

INTENSE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WHILE STUDYING ABROAD: STUDY ABROAD AS A TRANSCENDENT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In a hermeneutical analysis of 11 in-depth interviews with past study abroad participants and 65 photographs shared by these participants, we affirm the findings of Wright and Larsen (2012 and 2016) that study abroad is an ‘extraordinary experience.’ We also discover five additional emergent themes: sight versus blindness, words versus actual experiences, emotional intensity, extreme enjoyment and personal growth and awakening. We then interpret these five new themes as Transcendent Customer Experiences (TCEs), following Schouten et al. (2007), to explain the high levels of satisfaction and delight produced in participants of study abroad programs. The paper concludes with a discussion of the similarities and differences between TCEs and extraordinary experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore student satisfaction with study abroad programs (or SAPs). These programs can be defined as experiences that, under the guidance of university faculty or staff members, combine academic content with relevant cultural activities (Hill and Iyer, 2010). The most recent data available, the Open Doors 2017 study by the Institute for International Education, shows that business students account for 21% of all students who study abroad. And business student participation in study abroad programs continues to grow, increasing by 8.1% over the previous year (Morris 2017). This growth is fueled, in part, by the intense satisfaction students feel after completing a study abroad program (Wright and Larsen 2012).

A major goal of business-focused SAPs is to increase student intercultural proficiency (Clarke et al. 2009) and to prepare students for the global and multicultural work environment of the future (Toncar and Cudmore 2000; Wright and Clarke 2010). Evidence also suggests that students grow and transform while they are abroad (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw and Straughan 1999; Carsello and Greaser 1976; Dolby 2007; Paul and Mukhopadhyay 2003; Schuster et. al. 1998; Sell 1983).

In the past, much of the literature in marketing education about SAPs focused on the logistics of getting to the new country and the various activities that happen after arrival (e.g., Duke 2000; Erffmeyer and Al-Khatib 1997; Festervand and Tillery 2001; Johnson and Mader 1992; Henthorne, Miller, and Hudson 2001; Koernig 2007). More recent research has examined the attitudes and skills acquired by students who participate in SAPs (Clarke et. Al 2009; Wright

TABLE 1
Selected Research on Study Abroad Programs in the Marketing Literature

Study	Description	Important Findings
Albers-Miller, Prenshaw and Straughan (1999)	A survey of 656 undergraduate business students from seven different university campuses. Goal: to identify student beliefs about study abroad programs.	A large number of students are confused about study abroad programs offered by their universities. Returning students generally praise the experience, but others do not study abroad because they are unaware of how the experience will help them graduate.
Clarke et. al (2009)	This study compares students in courses taught at the home university (n=70) with students in a university sponsored, faculty led, semester-long study abroad program in Europe (n=87).	Study abroad participants demonstrated greater intercultural proficiency than students at the home university taking the same courses.
Duke (2000)	A review of study abroad settings and learning activities.	Students are impressed with company visits. Journal writing is a versatile exercise; treasure hunts work best on longer tours, and larger projects will require a fair amount of pre-departure planning.
Erffmeyer and Al-Khatib (1997)	A cultural orientation survey of 100 U.S. students studying in Japan.	Critical cultural orientation issues are missing from the cultural orientation programs. Pre- and post-trip cultural orientation programs are recommended to reduce cultural marginality.
Paul and Mukhopadhyay (2003)	Survey of 42 Executive MBA students in two cohort groups during a 2-week international trip. Global business students completed a pre- and post- test survey to identify learning that occurred while studying abroad.	Different foreign locations produced no difference in the level of learning. However, the SAP itself positively affected both cognitive and affective elements of learning.
Schuster et.al. (1998)	A two-year, pre- and post-trip longitudinal study of 90 Executive MBA students from 2 universities.	The SAP produced cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral learning effects in the students.
Toncar and Cudmore (2000)	The paper discusses a 6-week supervised overseas internship experience in England. It describes the program and cultural activities for 26 student interns who were also allowed time for independent travel.	The authors discuss and describe the value of the overseas internship program to students, faculty, the home institution, the host college, internship sponsors and prospective employers.
Wright and Clarke (2010)	Pre- and post-trip testing over three semesters of 85 undergraduate students participating in a university sponsored, faculty led, semester-long study abroad program in Europe.	The SAP itself is responsible for producing better intercultural communication skills, more global worldviews, and greater sensitivity to cultural differences.
Wright and Larsen (2012 and 2016)	An analysis of graffiti left on study abroad residence walls. Qualitative analysis of 200 painted bricks; 13 in-depth interviews; and use of autodiving (a photo-elicitation technique)	Four primary emergent themes are discovered: travel trophies, magic moments, community, and alcohol. The authors interpret these emerging themes as an extraordinary experience that leads to intense satisfaction with the SAP.

and Clarke 2010). Non-business researchers have also documented skills acquired in SAPs. Fry (2009) reported that undergraduate SAPs have a significant and direct impact on “global engagement” (operationalized as volunteerism, philanthropy, international and domestic political and civic engagement, global leadership, and global values) later in life. Sutton and Rubin (2010) found that students who return from SAPs have stronger cross-cultural navigational skills, higher graduation rates, and improved academic performance. See Table 1 for a selected summary of findings in the marketing education literature about studying abroad.

INTENSE SATISFACTION WITH STUDY ABROAD

While this focus on logistics, activities, attitudes, and skills is important, another important reason for studying abroad is emerging: the extraordinary experience enjoyed by participating students. Students often make superlative comments about their study abroad experience, such as “best semester,” “amazing,” “great,” and “best thing I’ve done in life” (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw and Straughan 1999; Wright and Clarke 2010; Wright and Larsen 2012). Wright and Larsen (2012) liken the study abroad experience to an “extraordinary experience,” a construct first illuminated by Arnould and Price (1993). Extraordinary experiences are “intense, positive, intrinsically enjoyable experiences” that entail “a sense of newness of perception and process” and are characterized by “high levels of emotional intensity” (Arnould and Price 1993, p. 25) resulting from an engaged interaction with other SAP participants, service providers, and merchants. Extraordinary experiences are spontaneous, authentic, unrehearsed, and, most importantly for this study, lead to intense satisfaction and delight. They are personally meaningful experiences that are interpreted within the broader context of the consumers’ lives, as demonstrated by comments such as the “best thing I’ve done in life.”

Wright and Larsen (2012, 2016) identified four aspects of studying abroad that lead to intense satisfaction and delight. They identified themes of travel, magic moments, *communitas*, and alcohol as substantial enablers of satisfaction and delight. Travel during study abroad programs, either with the study abroad program or individually during free time, emerged as a significant theme in their study. The more students were able to travel while studying abroad, the more satisfied and delighted they were with the study abroad program. Closely aligned to travel, magic moments were aspects of the study abroad program that went beyond the ordinary and entered the realm of the magical. The authors defined *magic moments* as “deeply emotional experiences that enchant and delight the participants” (Wright and Larsen 2012, pp. 230-131). Magic moments are *peak experiences* that are spontaneous, unrehearsed and difficult to replicate. “Peak experiences seem often to originate from outside the individual and to transport that person to unexpected emotional heights. In the midst of a peak experience an individual feels intimately connected to some larger phenomenon, such as nature, humankind, or the infinite” (Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007, pp. 357–358). One element of a magic moment was a surprise alteration to the schedule that led to this extreme but unanticipated delight. The third theme, *communitas*, refers to “an evolving feeling of communion with friends, family, service providers, and even strangers” (Wright and Larsen 2012, p. 133). Their research demonstrated how other students, service providers, faculty members and even local merchants, students, or neighbors contributed to their delight in the study abroad program. The fourth theme, extensively analyzed in Wright and Larsen 2016, was alcohol. While alcohol can be a problem for study abroad providers (Hummer et al. 2010; Pedersen, LaBrie and Hummer 2009; Pedersen et al. 2010; Pedersen, Larimer and Lee 2010), Wright and Larsen 2016 identified some of the aspects of alcohol that lead to satisfaction with the study abroad program. Taken together, these four

emergent themes lead to the interpretation of study abroad as an extraordinary experience and they offered it as an explanation of the intense satisfaction students often feel with SAPs.

