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Perspectives and Motives Involved in Study Abroad: COVID, Race, and SES

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The pandemic has impacted every aspect of academic life, including study abroad (SA), with 93% of programs canceled worldwide in 2020 (IIE, 2020). Long lasting consequences for SA are expected (Dietrich, 2020): a reduction in participation rates, an increase in online SA, and changes both in the nature and the importance of the factors that students consider for SA, with a potential new emphasis on health and personal safety. Our mixed-methods study relies on surveys and interviews to investigate Covid's impact on students' notions of the nature of SA as well as the factors guiding their choices. The MSA (Motivation to SA questionnaire: Anderson & Lawton, 2015) was adopted, adding two new factors: health and language learning. Two hundred twenty-nine participants were recruited during 2021; they belong in one of three categories: (a) students whose SA plans were canceled due to the pandemic, (b) students planning to SA, and (c) students who had not and will not participate in SA. Results indicate that the original MSA factors remain unaltered, that language development is an important motivation to participate, and that health-related factors rank high, especially for minority and low-income students for whom it is almost the number one factor, suggesting the possibility that participation rates for members of these groups are further reduced. Additionally, interview data reveal that for students, SA programs are defined by an immersive academic experience in another country. However, participants value online collaborations with students and faculty at international institutions when integrated in their on-campus coursework.

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad (SA) programs are but one of the many aspects of personal and academic life disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, 93% of SA programs planned for the summer of 2020 were canceled (IIE, 2020). Two years later, the appearance of new variants raised the specter of long-lasting effects for SA programs (e.g., Dietrich, 2020; Mercado, 2020). Two potential direct consequences are the decrease in participation rates (Bilecen, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Mok et al., 2020) and the possible removal of SA as a central part of undergraduate students' academic experience (Fischer, 2021a; Helms, 2020; Leask & Green, 2020; Mercado, 2020). Of interest to us is a possible change in the factors that make students want to participate in SA, with potential priority given to health and personal safety reasons (Fischer, 2021a; Mok et al., 2020). As

in Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) and Dietrich (2020), this is a crucial period for self-examination of the current functioning and organization, as well as the future of SA programs.

Following the project initiated in Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022), our objective in this paper is to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the factors that U.S. undergraduate students consider when deciding to participate, or not, in a SA experience. In addition, we also analyze their views on new forms of SA created in response to the pandemic. In Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022), undergraduate students who had participated in SA prior to the pandemic showed no differences in behavior compared to participants in Anderson and Lawton's study (2015), except that health-related factors were ranked in second place. In this article, we examine the decision-making process of students who had never participated in a SA program prior to the study. The information summarized here should help university administrators, educators, and policy makers to anticipate and address future problems and needs related to SA programs worldwide (Austin & Shen, 2016; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Li et al., 2013; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Stroud, 2010), as Mok et al. (2020, p. 9) affirm that "the COVID-19 pandemic has re-ordered the factors that students are considering to study abroad."

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of academic life, including SA, as shown by the sudden interruption of close to 100% of SA programs and the impact on the mental health of those students that were abroad at the onset of the pandemic (Koo, 2022; Pedersen et al., 2021). The future of participation rates remains a mystery. On one hand, some scholars (e.g., Fischer, 2021a, 2021b; Mercado, 2020; QS, 2020) defend that SA is still a central part of the academic experience and that students are still willing to participate in SA during their undergraduate studies; as an example, the Georgetown@Barcelona summer program received the highest number of applications ever for the summer of 2022. On the other hand, many scholars predict an important reduction in SA participation rates (e.g., Dennis, 2020; Mok et al., 2020), as students may prioritize their on-campus experience after several semesters of online classes. For instance, 84% of participants in Mok et al. (2020) were not interested in participating in SA after the pandemic. A factor to consider is the new and possibly detrimental financial situation that the pandemic may have created for students (Fischer, 2021b).

Previous studies have identified numerous factors that students consider during their decision-making process, many of which differ depending on the destination they are considering (Gaižauskaitė et al., 2021). One of the main groups of factors relates to education as a whole, specifically, the host institution's prestige. Participants in Cebolla-Boado et al. (2018) and Eder et al. (2010), indicated prestige was one of the most important details participants considered when choosing their SA destination. Similarly, the program quality is an important motivation for students to participate in SA (Austin & Shen, 2016; Chao et al., 2017). Students also favorably compare the professional development and intellectual growth that they experience during SA versus their own institution (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Finally, second language (L2) development is also a driving force (e.g., Allen, 2010; Austin & Shen, 2016; Basterretxea Santiso & Sanz, 2022; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Eder et al., 2010), as it is often linked to the possibility of accelerating progress towards a language major or minor (Allen, 2010; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). Other scholars defend that not all U.S. undergraduate students participate in SA to enhance their language skills, or at least not 'really' (e.g., DeKeyser, 2014; Shively, 2018).

A second cluster of factors considered is the international cultural and social experiences that they gain. Allen (2010) and Stroud (2010) comment that program participants are willing to get to know societies and cultures besides their own. Similarly, participants are interested in traveling abroad, often alone for the first time, and visiting tourist attractions and places about which they may have heard or read (DeKeyser, 2014; de Jong et al., 2010; Gaižauskaitė et al., 2021). Gaining cultural and social experiences leads to another important factor identified in the literature: students' own personal growth (e.g., Anderson et al., 2015; Gaižauskaitė et al., 2021; Oliveira & Soares, 2016).

The literature has identified other reasons encouraging or preventing students from participating in SA programs: parental support (e.g., Austin & Shen, 2016), students' (or their family's) financial situation, program costs or scholarship availability (de Jong et al., 2010; Oliveira & Soares, 2016), degree of difficulty to obtain a visa (Eder et al., 2010), motivation to live and work in a foreign country (Allen, 2010; Anderson et al., 2015), as well as students' own personality, psychological situation, and other individual differences (Albert et al., 2023; Li et al., 2013: Mercado, 2020).

With the aim of systematically analyzing the main factors that guide students to participate in different SA programs, Anderson and Lawton (2015) developed a questionnaire called *Motivation to Study Abroad* (MSA). The MSA consists of a list of 53 factors driving SA participation identified in previous publications and an open-ended questionnaire that they administered at a U.S. private university. The original 53 reasons that were believed to influence SA participation rates were ordered in importance using a five-point Likert-scale completed by 120 participants. After eliminating 37 factors, the remaining were presented again using the same Likert-scale to 173 participants. The authors concluded that there are four main groups of factors (formed by 23 statements) that influence undergraduates' decision-making process for SA: world enlightenment, personal growth, career development, and entertainment (Anderson & Lawton, 2015). Among these four groups of factors, world enlightenment is the most important group, followed by personal growth, career development and finally, entertainment. These results were replicated by Anderson et al. (2015).

