DECODING THE EDUCATIONAL TRAVEL DECISION: DESTINATIONS, INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract

In a globalized world, the connection between studying abroad and career development has been widely recognized. This study analyses how students contemplating overseas study evaluate prospective destinations and institutions. It fills a knowledge gap by finding that students are pulled by both institutions and destinations and are subject to an internal push - destinations and hence tourism plays a mediating role in study abroad decision-making. The authors gathered primary data from inbound and outbound graduate students in Paris, France and used Structural Equation Modelling for the analysis. Drawing upon social influence theory, it was concluded that subjective norms are primarily derived from friends, family and online comments, rather than experts and rankings and influence internal push and destination pull, though not institutional pull. The strength of the mediation depends on whether the level of the pull motivation is higher or lower. The implications are discussed for multiple stakeholders including destination management organizations, higher education institutions and students & families.

Keywords: decision process, push-pull theory, study abroad, social influence theory

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Introduction

In a globalized world, those seeking future managerial roles understand the potential merits of overseas experience and interactions with other cultures. Study abroad offers a path to advancing cultural intelligence, the prospect of a pleasurable trip, visits to foreign places and even nightlife (Behnke *et al.*, 2014; Forsey and Low, 2014; Holtbrügge and Engelhard, 2016; Stone and Petrick, 2013). Previous researchers have shown that students are internally pushed to study abroad and are pulled by both destinations and institutions (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). However, the competition between the two push factors is poorly understood. The present paper investigates the first gap by exploring the relationship between "pull destination" and "pull institution". The authors examine the various influences of: friends and family (the latter often contribute financially), online customers (Choi *et al.*, 2019, Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Philips *et al.*, 2017), social media influencers (Xu and Pratt, 2018), schools and universities rankings and official sources such as destinations management organizations (DMOs) and institutions experts (Ardelet and Brial, 2011; Beerli and Martin, 2004). Understanding student decision-making and sources of influence might have economic and strategic importance for a spectrum of stakeholders that include students and their families, destinations and institutions. Study abroad is lucrative for destinations because students spend extensively during their stay (Davidson and King, 2008; Lopez *et al.*, 2016; Martínez-Roget *et al.*, 2013). This also has a multiplier effect because students make recommendations to friends and relatives, who in turn spend substantially (Michael *et al.*, 2003). Lastly, non-local students support institutions because they commonly pay relatively

higher fees, contribute to internationalization and hence to global university rankings. There is evidently an opportunity for DMOs to capitalise on such attractiveness by collaborating with relevant institutions through a holistic approach. This empirical study is based on primary data collected from inbound and outbound students in a major tourist city - Paris, France. The authors address the two research questions in the following sequence: theoretical framework, methodology and of empirical evidence, findings and conclusions.

Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

The following section reviews the theories which apply to study abroad decisions. After exploring the tradition of study abroad that owed much of its appeal to destination attractiveness, the second part offers insights into the role of the destination and then sources of influence on the decision.

A tradition of study abroad involving attractive destinations

Destinations have had a longstanding appeal for young people and travel abroad has played an important role in the educational development of the young. Such mobilities offer the prospect of broadened horizons, enhanced cultural intelligence, and accelerated career development (Holtbrügge and Engelhard, 2016). Gibson (1998) noted the lengthy history of the study abroad phenomenon, with the Grand Tour characterised as "the culminating experience in the education of the young aristocratic male. By travelling through different countries, he was exposed to different cultures, arts, languages, and politics" (1998, p. 32). The primary motive for these Grand Tour aristocrats was self-development as they undertook extended educational tours around Europe (Bertrand, 2008; Black, 2009; Brodsky-Porges, 1981). Young English and French aristocrats were lured by Italy for the reputation of its food

and sunny climate. Youth mobilities in the contemporary era have included backpacking, gap years and voluntourism. Others choose to study abroad, thereby acquiring overseas experience along with obtaining credit for courses undertaken (Behnke *et al.*, 2014; Chadee and Cutler, 1996; Forsey and Low, 2014; Stone and Petrick, 2013). Study abroad extends to a wide range of academic majors, through is particularly prevalent amongst business and finance students (Carley *et al*., 2011).

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The role of destinations in the educational travel decision process

Academic institutions such as universities have a centuries old history of hosting visiting students. Student participation in international programs in the contemporary era allows educational institutions to extend their international coverage in a competitive and increasingly global market (Caton and Santos, 2009; James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017). The educational travel market includes segments such as at-sea programs, short term study abroad (Behnke *et al.*, 2014) and Erasmus (García-Rodríguez and Jiménez, 2015). The relevant literature has shown the applicability of push-pull theory (Dann, 1977) for such programmes, with student decision-making influenced by both push and pull factors (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Internal forces push travellers towards their decisions and they are then pulled externally to a specific destination.

