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# U.S. Student Motivations to Study Abroad in East Asia: A Regional Comparison

Nadezhda Braun

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U.S. STUDENT MOTIVATIONS TO STUDY ABROAD IN EAST ASIA: A REGIONAL  
COMPARISON

Nadezhda Braun  
International Education  
A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for a Master of  
International Education at SIT Graduate  
Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

May 1, 2023

Advisor: Dr. Melissa Whatley

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Student name: Nadezhda Braun

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### **Abstract**

Many factors influence student motivations to study abroad. This qualitative study examines U.S. student motivations to study abroad in East Asia (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), through the lens of push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The study finds that both theories accurately portray student motivations to study abroad in East Asia and that there are important distinctions between student motivations depending on their choice of host country.

*Key words:* push-pull theory; Theory of Planned Behavior; student motivation; East Asia; study abroad

## **U.S. Student Motivations to Study Abroad in East Asia: A Regional Comparison**

There is a long history of mobility between countries in East Asia and the United States, particularly from the second half of the twentieth century to the present, largely due to the significant and longstanding U.S. military presence in East Asia. For decades, thousands of students from South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have traveled to the United States to pursue higher education (Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, 2022). As the education systems in these countries have achieved international recognition, more students have been staying home for their studies (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021). At the same time, however, the number of study abroad students in these countries has increased, owing to the growing prestige of academia in South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Asada, 2020).

When I moved to South Korea in 2021, I had a basic working knowledge of the relationship between South Korea and the United States. I knew there was a longstanding military alliance, a robust trade partnership, and a meteoric rise in global cultural influence through K-Pop, K-dramas, and film on the South Korean side. The importance of this partnership has only increased during my time in South Korea, with the proliferation of internationally renowned TV shows such as *Squid Game*, the record number of North Korean missile launches, and the acceleration of investment from South Korean companies in the United States (Jung, 2022; Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2022; Souw, 2021). As of 2022, much of U.S. foreign policy has focused on defense, trade, alliances, and cultural exchange in Asia. The alliances with South Korea and Japan and close relationship with Taiwan make this region of particular importance to the United States in terms of foreign policy. The relationships between these three countries are also complex and interconnected, with historical and cultural ties and animosities (Blanchett & Green, 2019-present). Given the importance of these relationships, I wanted to further investigate

student mobility between East Asia and the United States. Although there are studies examining U.S. students' motivations for studying abroad, few studies examine U.S. student motivations for studying abroad in specific countries in East Asia, and none conduct a comparative analysis of these student motivations. Asada (2020) states that "Comparative studies in different national contexts are needed to better understand the role of the host country acting as a gateway to the host region" (p. 140). This study answers that call. Therefore, I conducted a comparative analysis of U.S. undergraduate students' motivations for studying abroad in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. My research question is: What motivates U.S. undergraduate students to study abroad in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan? How are their motivations similar and different depending on the country where they choose to study?

### **Terminology**

Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are often grouped as "Asian" or "East Asian," without noting the historical, cultural, and personal nuances and complexities of each country's identities (Moon et al., 2020). Although I will refer to the three countries of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan as East Asia or East Asian for the sake of readability in this study, I will intentionally distinguish between each country in my study and analysis. In acknowledging cultural and historical differences, as well as cultural and historical ties among these countries, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced discussion of the region from the perspective of study abroad.

For this capstone, study abroad is defined similarly to the International Institute of Education's (IIE) definition: "U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit" (IIE, n.d.). One difference is that IIE refers to U.S. students receiving credit at their home institutions, whereas this study also accepted participation from students pursuing full degrees in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan.



## Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical bases for this study are push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Push-pull theory has its historical roots in McMahon's (1992) study of the motivations of international students from 18 developing countries studying in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. The Theory of Planned Behavior is a psychological theory centered on an "individual's *intention* to perform a given behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181).

### Push-Pull Theory

Push-pull theory postulates that there are factors that motivate students to leave their home country and factors that motivate students to go to a particular country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) define "push" factors as those factors which "operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study," whereas "pull" factors "operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students" (p. 82). Within the context of this theory, I looked at the push and pull factors that motivate U.S. students to study abroad in four East Asian countries. I then conducted a comparison of the motivations to analyze what similarities and differences exist between the different destinations of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

Lam et al. (2011) found that institutional image served as a significant pull factor and job prospects served as a significant push factor for students choosing a particular institution in Malaysia. Undergraduate and postgraduate students at UKM, a university in Malaysia, filled out a survey "where the push and pull factors act as variables in the selection of the host educational institution" (p. 67). Lam et al. (2011) identified "academic and research quality of the institution" as the most significant pull factor (p. 73). Likewise, "job prospects" were the most significant push factor (p. 73). Similarly, Ahmad and Buchanan (2017) also found that students'