That was the situation prior to the onset of the pandemic. However, as mentioned earlier, recent publications have proposed new factors associated with the pandemic that may impact SA participation rates: personal safety, becoming ill during the program, infecting others with COVID-19 during their transit or when returning home, travel insurance coverage, and quality of health care in the destination country (Amoah & Mok, 2020). Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) designed an empirical study to test those observations. The researchers compare responses to the MSA questionnaire in the original Anderson and Lawton's (2015) study with responses to the same questionnaire collected during the pandemic from students who had already participated in SA prior to March 2020. Based on their results, Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) conclude that the relative importance of the factors considered by students remains the same despite the pandemic and the seven-year lapse between Anderson and Lawton's (2015) and their own study. The only exception, an increased importance of career development factors, they attribute to the timing of the data collection. Factors related to world enlightenment still rank first and entertainment factors still rank last. Importantly, Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) introduced health-related factors into their questionnaire; results show that this group of factors comes second in importance. The authors interpret these results as showing that students still consider SA a central academic experience that contributes both to their personal and their academic development. Health-related considerations, however, would weigh heavily on their decision to participate in a SA program. Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) also conducted interviews with a subgroup of participants to explore their perceptions of newly created virtual SA programs (Bista et al., 2022), a temporary

solution which a number of institutions implemented during the pandemic. Their participants clearly state that both immersion and a stay abroad are central parts of SA programs; for them, SA exclusively pertains to programs that are held in person in a different country.

Literature reviewed in this section references student decision-making prior to the onset of the pandemic. Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) explore the impact of the pandemic on decision-making by comparing data collected prior to 2015 and data collected in 2021 from students with experience in SA program(s). In contrast, the current study provides answers to the original research questions with responses from students who have never participated in SA. Specifically, we want to investigate whether the experiences brought about by the pandemic have changed undergraduate students' decision-making process for SA. A secondary goal of the study is to explore students' perceptions of some creative responses to the pandemic, including virtual SA programs. Although scholars such as Upson and Bergiel (2022) have compared short-term SA programs with virtual SA programs including a list of benefits (e.g., cost, risk, flexibility, and inclusion), and disadvantages (e.g., lack of travel and limited cultural exposure), to our knowledge, no study other than Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022) has explored university students' notions on newly created virtual SA programs.

In order to answer our first research question, we ran quantitative comparisons of responses to the MSA prior to and during the pandemic, with special attention to health-related factors. For the second research question, we conducted qualitative analysis of the interview data with special focus on virtual SA programs.

METHODOLOGY

Between March and October 2021, 229 participants were recruited from institutions of higher education across the U.S. through emails to colleagues, distribution lists, the university's Office of Global Education, and messages on Facebook groups. Literature suggests that undergraduate and graduate students differ in the number and the relative weight of factors guiding their decision process (Lee, 2017; Mok et al., 2020); we decided to focus on the first as they are the largest population of participants in SA programs. Originally, any college or university student was accepted as part of the sample. Subsequently, a number of criteria were applied: only participants who had completed the entire survey, were not international students, and had not participated in a SA program prior to 2021 were included. Also, as only a small fraction of students in public institutions had responded to the call for participation, we limited the sample to students enrolled in private institutions. The final sample is formed by 173 participants that belong in three different groups: (Group a, n=77) students whose plans were canceled due to the pandemic, (Group b, n=58) students who had committed to a SA program at the time of their participation in this study, and (Group c, n=38) students who had not and will not participate in SA as part of their college experience. Table 1 includes information on the participants' background.

Based on feedback received on Basterretxea and Sanz (2022), we included social variables in the project, specifically race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES), as minority and economically disadvantaged students participate in SA programs at much lower rates (Fischer, 2021a) and for whom the pandemic has resulted in much worsened economic situations (Fischer, 2021b). Participants self-identified as belonging to a racial group; SES was operationalized as Pell Grant recipient/non-recipient (Pell Grants are subsidies for low-income undergraduate students in the U.S.). Of the 173 participants, 57 were BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), and 116 were White; 143 were non-Pell recipients and 30

were Pell recipients, of which almost half, 13, were BIPOC. On average across groups, 5.2% of participants were language majors and 17.34% were language minors.

Table 1
Participants' Background Information

Gender		Race - Ethnicity		L1		Heritage speaker		Federal Pell Grant	
Feminine	125	Asian	22	English	148	Yes	26	Yes	30
Masculine	47	Black - African American	7	Other	7	No	147	No	143
Nonbinary	1	Hispanic - Latinx	4	Native bilinguals	18				
		White	116						
		More than one	21						
		NA	3						
Total	173	Total	173	Total	173	Total	173	Total	173

The study reported here is part of a larger project that follows a similar design as that in Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz (2022). It is a mixed methods design that relies on questionnaires and interviews to elicit data. The project adopts the MSA questionnaire by Anderson and Lawton (2015) to discover the principal factors that motivate students to participate in SA programs. This questionnaire is composed of 23 items grouped in four main factors found to affect SA participation rates: (i) world enlightenment, (ii) personal growth, (iii) career development, and (iv) entertainment. The MSA prompts participants to respond on a five-point Likert-scale to the factors that potentially impact their decision to SA. Since our objective was to examine the pandemic's consequences on participants' decision-making process, we added a fifth group of seven items related to health factors to the original MSA. In addition, as scholars (e.g., Allen, 2010; Austin & Shen, 2016; Eder et al., 2010; Gaižauskaitė et al., 2021; Goldstein & Kim, 2006) have argued that L2 development may also be valued by undergraduate students considering a SA program, we added four statements on language development to the original MSA questionnaire. The new statements were added and randomized; the final questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics. For Group a, two versions of the questionnaire were created which participants completed once in reference to pre-pandemic decisions and once in reference to pandemic times; Group b (participants who were planning for SA) and Group c (participants with no plans to SA) completed the questionnaire once. Data was gathered between March and October of 2021. Descriptive statistics are included below with their respective figures.