The initial study abroad motivation precedes the choice of a host country and university (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). This was endorsed by an empirical study of students travelling to Australia (Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008). Ruhanen and McLennan (2010) explored the relative importance of location, institution and program. Scholars have found that location considerations follow confirmation of the decision to travel for education (Garcia-Rodrigez and Jiménez, 2015). Destination pull factors make locations relatively more or less attractive and institutional pull factors play a similar role. Holtbrügge and Engelhard

(2016) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) proposed criteria for pull destination and pull institution. Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) identified roles for academic brand attributes (reputation, accreditation and campus) and curricular activities (quality and cost of courses). It is evident that students prioritise the destination over institutional pull factors. Such destination appeal is possible as international academic tourism is not primarily driven by economic considerations. Bento's (2014) empirical analysis of students travelling in Europe for their higher education, concluded that their decision-making was driven by factors that are not strictly economic such as relevant aspects of the destination and preference related to travel. Although the various contributions have highlighted the association pull factors with both the destination and the institution, they have not assessed their combined effects on decision-making. There is a gap in understanding the relationship between "pull destination" and "pull institution". The current research address this using push-pull theory and positing a mediating role for destination in the relationship between push and pull institution. The preceding section leads to Hypothesis 1 (H1) which proposes that pull destination mediates the effect of the student's push on the pull institution. Previous researchers have focussed on a single destination as a place of arrival or departure. The current investigation aims for a comprehensive view of the process, by examining students both going to and coming from a single destination.

Sources of influence in the decision process

It is important for relevant stakeholders to understand the sources of influence which apply when students are selecting an institution and destination. Consumer behaviour researchers have highlighted that significant others play a role in the decision and subjective norms are a potential predictor of intentions and behaviours (Ajzen, 1991). An individual's internalization of the subjective culture and specific interpersonal agreements of their

reference group directly affects their intention to act. If the reference group supports the decision, their influence is a significant and direct predictor of the intention to become involved in a new experience (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). Given the role of subjective norms in travel decisions (Tanford and Montgomery, 2016), they are also likely to impact on push-pull factors, albeit perhaps influencing each factor differently. This leads to Hypothesis 2: subjective norms may impact push to travel (H2a), pull destination (H2b) and pull institution (H2c). It may also be instructive to measure the applicable levels of impact.

Having affirmed the impact of subjective norms, stakeholders may wish to ascertain the sources of influence which compound them. Which influence is more important and how do the applicable influences impact on each factor? It has been recognized that friends and relatives are influential in educational travel (Behnke *et al.*, 2014) along with online comments by customers (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Choi *et al.*, 2019, Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Philips *et al.*, 2017) and social media influencers (Xu and Pratt, 2018). Since a relationship with others and feeling of closeness is evidently more important than expertise (Gafter and Tchetchik, 2017), online comments from customers have greater credibility and usefulness than official information provided by brand managers, experts and rankings. Young study abroad students are "digital natives" and trusting of online sources though rely financially on their families. This leads to Hypothesis 3 (H3) which posits that social influencers positively impact pull destination (H3a) and pull institution (H3b).

Lastly, some travel purposes are relatively more associated with higher motivations than others (Botzug *et al*., 2015). This is the case with study abroad. Based on the authors' observations and on the previous literature, some candidates have a highly motivation to go overseas that others. For a student with low push, subjective norms might be focused on demonstrating the importance of studying overseas and thereby the impact on push. For a student with high push, subjective norms should rather promote destination related

experiences, mingling with people and enjoying the lifestyle. This leads to Hypothesis 4 (H4): subjective norms impact stronger push and then pull destination for low push students; whereas for high push students, pull destination mediates subjective norms and pull institution. Figure 1 presents a model that extends the current research on push/pull and social influence by focusing on the destination as a mediator.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Methodology

Study area and sample description

France has a long tradition of welcoming foreign students dating back to the Middle Ages, notably to the iconic Sorbonne University. Paris is a particularly popular travel destinations and hosts a range of prestigious higher education institutions. The aforementioned reasons made Paris a credible setting to test the proposed research model. The data that were generated for analysis purposes came from online surveys of postgraduate students coming from Paris and going abroad (outbound) and students going to Paris from abroad (inbound). Previous studies have either collected data from multiple source markets towards a single host country, or from one market that sends students to several destinations. To acquire a broader and global understanding of the study abroad process, the current study used two subsamples: 174 outbound and 96 inbound students. Graduate students were chosen because of the relative paucity of study abroad undergraduates in France and because the former are independent young adults, who rely on online influencers whilst simultaneously depending financially on their parents. Their decisions may be subject to either or both

influences. Respondents possessed at least a Bachelor degree, the first level to study abroad in France.

Data collection

The applicable survey questionnaire was sent to prospective respondents through the researchers' own and association networks. Students were targeted across two systems - private higher education institutions and universities (public institutions in France). To qualify, respondents should be "currently studying abroad for at least three months". Several academic study majors were considered to ensure coverage of thing-oriented programmes (including accounting, finance and operations management) and more person-oriented (including management, marketing and information systems) programs. The relevant control variables are gender, age, length of stay, inbound-outbound and compulsory/free will and the sample is characterized in the Appendix 1.