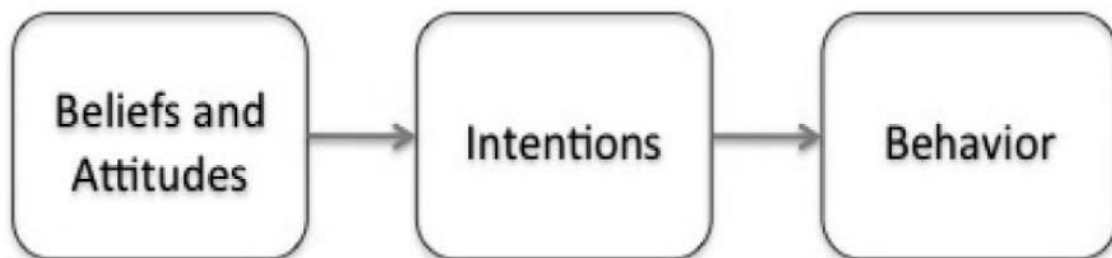
motivations to study at international branch campuses in Malaysia were shaped by push-pull factors, particularly the institution's reputation and perception of the country. Using push-pull theory as a basis, this study examines whether these rationales also impact U.S. students in their motivations to study abroad. For example, how do future job prospects factor into U.S. students' decision-making process when choosing to study abroad in East Asia?

### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

The Theory of Planned Behavior, like push-pull theory, highlights the importance of internal and external factors in decision-making (Goel et al., 2010). Goel et al. (2010) provided the first application of TPB to study abroad. TPB theorizes that “beliefs and their corresponding attitudes influence intentions, which drive actual behavior” (see Figure 1) (Goel et al., 2010, p. 251).

#### **Figure 1**

*“Overall Model of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)” from Ajzen (1985, 1991) in Goel et al. (2010)*



TPB's internal and external motivators are broken down into three categories “behavioral beliefs and attitudes, normative beliefs and perceived subjective norms, and control beliefs and perceived behavioral control” (p.251). Behavioral beliefs are how much an individual believes they can shape a desired outcome. Normative beliefs are how “an individual's perception of a

particular behavior...[is] influenced by the judgment of significant others” (p. 252). Finally, TPB considers individuals’ “perceived behavioral control,” or “the perceived ease or difficulty in performing the behavior” (p. 252). Goel et al. (2010) found that “behavioral beliefs are the primary drivers of study abroad participation,” based on their study of 113 undergraduate business students (p. 260).

Presley et al. (2010) examined whether the Theory of Planned Behavior accurately predicted the intent to study abroad among 188 U.S. undergraduate business students. These authors created a survey instrument based on interviews conducted with the target population, undergraduate business students. The most common responses were then categorized according to TPB “to determine relevant student referent groups to measure subjective norms, relevant outcomes to measure attitude, and relevant resources and opportunities to measure perceived behavioral control” (p. 236). These items were then placed on a seven-point scale. Strongly disagree and strongly agree, or related language, such as not at all – very much, served as endpoints. Through their quantitative analysis, they found that “the three predictor variables – attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control – each amplified the prediction of student intention to participate in study abroad” (p. 242).

Like Presley et al.’s work, Schnusenberg et al. (2012) outlined how the Theory of Planned Behavior maps onto several formative influences for students planning to study abroad by conducting a quantitative analysis of survey responses from 254 undergraduate business students. “In the context of study abroad programs, the perception of how important study abroad is to future job prospects is an example of behavioral beliefs” (p. 340). On the other hand, “significant others” in students’ lives, such as parents, friends, or faculty members, are an example of subjective norms, as these individuals’ opinions influence students’ behavior.

Finally, administrative support serves as a control belief for study abroad. Schnusenberg et al. (2012) concluded that all three of these beliefs impacted students' decision to study abroad.

Like push-pull theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior can be used to analyze how students decide to study abroad and, more specifically, where to study. However, TPB adds another layer beyond push-pull theory through which to analyze student motivations. Whereas push-pull theory examines external factors motivating students to study abroad, TPB includes internal student perception of these external factors. I anticipated that students in this study would not only provide examples of external motivators but would also reflect on their own internal motivations to study abroad in East Asia. By using both theories in tandem, I was able to gather a more nuanced picture of student motivation to study abroad.

## **Literature Review**

### **Student Motivations to Study Abroad**

Students study abroad for a wide variety of reasons. According to Pope et al. (2014), one major motivation is personal growth. More specifically, their research shows that “Gen Y [millennial] students recognize the benefits of fulfilling their own potential, enhancing their experiences, and seeking individual growth, and that study abroad might help them achieve those objectives” (p. 105). Sánchez et al. (2006) provide further insight into this idea, stating that “American students demonstrated a rich characterization of the dimension “search for a new experience...The American students perceive that a new experience represents a change: ‘to obtain a different view of the world,’ or what is possibly an even richer characterization ‘to become part of a new culture’” (p. 44-45).

Students are also often motivated by enhanced job prospects through their study abroad choices. Ahmad and Buchanan (2017) note that, “Several respondents believed that their

decision to study at an international branch campus would make them stand out among their peers once they entered the job market” (p. 660). Wells (2006) highlights that both students and their institutions “are claiming a job-related justification for study abroad” (p. 118).

Students are also influenced by peer groups, mentors, and parents to both study abroad and stay home. For example, Michael et al. (2003) noted that 29.7 percent of study abroad students in Australia chose Australia as their study abroad location based on recommendations from friends and relatives. However, when asked about information sources used to select a study abroad destination, friends and relatives jumped to 41.6 percent. King and Sondhi (2017) also highlight the importance of family in the decision-making process, finding that “family encouragement” to study abroad is an important factor for students’ decision-making processes (p. 183).

