

STUDY ABROAD DECISION FACTORS: A CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This exploratory study attempts to understand the key factors influencing students' study abroad decision-making in a cross-cultural setting. Through in-depth interviews of 12 students from two countries: the U.S. and China respectively, this research provides insights for a better positioning of study abroad programs for students from different cultures.

Introduction

In the past decades, study abroad is becoming an increasingly popular choice for university students around the globe. Universities offer study abroad opportunities to prepare their students for global society. Students will not only have the opportunity to see different places, but expand their worldviews and learn to appreciate differences and diversity among people of different cultural backgrounds.

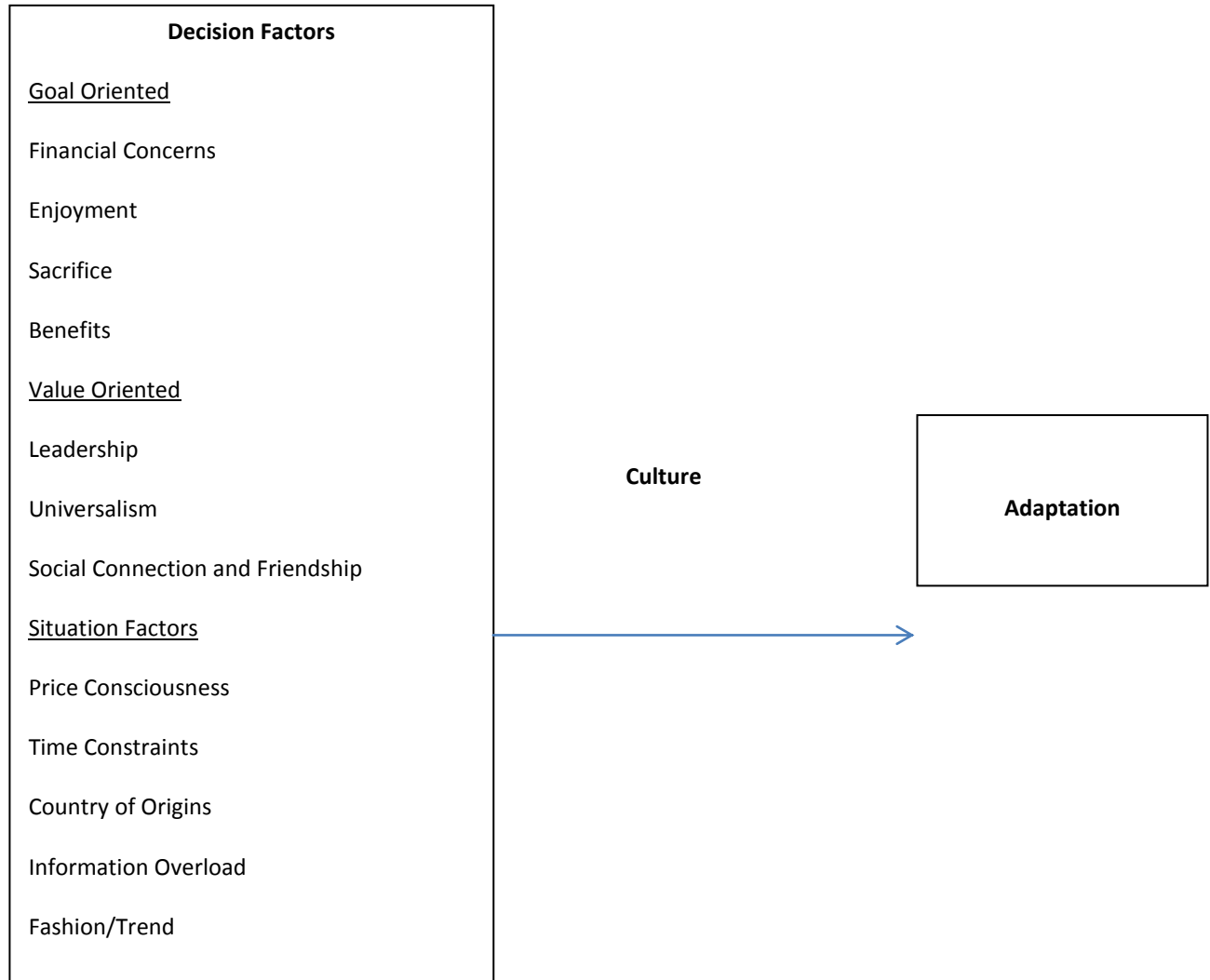
To help the study abroad program managers adapt their promotional efforts to appeal to students, this study attempts to build a comprehensive research framework to understand the motivational factors of students' student abroad intention from multiple perspectives. Specifically, this study will investigate how value orientations, goal orientations, and situational stimulus can jointly affect students' choices.

