

# WHY DO GEN Y STUDENTS STUDY ABROAD? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND THE INTENT TO STUDY ABROAD

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## ABSTRACT

*Research on Generation Y college students as a demographic group reveals that this group possesses unique characteristics and preferences that influence their academic career choices. This study proposes that Generation Y college students' motivations to study abroad are rooted in the desire for personal and individual growth. The study attempts to measure how individual growth in isolation and combined with other motivation factors among Generation Y students drives the intent to study abroad and addresses the issue of temporal distance between the actual intent and action to study abroad. In particular we propose that in the desire for individual growth/study abroad relationship is moderated by the student's gender, parents education level, prior experience, age and income. This further advances the body of research on study abroad by discussing critical factors that influence intent to study abroad and by providing insights into the issue of temporal distance, as most students express interest in study abroad as freshmen yet won't actually pursue study abroad until their junior year. This time lag creates additional challenges on how to effectively promote study abroad, a high involvement product, to Generation Y college students. The paper concludes with a discussion on marketing implications and provides recommendations to increase study abroad participation among Generation Y college students.*

## INTRODUCTION

Generation Y (Gen Y), also known as Millennials, are people born between 1977 and 1994 (Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007; Markert, 2004; New Strategist, 2009). This group, numbering about 70+ million in the United States, has been the subject of research examining their lifestyles, preferences, attitudes, communication styles, consumption behavior (Johnson, 2006), technological expertise (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010), work ethic and expectations (Broadbridge et al., 2007; Eisner, 2005), academic goals, and achievements (Deal et al., 2010; Meister & Willyerd, 2010). There may be such interest in Gen Y because of the distinctive characteristics they manifest when compared to previous generations.

This paper proposes that Gen Y's desire for individual growth is a critical factor that motivates them to study abroad. We argue that five additional variables -- gender, parents' educational level, prior international experience, traditional- versus non-traditional student status, and household income -- moderate this direct influence.

## GEN Y STUDENTS' DESIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL GROWTH

Gen Y's concern for individual growth is evident in their purchasing behavior. Gen Y feel that brands and products help them express their personality, freedom, and independence (Noble, Haytko, & Philips, 2009). Gen Y is exposed to many products and services from many sources,

and they have more purchasing power than prior generations (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003; Tomkins, 1999), making them highly brand conscious and loyal. Noble et al. (2009) identify the Gen Y student who buys OPI Cha Ching Cherry nail polish color to convey her “wild and crazy personality,” and cite another Gen Y student who purchases a Honda Accord as “a true representation of his conservative personality” (p. 621-22). Thus, Gen Y are concerned about image and trends (Gupta, Brantley, & Jackson, 2010; Noble et al., 2009), and how new technology influences product choices (Sullivan & Heitmeyer, 2008). Gen Y believes their purchasing behavior defines them, helps them build identity and status, and gives them independence (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003; Johnson, 2006; Noble et al., 2009). We argue that this desire for identity and independence is seen in their decisions about study abroad. Students value the independence, unique experiences, and cultural encounters that study abroad provides (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Sánchez, Fornerino, & Zhang, 2006), and students who studied abroad score higher on the “experience seeking” subscale, indicating a desire for unusual experience, than non-study abroad students (Schroth & McCormack, 2000).

Gen Y search for growth-related experiences, such as study abroad, because they strive to have a balanced lifestyle (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). They look for high levels of social interaction and teamwork, and constantly seek connectedness, growth opportunities, and meaning (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Ng et al., 2010). This desire for individual growth is an important reason why today’s Gen Y college students participate in study abroad programs (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, & Straughan, 1999; Bakalis & Joiner, 2004; Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1991; Toncar & Cudmore, 2000). In fact, individual growth also appears to be a driver of intent to study abroad among non-US students (Sánchez et al., 2006). But few studies have examined more deeply how individual growth motivates the intent of today’s Gen Y college students to study abroad, and this study is designed to examine that gap in the literature. This discussion leads to the following proposition:

**P1:** The desire for individual growth motivates Gen Y students’ intent to study abroad.

## **GENDER**

The results of many studies show that female college students are more likely to study abroad than males (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005; Dessoff, 2006; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Stroud, 2010; Thomas & McMahon, 1998). Women are 2.4 times more likely to pursue international studies than men, even when they study in fields such as engineering, business and the physical sciences (Salisbury et al., 2010; Stroud, 2010), which traditionally have a higher percentage of male students. There is some evidence, however, that there is no difference between men and women’s intent to study

abroad. Among 590 French adolescents and young adults at high school or university, gender played no significant role in their overall willingness to study abroad (Mullet, Dej, Lemaire, Raiff, & Barthorpe, 2000).