This research seeks to expand on Wright and Larsen's (2012 and 2016) studies to see if these results resurface in a new study. In addition, we are looking to identify other elements that can lead to intense satisfaction and delight with study abroad programs.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approaches used in this study are typical of research in the tradition of Consumer Culture Theory, or CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) with particular emphasis on depth interviews (McCracken 1988), analysis of photographs (Heisley and Levy 1991) and hermeneutic or interpretive data analysis (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

A total of 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with seven female and four male respondents from three different universities or colleges in the West and Midwest in the United States. Two universities were private, religious universities and one was a major state university. Two students spent an entire semester abroad, two spent eight weeks abroad, and the rest spent 10 to 14 days in a study abroad program. In addition, the two women who spent eight weeks abroad also served foreign missions for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one in Portugal and one in Argentina. Three other students participated in two study abroad programs while in college and one participated in three. The researchers came to these unstructured, in-depth interviews with several questions derived from the literature reviewed above, particularly Wright and Larsen (2012 and 2016). But as each question was answered, the researchers followed up with new and different questions derived from the respondents' experiences. We continued interviewing respondents about each of these foreign experiences until redundancy in responses was reached, which resulted in 11 usable, in-depth interviews.

The autodiving photoelicitation technique developed by Heisley and Levy (1991) was used to generate further insight as each of the eleven respondents provided five or more photos of their experiences abroad and commented on the photographs. The interviews were conducted over Zoom during the summer of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. These recorded video interviews were automatically transcribed, and researchers reviewed the automatic transcriptions for errors, comparing them with what was actually spoken in the recorded video, and making corrections as necessary. These transcripts, along with the photographs, became the main data set analyzed in the study. The recorded interviews came to more than 20 hours of video, 88 pages of transcribed, single-spaced text, and approximately 65 photographs. This "text" was then edited for clarity and readability, as when people speak, they do not always speak in complete sentences. We added punctuation and capitalization where appropriate and we removed extraneous words like "um," "uh," "er," "like," "you know" and other verbal placeholders that did not contribute to the flow of the text. But other than those clarifying edits, the text is as the respondents uttered it.

The photographic and verbal texts were then hermeneutically analyzed through an iterative process that identified and tested the validity of emerging themes (Thompson 1997). After several iterations, the emerging themes were interpreted holistically to give meaning to the entire data set (McCracken 1988; Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997). This study of these education abroad experiences is, thus, similar to other CCT studies of African funerals (Bonsu and Belk 2003), reality TV (Rose and Wood 2005), a stock show and rodeo (Peñaloza 2001) or climbing Mt. Everest (Tumbat and Belk 2011), to cite but a few CCT studies.

FINDINGS

This study affirms the four emergent themes discovered by Wright and Larsen (2012, 2016) and elaborates on five additional themes that produce intense satisfaction with SAPs. The first part of this section will briefly focus on Wright and Larsen's (2012 and 2016) four emergent themes and in the second part we explore new and different themes that emerged from an interpretive reading of the data. Specifically, we will elaborate on the themes of *sight versus blindness*, *words versus actual experiences*, *emotional intensity*, *extreme enjoyment* and *personal growth and transformation*.

Wright and Larsen

Wright and Larsen (2012) was the first study to link intense satisfaction with study abroad to the extraordinary experience construct. They identified three main themes in their narrative: travel, magic moments, and *communitas*. To these three themes, Wright and Larsen 2016 added a fourth: alcohol. In this section, we briefly affirm these findings from different respondents and data collected fifteen years after their data were collected, using different student respondents from different universities. Wright and Larsen's (2012, 2016) findings were based on a hermeneutic analysis of graffiti left by departing students in a residence in Belgium and by follow-up interviews, years later, with 13 former participants. Evidence for these four themes was abundant in the data for this study, but we will simply illustrate each theme with one or two examples, as they are not the major focus of this article. While this is not a replication *per se*, it does affirm the strength of their findings. Each of the responses are prefaced by an "R" (for respondent) and a number. For example, "R03" refers to respondent number 3.

Travel. One of the most satisfying aspects of a study abroad program is travel, either individual travel that occurred before, during, or after a structured study abroad program (SAP), or travel that occurred as part of the SAP. Every respondent mentioned some aspect of the pleasure and satisfaction of traveling, either independently or with the group.

R03: *My goal was to go everywhere. So, I went on that trip to Ireland and Scotland. Then I went to Amsterdam and Geneva, Switzerland and Lausanne, Switzerland, then I went to Spain, Belgium, London, Greece and another place... It was the way our schedule worked. We had three weeks on where we were in school and then a week off, so during those week breaks at the end of the month, I went everywhere.*

Magic Moments. Wright and Larsen define *magic moments* as "deeply emotional experiences that enchant and delight the participants" (pp. 131-132). These experiences are "spontaneous, unrehearsed and are often difficult to replicate" (p. 132). And more often than not, magic moments are communally shared. Given the communal nature of this experience, we will share two experiences from students in a group who visited the Mont St. Michel in Normandy, France. Both of the responses below were elicited using the autodiving photoelicitation technique previously described.

R06: *Yeah, so there's Le Mont St. Michel. I think, I don't remember if that was, I think it was when we were first walking up to it. When we arrived on the bus. So I remember my very first sight of this. I think we had all been asleep on the bus, after a morning at Normandy. And we looked out the window and in the horizon, we could see it. And it looks like it's just a tiny little*

castle. And we were all like, “What is that?” And then we got closer. And it was this beautiful monastery that we were able to venture around the rest of the day. And so I think that in this picture, I didn't really understand what I was going to be able to see that day and then it was just a really awesome experience to have.

R08: So I guess I had some other pictures of Le Mont St. Michel and I, I chose this one just because it has both the building ... as well as also the view... But this was just really a surprise for me on the trip. I was not anticipating this like [the beaches at] Normandy, or the Eiffel Tower, anything like that, but it was, it was quite breathtaking. To me, the view up on top, the water [the tide] that kind of, I don't know exactly how to describe that, with the sand and the water there and just the reflection of the sky, but then also the ... abbey. Yes, but the abbey itself, just built on the rock like that. And in the middle, you're surrounded by water, was just quite amazing to me and it was, it was like I said, it was just breathtaking and the, I mean, there's some interesting history behind it, too, I think. And it basically seems like something out of a movie.

In both cases, the trip to the Mont St. Michel was breathtaking and almost indescribable. Wright and Larsen (2012) mentioned that while magic moments are hard to replicate, a surprise stop in the itinerary or underpromising and overdelivering could set the stage for a magic moment. The surprise nature of the trip to the Mont St. Michel seems to have catalyzed the creation of a magic moment for the participants.