Data analysis

Data analyses were undertaken using structural equation modelling (SEM). This approach allows the analysis of covariance structures to assess causal relationships while considering the estimations of other paths. It involves measures that reputedly reflect unobservable variables such as push, destination and institution attractiveness. The data analysis deployed SPSS (22) and AMOS (16). The procedure tested the convergence validity, according to the goodness-of-fit and factor loadings statistics. The assessment of discriminant validity follows the test of perfect correlation between each pair of constructs. It is acknowledged that the measures are subject to common method bias, due to the use of single-source and self-report data. The likelihood of a bias related to this method of data collection is tested using a measurement model that includes a "method factor" test. The method factor

is added to the model with all of the items loading on their latent constructs. The method factor was not permitted to correlate with any substantive construct. The results revealed that the model including the method factor did not provide a better fit for the data than was the case for the original measurement model ($\Delta X^{2}_{(21)} = 30.9$, $p > .05$).

Findings

The following section presents the results of empirical testing of the proposed model, subsamples pooling and validity of the constructs. Two questions are addressed: does destination mediate between push and pull institution in the push-pull model? How do social influencers impact the decision process through subjective norms?

As mentioned above, the collected data consist of two subsamples - students coming from or going to Paris. If decision process theory is applying irrespective of student origin, it may be assumed that the factorial structure is invariant between groups. This assumption is acceptable in the present case since the fit of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) within each group is not statistically different. The unconstrained CFA is satisfactory ($\chi^2_{(396)}$= 646.82; p<.01; RMSEA = .05) as well as the CFA constraining the loading factors and the number of factors to be equal across the groups ($\chi^2_{(413)}$= 665.67; p<.01; RMSEA = .05). Therefore, the following analysis pools the sub samples ($\Delta \chi^2_{(17)} = 18.86$, $p > .05$). The CFA also investigates the validity of the various constructs by checking whether the measurements reflect the latent variables. The hypothesized factorial structure is validated from the sample data ($\chi^2_{(198)}$= 324.40; p<.01; RMSEA = .05). The pooling of subsamples and validity of the model checked, data can be analysed.

Descriptive data

Respondents were asked about their initial selection criteria and whether they obtained their first choice of institution. As is shown in Table 1, almost 2/3 (61.5%) singled out destination (city n = 70 or country n = 96) as the most important criterion. Institution accounted for 35.9% (program n = 60 then school or university n = 37). Even in cases where respondents applied to an institution and proceeded to select it from amongst the range of alternatives, 2.6% ultimately proceeded to the only institution that accepted them.

Insert table 1 about here

To provide an understanding of the role of destination in the decision process, scales derived from previous research were used to measure the constructs, thereby ensuring consistency with previous practice (Appendix 2). Table 2 describes the various empirical items that reflect the factorial structure.

Insert table 2 about here

Concerning the push to travel for education purposes, five items reflect the *push* variable (α = .87, AVE = 61%). The scale explains an average variance of 61% and items are loading significantly on the factor. Respondents agreed strongly about the importance of travel for education purposes. Self-development (m = 5.58) and improving career prospects (m = 5.35) seem more important than engaging in a field of study that is unavailable at home

(m = 5.07). Regarding control variables, the *push* is influenced by: age (-), budget (+) and length (+).

Of the various pull factors, six items reflect the *pull destination* (α = .80, AVE = 45%) for an average of "somewhat agree". The most important were living affordability (m = 4.92), level of safety and security (m = 4.96). Respondents also agreed about quality of public transportation and entertainment and nightlife. Age (-), budget (+), length (+) have an association with destination attractiveness. The item "tourist and cultural attractions" loaded marginally (λ^2 = .16), prompting its removal from further analyses. Six items were identified to constitute a scale for the assessment of *pull institution* (α = .89, AVE = 57%), with respondents in moderate agreement. Academic reputation was also found to be important (m = 4.94). The cost of the program is important (m = 4.85), compared with exchange partnership (m = 4.59). Items are loading significantly to the expected factor (λ^2>.5). Individual institutions and/or programs were rarely found to be a reason for studying abroad. Age (-), budget (+) and length (+) impact on the respondent's appraisals of institutions.

Two items measure *subjective norms* (α = .87, AVE = 75%) and three measure *social influencers* (α = .70, AVE = 50%). The results show that respondents agreed that they care about recommendations from people who are important to them (m = 5.11) and are influenced by others (m = 4.93). Lastly, about the nature of social influencers, respondents assessed advice from friends and family as being important in their decision to travel for education (m = 5.72), followed by recommendations from others (m = 5.11) and from experts through rankings (m = 4.84). This last item was not normally distributed, loading marginally to the factor (λ^2 = .20) and has been removed from subsequent analyses. Having confirmed the acceptability of the factorial structure and the measurement model, the relationships between constructs can be studied to understand the decision process and the role played by source of influence. Table 3 presents CFA.

