outgoing, which presumably aided in the processes of forming connections with classmates and teachers (134). This suggests that

language immersion can influence mental well-being in relation to socialization and the ability to find reliable communities.

With that said, language acquisition is easier in theory than in practice. Depending on students' linguistic abilities or the difficulty of the foreign language, language can become a risk factor for negative mental health experiences. In Ulukök and Ufuk's research, they detail that even with prior knowledge of the language, students are not accustomed to local slang, which can prompt exclusion and prevent them from genuinely engaging in local cultural practices. Body language can also influence interactions negatively if students' actions do not meet norms, leading to misunderstandings (355). It seems that language can enhance social and mental experiences during study abroad, but it can be difficult for students to capture the cultural insights of language.

III. Methodology

While the literature review offered a solid understanding of the interplay between mental health and relationships, I sought to explore more intimate, first-hand accounts of high schoolers studying abroad alone. Such perspectives are critical to obtaining a holistic picture given the subjective nature of mental health. Thus, I hoped to learn about high school students' genuine experiences and how they internally perceived them. To achieve this, I conducted an analysis through YouTube, an online video platform where creators can share their personal experiences. To begin, I deconstructed the different elements of my research question by identifying key phrases to guide my search such as *high school abroad alone* and *exchange program mental health*. These phrases were selected to address three main components of study abroad experiences: adolescent students, their relationships, and impacts on their mental well-being. I wanted to gain insight from online creators as it would allow access to perspectives from people from all over the world. Since the types of students participating in study abroad come from a range of backgrounds, it was

pivotal to recognize their perspectives and gather videos from creators with a diverse set of circumstances. To promote representation, I reviewed the channel of each YouTuber by looking at their creator description section and focusing on video titles related to their study abroad experience. Then, I ensured my selection of videos included people from a minimum of two different continental regions.

YouTube was intentionally chosen as much of the site consists of long-form content. Hence, the videos would be more likely to provide sufficient information about students' contexts and sentiments, in comparison to short-form content such as Tik Tok. To address the target demographic of my research, I selected videos that were published by high school students or those within the adolescent age range. Furthermore, I limited my search scope to videos published no more than three years ago to observe extant perspectives on study abroad. I maintained objectivity by using an incognito tab on Google Chrome to open YouTube, which prevented my personal algorithm from being factored into the search results.

I watched a range of videos over three days. Then, I reflected on how informative each video was in addressing my research question by writing down three key words for each and choosing the most relevant ones. I rewatched the selected videos and took notes, which included both summaries and direct quotations. The following are the selected titles for my analysis:

- **Carolina Ruby** - *“what nobody tells you about study abroad (the hard parts)*
- **Laura Langheinrich** - *“The Truth: What NO ONE tells you about Study Abroad 🥺❤️
(Homesickness, Loneliness & Mental Health)”*
- **Hannah Kosoff** - *“Should You Study Abroad In High School // Pros and Cons”*
- **Lucas Kult-Banout, interviewing exchange friend Ebube** - *“What It's Like Studying Abroad in America - High School Vlog”*

Table 1: Participant Profiles

YouTube Creator	Home Country	Host Country	Education Level	Duration Abroad
Carolina Ruby	United States	Germany	High School	1 year
Laura Langheinrich	Germany	Scotland	Undergraduate	1 year
Hannah Kosoff	United States	France	High School	1 year
Lucas Kult-Banout (Ebube)	Nigeria	United States	High School	1 year

The notes I took were utilized to identify key ideas and categorize the videos into themes. The themes related to different relationship factors: *Fear of Missing Out at Home*, *Forming Friendships in Host Country*, *Language as a Risk Factor*, and *Students' Relationship with Themselves*. Having these themes helped offer structure and meaning to the findings.