Communitas. *Communitas* refers to an evolving feeling of togetherness and communion with other students, friends, SAP service providers and perhaps even strangers (Turner 1974). Strangers thrown together into an intense experience can sometimes create lasting personal bonds (Arnould and Price 1993). *Communitas* was very evident in the data for this study and was one of the elements that led to intense satisfaction with the SAP.

In the vignette below, one nursing student who participated in a required, working, nursing study abroad program to Ecuador, had this to say about her group and the professors who lead it.

R01: There was one day when we all kind of got homesick and our professors kind of noticed that and then one of the hospitals closed down that day. So half of the people couldn't even go to their work site and so everyone was kind of bummed. And I noticed that the professor created, it could have gone both ways, it could have gone, “This was the worst day ever.” Or it could have been like, “This is the best day ever.” And what he did made a really big difference. And I could tell that he was kind of having a home sick day too. But instead of dwelling on that he grabbed all of us and he said, “Quick, we can swim for an hour in the pool. Run, grab your swimming suits!” And we ran and we got our swimming suits. And we played this game in the pool where we all had to swim across the pool and then team up with another person and swim back and honestly, we took videos and took pictures. And it turned out to be one of the funnest days on that trip. And I look back, because attitude is everything for a professor and if you get someone excited about a day, it creates an environment where everyone just enjoys everyone's company. And so I think the best thing that my professors did, my two professors that came, was they were just very positive about any and every experience, whether it turned out good or we had a flat tire or anything. They just laughed at it. And so I think positivity is a big one.

Communitas is evident in the above scenario, as the professors forged a bond with homesick students. And, unplanned and spontaneous, it also incorporated elements of *magic moments* that made the day memorable for the students.

Alcohol. Alcohol played a role in creating either *communitas* or in generating satisfaction with the SAP for all students except the two members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for whom alcohol is proscribed. Wright and Larsen (2016) suggest that while alcohol can be a problem, it can also lead to a deeper enjoyment of the SAP and can lead to stronger social bonds between the students participating in an SAP, as the following quote indicates.

R08: *I guess I'll start with Italy, the culture there with alcohol is just different than the United States. It is just not as big of a deal. It seems like it's just part of their culture. They have some wine with dinner and I mean that they drink it to enjoy it and for their meal. And I guess really that it probably changed my view on alcohol, especially that Italy trip. Especially in the United States, especially college culture, there's a lot of focus on just drinking. So, especially the Italy trip definitely started to change my view on that. It was in the [group's] first trip in Western Europe, I would say it did help our group probably come together, faster than we would have otherwise. I think people just tend to open up a bit more when they drank, and I don't really remember anyone getting too out of hand with it. I mean, there's definitely some people that drink a decent amount, but going out to the bars at night and having some time when you're not going exploring and just being having information being thrown at you, and just being able to bond, and have some drinks, it probably did help our group come together, faster. So I thought, overall the alcohol was a good part of this trip.*

Summary. In conclusion, this study affirms the four themes detailed in Wright and Larsen 2012 and 2016 and the impact they had on student satisfaction with the study abroad experience. But these data produced substantially more emergent themes than just those affirming the Wright and Larsen studies. In the next section, we will examine those emergent themes in greater detail.

EMERGENT THEMES

In this section, we examine in depth five new themes that give additional insight into how SAPs produce extraordinary levels of customer satisfaction. The five emergent themes are *sight versus blindness, words versus actual experiences, emotional intensity, extreme enjoyment and personal growth and transformation*.

Sight vs. Blindness. Several informants described the study abroad experience in terms of sight and seeing, verses blindness or not seeing. In some instances, such as the ones below, their eyes appear to open during the SAP.

R09: *[The SAP] opened my eyes to some more possibilities than what we are taught in the US... The US isn't necessarily the only way or the the right way or anything like that. There are many different opportunities and many different ways of doing things based off people's experiences and how they were brought up and everything like that. So it just opened my eyes to different possibilities. Because in the US we kind of get used to the same thing all throughout the US ... It's still pretty much similar where you always feel kind of at home, you know what's*

going to happen, or you know what's going on. So you want some experiences in Europe, it was quite different [emphasis added].

R08: *I've done quite a bit of domestic travel, which was great and I learn more about the United States and different areas of that. But, the class before the trip and also the trip itself, definitely **opened my eyes** to different cultures and just kind of made me realize that there's a lot more out there to **see** and do... I felt pretty **enlightened** by it. Just the history there, the focus on World War II was really interesting. I mean, I've read about it, **watched** movies, but being there is a whole different thing. So yeah, it definitely changed my **view** and opened up my horizons more, I would say [emphasis added].*

These “eye-opening” experiences described above imply that their eyes were shut, or they were blind to these differences before their eyes were opened by the SAP. Then they become **enlightened**, they **see** differently and they **view** the world in new and different ways, from a different **perspective**. Decades ago, Lee (1966) pointed out that one’s own culture is invisible and can only be made known, or *seen*, by cultural contrast. Apparently, the cultural contrast was sufficient to open the eyes of these informants. And opening eyes can lead to changed perspectives, as one of the students participating in a nursing SAP mentioned.

R05: *We had a very similar background because we all came into it with **the same nursing perspective**. But then we all come and **look at this new perspective of a new culture**, a new international culture. And we realized that the way that we've been taught how to **view** nursing is not the only way to **see** it and the challenges that we face in the US are not always the same in proportion [emphasis added].*

This student later said she was a “visual learner” and that being abroad helped her to learn lessons she would have missed in the United States.

R05: *I'm a **visual learner** and a bit more. I like experiences because they help me understand and connect emotions to the things that I'm learning in a textbook... When I actually go into a country and I **see** people with missing legs or **see** people living in poverty, or, I don't know, mothers with a lost child, like who lost a child in childbirth. That's different from learning about it in a textbook [emphasis added].*

This was echoed by the other nursing student:

R01: *I'll relate this to the health care system in Ecuador. I noticed that they didn't give pain meds to any women who are pregnant and I got to **witness** firsthand how much pain they were in while they were delivering a baby... If I were to further my education, I would try to help those women in different countries receive the help that they need... I think there are ways that we can help each other, globally, and I wouldn't have **noticed** that so much, if I had only worked in the health care system in the United States [emphasis added].*

Other students discussed how they learned by seeing cultural differences in new and different contexts. One SAP group visited Zaanse Schans, an historic neighborhood near Amsterdam. Zaanse Schans is a living museum with interactive workshops and exhibits, working windmills,

green historic houses, regional costumes, and reenactors demonstrating aspects of a now distant past. Of this experience, one student commented:

R09: *I really enjoyed the, just **seeing**, I really enjoy **seeing** the Netherlands and Belgium and **see** how they lived a certain way. I guess that we **saw** more of a touristy area. We could also **see** a little bit of how they keep the history in there... Our bus driver was originally from the Netherlands and he was talking about how he still wears wooden clogs, which I thought was very interesting, that that would just be a tourist kind of thing. I think he says unless he's driving he pretty much always wears his wooden clogs and it's just very interesting to **see** how they are still connected to more of their heritage and the past. And it seems to be more so than people in the US who are kind of disconnected [emphasis added].*

When images come into focus, some perceive what is about to happen. Sight also interacts with some of the other themes mentioned in the previous section. For example, the *magic moment* of visiting the Mont St. Michel is also peppered with allusions to sight.