These rationales and barriers for study abroad match with those of push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior both categorize these motivations and barriers into different groupings that help researchers better understand participant behavior. For example, future job opportunities as mentioned in Ahmad and Buchanan (2017) and Wells (2006) serve as push factors for students to study abroad. Influence from friends and relatives, as mentioned by Michael et al. (2003) and King and Sondhi (2017) is an example of normative beliefs in the Theory of Planned Behavior. The theories also provide different layers to study abroad motivation. For example, push-pull theory does not highlight the influence of significant others on student motivations. On the other hand, push-pull theory provides more contextualization to the beliefs and intentions outlined by the Theory of Planned Behavior. For example, a student may be “pulled” to a particular location because of job

opportunities, which were highlighted by their parents, representing normative beliefs. Utilizing both theories helps to create a more nuanced understanding of participant perspectives.

When looking specifically at U.S. student motivations for choosing particular study abroad locations, similar motivations and barriers arise, regardless of location (Wells, 2006). Wells (2006) notes that “nontraditional destinations” for study abroad, or host locations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, often build upon justifications for traditional study abroad. For example, whereas traditional study abroad motivations include workforce preparedness, a motivation to study abroad in a nontraditional location would be a “greater understanding of [the] global economy and employment issues” (p. 124) (see Figure 2). As U.S. student mobility is still largely centered in Europe, referencing a framework of motivations for “nontraditional destinations” is important to understanding student motivations beyond just the desire to study abroad (Wells, 2006).

## Figure 2

*“Nontraditional Study Abroad Destinations: Benefits” from Wells (2006)*

Level of Analysis	Common Rationales for Study Abroad	Potential Benefits of Nontraditional Destinations
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• workforce preparedness</li> <li>• transnational competence</li> <li>• global citizenship</li> <li>• personal growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• greater understanding of global economy and employment issues</li> <li>• greater flexibility</li> <li>• greater problem solving skills</li> <li>• improved language skills</li> <li>• a greater “stretch” of beliefs, values, and opinions</li> </ul>

## East Asia as a Study Abroad Destination

East Asia's education system has been widely praised, with students consistently performing at the top of international testing. According to the results from PISA 2018 (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment), Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (called Chinese Taipei) all scored above 500 in reading for the 2018 test. In mathematics, all four countries were in the top seven (Schleicher, 2019). As the overall education systems have risen in standing, international education has become more of a focus. For example, in South Korea, English was made mandatory for third grade onward starting in 1997, demonstrating a global focus of the education system (Lee et al., 2015). Krechetnikov and Pestereva (2017) point out that, "Based on the World University rankings, South Korea is currently ranked 9<sup>th</sup> and Japan 10<sup>th</sup> globally in higher education" (p. 77). As the countries' education systems have risen in prestige, more students have pursued study abroad there (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021). Oleksiyenko et al. (2021) highlight that Asian Tigers (Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan) have centered themselves in the student mobility marketplace:

...as the desirability of 'the West' has been deeply hampered by concerns about public health, security, and visas, this may open up new possibilities for the Tiger destinations as they continue to emphasize their desirability to invest in 'world-class excellence'

(Altbach, 2013; Salmi, 2009). (p. 16)

Aspinall (2013) notes similar trends taking place in Japan.

The peak of U.S. students studying abroad in East Asia occurred during the 2018/2019 school year, which included 8,928 students in Japan, 4,558 in South Korea, and 1,270 in Taiwan. Study abroad participation for U.S. students was also growing year over year, with participation increasing by 5.4% in Japan, 16% in South Korea and 48.2% in Taiwan between 2017/2018 and

2018/2019 (Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, 2022). According to Paige et al. (2009), among their sample of students who studied abroad, Japan was among the top ten destinations. The pandemic has had a significant effect on students studying abroad in East Asia, with only 1,201 students studying abroad in the three countries for the 2020/2021 school year. However, during the 2020/2021 school year, South Korea was one of the top ten destinations for study abroad (Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, 2022).

There is very little research on why U.S. students choose to study abroad in Asia more generally. Well (2006) argues that U.S. students believe “nontraditional” study abroad locations, or any location that is not in Europe, will help them achieve a “greater understanding of global economy and employment issues, greater flexibility, greater problem-solving skills, improved language skills, and a greater “stretch” of beliefs, values, and opinions” (p. 124). This study will expand on the narrative of why U.S. students choose to study abroad in “nontraditional” locations by specifically examining why students decide to study in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

### *Japan*

Japan made a conscious decision to internationalize its education system, which resulted in over 109,000 international students studying in Japan by 2003, making Japan the seventh largest recipient of foreign students by 2009, a statistic that continued until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Newby et al., 2009, p. 79 in Aspinall, 2013; Gürüz, 2011; Guillerme, 2021). Although most of these students are from Asia, notably for this study, “The only non-Asian major country of origin is the United States” (Gürüz, 2011, p. 268). The Ministry of Education has outlined the importance of internationalization, including the promotion of student exchange



and Japanese language education for foreigners (Aspinall, 2013). Japan has since announced “The Global 30 Project” which

aims to promote internationalization of [the] academic environment of Japanese universities and acceptance of excellent international students studying in Japan. The selected 13 core universities have been implementing a variety of approaches to internationalize academic systems and campuses such as developing degree programs conducted in English and enriching international student support, while they are expected to enhance inter-university network for sharing educational resource and other outputs including establishment of overseas office which can be jointly used by all Japanese universities. (MEXT, n.d.)