Insert table 3 about here

Hypothesis testing

Table 4 presents the goodness-of-fit statistics related to the model that are acceptable for testing the hypotheses ($\chi^2_{(160)} = 237.03$, $p < .05$). As was predicted, *pull destination* mediates the influence of *push* on *pull institution*. The direct effect of *push* on *pull institution* is not significant ($\beta_{31} = .19$, $t = 1.63$) but *push* has an important influence on *pull destination* ($\beta_{21} = .80$, $t = 8.33$), while *pull destination* impacts *pull institution* ($\beta_{32} = .69$, $t = 4.83$). This lends support to push-pull theory. Table 4 presents the testing of *pull destination* as mediation (H1). The null hypothesis of a non-significant indirect effect is tested according to bootstrapping and does not assume a significant total effect. The standardized indirect effect of *push* on *pull institution* is .55 (s.d. =.13), thereby differing to zero with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval [.28; .83]. H1 is accepted since *pull destination* is significantly mediating between *push* and *pull institution.*

Subjective norms are related to *social influencers* $\gamma_{12} = .54$ ($t = 5.81$). The two variables assessing sources of influence are correlated to the *push-pull* factors. First, subjective norms do not impact each factor equally. The empirical finding suggests that subjective norms positively impact significantly push $\gamma_{11} = .32$ ($t = 4.59$) and to a less extent pull destination $\gamma_{21} = .17$ ($t = 2.70$), but not pull institution $\gamma_{31} = .09$ ($t = 1.40$). This means that when the reference group support the decision to study overseas, students become more motivated and choose destinations that the reference group perceive as more attractive, though noting that they have no influence on which institution. Therefore, H2 is accepted. However, H3 is rejected as *social influencers* does not neither influence *pull destination* $\gamma_{22} =$

-.02 (t = -.38) or *pull institution* γ_{32} = -.02 (t = -.43). As asserted in the literature, social influencers do not have a direct effect but since they play a role in composing *subjective norms*, they impact the decision indirectly. It means that social influencers contribute to shape the decision through subjective norms.

The result also informs the composition of the various sources of social influence. Friends and family are most important, followed by comments from other students. Experts and rankings are less influential. Overall, 79% (R^2) of the variability of pull institution is accounted by the pull destination and social influence.

Insert table 4 about here

Hypothesis validity

To test H4, a continuous moderator variable estimated from the factorial analysis was dichotomized to form subgroups of high and low push. A principal component analysis was run with a view to splitting the sample between high and low *push* according to the median. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy of .85 was found to be satisfactory (Bartlett's test = 683.1; p<.01). The proposed theory suggests a factorial common structure for each group of *push*. The tests consist of nesting the same model in increasing degrees of constraints. At first, the model assuming the same number of factors and factor loadings pattern across conditions fits acceptably the data ($\chi^2_{(320)}$=556.33, p<.01, AGFI=.78 and RMSEA=.05). Next, the assumption that the measurement factor loadings are invariant across conditions is not rejected ($\chi^2_{(335)}$=571.65, $\Delta\chi^2_{(15)}$=15.32, p>.05). Finally, the test deals with the structural parameters invariance. The assumption of the same path estimates between conditions is rejected ($\Delta\chi^2_{(9)}$=18.56, p=.03). The proposed theory is helpful to identify the source of variance between the high - low push, as is shown in Table 5. The last column shows the z

statistic that has a standard normal distribution. First, the analysis confirms that the difference between the estimate of β_{21} = .86 for low push group and the estimate of β_{21} = .18 for high push group is significant (z = 3.16; p<.01). Second, the analysis confirms that the difference between the estimate of γ_{11} = .37 for low push group and the estimate of γ_{11}= .22 for high push group is significant (z = 2.27; p = .01). The relationship is not linear, thereby leading to acceptance of H4. As a result, as shown graphically in the Table 5, push-pull theory is different for low and high push students. For high push, the pull destination is a mediator between subjective norms and pull institution. For low push students, subjective norms impact push first, which impact pull destination, which later impact pull institution.

Insert table 5 about here

Discussion

Motivated by the globalization of higher education and its association with tourism, this research has illuminated the interrelated motivations for education and for travel. Institutions or programs were rarely found to be a reason for studying abroad. Given the prominent role of destinations in the decision process, the findings suggest that institutional managers should give proper consideration to the destination in their international strategy development. Moreover, it has been found that destination has a differential influence on high and low push students meaning that distinct approaches are merited to address these two market segments. Lastly, friends, family and online comments from other students compose subjective norms that exert influence on push and pull destination, though not on pull institution. The following section discusses the role of destination and the impact of sources of influence.

A moderated mediating role for destination in the decision process

Our findings align substantially with previous research that has asserted the important influence of both the destination and the institution on student decisions to go abroad. Yet we have also revealed novel results about the combined pull effect of destination and institution. Overall the results support the appeal of destinations in education and self-development as was formerly the case with aristocrats doing the Grand Tour (Bertrand, 2008; Black, 2009; Brodsky-Porges, 1981). It also is congruent with the prior assumption that three factors influence the study abroad decision simultaneously (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). The rating of items about the appeal of destinations and institutions is consistent with previous findings, giving credibility to the current sampling. Students attach high importance to destination attractiveness (Behnke *et al.*, 2014; Caton and Santos, 2009; García-Rodríguez and Jiménez, 2015), as well as the quality of their chosen institution (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Consistent with Bento (2014), choices are driven by factors that relate to destination factors. In line with Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008), respondents were more attracted by destination related attributes than by institutions. Destinations make the stay pleasant and enhance the period immediately after study, allowing them to deal with unfamiliar cultural contexts.