R06: *And so I remember my very first **sight** of [le Mont St. Michel]. I think we had all been asleep on the bus. After a morning at Normandy. And we **looked** out the window and like, in the horizon, we could **see** it. And so it **looks** like it's just a tiny little castle. And we were all like, "What is that?" And then we got closer. And it was this beautiful monastery that we were able to venture around the rest of the day. And so I think that in this picture, I didn't really understand what I was going to be able to **see** that day and then, then it was just a really awesome experience to have [emphasis added].*

One student went so far as to describe what he had learned in terms of an epiphany. *Epiphany* refers to a sudden perception or an abrupt intuitive grasp of reality or the meaning of something. All at once, one *sees* a situation in a new and clarifying way. While reflecting on the SAP, this student said:

R07: *I remember thinking that one day, if I have a kid, and when they're in college, I'm going to make sure that they study abroad. That was my **epiphany** that I had when I was there, that I want to make sure that they got to have that same experience [emphasis added].*

Thus, through the SAP, students have their eyes opened and they are no longer blind to cultural differences. They see things in new and different ways, and they embrace new and different perspectives. This new sight even leads one student to having an epiphany about his SAP experience. New sight, replacing blindness with vision or the opening of eyes, transforms the SAP into an extremely enjoyable, memorable and satisfying experience.

Words vs. Actual Experiences. Sometimes, the SAP proved to be more than participants could express. In trying to describe the SAP to someone else, they were sometimes left without words and could not adequately describe the experience to another person. In fact, several respondents actively denigrated concepts such as *words* and *pictures* in conveying their study abroad experience to others.

R01: *Yes, I think people who went on the Ecuador experience before me, they talked to me before I went on the trip, and they said, they kept on saying **words**. “Great.” “Oh it's wonderful.” “I loved it.” ... And I think you can't ever express memories with words. You can try and express them with emotions, but even that is hard.*

Here, the respondent lamented the ability of *words* to express the *emotions* she felt. “They kept on saying *words*,” as if the words were profane, inadequate, unworthy and failed descriptors of the experience. Another echoed this experience, commenting about “lots of words.”

R09: *One of the hardest thing for me for going on any trip is coming back and describing, just, **lots of words**. I think I just ended up saying, “It was awesome. It was amazing.” These words aren't that great at describing at all for how, just how wonderful that trip was. And being around my peers and meeting different people and seeing different places that I've never seen before and learning about it at all. I'm learning all the history and everything. So there's a lot. Yeah, I couldn't describe it to my friends. I can show pictures and I hope their reactions are similar to mine [emphasis added].*

Another respondent described how others viewed his experience as “just words and pictures.”

R11: *I think that's pretty accurate right there. I mean, until you actually have the chance to experience it. I mean, **it's just words and pictures**. Basically, I mean, it can be a really beautiful picture and you can try to describe what it's like but people don't really understand what it's like until they've had the “boots-on-the-ground” experience [emphasis added].*

Yet another respondent decried the inability of the word “amazing” to convey the complexity of his experience.

R07: *And when people ask, “How is it?” you say, “It was amazing.” But that word “amazing” doesn't let them know. I mean, it is all, it literally was amazing. I loved it. But it's hard to describe to other people that enjoyment that you felt. It's really one of those things that you have to be there to experience it, to get the full feel of it.*

One respondent described the reactions of others when she tried to explain or describe her study abroad experience to them and failed to do so.

R02: *That's an awful feeling, not to be able to describe it to someone, because you're just so excited about it. Like, come on, you're trying to give it to them. And they're just like, “Huh?”*

A different respondent talked of an experience visiting a local high school French class to talk about her study abroad experience in two French-speaking countries, France and Belgium. Of that visit, she said,

R03: *They asked me how the experience was. And I couldn't, I couldn't explain it and it was too short of a time period to be able to explain it. You can't really put that into words. What you feel, when you're doing, when you're there and you're experiencing all of that, and then you tell high school students who just wanted a grade.*

Even with family, people with whom one normally ought to have an emotional bond, words failed.

R03: *I called my mom right when I landed in Scotland. My mom had called me, and we were on an eight-hour bus to Isle of Skye and I had said, "Mom, this is like a unicorn movie. Like, I can't even describe to you how beautiful it is." And that was a very, it was, it was so crazy. I just, I'm expecting *The Hobbit* to come out of a hill.*

R05: *As I kept going on these trips, my family became like, "Oh, you went on another trip. Cool. Good for you." They weren't as interested to hear my stories and so I just compiled all the pictures and all the stories for myself. And if anyone wants to hear them, I have a little pocket, like a little file. It was, I guess, easier to convey because things were a bit more repetitive in Ecuador and Paraguay, but also different because I had different reasons for being there. Yeah. So yeah, I guess, in all of them. I couldn't talk about it completely.*

R08: *I mean, especially with family. You show pictures and they just don't do anything, any justice and you can try to explain the culture and explain the feelings you had, but I've never been great at that. Anyways, I definitely did struggle with that because you want to explain and express how wonderful it was. I had a great experience for both my trips, so I it was kind of frustrating, actually, because I wanted them to understand how great of a time I had and what I experienced. But I just, I just don't know if words can adequately describe some of the experiences that I had.*

Some commented on how they could only fully share the experience with others who had been on a study abroad program themselves. They may not be able to relate to the exact same experience, but they understand the emotions, the feelings behind the words that are used to inadequately describe the experience.

R06: *I feel like, I think it's maybe a little bit easier to explain to other people who have been abroad, but for somebody who's never experienced anything like it, I don't think words can do it justice at all.*

R10: *I've found that with individuals who have studied abroad before, it's easier to get into those conversations. In my experience, when speaking with those that have not been able to travel, I almost don't even attempt to get into the sentimental side of the trip. It was more of kind of like a surface level. "These are the cool things I saw. This is what we did." But for those that have been to different places and experienced those things, I feel like the conversation goes less like, "This is what we did, here's where we went" to "This is how these made me feel."*

Each of these respondents is expressing some aspect of *ineffability*. Ineffability is the inability to express or describe an experience in words because of the sacredness or meaningfulness of that experience. And as described above, these experiences were sacred (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), personal memories that were profaned by trying to express them to unworthy others in mere words and pictures. Each of the eleven respondents expressed some aspect of ineffability in her/his interview, which demonstrates the pervasiveness of the topic in the interviews. And it also

demonstrates the meaningful nature of the experience to the respondents, providing another reason for their intense satisfaction with their SAP.

Emotional Intensity. Respondents felt intense emotions during the SAP. These emotions could be positive, negative, remorseful, wistful, depressing, longing, sorrowful and sometimes even overwhelming, as participants experienced different aspects of the SAP. Several respondents expressed these emotions as they discussed photographs of particularly meaningful places they had visited.

One student respondent visited a depressing site, the Auschwitz concentration camp in Oświęcim, Poland.

R02: *Well, we went to Auschwitz. So that's kind of a big one that was just a very dreary day. I don't think I ever got out of that emotional slump from just being exposed to all of that, it was super depressing. But also I learned so much from that and was able to almost walk where they walked and it was very, very deep and dark.*

Later, this same respondent showed a picture of the Birkenau death camp, not far from the Auschwitz concentration camp. In Birkenau, many Jews were murdered in gas chambers or worked to death in horrible conditions and this visited affected her like the visit to Auschwitz did.