Other studies have also found that women have more positive intercultural attitudes than men (Kim & Goldstein, 2005), scoring lower on ethnocentrism, prejudice and intercultural communication apprehension. This suggests women may be more open-minded and have more positive attitudes towards international experiences. US male students, in contrast, seek growth experiences and social integration more among college peers, and they may be less inclined to abandon their social network to study abroad (Fischer, 2012). Interestingly, when US female college students study abroad, they often look for thrills, adventure (Schroth & McCormack, 2000), new experiences, and freedom (Presley, Damron-Martinez, & Zhang, 2010; Sánchez et al., 2006), which are linked to achieving individual growth. Given the majority of evidence, we pose the following hypothesis:

**P2:** The desire for individual growth motivates Gen Y women’s intent to study abroad more than it motivates Gen Y men’s intent.

## **PARENTS’ EDUCATION LEVELS**

Parents’ values and goals may influence the choices students make during their academic careers, therefore Gen Y students’ desire for individual growth may be related to how well their parents were educated. For some students, such as first generation college students or students from underrepresented groups, parents’ involvement is critical to how they navigate college life (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Pagliarulo McCarron & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2006; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Parents with degrees in higher education tend to encourage their children to earn a university degree, and they influence their course of study and what they do outside the classroom (Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2009; Presley et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2010). Indeed, participation in special college programs such as study abroad is much higher among students whose parents have earned a university degree (Miller, 2008), and even higher for women (Salisbury et al., 2010). This leads to the following hypothesis:

**P3:** The desire for individual growth motivates the intent to study abroad among Gen Y students whose parents have a high level of formal education more than it motivates intent among Gen Y students whose parents do not have a high level of education.

## **PRIOR EXPERIENCE**

Results of studies of the effect of a student’s prior international experience on intent to study abroad are mixed. Some scholars found no relationship between previous international experience and participation in study abroad (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Stroud, 2010). However, most studies found that prior international experience, including international experiences before college (Harpaz,

2008; Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2011; Pedersen, LaBrie, Hummer, Larimer, & Lee, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2009), positively influence a student's desire to study abroad (American Council on Education, 2008; Athavaley, 2008; Cardon, Marshall, & Poddar, 2011). Exploring other countries for the first time lets students test if they can navigate an unknown place. Early international experience builds self-esteem, and teaches them how to function in new situations. In response to this, we propose the following hypothesis:

**P4:** The desire for individual growth motivates the intent to study abroad among Gen Y students who have traveled to or lived in another country, more than it motivates intent among Gen Y students who have not.

### **TRADITIONAL VS. NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

Traditional students, those between 18 and 25 years of age, and non-traditional students, who are over 25 years, share many college goals including career-focus and personal development (Bean & Metzner, 1985). While they are all considered Gen Y, traditional and non-traditional students may make different choices in college, reflecting their different priorities and differences in their social constraints. Traditional students are more likely to participate in personal growth-related activities in college than non-traditional students (Bauer & Liang, 2003; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010), including study abroad (Athavaley, 2008; Kim & Goldstein, 2005). In fact, students are studying abroad at a younger age, evidenced by the growing numbers of freshmen and sophomores who study abroad, such that in 2002, over 40 percent of study abroad students were juniors, compared to only 36 percent in 2008/2009 (Institute of International Education, 2011).

The desire to study abroad among non-traditional students is less strong. Career focus (Chao & Good, 2004; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006) and growth (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007) are key goals among non-traditional students. But non-traditional students are less likely to find personal growth in extracurricular college activities (Newbold et al., 2010) such as study abroad. Non-traditional students may have more significant job experience, more social obligations, and more permanent personal relationships, including spouses and children, which shift their emphasis from "what I can do for me" to "what I must do for my family." This distinction between traditional and non-traditional students merits further attention, suggesting that age may influence the intent to study abroad differently among younger (ages 18 to 25 years) students compared to older (over 25 years) students. We argue the following hypothesis:

**P5:** The desire for individual growth motivates the intent to study abroad among traditional Gen Y students (aged 18-25) more than it motivates intent among non-traditional Gen Y students (over 25 years).