Analyses were conducted on responses to the modified MSA questionnaires from all three groups. Paired *t*-tests were conducted on Group a's scores from both questionnaires to observe any potential differences between decisions made pre- and post-pandemic. To explore the role of race/ethnicity in SA participation, linear regressions with random effects were conducted for each factor group. Participants who chose (NA) and those who identified themselves as Hispanic/Latinx were excluded from the analysis because the number did not reach the minimum (five) necessary (Silva-Corvalán & Enrique-Arias, 2017). To investigate the effect of SES on decisions to participate in SA, independent sample *t*-tests were conducted

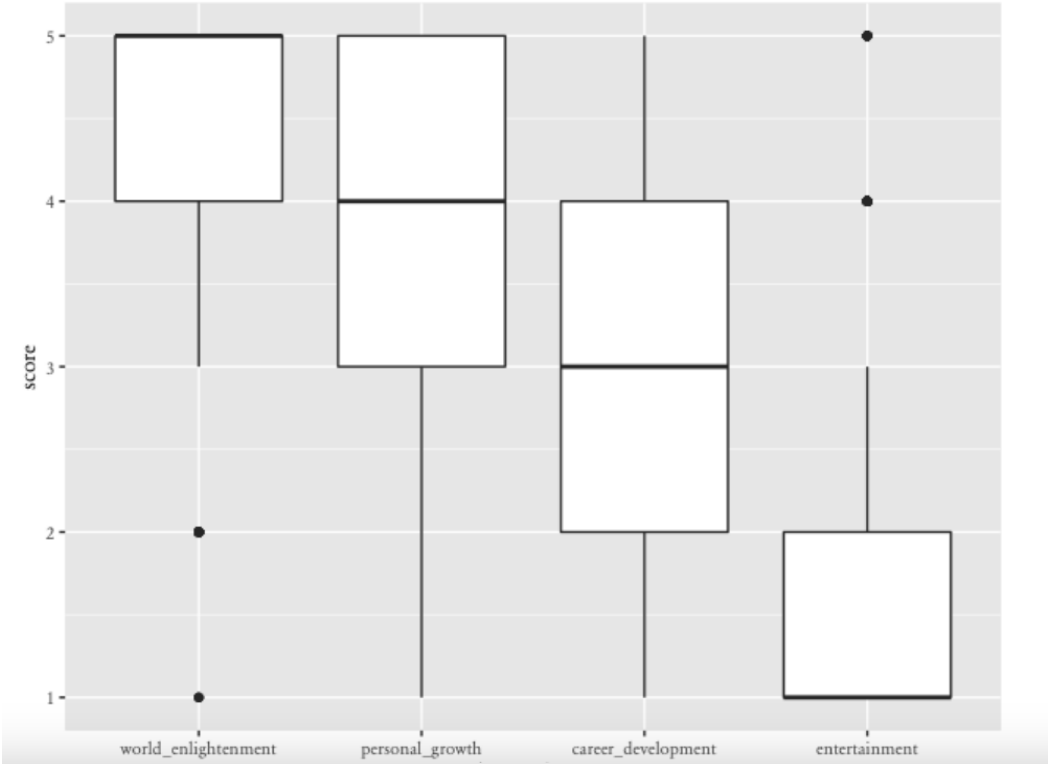
on responses from Pell Grant recipients vs. non-Pell Grant recipients. As the second group was disproportionately larger (see Table 1), 30 non-recipients were randomly selected in *R*.

Finally, 20 participants volunteered to participate in a 15-minute online interview with one of the researchers. These interviews were designed to elicit participants' perspectives on aspects of SA related to the pandemic, including loss of personal and academic experiences and the implementation of virtual SA programs. Participants were read a prompt, a description of online SA programs that emphasized comparable outcomes from immersive and online SA programs taken from a college webpage. These interviews were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in *NVivo* (using theme nodes) based on the automatic transcriptions generated by *Happy Scribe* and subsequently reviewed and edited.

RESULTS

This section presents a summary of results, with quantitative analyses of responses to the MSA questionnaire, followed by qualitative analysis of the interview data. Figure 1 summarizes the relative-weight of the factors participants in Group a considered when they decided to participate in SA, before their plans were canceled due to the pandemic.

Figure 1
Factors considered by participants with canceled SA plans due to the pandemic

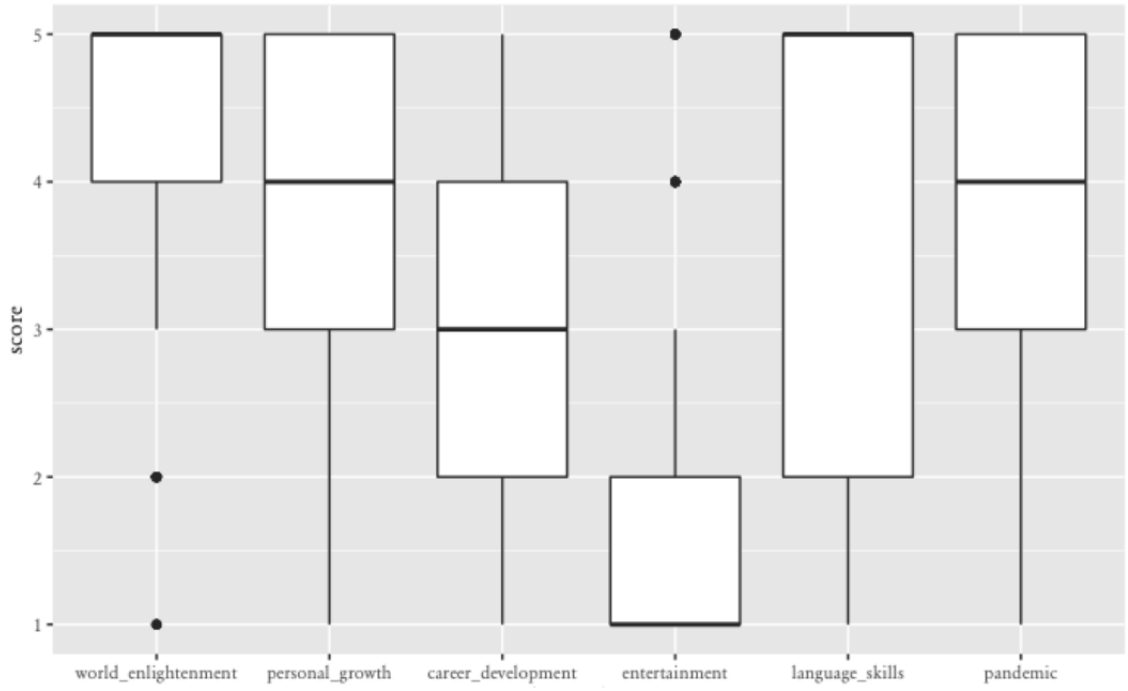


The mean scores in Figure 1 show that World Enlightenment was the most important group of factors for these participants (World Enlightenment mean = 4.29, SD = 0.88, *N* = 77), followed by Personal Growth (Personal Growth mean = 3.59, SD = 1.19, *N* = 77), and

Career Development (Career Development mean = 3.21, SD = 1.22, *N* = 77), with Entertainment ranked lowest (Entertainment mean = 1.76, SD = 1.1, *N* = 77).