R02: *That was at Birkenau. Those are actually the tracks where all of the Jews were brought into it before they were ushered into gas chambers and into their quarters. So that was just super emotional.*

This same respondent had another emotional experience near Humboldt University in Berlin, at a site commemorating the Nazi burning of books. On the ground, there is a glass window that looks into a white room with rows and rows of empty bookshelves. Of this experience, this respondent said:

R02: *But the other thing that also kind of made me emotional was where they burned all the books and they had like a memorial spot. That's actually one of my pictures.*

Later, when viewing the photo of this exhibit near the university, she lamented that:

R02: *It's the library picture. Unfortunately, you can't really see the bookshelves.*

A different respondent became very emotional at another World War II site, the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

R06: *We visited the Anne Frank house. I have a really close relationship with my dad. And so some of the memoirs from Anne Frank's father really spoke to me and were very moving. I feel like that museum does an excellent job of showing her life and what they went through during World War II. And then secondly, one of my favorite parts from the trip, was when we visited Normandy. There was one of the sites that we went to right along the ocean. I kind of wandered off on my own and was able to sit in this stillness of the ocean for five or six minutes and kind*

of just reflect on both the Americans and Germans and any other soldiers that lost their life there and I felt that was very emotionally captivating.

This respondent also took a picture of the graves in the American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer in France and commented on the emotional experience in this cemetery a second time.

R06: *So this was the site at Normandy, where I was able to kind of be on my own for a little bit and was really able to just enjoy my surroundings. It was a perfect day there and just being able to kind of reflect on the rest of our time at Normandy. I think this was the very last site that we visited just to be able to reflect on all of that was a really good time and was really important to me.*

The visit to the American Cemetery near the D-Day beaches affected other respondents in a similar way.

R08: *I think at the American cemetery in Normandy, that was pretty emotional to me. I mean, you can try and grasp numbers in your heads about like how many people died, things like that. But seeing all the crosses and all the grave markers there, that definitely struck home for me, just knowing that they're buried in a foreign land after fighting for a bigger cause than themselves. That was really impactful to me. And then another place was at the Anne Frank House ... I mean her experience is unique, but it's not that unique compared to all the other Jews and all other Holocaust victims. But when you have an individual story to put with it and understand what they went through being there. I was definitely pretty emotional. So both of those are more like sorrowful emotions.*

Later in the interview, this respondent referred to Normandy again, when he showed a meaningful photo of his experience at the cemetery to the researchers.

R08: *This is the American cemetery at Normandy and like I was saying earlier in the interview, it just struck me by how many graves there was, and also just the beauty of it. It was a perfect day that we went there, I believe, it was the same day we went to Le Mont St. Michel. When I think of Normandy, I wouldn't think of the cemetery necessarily, I think of the beach. Yeah, basically the beachhead but exploring this and realizing the other sacrifices that people made and, yeah, it was, it was just an impactful visit for me and I really just enjoyed exploring the cemetery.*

Several other respondents mentioned emotional experiences at World War II sites such as the Normandy beaches and cemetery, the Anne Frank house, and the Auschwitz concentration and Birkenau death camps.

R09: *There were some more serious times, especially when we went to the Anne Frank house. Some of the more emotionally impactful places like the Anne Frank house and the Normandy beaches and all those places that were meant to be more emotionally impactful... My favorite places are the ones that impacted me a little bit more, that made you think a little bit more, and they touched you differently than just having, oh, it's a fun time for the entire year.*

R11: *I do think it was really impactful when we went to the beaches of Normandy and visited the cemetery. That was emotional there. I think that was definitely an emotionally intense experience because we had some people that had relatives that were kind of involved in some way, shape, or form in that. So I think it makes you kind of appreciate and kind of realize exactly what it is like when you can look up and see an old armament kind of area up there and it looks so beautiful now, but you know exactly, you know how intense of a battle that was at the time too.*

But not all emotional experiences were tied to historic sites. Two experiences below demonstrate this. The first details a personal mourning ritual of one of the respondents.

R10: *Prior to the trip I had lost one of my siblings... [Several of us] stayed an extra week after. So on that very last day, we were just kind of figuring out things to do and [someone] suggested... I forget what the name of the church was but there's this big church in Strasbourg where I was able to go light a candle for my sister at this kind of mourning or remembrance type of thing that they were doing there. So that was a very emotional moment for me [bracketed text indicates the removal of specific names].*

One of the nurses who participated in an eight-week-long SAP in Ecuador reported the following.

R01: *Yeah, there was this lady. And it was my first week there in Ecuador. And she came up to me and she was just kind of mumbling in Spanish, and I could kind of break out some words and I noticed that she said she had two sons, both in the hospital. One was about to pass away from cancer and the other one also had cancer, but he was in the ER for an entire month and she didn't feel like they were getting treatment. I couldn't really speak the language very well, but I just said, "God loves you" and I said, "He will take care of your sons." And that was really, really emotional for me because I felt like I just wanted to help this lady so much but I technically wasn't a nurse for that country and so I could only do my part. And obviously, I'm not a doctor. But then a couple days later I remember I was back in that same hospital with some of my co-workers. They said, oh, this is [name] and they ran and got me. And it was the same lady, and she just came back and she just said, "I love you and God loves you" and she gave me a hug. And you never know the impact you have on people until you really go out of your way to, like a study abroad or something that's out of the normal comfort zone to receive those type of experiences that I otherwise would not have had. And, you know, I don't know what happened to that lady, but she made a lasting impact on me.*

Another respondent described a time when she was new in the language and very overwhelmed.

R03: *When I first got there [Prague in the Czech Republic], I kind of had, it wasn't necessarily culture shock, but the fact that I was there alone and the language switch in my brain hadn't come on yet and I just was trying to figure out where I was going, and what I was doing. And it was just very overwhelming, and I had an emotional experience. And I couldn't talk to anybody because everyone in the US was asleep. Yeah, I just kind of had to figure it out.*

One of the respondents who served an 18-month-long mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Argentina described her emotions when she made some discoveries about herself and economic justice in other parts of the world.

R05: *Yeah it's like it's not fair that I was born in the US in a stable family with a mom and a dad and raised in that home, and some kids were not raised like that. And it doesn't seem fair. On my mission. I was with my Argentine and Brazilian companions, and they were on the mission and they had the same cause and they still wanted to serve God and His people. But they had very different circumstances that they were coming from financially, economically, and socially, and it was kind of emotionally hard to see that difference. But also, it made me feel like I have a responsibility with what I have been given, being raised in the US and having a lot of privileges. There's a responsibility to do good with those resources that have been given to me to not use it.*

Another explicitly mentioned making emotional connections from her study abroad programs.

R01: *I feel like I became that annoying person that said, "Go on a study abroad! Go on a study abroad!" It just changed my views and still to this day if something reminds me of Ecuador or Portugal and I just come back with like a lot of emotions. Women work with a lot of emotions, guys are more logic based, and if I can relate an experience with an emotion, it gives me a connection. And that's something that I'll never forget.*

Emotionally intense experiences were prevalent throughout the SAPs of these respondents. They occurred for different reasons in different places and contexts, but most of the respondents described being emotionally impacted by their experiences abroad. Some of the experiences were positive and uplifting, such as the nurse who told the woman that God loved her and some were depressing, such as coming face to face with the atrocities at Auschwitz and Birkenau. Others were mournful, such as the respondent who lit a candle for his late sister and still others were overwhelming, such as the emotions experienced in Prague when learning a new language. But all of the experiences were remembered positively, and the respondents learned from these emotionally intense experiences. Learning is connected to emotional experiences (Rapaille 2006) and these experiences accelerated the learning process. This, in turn, contributed to the fond remembrance of the experience and the satisfaction the participants took from their various SAPs.