Asada (2020) found through a study of U.S. study abroad students in Japan from the 1960s to the 2010s that students were deeply impacted by their study abroad experience. Asada describes this impact as a “gateway to the host region” (p. 119). In addition, for students “with a prior interest in Japan, Asia and the wider world, the study abroad experience in Japan acts as a catalyst to intensify their interest and engagement with these dimensions in subsequent life experiences” (p.119).

### ***South Korea***

U.S. higher education has a long history of influence on the South Korean education system, beginning with the end of the Japanese colonial period in 1945, as the U.S. Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) controlled the education system for three years, from 1945 to 1948 (Lee et al., 2015). Even after the transfer of power to the Korean government, the education law was still “thoroughly American” (Lee et al., 2015, p. 29). Even 70 years later, Kim (2011) points out that 70-80% of new faculty members at the top five South Korean higher education institutions

received their doctorate degrees in the United States, demonstrating the continued influence of the U.S. higher education system on South Korea.

Jon et al. (2013) note the rise of South Korea as a higher education hub, largely for East Asian students, with “approximately 80% of international students at Korean HEIs originat[ing] from two neighboring countries, China and Japan” (p. 695). Alemu and Cordier (2017) build on this work, suggesting that international students from the “East Asian sphere” experience more satisfaction with studying in South Korea. Notably, however, only 19.2% of participants in Alemu and Cordier’s (2017) study were exchange students, which is the population that will be examined in this capstone. Furthermore, although Alemu and Cordier (2017) did find a correlation between a longer stay in South Korea and increased satisfaction, they did not find that there was a correlation between the type of student (exchange, transfer, etc.) and satisfaction. Also of note was the finding that 31.7% of students reported choosing their university to “try something new,” which mirrors Pope et al.’s (2014) findings that Gen Y students study abroad for personal growth (p. 58).

Stewart and Lee (2022) highlight in their study that pull factors are often more significant than push factors for students studying abroad in South Korea, particularly for students in exchange programs. Their study points out that there are four major pull factors for students studying in South Korea: “the appeal of South Korea, experiential motivations, social network influences, and institutional appeal” (p. 889). Their study found that experiential motivations are the most important for students participating in short-term exchange programs. This study aims to expand on Stewart and Lee’s (2022) quantitative analysis by providing a qualitative analysis of motivations to study in South Korea and other countries in the East Asian region.

### ***Taiwan***

Lee (2017) highlights the differences in motivations for students choosing to study abroad in Taiwan through a quantitative analysis of 555 international university-level students, finding some striking differences between Asian and non-Asian students. The study found that “although non-Asian students generally and short-term nondegree students in particular are more likely to be ‘tourism-first’ educational tourists, Asian students pursuing formal degree are considered as ‘education-first’ educational tourists.” (Lee, 2017, p. 533).

Hsiao et al.’s (2021) findings also support the “new experiences” motivation. Hsiao et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative analysis of the experiences of nursing students who participated in short-term study abroad in Taiwan. Although the study focused on the study-abroad experience itself, Hsiao et al. (2021) also found that students “...demonstrated motivation to leave their comfort zone and face a challenging environment...” (p. 8).

The literature highlighted several common motivations for study abroad in East Asia, particularly the interest in new experiences (Alemu & Cordier, 2017; Hsiao et al., 2021; Lee, 2017; Stewart & Lee, 2022). Although only one study applied push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior to student motivation to study abroad in East Asia, many of the studies highlighted student motivations that would be informed by both theories.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Methodology and Genre**

I used a qualitative research methodology for this study. Since I was exploring former study abroad participants’ motivations for studying in East Asia, I believed that the best way to capture these motivations was by using the participants’ own words. With the focus on participants’ voices, this study fits within the qualitative methodology. This study is an exploratory qualitative study, as there are foundations in theory for the work, but little research

in this specific topic of regional comparisons for students studying abroad in Asia (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

### **Participants and Sampling**

Participants were current or recent undergraduate students who were U.S. students and had studied abroad in Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan since the fall semester of 2020. The sampling strategy was a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. First, using purposeful sampling, I contacted individuals employed at universities around the United States and East Asia that have study abroad programs in East Asia or host study abroad students from the United States. These higher education institutions represented a variety of sizes, locations, and types. The commonality is that they either have had students study abroad in East Asia (in the case of U.S. institutions) or have hosted U.S. study abroad participants (in the case of East Asian institutions). If they agreed, these individuals connected me with potential participants. Snowball sampling was used if participants were able to connect me to other potential participants who met the study's sampling criteria. I also posted my recruitment letter on LinkedIn, to use my network to connect me with potential participants. To ensure potential participants' privacy, I reminded my connections not to share potential participant information with me, but rather to simply send them the recruitment letter. I did not exclude participants who studied abroad on a short-term program, as long as they received academic credit for their participation. As I was looking for participants that studied abroad within a particular timeframe, a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling best fits that requirement (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Five participants took part in the study, four of whom identified as female and one of whom identified as male. Two participants studied in Taiwan, two studied in South Korea, and

one studied in Japan. When asked about their ethnicity, three of the participants identified as White, one identified as Chinese, and one identified as Ashkenazi Jewish. Four participants studied abroad for a semester and one participant studied abroad for a full year, although another participant originally intended to study abroad for a full year but ended up only studying abroad for a semester due to Covid-19 (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant pseudonyms</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Study abroad location</b>	<b>Duration of study abroad</b>
John	Male	White	Finance and International Business	Japan	Semester
Molly	Female	White	English; Minors: Writing & Communications; Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies	South Korea	Intended one year; stayed one semester
E.G.	Female	Chinese	Communications	South Korea	Semester
Sarah	Female	Ashkenazi Jewish	East Asian Language and Culture	Taiwan	One year
Claire	Female	White	Chinese	Taiwan	Semester