Group a was asked to complete the same questionnaire for a second time, but were instead asked about post-pandemic plans for SA. These results are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Factors considered at a future time of application by participants with canceled SA plans



Figures 1 and 2 allow a side by side within group comparison of the importance of factors prior to and during the pandemic: World Enlightenment is ranked highest (World Enlightenment mean = 4.27, SD = 0.91, *N* = 77), closely followed by Personal Growth (Personal Growth mean = 3.61, SD = 1.24, *N* = 77), Career Development (Career Development mean = 3.19, SD = 1.26, *N* = 77), and finally, Entertainment (Entertainment mean = 1.72, SD = 1.26, *N* = 77). The tables show that the order of importance of the original four factors remains the same and replicates Anderson and Lawton's results (2015). The paired *t*-tests yielded no significant differences between Time 1 and Time 2. Table 2 summarizes the results of the paired *t*-tests.

Table 2
Paired t-tests: Factors Prior to and During the Pandemic by "Group a"

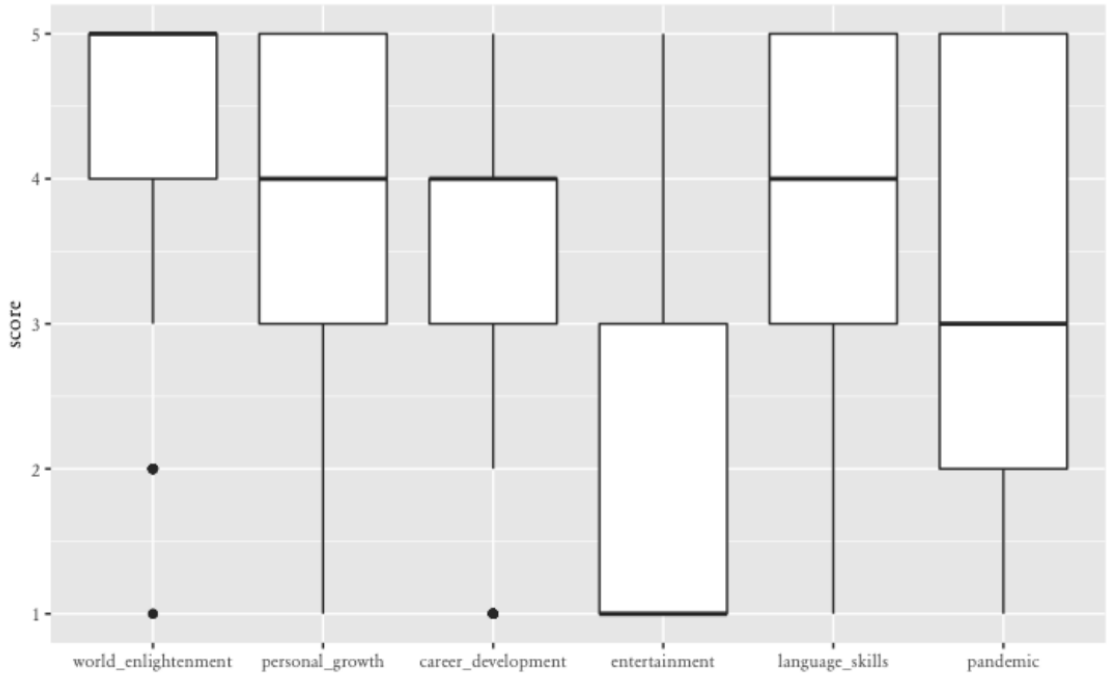
	t	df	*p*	95% CI	Effect size (Cohen's *d*)
World Enlightenment	1.452	76	0.15	-0.070, 0.451	0.02
Personal Growth	0.455	76	0.649	-0,313, 0.500	0.01
Career Development	-0.514	76	0.608	-0.478, 0.282	0.01

Entertainment	-0.273	76	0.785	-0.444, 0.337	0.03

Figure 2 also represents descriptive stats for two new factors, health and language development. Health-related factors are now the second most important group of factors for participants in Group a (Health-related mean = 3.8, SD = 1.25, *N* = 77) nestled between World Enlightenment and Personal Growth. Figure 2 also shows the considerable importance given to Language Skills (Language Skills mean = 3.69, SD = 1.61, *N* = 77), now the fourth most important group of factors, even as the sample includes only 6.49% of language majors and 25.97% of language minors. Note, however, the large size of the box–denoting greater variability in responses.

Figure 3 summarizes descriptive statistics for responses to the new version of the MSA by participants in Group b, who in the Spring of 2021 were hoping to participate in SA programs that summer or fall.