Extreme Enjoyment. All of the respondents experienced extreme enjoyment during certain moments of the study abroad experience. Extreme enjoyment refers to experiences outside of "normal" enjoyment, where unique settings and possibilities produce an outsized portion of enjoyment. While trying moments occurred to almost everyone (e.g., homesickness, getting lost, frustration at not understanding the local language), moments of extreme enjoyment seemed to cancel out the more difficult aspects of the experience and lead to very fond memories of the SAPs. As the respondent below suggests, such experiences can be "mesmerizing."

R02: *In Costa Rica, we went hiking up in the cloud forest, and we were actually able to touch the clouds and then zip line through the forest. And that was just a very mesmerizing day for me. It also happened to be my birthday that day. So I was just on a high.*

The social aspect of the SAPs is important, as Wright and Larsen (2012) detail and as we affirmed in the section on *communitas* above. But for some respondents, the social aspect of the SAP brought them actual joy.

R05: *I think in all of my experiences that people have been the highlight, whether it's the people that came with me or the people that I met while I was there. And so I think I had feelings of extreme enjoyment frequently when I got to know people and as I felt understood by them. And I felt like I understood them and it was a mutual connection. And also feeling like I can help or I can make a difference in someone's life, whether it's my study abroad partner or the translator that I'm working with. I feel like me being there made a difference in someone's life **and that brought me joy** [emphasis added].*

Another student spent a full semester in France and was able to easily travel to other destinations in Europe. But as she says below, France became a home to her, a place to which she could happily return after many enjoyable travels. This was surprising to her, as France was not her home.

R03: *I was in Scotland and it was so undeniably beautiful there that I did feel that I said, "I don't ever want to leave. I don't want to leave Europe, I want to stay here." And then there was another time where France was definitely a home to me. And so anytime that I would come back from a vacation, it felt like home and I experienced a lot of joy with that too. Just because I never really would have thought that any other place other than [name of city] would be my home.*

Exhibit 1



R01 experiencing extreme joy by swinging out over a giant cliff while studying abroad in Ecuador.

Several respondents discussed thrill-seeking behaviors that brought them extreme satisfaction with their SAPs. Some hiked, some explored, some engaged in ziplining and, in the vignette below, some went swinging off a giant cliff. **R01** had one of her cohort group take a picture of her swinging over a “very unsafe” cliff and this photo is captured in **Exhibit 1**. Of this experience, **R01** said,

R01: *It was a huge drop off from this gigantic mountain and probably very unsafe, but very rewarding, very enjoyable. There was this tree, and it was connected to a big, huge swing and you swung off of the cliff to see all of it. I can't remember exactly where it was. But that was an Ecuador summer.*

Interviewer: *How did you feel while on that swing?*

R01: *It was awesome. It was so fun. Yeah, we had a good time.*

Many respondents reported extreme enjoyment on their first sights of a new and different country. The descriptions of the *magic moments* in the section above that describe seeing the Mont St. Michel for the first time. But others also experienced awe and wonder upon seeing different places and monuments, as the next two respondent comments make clear.

R07: *The first time that we're walking down an alley and, you know, we walk down the alley and there's just this huge, massive cathedral in Strasbourg. I mean it's, I think, the second tallest church in France and in the top five in Europe, but it was just a massive cathedral. And when you see that, your eyes open, your jaw drops. And it's just amazing.*

R10: *I think it was, it may not have been the first night we were there, but it was the first night that we were able to walk around. We had a group of maybe seven of us. Not too many people, but we were just walking down the middle of this cobblestone street and I was looking up. Looking at the architecture, looking at the cathedral, looking at everything and it just, I got chills, goosebumps over my body. It's right then that it hit me, I am across the country in Strasbourg experiencing this for the first time. It's completely different architecture completely, different people. It was one of the cooler kinds of, not really an epiphany, but just kind of like when you step back and just really appreciate just, wow, you know this is incredible. There were a few of those moments during the trip. It was not an isolated thing.*

But Le Mont St. Michel stands out in one respondent’s mind as a signature moment of the trip.

R09: *There are probably so many times on the trip that is so different from anything I've experienced. Probably my favorite and probably most “Wow!” moment would be at Le Mont St. Michel. That was probably the most, one of the most amazing places to be. It's like a castle. It's an island, that suddenly becomes not an island. And you have to climb up through the people there. And again, just like walk through the main building [the Abbey] and seeing how beautiful and that was probably one of the most “Wow!” moments on the whole trip.*

Extreme enjoyment comes from sensation-seeking, from experiencing new and different things, from experiencing magic monuments the first time, and from discovering a new place as “home.” And extreme enjoyment implies intense satisfaction, as it creates a very positive disconfirmation of expectations and produces surprise, arousal, positive affect and, ultimately, delight (Oliver, Rust and Varki 1997).

Personal Growth and Transformation. The final emergent theme we will explore is personal growth and transformation. The SAPs change participants, as the literature review demonstrated (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw and Straughan 1999; Arnould and Price, 1993; Clark et al. 2009; Wright and Clarke 2010; Wright and Larsen 2012). Through encounters with culturally different places, students are forced to reexamine assumptions, understand native practices, and participate in new and different aspects of life abroad. In the process of doing this, they experience personal growth and transformation. The data for this study demonstrated this process of personal growth and transformation with abundant examples from each participant.

Several respondents described their SAPs as pushing them out of their “comfort zones” by going to a new and unfamiliar countries, by trying new and different foods, by having new experiences and by helping other people.

R01: *And you never know the impact you have on people until you really go out of your way to study abroad or something that's out of the normal **comfort zone** to receive those type of experiences that I otherwise would not have had ... And everyone is different. I went to Portugal. It helped me to be less selfish. If someone else goes to Portugal, it might help them to be more loving and if someone else comes to Portugal, they might notice that they need other people to help them. You know, like everyone gets an experience very personally when they go somewhere outside of their **comfort zone** [emphasis added].*

R07: *I had escargot [snails] for the first time, I had it twice. There's something in Strasbourg that looks like a pizza but it's not a pizza [called tarte flambée], that was like a native food that they have. Yeah, so we had that a couple of times. But no, I definitely tried to eat things that you couldn't get in America. So I went outside of my **comfort zone** and ate, whatever it was [emphasis added].*

R11: *[An SAP is] a great way to get out of your **comfort zone**. Definitely explore a lot of new things and it definitely helps. It helped me personally to kind of expand, to want to travel and see other things, or to feel more comfortable in a bigger city [emphasis added].*

While most respondents did not learn a new language during their SAP, four of the eleven did. Learning a new and different language also helped to push people out of their comfort zones.

R02: *Nothing is quite like going into a new country. You're definitely open to a lot more different aspects than you were in the class. It's different learning about it than reading about it in a book and actually having it happen to you. You're pushed out of your **comfort zone**, talking with people significantly different, especially if there's a language barrier. A lot of them know English, which is great, but just it's a whole different game plan ... I was definitely thrown*

out of my comfort zone in Brazil. I was trying to learn a new language because I wanted to grow in their culture [emphasis added].

R05: *Learning new languages. Definitely stretching at the beginning of my missionary experience. It was different to live with someone who was very different from me and to be able to cope with those differences and to compromise and that definitely made me learn how to love other people in a more real way. And I get a lot of anxiety, talking to new people. And actually, I talked to a lot of different people in a new language about things that they might not be very comfortable talking about. On the mission, it was about church. In Paraguay it was about sexual health, which is very taboo and ... that was something that stretched me and made me come out of my normal borders, my normal **comfort zone** [emphasis added].*

Curiously, the act of traveling, of getting from point A to point B, caused a lot of growth in many of the participants. For example, some had to come to grips with the public transportation systems in the various countries they visited, as well as alternate modes of transportation such as walking and biking. While public transportation is widely available in the USA, many students in this study came from regions of the country where public transportation is not widely used. The availability and wide use of public transportation, walking and biking was striking to many.