Values are "abstract structure that involves the belief that people hold about desirable ways of behaving or about desirable end states" (Feather 1995, p1). Value has been found critical in individuals' decision making, and it also has a profound impact on students' study abroad intentions (Fornerino et al. 2011). Meanwhile, some immediate factors may appeal negative for students who value study abroad, and they would decide not to pursue the opportunity. That is, students' ultimate choice can also be influenced by other issues, such as goal and situational stimulus. Compared with value, goal is more concrete as goals drive people to obtain satisfaction from a specific situation, such as money, power, and achievement (Goldberg and Baumgartner 2002). While both value and goal address the psychological motivators, some situational context may influence individuals' decision making.

Besides examining some specific situational factors such as time and price, the study incorporates cultural contexts. The study will compare the study abroad choice between Chinese students and American students. According to the most recent open doors report on international Educational Exchange, China has becoming the top country of origins of international students in the U.S., making up 25% of all international students in the U.S.. Meanwhile, China becomes one of the most desirable destinations for U.S. students' study abroad choices.

Research Frameworks

The study presents a research framework (See Figure 1) that attempts to investigate the study abroad decision factors in a cross-cultural context. Different perspectives are incorporated to give a complete and in-depth view of this important issue.

Figure 1: Research Framework

Research Design

To understand the study abroad decision making factors, the exploratory research using semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted using snowballing technique (Moriarty and Bateson 1982). Students who had study abroad experiences were interviewed by the authors, proficient in conducting qualitative research. This process resulted in twenty interviews from U.S.A. and China, respectively. The interviews were conducted in natural settings convenient to the participants and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Research Findings

Motivators for both U.S. and Chinese Students

a. Benefits

Chinese Student: The biggest benefit is for future career goals, to get a better job. The Western culture has many differences and studying her has changed the way I think. I am more objective.

American Student: It increased my confidence. I had never been on an airplane before, travelled around a foreign country, or been away from home for so long. I did all this by myself, which I never knew I could do.

b. Social Connection and Friendship

Chinese Student: Some of my American friends like to learn about Chinese Culture from me and learn more about the U.S. culture from them. We have good relationships and can share many ideas with each other.

American Student: I think it is an amazing gift to have a friend from a different culture. It adds a richness and dimension that is more dynamic than my American friendship.

C. Fashion/Trend

Chinese Student: When I go home and I tell people that I studied in the U.S. , they will think it is amazing. They will think it's unbelievable. Some of my friends are not now thinking about study abroad for a year.

American Student: It was kind of fancy because not that many people do it and not many people have the opportunity to say they lived abroad for a while.

Motivators Mainly for Chinese Students

a. Universalism

Chinese Student: The world is very different and I wanted to learn about the American ways. I want to teach my family and friends about why the U.S. people think in a different way.

b. Country of Origins

Chinese Student: I wanted to study in a big country and the technology in the U.S. is the best in the world. The education system is very good and I have many more opportunities her than I do back in China

Motivators Mainly for U.S. Students

a. Leadership

American Student: Being able to say that I travelled to another culture instantly makes people interested in my story... but also makes me stand out in future career,

b. Price Consciousness

American Student: Price was very important. I was able to use an exchange program which allowed me to pay my university tuition, fees, room, and board. Had I not been given that option, I would not have studied abroad.

C. Information Overload

American Student: Each program has so many benefits to it. You just have to see which benefits you more. If you want trips, you can choose a program with many trips.

Reference Available upon Request