Figure 3
Participants planning to participate in SA post-pandemic



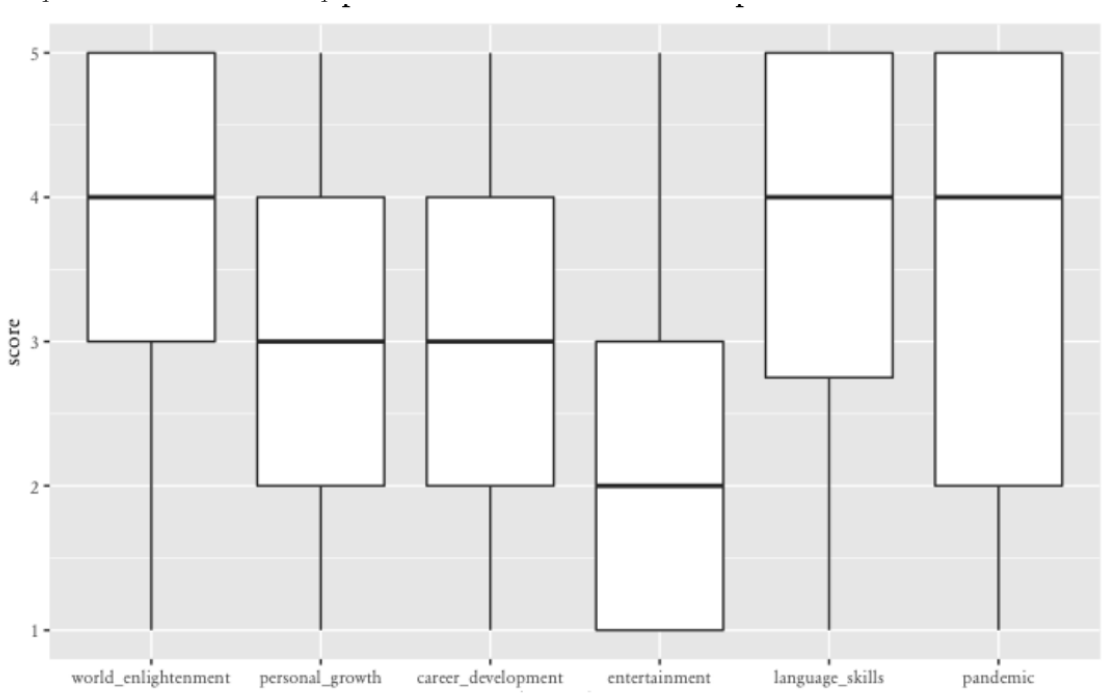
We can see once again that the relative ranking of the factors replicates Anderson and Lawton's 2015 study and are the same as those obtained for Group a, which shows that neither time nor the pandemic have altered the relative weight of factors guiding participants in their decisions to participate in SA. World Enlightenment is the number one factor (World Enlightenment mean = 4.32, SD = 0.84, *N* = 58), then Personal Growth (Personal Growth mean = 3.7, SD = 1.1, *N* = 58), followed by Career Development (Career Development mean = 3.62, SD = 1.04, *N* = 58), and finally Entertainment (Entertainment mean = 2, SD = 1.25, *N* = 58).

Figure 3 also summarizes statistical values for the new factors (Health-related mean = 3.4, SD = 1.29, *N* = 58) (Language Skills mean = 3.81, SD = 1.37, *N* = 58). For participants in Group b, who were planning on joining a SA program later in the year, health-related factors rank fifth compared to second for Group a participants whose plans had been canceled (Figure

2). In fact, for participants in Group b in particular, Language Skills factors (Language Skills mean = 3.81, SD = 1.37, *N* = 58) are considered more important than Health-related factors, even though the percentage of language minors is lower (6.89% were language majors and 15.5% minors). The development of language skills is the second most important group of factors right between World Enlightenment and Personal Growth.

Group c is made up of participants who have not participated in SA and are not planning to do so in the future. Their responses to the questionnaire are summarized in Figure 4 and show a clear contrast with responses from Groups a and b.

Figure 4
Participants not interested in a SA experience



Descriptive statistics plotted in Figure 4 indicate that World Enlightenment (World Enlightenment mean = 3.8, SD = 1.19, *N* = 38) remains the most important factor; however, Career Development (Career Development mean = 3.34, SD = 1.24, *N* = 38) appears as second, with Personal Growth in third place (Personal Growth mean = 3.1, SD = 1.25, *N* = 38). Entertainment factors are last (Entertainment mean = 2.15, SD = 1.23, *N* = 38). As for the new factors, Group c ranks Health-related Factors in third position (Health-related mean = 3.42, SD = 1.49, *N* = 38), and the factors related to languages (Language Skills mean = 3.67, SD = 1.34, *N* = 38) appear second; importantly, only one participant was a language minor, and there were no language majors. Career Development is fourth and Personal Growth fifth.

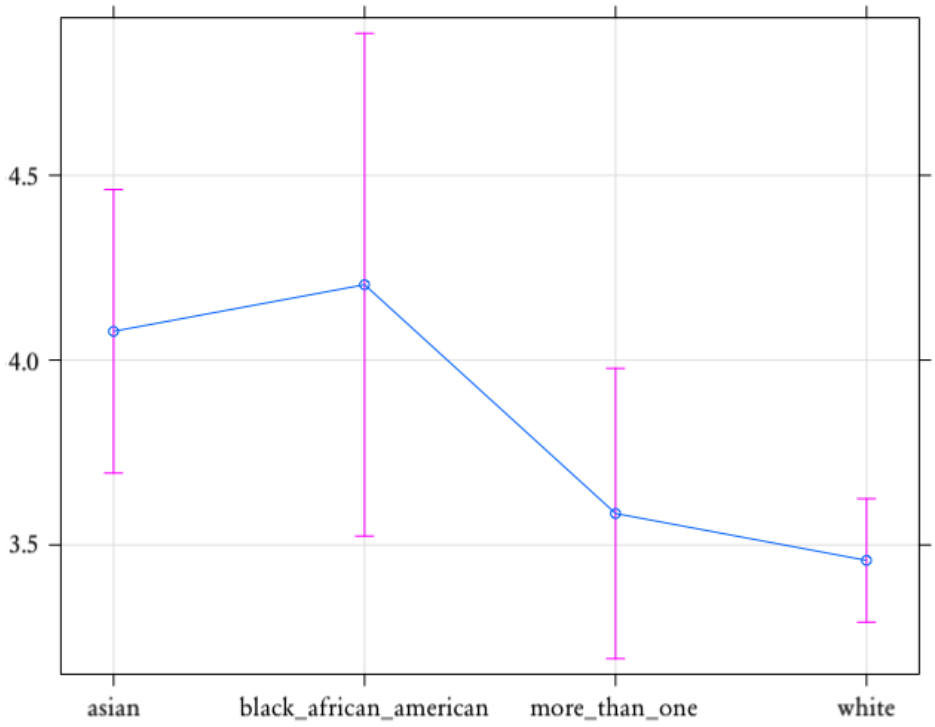
Part of the thrust behind this study was to understand how race and SES affected students' decision to attend a SA program. To that end, we conducted linear regression analysis to examine possible differences based on participants' race/ethnicity. The interaction between the dependent variable (scores in the Likert-scale) with participants' race/ethnicity in each factor group was calculated through *R*'s analysis of variance function. No main effect for race/ethnicity was found for any of the factors except for health-related factors (Table 3); effect size for the main effect of race/ethnicity on health-related factors was higher than

moderate effect ($R^2 = 0.42$), based on Ferguson's (2009) standards. The main effect for health-related groups by participants' race/ethnicity is illustrated in Figure 5.

