

# “The World is Your Campus”: Exploring Generation Z Students’ Experiences in the Semester at Sea Program

Siri Wilder  
Christina Scott

## ABSTRACT

Studying abroad provides an opportunity for emerging adult college students to see the world and explore their identity outside of the confines of everyday life, but the experience can also be a source of stress and adversity. Evidence suggests that the current generation of college students (Generation Z) display a higher level of anxiety and fear as compared to the cohorts before them, and are increasingly opting into short-term, faculty-led programs because they provide both structure and guidance for participants. However, it is still unclear the extent to which these programs are able to meet the needs of Generation Z students. The purpose of the current study was to explore the perspectives of undergraduates participating in Semester at Sea, a unique, voyage-based study abroad program that involved students and faculty traveling together to eleven countries over the span of 106 days. Respondents (N = 302) answered a series of open-ended questions regarding their goals for the trip, their specific concerns, and the extent to which their goals were met by the end of the semester. Qualitative analyses indicated that students were focused on cultivating global citizenship, finding belonging within the shipboard community, and experiencing personal growth through their study abroad experience, and the majority of respondents were able to successfully meet their goals with programmatic support. Our results suggest that Generation Z college students, both those studying abroad and on college campuses, would benefit from targeted initiatives aimed at fostering peer connectedness and community.

**KEYWORDS:** Study abroad; Semester at Sea; Generation Z; qualitative analysis

American study abroad programs have become increasingly popular over the last few decades, and in the 2018-2019 academic year over three hundred thousand U.S. students studied abroad (Institute of International Education 2021). Undergraduate college students, most of whom are in the life stage of emerging adulthood (spanning ages 18-29; Arnett, 2000), have remained the largest population of U.S. study abroad participants across the last two decades (Institute of International Education 2021). For these students, studying abroad offers the opportunity to explore various identities and experiences during a time that is primarily self-focused before having to shoulder the adult responsibilities of settling into a career, raising a family, and “settling down” (Schwartz 2016). Generation Z’s undergraduates (those born 1997

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onward; Dimock 2019) express a high level of fear and anxiety about themselves and their place in the world but are motivated by an interest in social involvement and a desire for global awareness (Seemiller and Grace 2016; Broadbent et al. 2017). Previous research suggests that these students are opting into short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs that offer a structured and guided travel experience (Salyers et al. 2015). The purpose of the current study was to explore the extent to which one such program, Semester at Sea, met the needs of the current generation of college students.

## GENERATION Z AND STUDY ABROAD

The first members of Generation Z began entering college around 2015, and currently the majority of traditional college students are likely to belong to this generational cohort. Dubbed a generation of “digital natives” (Dimock 2019), Generation Z is the first to grow up with no memory of a pre-Internet, pre-smartphone world (Seemiller and Grace 2016). Over 80% of 18- to 29-year-olds use social media (Auxier and Anderson 2021), which the members of Generation Z view as a tool to enrich social interaction (Okros 2020). However, evidence suggests that communication technology detracts from time spent in in-person social interaction and may contribute to struggles with in-person communication (Pichler, Kohli, and Granitz 2021). Although Generation Z students are highly relationship-focused, it appears that their intense use of communication technology may actually be impeding their ability to make face-to-face connections (Seemiller 2017).

Generation Z individuals are also active consumers of online news, which in recent years has become more negatively focused on tragedies both in the United States and abroad (Talmon 2019). This media consumption has been implicated in Generation Z’s risk aversion (Talmon 2019) and fearfulness (Seemiller and Grace, 2016). Generation Z appears to be driving the rising number of college students presenting with mental health problems (Plochocki 2019), which included a 71% increase in serious psychological distress between 2008 and 2017 among young adults aged 18-25 (Twenge et al. 2019).

One possible contributor to Generation Z’s increasing participation in study abroad is the breadth of online marketing. Educational institutions use their websites and social media accounts to distribute information about study abroad programs (Schouten 2011), engaging users with written messages and photos (Apperson 2015). Many of these websites feature student testimonials (in the form of quotes and blog posts) and videos of students’ study abroad experiences (Apperson 2015). Miller-Idriss, Friedman, and Auerbach (2019) conducted an assessment of online study abroad marketing materials posted on the websites of U.S. college institutions and identified three key themes across 2,000 images. First, many schools used photos of students engaged in fun and adventurous activities, often posed in front of famous landmarks and in groups. Second were images of students the authors described as “horizon-gazing,” looking off into the distance, generally across a foreign landscape, to illustrate a moment of contemplation and quiet reflection. The final category included photos of students with their arms outstretched, often with the foreign host country in the foreground, suggesting a sense of amazement. The authors concluded that these images may cultivate students’ perceptions of study abroad as “an intense time for personal growth and transformation, for expanding one’s horizons, bonding with fellow students, and experiencing joy, adventure, and liberation” (Miller-Idriss, Friedman, and Auerbach 2019:1104).