## **HOUSEHOLD INCOME**

The cost – real or perceived -- of study abroad programs influences a student's decision to study abroad (Albers-Miller et al., 1999; Bakalis & Joiner, 2004; Dessoiff, 2006; Garver & Divine, 2007; Presley et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2009; Sánchez et al., 2006; Toncar, Reid, & Anderson, 2005). The cost of study abroad was a significant barrier to university students in China, France and the USA; most significantly among Chinese and US students (Sánchez et al., 2006). Business students think study abroad is expensive, that it increases student debt (Sánchez et al., 2006), and students want scholarships and grants to help pay for it (Garver & Divine, 2007; Presley et al., 2010; Toncar et al., 2005). Minority students view study abroad positively, but a lack of household financial resources hinders many minority students' ability to do it (Albers-Miller et al., 1999).

Evidence is mixed regarding the relationship between household income and intent to study abroad. Salisbury et al. (2009) found that lower income students are less likely to study abroad than higher income students. Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard (2008) found that a third of students who studied abroad had annual family income greater than \$70,000. Yet Stroud (2010) found no significant correlation between household income and the intent to study abroad. In a later study, Salisbury et al. (2010) found that low-income women are less inclined to study abroad, but among men, income level was not significant.

The cost of study abroad might be mitigated by access to more financial resources, so we argue that the greater the student's household income, the more likely he or she is to seek a study abroad experience. Because results of prior studies are mixed, we attempt to study the effect of household income on the relationship between desire for individual growth and intent to study abroad. We propose the following hypothesis:

**P6:** The desire for individual growth motivates the intent to study abroad among Gen Y students with higher household incomes more than it motivates intent among Gen Y students with lower household incomes

## **CONCLUSION**

Business schools know that study abroad is important to their students' development as individuals and as global citizens, but only a small fraction of business students study abroad. Business schools also know that study abroad may increase university revenues, diversify the student body, and add value to academic programs in business (Sánchez et al., 2006). About three-quarters of adult respondents said college graduates should have a study abroad experience (Marcum, 2001). The AACSB, the international business school accrediting organization, has encouraged its member schools to increase international business programming for graduate and undergraduate students for over a decade. Most business schools now offer international courses in accounting, marketing, management, finance, and information

technology, and many offer extensive study abroad program offerings (Tucker, 2003). Overall, nearly 275,000 US students received academic credit for study abroad in 2009-2010, a 4 percent increase over the prior year (Institute of International Education, 2011). Yet, this is still only 1.32 percent of U.S. college students (NAFSA, 2011).

This offers some insight into what could be done to increase the number of US college study abroad students. We discovered that a desire for personal growth is one of the factors that drive students to say they intend to study abroad, and we found clues that could help market study abroad to students in professional programs. But action does not always follow intent, especially if there is a significant time lag or temporal distance between them when other factors can intervene. One factor could be the way people discount time and money considerations when they commit to an event or purchase in the future (Alexander et al., 2008; Morwitz, 1997; Van Ittersum, 2012). This is called the “Yes...d\*\*n!” effect (Zauberman & Lynch, 2005) by which people commit to things and regret them later, and it may impact the relationship between study abroad intent and action. When events are in the distant future, people may agree to do them based on their abstract benefits instead of specific constraints. When the events become imminent, people may reverse their intent as the relative costs become closer. For example, students may say they intend to study abroad in the future, thinking that they will have the money and the time to do so, and without considering the time and planning that study abroad requires. Therefore, it may be crucial to reinforce how important it is for students to plan for study abroad early in their academic career. It may also be important that study abroad marketing messages focus on what motivates students to study abroad. As Morwitz (1997) found, greater involvement in the decision-making process and greater connection to the experience may increase the likelihood that people follow through with their stated intention, even if temporal distance is involved.

Gen Y students respond to promotions and advertising differently than students ten years their senior, possibly because they have grown up with information technology continually in their grasp. Millennials view promotion of affective (feeling) services more positively than promotion of informative services in advertising campaigns no matter what advertising appeal is used, suggesting that Gen Y's care more if the service is affective, feeling and self-satisfying rather than informative, and care less about the appeal used in the advertising message itself (Lepkowska-White & Samph, 2006). Study abroad promotions might be more appealing to Gen Y students if they highlight the emotional benefits of study abroad to personal growth, fun, and excitement, rather than educational or future professional benefits.

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