This paper makes an original contribution by illuminating the combined impact of pull destination and pull institution and the main hypothesis (H1) has been accepted. Destination was found to have a mediating effect between push and pull institution - destination appeal reinforces the choice of institution. This means that students are motivated to go abroad by destinations and tourism prospects. The destination enhances the study abroad period and boosts the market-value of the overseas experience. This finding may prompt internationally reputable institutions to redouble their consideration of location when

appealing to foreign students. By accounting for how pull destination and pull institution work together, we have proposed a more comprehensive and complete understanding of study abroad.

Moreover, our findings reveal that the level of push varies by student and this distinction merits consideration by both institutions, destinations and influencers - high and low push students exhibit different decision processes with consequential impacts. In the case of low push students, subjective norms first impact push, then pull destination. An institution should first promote the benefits of studying overseas and then the travel opportunities afforded by the location. Conversely, high push students are already fully convinced of the prospective enhancements from study abroad. Institutions should promote destination opportunities directly. Overall, the results support a moderated mediation.

Sources of influence in the decision process

The current findings contribute to knowledge by advancing the role played by social influence in study abroad decisions. Previous studies highlighted the impact of subjective norms on decision process (Ajzen, 1991; Tanford and Montgomery, 2015). This has been extended in the current study by explaining that subjective norms impact push and pull destination though not pull institution. It has been shown that social influence revolves around: a) the study abroad "project" – to go or not – and b) whether the destination is safe and appealing – not particularly about the institution. To exert influence, it is necessary to have a degree of expertise and insight into the subject. Friends and family have insufficient knowledge about the institution and hence little influence over this component, whereas they have a more informed opinion about the benefits and risks of overseas travel generally and about prospective locations.

Having ascertained the impact of subjective norms, the authors examined the aggregation of influences. Aged 23 years on average, the survey respondents attached importance to online comments but need to consider parental advice because of their financial dependence. Consistent with the previous literature, the authors have identified an array of potential influence - friends and family, online comments, DMOs and rankings (Choi *et al.,* 2019; de la Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva, 2019; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Philips *et al.,* 2017; Tanford and Montgomerry, 2015 ; Xu and Pratt, 2018). The results fill a gap in the literature about the relative influence of various sources, notably that respondents were more influenced by friends and family and other students than by experts and rankings. Secondly, it contributes to the discussion about their influence in shaping subjective norms and extends existing knowledge by showing that their impact is confined to push and pull destination. To capitalize on this potential, destinations and institutional managers may review their established marketing strategies to pay greater attention to those influencers.

Implications

The theoretical and managerial implications of this research start with recommendations for each stakeholder, followed by associated marketing concerns. The paper combines theories about decision processes and sources of influence to consider both pull destination and pull institution and also to add social influence. It contributes to push-pull theory in demonstrating that the relation is non-linear and depends on the level of push. The relation is different for high and low pushed students. Moreover, the authors have extended the decision process by showing that the criteria determining a single decision can emanate from two actors – the institution and the destination. Destination related criteria rank higher than their institutional counterparts. However, since destinations and institutions can offer mutual support, respective managers and leaders may consider closer collaboration.

Regarding the respective tourism and education literatures, the study extends Behnke *et al*.'s (2014) undergraduate sample to graduate respondents and to a longer duration of stay. The current study complements previous findings by addressing multiple markets that send students to a single destination and one market sending students to several destinations.

The research findings have three main implications for stakeholders and practitioners. Firstly, the settings and weightings of items can provide useful criteria for students and their families for study abroad decisions. It can also inform destination and institution managers about the importance attributable to each criterion. When managers seek to establish prospective new campuses where students might venture on exchange, the weightings applicable to each destination item may support the application of more objective cost-benefit criteria. Policymakers and DMOs can plan activities that address the specific needs of exchange students.

Secondly, the mediating role played by the destination highlights its importance for students. Choosing the right place and institution offers the best prospects for a positive experience during their stay and job search. Though academic knowledge can be acquired at home through online courses, it is hard to acquire cultural experiences and a changed frame of reference without studying abroad. As part of the value proposition, programs might include more opportunities to mingle with the locals. Furthermore, the level of student push affects the strength of the role of destination and social influence. Consequently, recruiters who assess student push levels when interviewing may proceed to adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. They could make a segmentation, selling the overseas project to less motivated students and emphasising a specific destination for more highly motivated students. After applicants have been interviewed, institutions may engage in a more customised approach by mailing personal messages and by moderating forums.

Thirdly, though students trust the influences of friends and family and online sources, they pay little attention to experts and rankings. To capitalize on online sources, DMOs and institutions should engage alumni and current students to share their experiences. The destination appeal should also be reflected in the institutional name, in the choice of a new campus or in decisions about acquisitions. The best performing institutions are those that organize student experiences outside the classroom. DMOs should monitor the minority of institutions that already integrate destination attributes into their offerings and communications. An integration across the value chain would yield potentially positive results.