R08: *One thing that for sure struck me in the Western Europe trip, especially Amsterdam in the Netherlands, was the biking and transportation, just the transportation in general. And a lot of the cities. There's a lot more walking, a lot more biking.*

Another respondent talked about walking a lot to get places.

R03: *The one big one was that I did not really use transportation, like I didn't drive, ever, probably didn't want to do their kind of crazy driving... [The town] was much more pedestrian friendly and so I really liked that. Which was, yeah, out of the norm. Here [in the USA], I have to drive everywhere.*

One respondent described a “cool” aspect of the bus system in Paraguay.

R05: *And it was just cool to like use the bus systems there. They're very courteous. It's cool to see when a bus is completely full. But if a pregnant lady walks in, or an elderly lady walks into the bus, someone stands up and gives them their seat. They're very polite in that way. And the person who gives up a seat stands for the rest of the trip and I think it's good for society to see that kind of respect.*

Some respondents viewed their mastery of the local public transportation systems as a marker of personal growth. Several respondents talked about losing their way in Brussels and confusing the train system with the tram system, ultimately getting lost. To return to the hotel, they had to figure out the public transportation system. Of this experience, one respondent said:

R06: *I felt like I was maybe a little nervous but mostly calm. I think some students were definitely very, very worried about how we were going to get back. But I think that, in those situations, like we were in a big enough of a group, we were all safe, we had enough people to*

be able to problem solve our way back to the hotel ... But in the end, we made it back. So I think, it'll be good if I'm ever in a situation like that again where I'm not able to get home the way I wanted to, I can think back, "Oh, I made it back in Brussels, I can make it back here."

One woman described the sense of accomplishment she gained from figuring out how to get places on her own.

R03: *My sense of direction. And being able to find things, I guess, or, if I was lost, being able to go up to somebody and figure it out. The French are very helpful when you attempt at speaking their language and getting places and knowing their culture.*

One man described how working with the various transportation systems during the SAP made him more courageous and adventurous. In his response, he mentioned "by myself" four different times, suggesting he had learned about traveling from the SAP.

R07: *I think I became a little more courageous, a little more adventurous. After the trip ended. I hopped on a train and went to Switzerland **by myself** for no apparent reason. I spent one day in Switzerland **by myself** and then the other in Zurich, just **by myself**. I kind of looked at a map, my phone. I was like, what's the closest city and I just booked a train ride to Zurich and went to Zurich **by myself**... Definitely a little more courageous and adventurous [Emphasis added].*

Other respondents experienced personal growth and transformation in different ways. While not all students learned another language during their SAPs, those who did spoke of the growth and transformation that occurred from language study. One nursing student talked about the difficulties in learning Portuguese on her mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

R01: *I think this is something that you could tell people, the harder moments became the fondest memories for me ... So even the hard times, like learning a language, was really, really difficult for me. But it's like one of the coolest talents that I can come back with, so okay! ... Bring the hard memories because they'll become the fondest memories.*

Later, this same respondent participated in an SAP in Ecuador where Spanish, not Portuguese, was the local language. But the two languages were similar enough that she was able to get by in Spanish. Before the trip, she studied Spanish and continued to practice it during her eight weeks in Ecuador. Of this experience, she said:

R01: *And I think there is a point in learning a language when you actually go to a country. I did a little bit of Spanish in high school. But when I went to Ecuador with my Portuguese background, I was able to really immerse myself and only speak Spanish for almost eight weeks. And so that was a really cool opportunity for me to grow.*

Another respondent talked about her French improving when unable to communicate in English.

R03: *It's improved a lot. I had been studying French for seven years before that. And once I got there, just kind of being forced to speak it all the time and then not wanting to speak English with me all the time that it got a lot better.*

Yet another respondent talked about growing through language learning.

R02: *I was definitely thrown out of my comfort zone in Brazil. I was trying to learn a new language because I wanted to grow in their culture.*

Many respondents talked about cultural learning, discovering new and different ways of living, how culture impacts their lives and the lives of other people, and realizing that one's own culture is not the only viable way of living.

R02: *But it's definitely given me a broader perspective as to what other cultures are, what they look like, how other people live. And the different histories in their cultures and how they go about their daily lives ... In Ireland, it was probably my second time out of the country with none of my family, so that one just threw me for a loop because I didn't know anybody. So I was just trying to learn about the culture there.*

R03: *I think [my SAP is] one of the best things I've done. I changed a lot and became a very independent and more cultured person.*

R06: *I think it impacted my view of culture and the importance of it and understanding the way other people in the world live. I think we can appreciate the way that other people spend their life.*

R08: *Everyone has their own reality and it's so different based on their situation, especially going to a different country, you realize that this is not how everyone lives. I mean, people live in so many different ways and with such different cultures. So for me, my biggest realization was just understanding. Understanding where people come from by understanding how the different situations shaped them, and how my situation in America has shaped me growing up in the Midwest. And understanding that's where a lot of people's differences come from, is just where they grow up, the culture around them. The structure around them. That was probably one of the biggest realizations...*

Sometimes, the SAP transformed participants in very significant ways. The two nursing students who had served missions and also participated in one or more SAPs, discovered what they wanted to do going forward. Both responses focus on helping and serving others.

R05: *Knowing I needed experience to see the world a bit more, to see it in a first-person perspective, instead of an outsider's perspective, and so all those experiences [in Argentina, Ecuador, and Paraguay] helped me to see that there is need for continual service. Especially because I went to and I focused on the slightly poor areas of each of these countries, and I feel drawn to help and I feel drawn to use my education to help in the future. I know that there are poor areas in our country and even close around me and I hope that my education can build up the community rather than build me up. And I feel like the difference is, beforehand, it was, "How can my career help me and my family?" And now it's, "How can my career help the community and the world?" It just makes more sense. Although one downside is because I*

have seen so much of South America and the kind of public health side of nursing, it makes me want to be in the public health side in my career versus in the hospital.

R01: *I think when we just start out of college we feel so small. And in a world of chaos. I feel like we don't necessarily, I mean, I'm talking about my generation, us as millennial. We don't feel like we can impact the world and truly we don't. We try to and we try to act big on Instagram, or what we're doing. But I feel like this happened, both in Portugal and in Ecuador. I felt like I really made a difference. And for me, I don't have to make a difference with hundreds of people, but if I can just touch that one individual and give them hope. It really made a difference in me. And so if I can say anything, it's that we can give to others and we can be a huge impact or give a huge impact on someone special.*

These two responses were from nursing students, whose natural focus is on serving other people. Other respondents looked inward and focused the learning in on themselves.

R08: *[My two SAPs were] both great experiences. I will definitely build off them for the rest of my life.*

R09: *I guess the visit to Normandy made me aware of how important things are. Their [the soldiers buried in the cemetery] average age is 22 years old, which I am about right now ... And my grandfather was a World War II vet who never actually made it overseas, but just the idea that he could have been sent over and, just all the people that left families.*

R10: *I think in addition to the two weeks that we spent as a class, I think adding the extra week for myself at the end really pushed it to that point. I was in a hotel by myself for two days, doing whatever I wanted. In a city with a language I barely spoke or had minor proficiency in. So it was almost a kind of a test for myself that I was able to pass and prove to myself that I shouldn't have had that anxiousness that I talked about at the beginning [of this interview]. And turn it into excitement. So I think conquering that was fantastic. I think I mentioned just being able to go and speak to people who were so understanding and so friendly to me. When I had heard the French don't like talking to Americans that come to visit abroad, they'll be rude, they'll give you wrong directions, you know, all the different things that you hear. So I absolutely kind of rejected those ideas that I heard before, which is something I was worried about. So I think that learning to understand how the people are there, while also being out there, relatively isolated, really enhanced my trip and that it kind of bolstered my ability to know that I can do those things.*

Whether by traveling, figuring out local transportation systems, learning new languages, or coming to grips with new and unfamiliar cultures, all respondents demonstrated personal growth and transformation from their study abroad experiences.