Table 3
Summary of Linear Regression for Health-related Factors by Race/Ethnicity

	Estimate	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
Intercept	4.0779	0.1955	20.860	< 2e-16
Race/ethnicity = Black/African American	0.1262	0.3979	0.317	0.7516
Race/ethnicity = More than one	-0.4929	0.2797	-1.762	0.0799
Race/ethnicity = White	-0.6198	0.2132	-2.907	0.0041

Figure 5
Estimated Marginal Means for health-factors by race/ethnicity



Health-related factors are particularly important for those participants that self-identify as Black or African-American (African-American mean = 4.2, SD = 0.89, *N* = 7), as well as those that self-identified as Asian (Asian mean = 4.08, SD = 1.01, *N* = 22), but not so much for the other groups (more than one race/ethnicity mean = 3.59, SD = 1.34, *N* = 21; White mean = 3.46, SD = 1.37, *N* = 116).

One of the reasons explaining the overall lack of main effect of race/ethnicity might be attributed to the uneven distribution of participants in each of the categories, so we conducted a second analysis on data from two groups: White vs BIPOC, which included Hispanic/Latinx.

This may not be perceived as an inclusive analysis, but the decision was both numerically driven and justified by the fact that the majority of participants in SA programs are White: only one out of three individuals in SA identify as a member of a racial/ethnic minority (Fischer, 2021a, 2021b). These statistical analyses yielded a main effect for participants' race/ethnicity for career development and Health-related factors. These main effects are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Summary of Linear Regression for Career Development by White vs BIPOC

	Estimate	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
Career development Intercept	3.6630	0.1310	27.96	<2e.16
Career development & Race/ethnicity	0-0.4061	0.1586	-2.56	0.0113
Health-related intercept	3.8651	0.1257	30.744	<2e.16
Health-related & Race/ethnicity	-0.4070	0.1522	-2.674	0.0082

As shown in Figure 6, career development factors appear to be more important for BIPOC participants (BIPOC mean = 3.66, SD = 1.09, N = 54) when compared to the White group (White mean = 3.26, SD = 1.22, N = 116; R^2 = 0.59, close to a strong effect (Ferguson, 2009). Similarly, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 5, Health-related factors are not as important for White participants (White mean = 3.46, SD = 1.37, N = 116) as for BIPOC participants (BIPOC mean = 3.87, SD = 1.2, N = 54; R^2 = 0.41), a moderate effect.

Figure 6
Estimated Marginal Means for career development by race/ethnicity

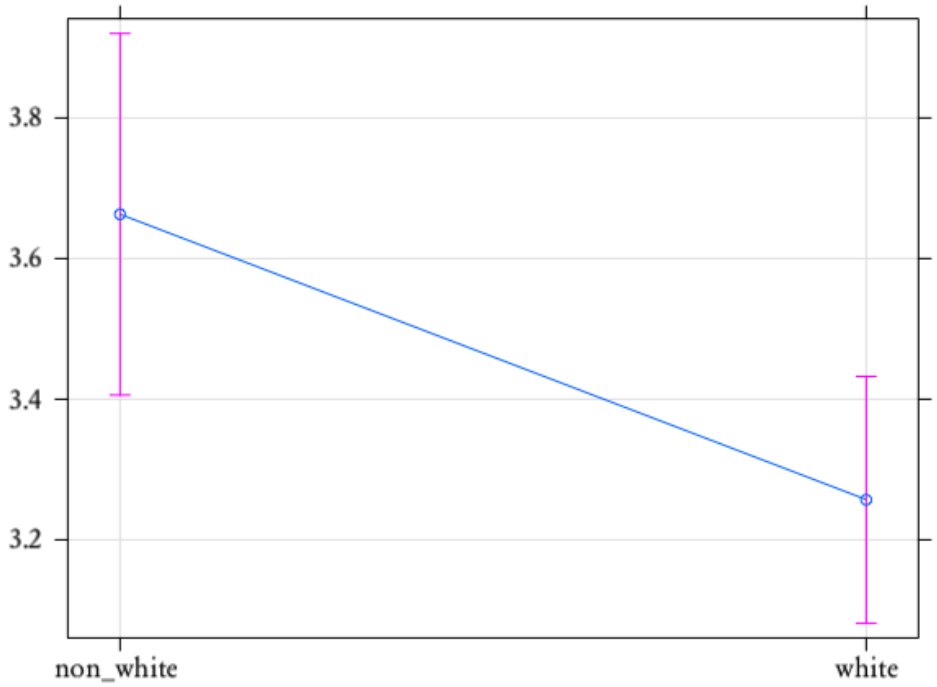
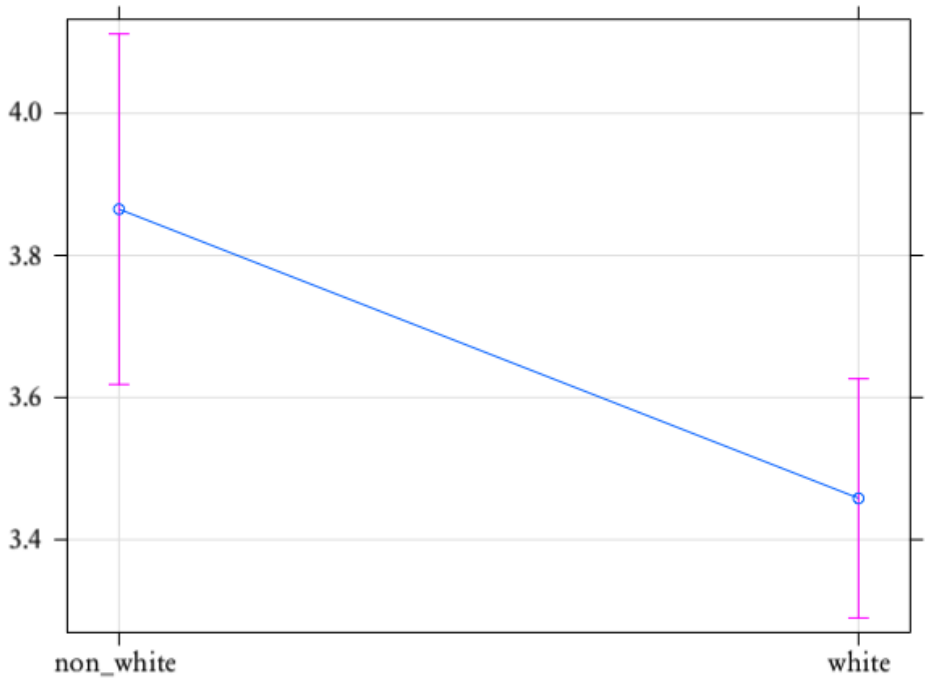


Figure 7
Estimated Marginal Means for health-related factors by race/ethnicity



To investigate the importance of socioeconomic status in decision-making, we use the Federal Pell Grant as a proxy for SES: we compare responses from Pell recipients and non-Pell recipients. The results of the independent sample *t*-tests are included in Table 5.