A number of limitations of the current research should be noted. Though a commonplace limitation in previous comparable research, the costs associated with data collection meant that the size of the sample was modest. Though the sample included inbound students from several nationalities and outbound students going to various countries, the data collection could undoubtedly have been more extensive. Another limitation comes from the choice of scales to assess pull factors. As with previous research, destinations and institutions are considered as the key "actors", when in reality, many parties are involved, including student academic advisors and teachers/professors. This is both a limitation and an opportunity for future researchers: taking account of the influence of each person involved in the chain. Lastly, alternative theories may explain the role and strength of destinations in the decision process. Though the present investigation shows a mediation that leads to an acceptance of push pull theory, the collected empirical data do not constitute a rejection of other possible models. Since a model where push plays a moderator effect might be applicable, future studies could usefully explore other theoretical models. More research is also needed to understand the full range of alternatives, notably those who gave up or stayed home. Further work is also required to explore the diversity of the destination concept or to

explore customer experience before and after (Chen, 2019). A comparison could also be usefully undertaken with the Scientific, Academic, Volunteer and Educational (SAVE) tourist markets (Kask *et al.,* 2011). Lastly, young travellers show a growing environmental awareness that could potentially be included in scales assessing destination choice (Han *et al.,* 2018).

Conclusions

Globalization has intensified concerns about potential market-value and employability for study abroad. It offers a medium to mingle with those from other cultures and to experience cross-cultural interactions, qualities that cannot be attained through formal academic programs. The current research has extended previous research about study abroad, firstly by exploring the relationship between pull destination and pull institution. Secondly, it asserts the impact of subjective norms on push and pull destination but not pull institution. Thirdly, it shows that student's decision process depends on the level of push motivation.

In sum, the researchers posit the mediating effect of pull destination. This means that tourism motivations enhance the choice of an institution and help convince students to go to a specific location. To capitalise on such potential, destination and institutional managers should develop fresh marketing strategies and differentiate the targeting of students with high or low push, from the time of initial interviewing and screening. The research has identified relevant sources of influence. As young adults, students care about online influencers, though must consider the opinions of parents who have a financial involvement. Moreover, social influencers impact the push motivation and pull destination but not pull institution. They influence the decision of going or not and where to go but do not give opinions about which specific institution. Institutions are the end point of the decision process. They are not, however a factor with influencers to advise about a specific institution. Recommendations are

focused on raising push motivations and destination appeal. Noting that the study abroad market is likely to grow post-pandemic, higher education institutions and destinations have a shared challenge and opportunity. Moreover, these students will become “bleisure travelers”, later in their career, combining leisure with overseas professional obligations (Lichy and McLeay, 2018). Attracting them during their youth may pay off as a lifelong investment, given the tendency for travel patterns to be shaped by early formative experiences.

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Figure 1: The student's study abroad decision-making process

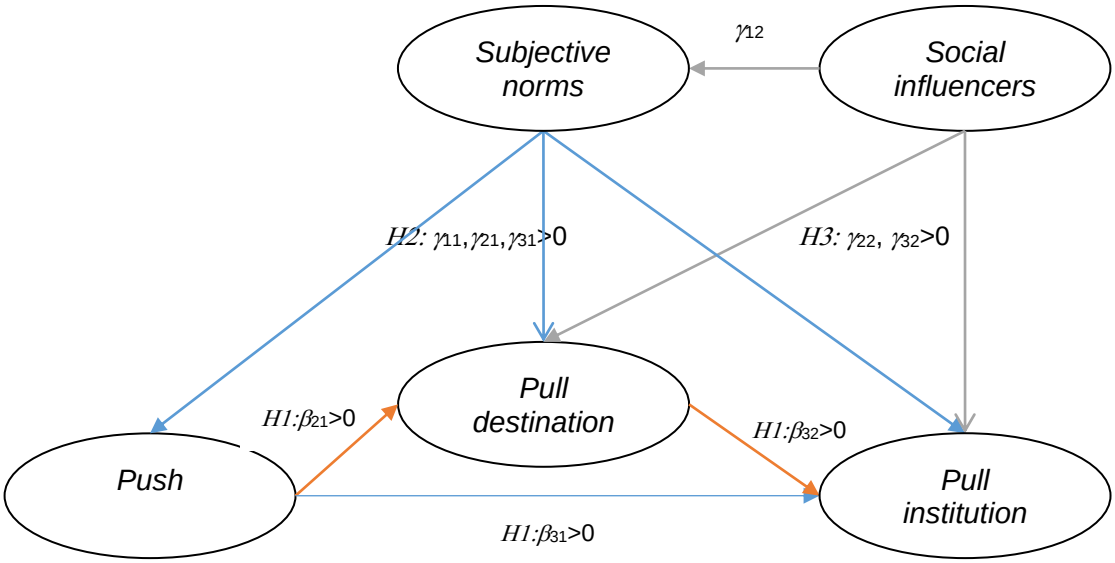


Table 1: What was your first criterion in favor of this specific education? (*N*= 270)

		frequency	percentage
Destination	City (or Paris)	70	25.9%
	Country	96	35.6%
Institution	School or University	37	13.7%
	Program	60	22.2%
	Where I was accepted	7	2.6%

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of items (*N*= 270)