IV. Results

Fear of Missing Out back Home

Across all the videos, the relationships students maintained back in their home countries were discussed as a defining factor to their mental well-being during their time abroad. Creators shared their personal hardships with homesickness and feeling disconnected. *Carolina* remarked that the beginning of her exchange provided a necessary escape from her home environment, separate from her family. Yet, as the initial excitement dwindled and family holidays approached, she noted whenever she saw pictures of “friends and family back home, [she] just breaks down crying.” *Carolina* ended up shortening her program, and reflected that back home in the States, she “has friends and family who [she] knows will support [her] no matter what.” *Laura's* experience has similar characteristics but takes on a more nuanced view. Though she was originally keen on getting out of her small hometown, she said: “The more I go abroad, the more

homesick I get.” However, she instills optimism by adding it has helped her appreciate her family more and that it is a “beautiful thing to be homesick.”

These findings illustrate the varying impacts of being far from home can impose on students’ mental health. This is especially pertinent when students are facing difficulties with integration. The lack of a stable support system can be detrimental in times of need as it could exacerbate feelings of loneliness and self-doubt. As a result, it places mental pressure on the student without an effective way to cope. Conversely, it can have a positive impact as it can make students more considerate about their pre-existing relationships. This newfound value could strengthen their support system and help improve their mental state, even from a distance.

Forming Friendships in Host Country

Another theme that was prominent in the research was the importance of different types of friendships in impacting mental health. *Laura* describes the differences between her relationships at home versus abroad. She is normally physically affectionate, but this kind of amity can be hard to replicate abroad depending on the environment and norms. She also cautions viewers about interacting with toxic individuals: “pick your friends wisely.” On the contrary, *Ebube* felt as though he encountered no difficulties in making American friends, stating that it was “pretty easy because I’m kind of like friendly and I talk a lot.” His involvement in extracurriculars such as the school’s international club and sports helped him engage with friends, making it his favorite part of the study abroad experience. Moreover, *Hannah* shared that despite the challenges in maintaining foreign friendships, it has enabled her to be “more ambitious” and “fearless when it comes to meeting more people around the world.”

Seemingly, the quality and context of friendships formed abroad heavily influence students’ mental health outcomes. While some thrive in a socially dynamic environment, others

can struggle to establish meaningful connections, which can heighten feelings of isolation. Proactive and inclusive social environments, which can be fostered through community-bonding activities or buddy systems, are crucial to instilling a sense of belonging. Such settings support students' mental health, underscoring the need for increased prioritization.

Language as a Risk Factor

Language is a crucial factor in the integration process for study abroad students, serving as a gateway for socio-cultural insights about the host country. *Carolina* candidly tells viewers that “friends are really hard... the language barrier has made it more difficult because people get bored of trying to talk to you.” She ultimately always feels like “the odd one out” since she “can’t really add much to conversation.” While *Hannah* met similar circumstances, she shares that such challenges have only forced her to develop new communication skills as she has learnt “how to have a fun time with limited conversation.” Promisingly, she saw the language barrier as an opportunity for learning and cultural immersion.

The dual nature of language barriers stresses the principal role they have in the mental health of study abroad students. The extent to which language is a risk or protective factor appears to be based on personal styles in friendship formation. Though they can amplify sentiments of alienation amongst relationships, they can also push students to develop mental resilience and strategies for interpersonal connection. By transcending linguistic boundaries, students can form supportive relationships rooted in empathy and sincerity, promoting an improved state of mind.

Students' Relationship with Themselves

Although human connection is fundamental to shaping the mental experiences of students studying abroad, it is also important to consider their self-relationship. Studying abroad alone entails a greater number of responsibilities, compared to high schoolers who live with their parents.

This additional obligation can often be mentally taxing and become worsened by the lack of familial presence. Therefore, *Laura* advises students to “be graceful with [themselves]” and to “not feel bad if you have bad days.” However, this mindset is more difficult to adopt than it appears. *Carolina* recalled her hardships with getting involved in the classroom and extracurriculars, which juxtaposed her lifestyle back home where she was an athlete and academically competitive student. Her lack of routine led to a “constant feeling of loneliness and hopelessness” as she struggled with self-care. She also developed disordered eating habits as a coping strategy.