**Methods**

This study used surveys and virtual semi-structured interviews for data collection (see Appendices A and B, respectively). Surveys allowed for the collection of initial, demographic and academic data, as well as the confirmation that participants met the criteria to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants' own words to be captured while giving me the flexibility to adjust the interview as needed (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Interviewees answered nine different questions, with follow-up questions asked as needed for clarification, confirmation, or elaboration. Questions were based on push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior but were formatted in a way that participants framed their

experiences in their own words. For example, participants were asked “How would you describe your motivations to study abroad in (Japan/South Korea/Taiwan)?” and “What did you hope to achieve by studying abroad?” By asking for descriptions of motivations and achievements, I anticipated that participants would respond with both external and internal motivators, which could then be categorized using push-pull theory and TPB. By framing the questions in this open-ended way, participants’ words were less influenced by my word choices and question framing. Interviews and surveys also limited the influence of other study participants’ motivations and experiences, which could be influenced if focus groups or group interviews were conducted. Instead, individual interviews captured each participant’s thoughts and feelings as their own. Conducting these interviews virtually allowed me to access participants from wherever they were in the world rather than being constrained to a physically accessible location for both myself and the participant. During the interviews, I hoped to capture students’ perspectives on their influences and motivations while deciding to study abroad.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My positionality as a White, U.S. citizen working in South Korea greatly influenced my interest in this subject. Additionally, as a former study abroad participant in a less popular study abroad location (Russian Federation), I was interested in why other students choose less popular study abroad locations. However, given my positionality and experience in this field, I was careful to write interview questions that did not “put words in the mouths” of participants. When conducting interviews, if I inferred information based on participants’ stories, I asked participants about my inferences, so that they could confirm whether that was actually what motivated them or how they felt about their experiences. For example, when Claire discussed that she attended two different universities during her study abroad experience in Taiwan, I

followed up with a question “Did you know that going in before you applied to the program? Or was that something that kind of happened through the application process?” She responded that she “did not originally know that [she] would be going to two universities. It happened throughout the application process.” To clarify, I confirmed that being able to attend two universities did not impact her decision-making process to study abroad, to which she replied, “No, it did not” (Interview with Claire, March 8, 2023).

### **Ethics**

All participants contacted me personally after hearing about the research through their study abroad offices or universities. Having participants contact me ensured that participants did not feel coerced to participate in the study. Participants chose the time and date of the virtual interview, so that it was convenient for them. Participants consented to the recording of the interviews and all recordings were deleted as soon as transcripts with pseudonyms were created, to ensure the anonymity of the participants in the study’s final report. Participants were reminded at the start of the interview that they could stop the interview at any time and choose not to answer any questions. I also asked participants if they had any questions about the study before the start of the interview, to ensure that they felt comfortable with the process. At the end of the interview, I shared the next steps in the process with participants: transcription, final paper and presentation, and publication. Participants were also sent a copy of the final paper and presentation so that they could engage with and benefit from the research.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

All participant communication occurred on a password-protected email. Once the capstone was completed and sent to participants, all participant emails were permanently deleted. Interviews were recorded and transcribed within one week of completion. Once interviews were

transcribed with pseudonyms for participant names, interview recordings were permanently deleted. Transcripts were stored on a password-protected, personal computer. Transcripts were coded using a password-protected software, Dedoose. When coding, I used push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior to create preliminary codes and categorize participants' motivations. For example, for push-pull theory, I created codes for "push" and "pull" factors. I then created child codes such as "institutional prestige" under pull factors and "job possibilities" under push factors. For the Theory of Planned Behavior, I created a code for "barriers," aligning with the idea of perceived behavioral control. I then included child codes such as "Covid impact" and "Language barrier." Since my interview questions for participants were based on these theories, utilizing the theories as a starting point for coding provided me with a framework through which to view participants' narratives.

### **Findings**

Based on these five and interviews, I was able to glean some interesting trends in why the participants decided to study abroad in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, which correlated with push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior.

#### **Culture and Language Exposure**

All five participants mentioned culture and language exposure as part of their motivations for studying abroad, providing an important example of behavioral beliefs and outcomes, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior. Participants believed that the language and culture exposure would improve them and/or their study abroad experience in some way. For example, E.G. shared, "I think everyone should study abroad...Or just like, not even studying, just going abroad, and experiencing a different culture, reconnecting, like, living in a way that you otherwise wouldn't live" (Interview with E.G., March 11, 2023). When I asked if this desire to



“live in a way that you otherwise wouldn’t get the opportunity to” motivated her, E.G. responded in the affirmative: “Absolutely, yeah” (Interview with E.G., March 11, 2023).