Construct	Item description			
	Mean	Std.Dev.	Skew.	Kurto.
Push	Considering my decision to study in Paris/there(*), I think that self-development is…			
	5.58	1.19	-.15	.29
	improving my career prospects is…			
	5.35	1.11	.08	.14
	desire to learn a language is…			
	5.42	1.28	-.15	.10
	desire to travel is…			
	5.20	1.29	-.15	.05
	engaging in study field not offered at home is…			
	5.07	1.58	-.12	-.31
Pull destination	When considering a university or school, to support my decision to study abroad, The affordability of living is…			
	4.92	1.36	-.04	-.26
	The safety and security is…			
	4.96	1.30	.06	-.29
	The quality of public transportation is…			
	4.72	1.37	.04	-.03
	The entertainment and nightlife is…			
	4.71	1.40	-.07	-.07

	The tourist and cultural attractions is…			
	3.86	1.46	.35	-.10
	The availability of accommodation is…			
	4.72	1.45	-.11	-.20
Pull institution	When I come to choose a university or school, I think that			
	The cost of program is…			
	4.85	1.45	-.30	.25
	The domestic academic reputation is …			
	4.94	1.49	-.44	.26
	The accessory services provided by the host are…			
	4.67	1.56	-.16	-.30
	The campus looking attractive is…			
	4.80	1.50	-.33	-.02
	The exchange partnership with my previous university/school is …			
	4.59	1.60	-.22	-.40
	The international accreditation is …			
	4.72	1.47	-.11	-.17
Subjective norms	People who influence my behavior think that I should study in Paris/there(*)			
	4.93	1.78	-.05	-1.28
	People who are important to me think that I should study in Paris/there			
	5.11	1.72	-.22	-1.13
Social influencers	How do you find useful information, gather data and choose the best alternative.			

I often ask experts and rankings				
	4.84	1.80	-.12	-1.15
I often ask my friends and relatives				
	5.72	1.45	-.74	-.37
I often read comments from others students				
	5.11	1.58	-.34	-.75

Legend: Kurto.: kurtosis-3. Normal distribution of the items is not rejected (test Jarque-Bera and Mahalanobis's distance).

*= for inbound, the question was "there" and for outbound it was "in Paris"

Table 3: Confirmatory factorial analysis (*N*= 270)

Construct (AVE) (α)	Item description	λ	*t*-value	R^2
Push (.61) (α =.87)	self-development is…	.89	18.06***	.79
	improving my career prospects is…	.83	16.27***	.69
	desire to learn a language is…	.79	15.13***	.63
	desire to travel is…	.75	14.07***	.56
	engaging in study field not offered at home is…	.64	11.23***	.41
Pull destination (.45) (α =.80)	affordability of living is…	.75	13.80***	.56
	safety and security is…	.71	12.64***	.50
	entertainment and nightlife is…	.66	11.67***	.43
	availability of accommodation is…	.64	11.20***	.41
	quality of public transportation is…	.57	9.66***	.32
Pull institution (.57) (α=.89)	domestic academic reputation is …	.83	16.27***	.69
	accessory services provided by the host are…	.76	14.24***	.58
	exchange partnership is …	.76	14.23***	.58
	international accreditation is …	.74	13.85***	.55
	in my decision, cost of program is…	.74	13.80***	.55
	campus looking attractive is…	.70	12.56***	.49
Subjective norms (.75) (α =.87)	people who influence my behavior …	.90	15.79***	.81
	people who are important to me …	.83	14.46***	.69

Social Influencers	I often ask my friends and relatives	.80	8.48***	.81
(.50) (α =.70)	I often read comments from others students	.60	5.82***	.36

$\chi^2_{(198)}$=324.40; $\chi^2_{/d.f.}$=1.64; p<.01; AGFI=.88; RMSEA=.05

Legend: λ are the standardized factor loadings. *** indicates p-values lower than .01, AVE = average variance extracted, AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index.

Table 4: Path estimates of the proposed model

	Coefficient	Standardized Estimate	*t*-value
H1	β_{31}	.19	1.63
	β_{21}	.80	8.33***
	β_{32}	.69	4.83***
H2	γ_{11}	.32	4.59***
	γ_{21}	.17	2.70***
	γ_{31}	.09	1.40
H3	γ_{12}	.54	5.81***
	γ_{22}	-.02	-.38
	γ_{32}	-.02	-.43

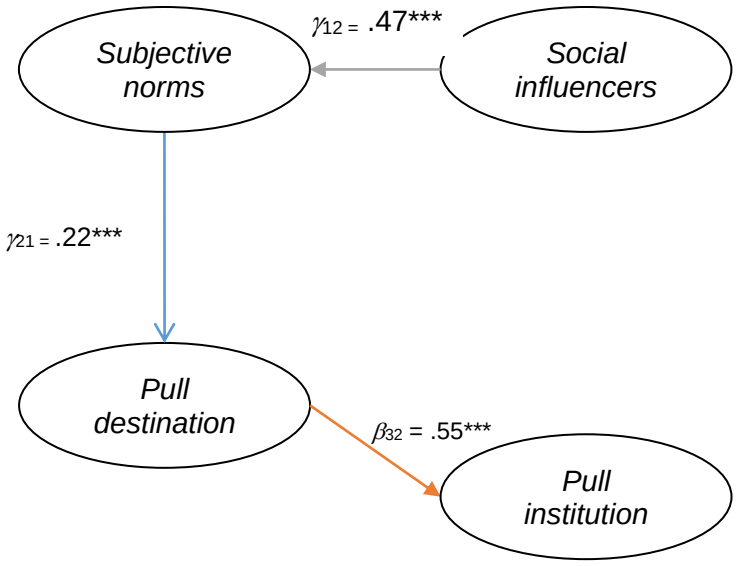
Legend: $\chi^2_{(160)} = 237.03$; $\chi^2_{/d.f.}=1.48$; $p<.01$; AGFI=.90; RMSEA=.04