As suggested by the direct experiences of both students, nurturing a compassionate relationship with oneself is essential during the study abroad period. Indeed, the nature of this relationship can influence their external interactions and subsequently, their mental well-being. Students who may not be mentally prepared to navigate time alone, routine disruption, or identity changes seem to be particularly vulnerable to poor mental health. The findings make it clear that students must practice self-compassion as they confront shifts in their self-concept and face challenges in their foreign environment.

V. Discussion and Implications

The results from the social media analysis reveal the duality of relationships in influencing the mental health experiences of high school students who study abroad. It reaffirms existing research about the subjective nature of mental health and how students internalize their experiences differently. Factors such as cultural differences in friendship norms or language fluency were found to be common with literature. For instance, the juxtaposition between *Carolina*'s and *Hannah*'s perceptions about language speaks to Ulukök and Ufuk's and Alami's research on language socialization. While language is key to building social relationships that support mental well-being, students who lack fluency may struggle to integrate into everyday settings, increasing

their risk for mental health issues. Yet, this duality presents opportunities for growth regarding interpersonal relationships and awareness as it can promote more authentic exchanges. It seems that such socio-cultural elements remain challenges that high school students inevitably face during their time studying abroad. However, as our world becomes more globalized, it appears that both students and locals are becoming more open to international relationships, employing strategies that go beyond mere language or cultural divisions.

Additionally, the findings provided insights into the impact that relationships back home can have on the mental health of students abroad. Although students can experience feelings of homesickness and instability, this hardship can encourage a deeper appreciation for their home relationships and help strengthen such support systems, which is a protective factor for mental health. Another observation from the research highlights the role of students' relationship with themselves, adding a unique dimension to the understanding of study abroad mental health that has not been widely explored thus far. Amidst unfamiliar and challenging experiences, it seems that nurturing a healthy self-relationship and self-concept is crucial for upholding mental health.

Limitations of this research concern the diversity of the creators whose videos were selected. Even though the videos offered perspectives from various countries, they were primarily Western-centric, focusing on North American and European experiences. This raises concerns about the representation of experiences from those from other backgrounds, namely Asian students. According to the United States Census Bureau, roughly 70% of the international student population come from Asian countries. Given this statistic, it would have been greatly beneficial to have personal accounts from this demographic. However, there was a lack of videos from Asian YouTubers that met the requirements. Hence, further research should strive to incorporate more culturally diverse perspectives, possibly seeking them out on other platforms. Another informative area of research could be the interlink between mental and physical well-being since disordered

eating was revealed as a consequence to poor mental health in the research. Further investigation would enhance our knowledge of how mental health contributes to a holistic approach to the well-being of students.

In addition, caution should be taken to avoid generalizing these experiences. The study abroad journey is inherently personal and influenced by numerous factors. Even amongst students from the same country, the mental health impacts they experience can vary greatly.

The significance of these findings helps provide a more nuanced understanding about students' mental health, highlighting the impact that relationships have in fostering positive or negative outcomes. By expanding upon the current literature, this offers a basis to help navigate improved frameworks and strategies for the mental well-being of high school students studying abroad alone, which is especially crucial during this formative period of their lives.

VI. Conclusion

Ultimately, it is pivotal that we recognize the mental health experiences of high school students studying abroad alone. Exploring the role of relationships in this context has provided a deeper perspective of the risk and protective factors. Research has highlighted the potential harmful impacts it can inflict, necessitating a greater awareness of mental health challenges among students, families, and educational coordinators. Along with knowledge of the positive impacts of relationships, this will allow for effective preventative and coping measures. Based on the results, I propose that more support structures are implemented, including buddy-systems in host countries to help students integrate socio-culturally and strategies to build stronger relationships with oneself, family members, and friends prior to travelling abroad.

While studying abroad is indeed an unforgettable experience, we must ensure that high school students can emerge from it with a positive outlook. Having a nuanced understanding of

student mental health and relationships is vital to creating empathetic environments that support their pursuit for opportunities in education and connection, without compromising well-being. Such spaces not only promote diversity and global awareness but also empower students to truly thrive. To make this a reality, we must ensure that mental well-being is treated as a priority of the high school study abroad experience, rather than an afterthought.

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