Table 5
Independent t-tests: Federal Pell Grant Recipients vs Non Recipients

	t	df	*p*	95% CI	Effect size (Cohen's *d*)
World Enlightenment	-3.105	441	0.002	-0.507, -0.113	0.305
Personal Growth	-0.566	352	0.571	-0.356, 0.196	0.06
Career Development	-0.969	293	0.332	-0.387, 0.131	0.105
Entertainment	2.803	293	0.005	0.118, 0.674	0.328
Language skills	-0.093	233	0.925	-0.369, 0.335	0.014
Health-related	-3.242	411	0.001	-0.668, -0.163	0.313

According to the results summarized in Table 5, three factors appear to be statistically different for participants who have received the Federal Pell Grant and those who have not: World Enlightenment, Entertainment, and Health-related factors. Entertainment factors are statistically more important for those who have not received the grant (grant mean = 1.69, SD = 1.15, $N = 30$; no-grant mean = 2.09, SD = 1.28, $N = 30$). In contrast, World Enlightenment (grant mean = 4.28, SD = 0.99, $N = 30$; no-grant mean = 3.97, SD = 1.04, $N = 30$) and Health-related factors (grant mean = 3.92, SD = 1.23, $N = 30$; no-grant mean = 3.51, SD = 1.38, $N = 30$) are more important for low-income students.

The rest of the section is devoted to the qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted. Our objective was to capture the potential impact of the pandemic on participants' views on the benefits of SA in the context of academic curricula and on the creation of virtual SA programs, a proposal considered by many institutions during the pandemic. Thematic analysis identified three main topics: personal and academic gains obtained from a SA experience, virtual SA programs, and more particularly, virtual SA programs as adequate alternatives for immersive SA. Participants' quotes regarding their visions on virtual SA are included below in italics.

First, when asked about the academic and personal losses resulting from program cancellations and, consequently, lack of participation in SA, one of the most repeated themes was L2 development: *achieving true fluency and increasing my listening ability, especially with the accents and the speech with which people speak* or *you just get a different level of confidence and level of fluency*. Participants defend their position with arguments such as *you have more like just like authentic interaction with native speakers in a way that you can't really get in a classroom setting*. Another theme that appears consistently is the opportunity for personal growth and maturity: *you can learn more about yourself* [...] *it pushes you a bit out of your comfort zone to adapt to this new environment*, *you get a lot of skills kind of packing up and living in a city you've never been to*, or *being abroad is very much just an opportunity to go outside your comfort zone and not really know specifically how it is that you'll be changed or what exactly it is that you'll learn*. Apart from these two main themes, the discovery of new cultures afforded by SA is also a common thread. Participants mention the opportunity *to travel around the world and be able to navigate through different cultures and countries*, as well as the chance to learn

concepts related to their major through experience and not only through books: *probably some of the hands on experience of getting to learn about the subject actually in the location and visit again, the ruins up close*, or *to be able to actually see the places that you're learning so much about [...] So I think it really can deepen your education through that*. Finally, one of the participants sees a potential to develop new professional experiences and contacts leading to opportunities for future jobs: *another thing that I was really looking forward to going there for was I actually received some contacts from a contact of mine who was willing to reach out to people in Australia radio. And if that connection really, maybe that's a job, maybe that's another opportunity and things like that. So also just like further career opportunities and being able to build that sort of network of possibilities as well.*

Second, when asked about online study abroad programs, responses show a general consensus among participants that virtual SA is *very different, and it's not the same experience by any means*. For instance, they mention that *I don't think it's sufficient to count as a true study abroad experience. I just think you need to physically be there and be engaging with the language and the cultures of the area*. According to many participants, an essential part of the SA is going *somewhere else physically*. One of the participants creates an interesting comparison to illustrate their opinion: *it's almost like saying I bought a ticket to go to The Super Bowl, but then it's online*. Another participant was actually part of a virtual SA program at the time of the interview and they categorized it as *horrible* and *tedious*: *it wasn't immersion because after eight hours of class, then I went downstairs and I talked with English, in English to my parents and my dad, my brother*.

Although some of the participants value the opportunity to interact with people from other countries and cultures afforded by online SA initiatives, participants do not think it adds to their education, as they regularly live and work next to a considerable number of international students on campus: *I think that collaborating with other students from other countries is good but it's something that we do in our normal [university] classes* or *that's not much different from what I'm doing now*. Other reasons to reject this new type of SA programs: *Zoom fatigue* and distrust of institutions that put the bottom line before students' education as in *I feel like that sounds like something they're just trying to get more money from me without delivering the same experience*.

In conclusion, participants did not accept virtual SA programs as good alternatives for traditional immersive SA programs: *I don't think that there is a good replacement for in person study abroad* or *I definitely think generally speaking I'd probably opt out of doing a virtual study abroad program if there were other physical options available*, although some understand that online SA was the only alternative during the pandemic (*I would consider it something, what we can do best especially in light of our current situation*), a position reflected here: *I feel like learning and growing in some way is better than not learning and growing at all. So I think that's definitely a good option*. Nevertheless, when specifically pushed to enumerate those circumstances under which they would consider participating in a virtual SA program, participants listed a number of conditions: advancing in the major or minor to graduate in time (*the reason why I'm considering this summer's program taking like one or two classes is because I'm a Spanish major so it would help me advance towards some of my credits and especially because I might be writing a thesis*), length of the program (*if what you just described was like a week-long over summer*), cost (*depends on how much they would charge you for it, because obviously study abroad courses are usually pretty expensive*), or if online SA was the only option. Interestingly, themes and positions were shared across racial and SES groups.

DISCUSSION

Much of what has been said about the effects of the pandemic on the future of SA is negative (e.g., Bilecen, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Fischer, 2021a; Helms, 2020; Leask & Green, 2020; Mercado,

2020; Mok et al., 2020). This was especially true in 2020, when 93% of programs were suddenly canceled (IIE, 2020) and vaccination campaigns had yet to start. The pandemic allowed a number of researchers and practitioners to reconsider common practices to understand how programs could adapt to a brave new world and to improve them. We decided to focus on students' motivations to SA; specifically, our goal was to gauge any potential impact of the pandemic on the factors that students consider when deciding to apply to SA. To this end, we replicated and extended Anderson and Lawton (2015), and compared their original results with ours. The design of the study follows that of Anderson and Lawton's MSA, with two differences: 1). We included four different groups of students according to participation in SA programs: students who had participated (results are reported in Basterretxea Santiso and Sanz, 2022), students whose plans were canceled, students who had applied to participate, and students whose academic plans do not include the experience of an immersion program abroad; the latter is rarely included in this type of study; 2). We included two new factors: health, and language learning. A secondary goal of the study was to take a qualitative look at students' notion of SA, and the weight of 'abroad' and 'in person' in that notion.