These online representations of study abroad may appear especially attractive to Generation Z consumers, who are driven by convenience, security, and escapism (Wood 2013). Indeed, Nguyen and Coryell's (2015) interviews with study abroad students revealed that their primary motivations for studying abroad were to "escape" and "have fun," and 75% of students indicated that their positive perceptions of the study abroad experience were influenced by media (including online research and interactions). Similarly, students in Beech's (2015) study abroad sample reported that they used social media to reach out to students at the foreign universities they expected to study at, and to connect with other students who had previously studied abroad.

Although Generation Z college students are digitally savvy with research and preparation for the study abroad experience, there is still some amount of trepidation about embarking on the journey themselves. In one investigation, almost half of students reported feeling stressed "often" or "almost always" prior to embarking abroad (Bathke and Kim 2016). Logistic and safety concerns are prevalent, including specific worries about living conditions and political situations (Bell 2016; Brown, Boateng, and Evans 2016). In addition, despite increasing globalization, cross-cultural differences and culture shock continue to create challenges for study abroad students (Salyers et al. 2015; Harrell et al. 2017; Brown et al. 2016; Bell 2016).

The anxiety that characterizes Generation Z has not stopped them from participating in study abroad, but it does appear to have influenced their choice of programs. Students rely on institutional support and preparation (Harrell et al. 2017; Nguyen 2015; Bell 2016), and expect their study abroad program to be a safe travel experience guided by faculty from their home university (Salyers et al. 2015). The majority of Generation Z students choose short-term programs lasting from a few days to a few weeks (Institute of International Education 2021), which often involve traveling with familiar peers (Kortegast and Boisfontaine 2015; Scally 2015; Redwine et al. 2018). These peers play an important role in the study abroad experience, as students develop friendships through programmatic activities (Kortegast and Boisfontaine 2015) and "[depend] on each other to get through" (Redwine et al. 2018:80).

Coinciding with students' changing preferences for programs, there has been an increase in the use of third-party providers and services in study abroad programming (Dietrich 2018). Semester at Sea, established in 1963, is a third-party option that provides students with the unique opportunity to visit multiple countries over three and a half months at sea (Semester at Sea 2022). During a single voyage on the program's "floating campus," a cohort (comprised of students from multiple universities across the U.S.) travels to approximately a dozen countries in the span of just over 100 days. Ultimately, the Semester at Sea program allows students to study abroad while retaining the comfort and familiarity of a communal college campus. The common language onboard the ship is English and in between port stops students attend classes, engage in extracurricular activities, socialize, and sleep onboard.

Semester at Sea includes a variety of initiatives designed to support students in their international travel. Students are expected to take a full course-load (with all classes provided in English, bypassing any foreign language obstacle), including a required "Global Studies" course which provides in-depth information about each country visited during the semester abroad. Along with experiential learning in the form of independently driven offshore excursions and field programs, students have the opportunity to participate in evening seminars, diplomatic briefings, and a variety of recreational clubs. Finally, although they likely

experience some amount of culture shock in integrating to life at sea, students are surrounded by residential life staff, faculty, and peers who were available to support them for the duration of the voyage.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

Programs like Semester at Sea are likely to see a rise in popularity in the coming years, given that Generation Z students are highly interested in study abroad experiences that incorporate travel with peers, programming, and guidance from faculty and staff (Institute of International Education 2021; Seemiller and Grace 2016; Talmon 2019). However, it is unclear the extent to which these types of programs are able to successfully ameliorate the concerns of Generation Z students while meeting their goals for their study abroad experience. To investigate these outcomes, the current study utilized an exploratory qualitative approach, guided by the following research questions:

1. What goals did students have for their Semester at Sea voyage?
2. To what degree were their goals met?
3. What features of the Semester at Sea program contributed to students' successful goal achievement?

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

The sample included 302 undergraduate students participating in the spring 2019 Semester at Sea voyage, representing over half (52%) of the student population onboard. Consistent with the shipboard population, 80.1% of the sample were women (242 women, 60 men). The average age was 20.5 ( $SD = 1.1$ , range = 18-29), and 78.8% were 20-21 years old. The majority of participants were White (77.2%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (7.4%), biracial/multiracial (7%), Asian (5.7%), Native American (1%), other (1%), and Black (.7%). Over half of participants were college sophomores (27.9%) or juniors (61.4%). Ninety-five percent were enrolled in a university in the United States. Ninety-eight point three percent attended a four-year state university or private college and 1.6% a two-year community college. Nearly two thirds (64.1%) of Semester at Sea respondents knew someone who was attending the voyage prior to the trip, and on average students reported prior familiarity with three individuals onboard.