Two participants, Claire and Sarah, highlighted the connection between language and culture as part of their motivations for studying abroad in Taiwan specifically. Notably, both these participants studied Chinese in Taiwan and were studying abroad on language programs in connection with their majors (Chinese, Claire; East Asian Language and Culture, Sarah). This desire for language and cultural study represents not only a behavioral attitude as in TPB, but a pull factor for participants, as they were “pulled” to Taiwan to improve their communication skills in Chinese. For example, Claire stated:

I knew that, with Chinese being my major, it’s hard to fully understand the culture and the language while not being in a, in the native country. So, in order to actually fulfill my desire to learn Chinese, I knew that I wanted to study abroad. (Interview with Claire, March 8, 2023)

Sarah highlighted similar motivations: “I knew I wanted to learn Chinese and study Chinese, specifically, um, traditional style Chinese, which is what they use, like a script that they use in Taiwan, um versus China, so that was the major reason starting off” (Interview with Sarah, March 14, 2023). Interestingly, although the existing literature highlighted non-degree students’ (exchange students’) motivations for “new experiences” as influencing their decision to study in Taiwan, Claire and Sarah did not highlight this as a motivation in their interviews.

### **Media Influence**

Sarah, E.G., Molly, and John all mentioned media influence in their interviews, although only E.G. and Molly specifically named it as part of their motivations to study abroad. Media influence represents a pull factor, as participants are drawn to study in a specific location due to

that country's media. However, neither E.G. nor Molly named media as the most significant factor when deciding to study abroad. E.G. states, "...least influential, probably just, like, Korean films and Korean dramas. Because even though I'm a fan, I kinda understand that they're selling like a story" (Interview with E.G., March 11, 2023).

Sarah highlighted that she first became interested in South Korea due to an interest in East Asian pop culture, which led to her interest in Taiwan.

...when I was younger in middle school, mostly, I was really interested in East Asian culture and East Asian pop culture, and so, um, I started self-teaching myself Korean, actually, and then from there in high school I studied abroad in Korea, which is where I met my Taiwanese friend, and so that, um, was kind of, the rest was history from there. (Interview with Sarah, March 14, 2023).

John, on the other hand, highlighted that he was not interested in Japanese culture prior to studying abroad, but knew that many of the people on his program would be, leading to a concern about making friends while on the program. He also noted, however, "I thought that would be difficult, but at the same time I know I'm someone that gets along pretty easily with most people, um, and I'm pretty open-minded when it comes to making new friends," so it was never a major concern for him (Interview with John, March 14, 2023).

### **New Experiences**

Three participants, John, E.G., and Molly, mentioned new experiences as a significant motivator for their decisions to study abroad in Japan and South Korea. This desire for new experiences is classified as a push factor when looking at motivation to study abroad overall, as a search for new experiences outside of their home country is "pushing" the participants to study abroad. On the other hand, when choosing a specific study abroad location, new experiences can

be defined as a “pull” factor, as it is the newness of the specific experience that a geographic location offers that is pulling the participant there. For example, when describing her motivations to study abroad Molly highlighted, “I would probably put environment first...as like most influential...just because...I like really wanted to get out of my area, and there’s...like a lot of places I want to travel, I have like a huge list of countries...” (Interview with Molly, March 10, 2023). This shows an example of a “push” for Molly to study abroad because seeking new experiences “pushed” her to study abroad. On the other hand, John’s perspective provides an example of new experiences providing a “pull” factor, as he was “pulled” to Japan because of the opportunity to have a unique experience. “So then, I looked into Japan, and I just thought it would be really cool...I just figured it was the most unique and out of my comfort zone place I could go to out of all the available options” (Interview with John, March 14, 2023).

### **Family and Friends**

Multiple participants mentioned that family or friends inspired them to study abroad in East Asia. E.G., who was adopted from China, originally wanted to study abroad in China, but the Covid-19 pandemic prevented her from doing that. However, since her mother is Korean, she shifted gears and decided to study abroad in South Korea. Similarly, Molly was originally inspired to study abroad in Japan because of her father’s experiences there as a child. However, a combination of other factors, including program location, health, and interest in South Korean culture, ultimately led her to choose South Korea over Japan for her study abroad experience. Although neither of them ultimately ended up in the country that they originally intended, familial exposure was part of their inspiration for looking at the region. On the other hand, Sarah studied abroad in high school where she became friends with a student from Taiwan. After visiting her friend in Taiwan, her interest in pursuing study abroad in Taiwan was cemented.

Connecting with family and friends was a significant pull factor for students, as participants' interest in connecting with family and friends pulled them towards specific countries. Family and friends also represent a normative belief in the Theory of Planned Behavior.

Molly's family, on the other hand, shared their concerns about whether she could "handle" going abroad, particularly with a language barrier. Molly was motivated by "wanting to prove them wrong" (Interview with Molly, March 10, 2023). Her family's opinions served as normative beliefs that influenced her decision-making process.

### **Job Possibilities**

One of the push factors for both Claire and John was the potential for better job opportunities in the future, as they would not be able to pursue this type of opportunity at their home institution. Job possibilities also represent a behavioral belief according to TPB (Schnusenberg et al., 2012). For example, Claire, as a student at one of the military academies, noted that she hoped that "learning the language would put me a step ahead of other candidates that also want to be an intelligence officer" (Interview with Claire, March 8, 2023). Similarly, John notes that "...down the road if I wanna look for, maybe, a bank based in Asia, having this experience under my belt, I feel like would give me the upper hand, um, when it comes to maybe some other applicants" (Interview with John, March 14, 2023).