(** *p*-values< .05, *** <.01)

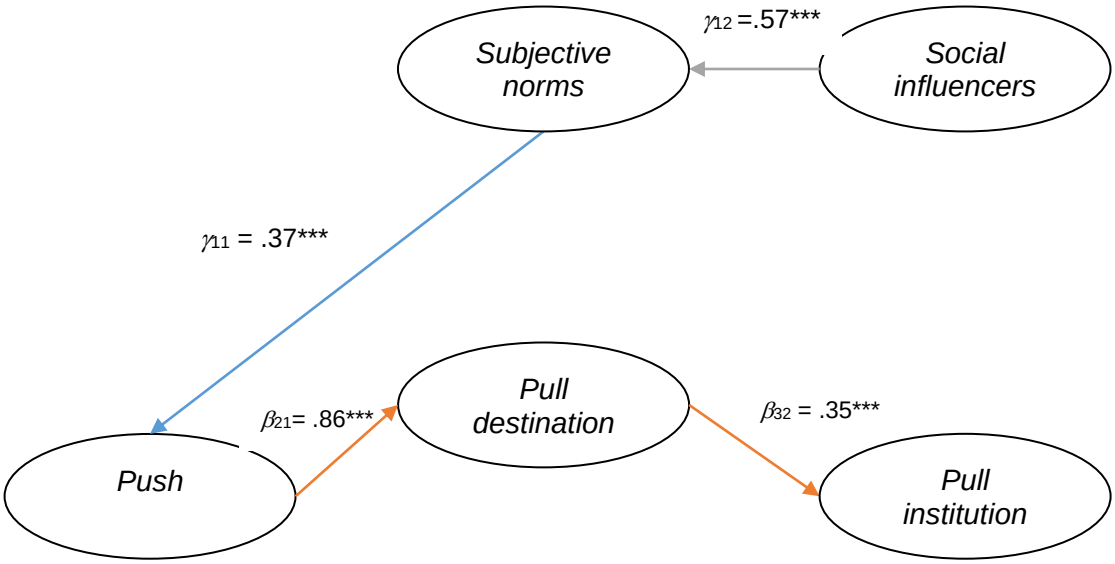
Table 5: Test of moderation according to level of push.

Part a: High push			*Part b: Low push*			
Coef.	Standardized Estimate	*t*-value	Coef.	Standardized Estimate	*t*-value	*z*-value of difference
β_{31}	.00	.07	β_{31}	.35	1.70*	1.3
β_{21}	.18	1.20	β_{21}	.86	5.88***	3.16***
β_{32}	.55	3.34***	β_{32}	.57	2.50***	-.49
γ_{11}	.22	1.70*	γ_{11}	.37	3.79***	2.27***
γ_{21}	.40	2.68***	γ_{21}	.08	.90	-1.13
γ_{31}	.13	.94	γ_{31}	.09	1.19	.03
γ_{12}	.47	4.00***	γ_{12}	.57	4.68***	1.05
γ_{22}	.00	.00	γ_{22}	.00	.04	0.04
γ_{32}	-.02	-.21	γ_{32}	-.03	-.44	-.17

High push



Low push



Legend: *** (**) indicates *p*-values lower than .01 (.05).

Appendix 1: Sample description

The authors collected 270 questionnaires from April to June 2018. The median length of stay was nine months for an average budget of 14,850 euros for the stay.

Descriptive statistics

Variable		*% of the sample*
Age	=<20	11.9 %
	21	18.1 %
	22	18.5 %
	23	11.9 %
	24	12.6 %
	25	6.7 %
	>25	21.4 %
Gender	Male	36.7 %
	Female	63,3 %
Origin	Inbound	64.4 %
	Outbound	35.6 %

Appendix 2: Scales

The scales that were deployed in the study for *push, pull destination, pull institution, subjective norms and social influencers* were drawn from the relevant literature, namely: Cubillo *et al*. (2006), García-Rodríguez and Jiménez (2015), Sánchez *et al.* (2006), Ajzen (1991) and Venkatesh *et al.'s* (2003). The Likert scale ranged from "strongly disagree" = 1 to "strongly agree" = 7 or from "not important at all" = 1 to "very important" = 7.

Correlations between constructs were as follows:

Construct (AVE)	1	2	3	4	5
Push	*.61*				
Pull destination	.85***	*.45*			
Pull institution	.80***	.88***	*.57*		
Social influencers	.26***	.27***	.26***	*.50*	
Subjective norms	.31***	.41***	.41***	.51***	*.75*

Legend: first diagonal reports AVE, in italics. Numbers below the diagonal are correlations between factors *** (**) indicates *p*-values lower than .01 (.05).