We first asked whether the factors that U.S. undergraduate students consider in relation to SA have changed due to the pandemic. Comparing the results from Anderson and Lawton's (2015) original survey with ours, we do not find evidence of a significant alteration in the weight of the factors guiding participants' decision-making process. We anticipate that, contrary to what some scholars predicted (e.g., Dennis, 2020; Mok et al., 2020), undergraduate students seem willing to participate in future SA programs. Nevertheless, the introduction of health as a new factor reveals that while health is an important consideration, its relative weight varies depending on the group of participants. Health-factors rank very high for students whose plans to SA were canceled and for those without an interest in participating in future SA programs. In contrast, health factors rank only above entertainment for students who had applied to SA at the time they completed the survey (between March and October 2021). We interpret these results as evidence that despite the pandemic, participation in SA is a central part of these students' academic experience in contrast with other scholars' views (e.g., Fischer, 2021a; Helms, 2020; Leask & Green, 2020; Mercado, 2020). Timing is important here: while those scholars were writing at the onset of the pandemic, we conducted most of our study at a time when the vaccination campaign was in full swing and vaccinations were required by many private colleges in the U.S. As for language development, and compatible with previous publications (e.g., Allen, 2010; Austin & Shen, 2016; Basterretxea Santiso & Sanz, 2022; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Eder et al., 2010) results are encouraging for language departments, as it appears to be an important factor driving the SA decision process even as the vast majority of participants are not language majors or minors.

Our second goal was to reveal the potential impact of race/ethnicity and SES on the factors driving SA participation. The race/ethnicity variable was analyzed twice, first with each group entered separately, then aggregating all BIPOC groups together. Both analyses yielded interesting results showing that White participants place less weight on health-related factors compared to BIPOC and look at career development factors as less important compared to BIPOC. The analysis by SES also evidenced differences: for low-income students, the SA experience is perceived as a strong contributor to a more sophisticated view of the world compared to students of more robust financial means; for the latter, the entertainment factor is significantly more important. We interpret these results as indicators of a greater appreciation among minority and low-income students of the academic and personal gains afforded by an immersive experience abroad. There is also a greater awareness among minority and low-income students of the cost of a SA program; in practical terms, the economic risk

of paying for a SA program that is subsequently canceled could be a potential explanation for these results. A better reason however is the evidence presented in Fischer (2021b) and similar research suggesting that the pandemic hits the most economically vulnerable harder, widening inequality. Illness that leads to loss of income and lack of adequate access to health insurance or health benefits are real threats to low-income students who, as a result, may select 'safer' sites or who may choose not to participate in a SA program out of fear of contracting the coronavirus. Based on our results, we predict that the number of SA participants from minority and low-income students will be even lower than it is now, further contributing to a lack of diversity of race, ethnicity and income in participation. This is, of course, a situation that cannot be ignored (also see Quan et al., 2023, this issue).

Our third and final goal was to better understand undergraduates' views on virtual SA programs, a creative substitute for traditional SA programs during the pandemic. Our qualitative data reveal that, across groups–students who had participated (Basterretxea Santiso & Sanz, 2022), students planning to attend or who had missed the chance or who were not interested in participating–all agreed on starkly different views of virtual SA vs immersive SA. Specifically, there is a clear sense that participation in a SA program implies both travel to a foreign country and 24/7 contact with its culture (identical to the disadvantages listed by Upson and Bergiel, 2022, when compared to in-person SA); SA is not distant, online contact limited to a few hours per day. Similar to the suggestion by Upson and Bergiel (2022) in reference to the additional and economical character that virtual SA programs should take in the future, some participants do welcome the opportunity of increased collaboration with students and faculty at other institutions as a way of internationalizing current course offerings, but never as a substitute for immersive SA. In fact, and similar to Gaižauskaitė et al. (2021), for international students in Lithuania, students see in a SA program their opportunity to develop their language skills, to discover new cultures and grow personally, as well as to expand their academic experience and improve their professional outlook.

CONCLUSION

At this crucial period of self-examination of the functioning, organization and future of SA programs, we conducted research to gauge any changes, within the last seven years, in the factors guiding students to participate in SA. This is a period that included the trauma of forced cancellation of almost 100% of SA programs as a result of the pandemic. Based on quantitative data, we first conclude that the relative importance of the factors considered by students to participate in SA has not changed despite the time lapse and the pandemic. A second conclusion is that language learning is an important factor for students when choosing to go to SA, even for non-majors. Third and last, the importance of health factors is different for different racial and SES groups; it also weighs differently depending on SA experience. Future SA students differ from the rest: for them, health-related factors are almost last, only above entertainment factors. These results are certainly good news for SA programs as they debunk pessimistic predictions about the future of study abroad (Bilecen, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Fischer, 2021a; Helms, 2020; Leask & Green, 2020; Mercado, 2020; Mok et al., 2020). More worrisome are the results for minority and low-income students, two groups of students for whom health ranks almost first in importance, suggesting the possibility that they chose a specific program based on health-related issues such as affordability of quality of health care, or worse, that they are even more reticent to participate in SA programs.

As for online forms of SA initiated by a number of institutions in response to the pandemic, college students appear to have established two requirements, namely time–*24/7 immersion*–and space–*a different country*–for the use of the 'SA' label. This view of SA was universally shared across race and SES groups, as well as across groups that differed in levels of experience with and interest in SA.

The information summarized here provides a picture of motivations to SA among undergraduates enrolled in private universities in the U.S. It would be interesting to broaden this view with that of students in public universities that are less internationally oriented and to place special attention on student subgroups, like heritage speakers. Though little is known about them, their reasons for SA participation are believed to be different (e.g., Moreno, 2009; Petrucci, 2007). Research of this kind should help university administrators, educators, and policy makers to anticipate and address future problems and needs of SA programs (Austin & Shen, 2016; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Li et al., 2013; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Stroud, 2010) in relation to students' decision-making and their notions of what SA is.

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