### **Institutional Prestige**

For both E.G. and Molly, studying in South Korea offered an opportunity to study at an institution with significant prestige, demonstrating an important pull factor. E.G. states, "And also, the university I was going to study at, one of the SKY universities, I always heard my grandma talking about how good of a university that was and I just wanted to go and, like, show her I could do it" (Interview with E.G., March 11, 2023). Molly also built on that idea, saying,

Okay, um so the university is part of the SKY universities, and it's like, basically the same level as like an Ivy League back in America. And the school that I go to now is not very challenging, um, so I wanted to kind of challenge myself by like being abroad and studying abroad. Um, and I feel like being in that environment also heavily, like, changed my viewpoint, um, as far as academics go, and the way that I approach certain like papers or studies and things like that. (Interview with Molly, March 10, 2023).

### **Covid-19**

The most significant perceived behavioral controls for participants, or outside factor that shaped the ease or difficulty of an action, was Covid-19 (Goel et al., 2010). Due to different restrictions and requirements surrounding the pandemic, participants had to consider country policies as part of their study abroad calculus and decision-making processes. As E.G. states, "At first I wanted to go to China because I was adopted from China and I thought it would be nice to go back and see the place I was born. But with Covid, it just wasn't possible." (Interview with E.G., March 11, 2023). Molly reiterates the impact saying that, although there were other factors in her decision-making process, "I'm pretty sure Japan's borders were also closed for Covid at that time...I opted for South Korea..." (Interview with Molly, March 10, 2023). John also noted that he looked at his university's program in Shanghai, but "they [the study abroad office] kind of weren't, because of Covid...they kinda weren't recommending that I even look into it" (Interview with John, March 14, 2023). Sarah mentions that she had "tried to study abroad [in Taiwan] actually three times, but Covid shut it down, twice, so, third time's the charm" (Interview with Sarah, March 14, 2023). She also mentioned that she "was a little worried that I wouldn't be able to come and that it would be more of a lockdown type situation because they've been so intense with Covid" (Interview with Sarah, March 14, 2023).

### Other Perceived Behavioral Controls

Interestingly, other than Covid-19, no perceived behavioral controls changed participants' decisions to study abroad. There were several perceived behavioral controls that were considerations but did not ultimately impact the outcome of their decision of where to study abroad. Four out of five participants stated that they were not really worried about any obstacles, and then provided examples of how they would overcome those challenges. For example, John highlights his concerns about being able to make friends and adjust to the food in Japan. However, he also notes that, "So I wasn't really worried. Um, you know, I kind of just threw myself out there and I knew I would just like figure it out" (Interview with John, March 14, 2023).

One of those perceived behavioral controls was the language barrier. Molly and E.G. both highlighted the language barrier as a consideration, although ultimately not a deterrent, in their decision-making process. Notably, both participants who cited a language barrier as a behavioral control were not motivated to study abroad as part of a language study program. Molly states, "I think I was most worried about the language barrier. Just, because I didn't know any Korean before I went..." (Interview with Molly, March 10, 2023). E.G. also noted the language barrier as a consideration, although ultimately not a huge concern:

Yeah, I think...I feel like most people when they study in any country, language is always a big concern. And...because I always...knew I was gonna be in Seoul...So, I knew some people would speak English, so I wasn't super worried. But I still tried to...familiarize myself with basic Korean..." (Interview with E.G., March 11, 2023)

Sarah, on the other hand, noted a perceived behavioral control that she worried would prevent her from studying abroad: politics. "...My major concerns were mostly just, honestly,

can I say political? Just because the tensions between Taiwan and China and China and the U.S. have been so tense” (Interview with Sarah, March 14, 2023).

### **Limitations**

One of the most significant limitations in this study is a lack of participants who studied abroad in China. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was difficult for students to study abroad in China due to lockdowns and restrictions. Additionally, the increasing global tensions between China and the United States may have further reduced the number of students studying abroad in China. For comparison, 2,481 students studied abroad in China for the 2019/2020 school year, but only 382 students studied abroad in China for the 2020/2021 school year (Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, 2022). Since my study had a time limitation of studying abroad in Fall 2020 or later, this made recruiting participants who studied in China difficult.

Additionally, I was only able to survey and interview two participants each who studied abroad in South Korea and Taiwan and one participant who studied abroad in Japan. Their unique, individual motivations, while informative, do not represent the entire population of U.S. students who choose to study abroad in these three countries.

Another limitation is that I conducted only one interview per participant. As Seidman (2019) notes, three interviews are preferable to conduct qualitative research to achieve in-depth responses from participants. However, within the feasibility of the study (time and personnel constraints), there was only the opportunity to conduct one interview. This interview was balanced by including an initial survey to provide another method of collecting data from the participants before the interview. Polkinghorne (2006) states, “the quality of the results of a

qualitative study does not depend on the strict adherence to a sequence of steps or the application of techniques advocated by a particular method” (p. 72).