Summary. Several themes emerged from the analysis of these data. Specifically, we affirmed the four themes described in Wright and Larsen 2012 and 2016. In addition, we elaborated on five themes that were not in Wright and Larsen's data: *sight versus blindness, words versus actual experiences, emotional intensity, extreme enjoyment and personal growth and*

transformation. Each of these five emergent themes add to the discussion of the extreme satisfaction most participants of SAPs feel after their travel experience is over.

DISCUSSION

Wright and Larsen (2012) recast the study abroad experience as an “extraordinary experience” to describe the outsized levels of consumer satisfaction and delight that were evident among SAP participants. Extraordinary experiences are very positive and intrinsically enjoyable experiences that are spontaneous and unrehearsed, authentic and communally produced with other participants, service providers, and even merchants and local residents. These highly meaningful experiences are then interpreted in the broader context of the consumers’ lives. For an SAP, this interpretation manifested itself in the form of superlative statements such as “best thing I’ve done in life.”

This analysis affirmed the four major emergent themes they uncovered and expands upon it by citing five additional emergent themes. Each of these five additional emergent themes, *sight versus blindness*, *words versus actual experiences*, *emotional intensity*, *extreme enjoyment and personal growth* and *transformation*, can also be interpreted as contributing to an extraordinary experience. But they go well beyond the extraordinary experience construct. They describe “transcendent customer experiences,” or TCEs (Schouten et. al 2007, p. 358). TCEs are “characterized by feelings such as self-transformation or awakening, separation from the mundane, and connectedness to larger phenomena outside the self. TCEs may also be marked by emotional intensity, epiphany, singularity and newness of experience, extreme enjoyment, oneness, ineffability, extreme focus of attention, and the testing of personal limits” (Schouten et. al 2007, p. 358).

As we have shown in the last section, respondents experience a fair amount of transformation or awakening. We detailed how new sight is gained, how eyes are opened, how their perspectives change in the light of their study abroad experience. Many respondents described emotionally intense experiences as they visited World War II sites or by participating in mourning rituals while abroad. One of the themes was on extreme enjoyment, enjoyment that went above and beyond “ordinary” enjoyment. These experiences were triggered by new and different sights, thrill-seeking behaviors and group dynamics. To a person, each of the respondents had difficulty in describing their study abroad experiences to others, and at least two even suggested that “pictures don't even do justice” to the experience (R03 and R08). *Ineffability* means being incapable of expressing or describing something in words because of the almost sacred nature of the event. Indeed, these SAPs were anything *but* profane and mundane experiences. They seem to occupy a sacred space in the respondents’ memories and discussing these experiences with people who have not studied abroad becomes an exercise in futility. Several respondents described seeing things in new ways, with new eyes, and two respondents even used the word “epiphany” in their responses (R07 and R10). And while we did not discover a consistent theme about the testing of personal limits or connectedness to larger phenomena outside of the self, these ideas were evident in at least some of the responses. Taken as a whole, the experiences of these respondents clearly describe a transcendent customer experience, or TCE.

And these are “customer experiences.” Each of the participants paid several thousand dollars and weeks or months of their time to embark of the various SAPs described in this research. The service providers, the professors, bus drivers, tour guides and others labored to produce emotionally fulfilling and extremely satisfying consumption experiences. Given the comments by these respondents in the interviews, their professors were successful in creating extremely

satisfying, even life-changing, consumption experiences. As extended service encounters (Arnould and Price 1993), where both service providers and participants cocreate the customer experience, intense customer satisfaction is the result. As Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 6) put it, “The services-centered view of marketing is customer-centric ... and market driven ... This means more than simply being consumer oriented; it means collaborating with and learning from customers and being adaptive to their individual and dynamic needs. A service-centered dominant logic implies that value is defined by and cocreated with the consumer rather than embedded in output.”

While the TCE and extraordinary experience constructs are similar in some ways (e.g., emotional intensity or a sense of newness), TCEs describe personal transformation and growth, the testing of personal limits, the inability of one to express the experience in words, one’s extreme focus of attention, personal epiphany, etc. In short, they are *individual* experiences. Extraordinary experiences are communal, shared experiences that arise out of the engaged interactions with others. Indeed, Tumbat and Belk (2011) describe the difficulties that arise when trying to have a solitary extraordinary experience. Extraordinary experiences are *group* experiences.

The graffiti data for the Wright and Larsen studies were produced “in the moment,” as the participants were still in the midst of their communal experience, thus convincingly demonstrating the more social aspects of extraordinary experiences. The data for this study were recorded one or more years after the SAPs transpired. The respondents were looking back on the experiences and focusing on what these experiences meant to them personally. Thus, it is unsurprising that an interpretation of a transcendent customer experience is stronger in this study than the group-oriented extraordinary experiences in the Wright and Larsen studies.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These findings, as mentioned earlier in the paper, are generated using methodologies prominently used by CCT practitioners. As such, they may be used in the future development of measurements of these two constructs for study abroad participants. Schouten et al. (2007) developed a similar measure for Jeep and off-roading enthusiasts that might serve as a starting point for the development of a measure pertaining specifically to study abroad as a TCE. Once we have such a scale developed, we can test then customer satisfaction as the dependent variable.

LIMITATIONS

As mentioned, we developed these findings using methodologies of the CCT community. As such, it is important to remember that we did not stumble upon THE interpretation of the data we generated, but AN interpretation. Theoretically, at least, the interpretive possibilities are infinite (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Another set of researchers could approach the same data in good faith and come up with other, equally compelling interpretations, based on their knowledge, values, and experience of the world. For example, new and different interpretive readings of the works of William Shakespeare and of the Bible appear regularly across the decades, even centuries. Rather than negating previous readings, these new readings add evidence about the depth and complexity of the texts studied. It is important to remember that interpretive findings are potentially infinite.

CONCLUSION

Wright and Larsen (2012) recast the study abroad experience as an “extraordinary experience” to explain the outsized levels of consumer satisfaction and delight that were evident among SAP participants. To this we add the concept of a Transcendent Customer Experience, or

TCE, to provide a second, complementary explanation for the high levels of customer satisfaction experienced by SAP participants. Extraordinary experiences focus more on the communal aspects of SAPs, while TCEs better describe personal change and growth. In reflecting on their SAP experience one or more years later, respondents described having their eyes opened, seeing new and different aspects culture for the first time, changing their views and seeing life from a new perspective. Respondents experienced ineffability, or the inability to describe in words or pictures the experiences they had while studying abroad. The SAPs in which they participated produced intense emotions directly resulting from the experience, such as sorrow, joy, mournfulness, satisfaction and delight. The respondents described the extreme enjoyment they had from the various aspects of the SAP and they all elaborated on their personal growth and transformation resulting from the SAP. Thus, TCEs are a new way to understand the intense levels of satisfaction experienced by SAP participants that complements the extraordinary experience construct.

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