A final limitation is the lack of diversity among my participants. The majority (four out of five) of my participants identified as female and three out of five participants identified as White. However, given the time limitations for this study, I was unable to recruit participants with different identities.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the motivations of U.S. students studying abroad in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan through the lens of push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. I found that both push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior provided useful lenses for examining student motivations in this context. Push-pull theory helps to identify why a student chose a particular location, while the Theory of Planned Behavior adds the nuances of internal and external influences for those motivations.

#### **Japan**

John highlighted multiple reasons for studying abroad in Japan, with job possibilities and new experiences being the most significant. Both of these factors represent the pull in push-pull theory and behavioral beliefs from TPB. However, John also noted, that it was not Japan specifically that interested him, but rather the idea of new experiences. He chose Japan because it was the most unique experience available to him.



## **South Korea**

E.G. and Molly both studied abroad in South Korea, with a variety of parallels to their experiences. Both were “pulled” to South Korea by family, media influences, and institutional prestige according to push-pull theory. Also of note, however, is that neither E.G. nor Molly originally intended to study abroad in South Korea. Rather, they were interested in other countries in the region (China and Japan, respectively), but due to external factors, or perceived behavioral controls in TPB, ended up choosing South Korea.

## **Taiwan**

Both participants in Taiwan, Claire and Sarah, deliberately chose Taiwan with the intention of improving their Chinese language skills, demonstrating the most significant pull factor and behavioral belief for both of them. Neither of them considered study abroad in other locations, which is markedly different from the other three participants’ motivations.

## **Implications for International Education Practice**

There are multiple implications for international education practice based on this study. First, study abroad programs should capitalize on the fact that students want to gain exposure to a different language and culture. Programs should highlight both the opportunities to explore East Asian media and pop culture, as well as the opportunities to explore other aspects of the host country and culture. Study abroad programs and universities can capitalize on this knowledge by providing students with opportunities to explore their host culture more in-depth and emphasizing these opportunities in their marketing.

Another important implication is regarding language study. Both Claire and Sarah were studying Chinese as part of their major. As Claire says, “So, in order to actually fulfill my desire to learn Chinese, I knew that I wanted to study abroad” (Interview with Claire, March 8, 2023).

None of the other participants were pursuing the host language as part of their major, and all of the other participants considered other countries before landing on their final study abroad location. Institutions and study abroad programs need to consider if, how, and when students are being introduced to foreign languages prior to study abroad.

On the support side, programs should work to alleviate perceived behavioral controls for participants. Other than Covid-19, the major perceived behavioral control for this study's participants was the language barrier. Providing support in language learning pre-departure or more information about available support in-country would help alleviate participants' concerns.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The next step in the pursuit of this research is to conduct a similar study, at a larger scale, using mixed methods. This would allow for a quantitative comparison that would corroborate these findings at a larger scale, while still centering the voices of participants. Additionally, when conducting this study, special attention should be paid to having greater diversity of participants, to ensure that an equitable representation of voices is presented.

More research should be done investigating student motivations to study abroad in East Asian nations and its connections to job opportunities and language learning. This study found that both job opportunities and language learning were motivators for students to study abroad, but a larger sample size and analysis across nations and program types should be conducted.

Additionally, there should be more research into how students get introduced to study abroad, as so many participants mentioned knowing that they wanted to study abroad from a young age. One of the unexpected findings of this study was that four out of five participants mentioned knowing that they wanted to study abroad before starting college. In addition, several

participants mentioned being interested in high school study abroad programs (Molly and E.G.) or participating in a high school study abroad program (Sarah).

### **Conclusion**

There were two key findings from this study. First, the most significant motivation for students to study abroad in East Asia, regardless of country, was exposure to a different language and culture, demonstrating a significant behavioral belief that was shared by all participants.

The other key finding was the differences in motivations across countries. Although there were commonalities across some or all participants, there were also marked differences. The major difference between countries was whether or not participants considered other study abroad locations. John, who studied abroad in Japan, had considered multiple study abroad locations, including London and Italy, before finally deciding on Japan. E.G. and Molly, who studied abroad in South Korea, considered other countries in East Asia (China and Japan, respectively), before deciding to study in South Korea. Finally, Claire and Sarah did not consider other study abroad locations before going to Taiwan, although Sarah had previously studied abroad in South Korea.

Although these findings represent a small sample of the motivations for student study abroad in East Asia, their implications highlight the need for further research in this area to promote better understanding of and support for student learning in an education abroad context. This study has taken a step in answering this need by providing a comparative analysis of student motivations to study abroad in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

Current Age:

Ethnicity:

Gender Identity:

Where did you attend college?

What was/is your major(s)?

What institution did you attend when studying abroad?

When did you study abroad (semester and year)?

Did you have any previous experiences traveling or living abroad?

Did you travel outside of your host city before, during, or after your study abroad experience?

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

When choosing an undergraduate institution, was study abroad in (Japan/South Korea/Taiwan) a part of your motivation for attending that institution?

When did you decide that you wanted to study abroad in (Japan/South Korea/Taiwan)?

What was the process of deciding to study abroad like?

What influenced your process of deciding to study abroad?

What factors influenced your process of deciding where to go to study abroad?

How would you describe your motivations to study abroad in (Japan/South Korea/Taiwan)?

If you were to rank those factors, how would you rank them from least influential to most influential? Why?

What did you hope to achieve by studying abroad?

Did you have any concerns about studying abroad in (Japan/South Korea/Taiwan)? How did those concerns weigh into your decision-making process?