Most respondents (93.8%) reported having prior international travel experience and 81% had been to multiple international locations. However, many of these trips were not independent and occurred in the context of family vacations, school programs, and service programs (e.g., as part of a mission trip or service-learning). The three most common international locations were North America (61.9% of students), Europe (60.9%), and Asia (22.8%). Of the students who had traveled within North America, the majority were U.S. students visiting Canada.

Students were invited to take part in the study during the last week of classes onboard. After their final exam for the common "Global Studies" class, students were provided information about the study. Interested participants reviewed and signed a consent form and were immediately provided the paper and pencil study survey at their desk, followed by a debriefing form containing further study details and contact information for the researchers. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The study was approved by the

Institutional Review Board of the participating university and adhered to the research policies set by the Institute for Shipboard Education.

#### Materials

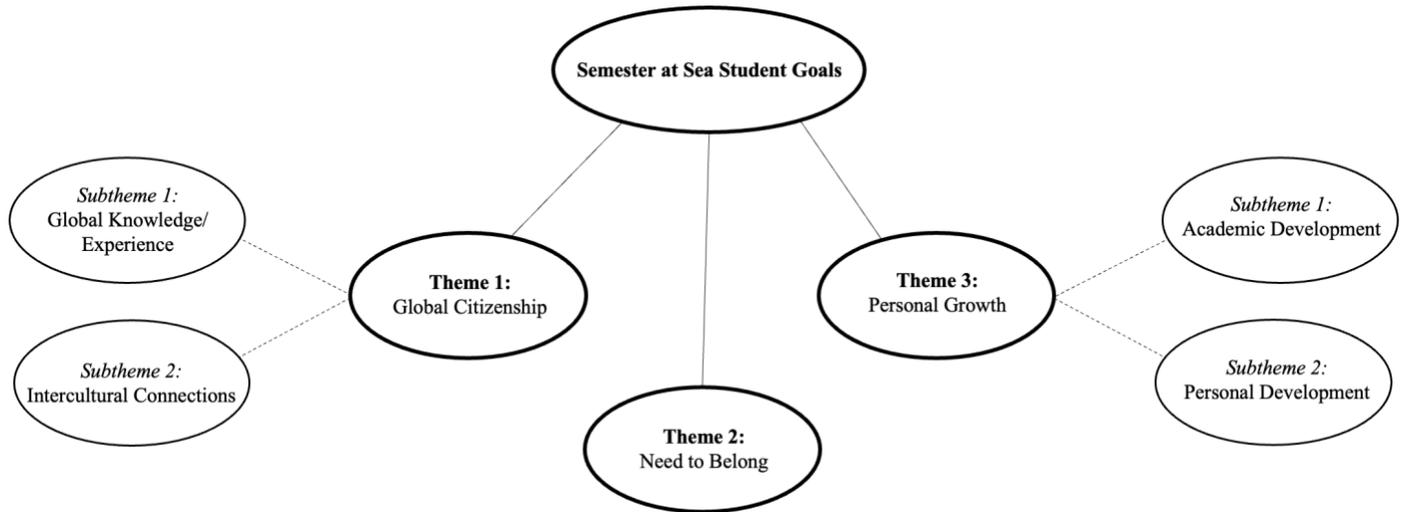
The study survey first included a series of demographic questions. Students were then asked to identify their goals for the trip and which of those goals had been met, their expectations and concerns about roommates and making friends during the voyage, and sources of interpersonal conflict.

#### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 28.0.1.0. We used the framework described by Elliott and Timulak (2005) to guide qualitative data analysis. First, we prepared the data for analysis by conducting an initial review of responses. After redundancies and irrelevant digressions (unrelated to the original survey questions) were removed, we realized that there was significant overlap in students' responses regarding their educational and social goals and decided to analyze these data together as one domain. All other responses were organized into domains according to the survey questions. We then divided the data associated with each domain into standalone meaning units by separating distinct information provided within individual responses. Finally, we assigned the meaning units to categories based on their similarities. This process continued until all meaning units were assigned to a thematic category, after which the thematic categories themselves were compared and, if necessary (based on similarity), collapsed. We maintained an ongoing dialogue throughout qualitative coding, returning to the meaning units and recategorizing as needed based on reinterpretation of the data over the course of several reviews and consultations between the authors.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and challenges of Generation Z college students participating in a voyage based, short-term study abroad program. Overall, the current sample's goals were consistent with those reported in other investigations (e.g., Wintre et al. 2015; Bell 2016; Harrell et al. 2017); students appeared to be interested in the security of a cohort-based, faculty-led trip, and their narratives revealed a mix of anxiety and excitement associated with studying abroad. However, the findings also highlighted overarching themes specific to Generation Z and provided a nuanced look at the needs of the current generation of college students studying abroad. Qualitative analysis of students' responses to open-ended questions regarding their educational and social goals revealed three primary thematic categories: *global citizenship*, *need to belong*, and *personal growth*. Further examination revealed several subthemes (Figure 1), which are discussed in relation to students' reflections on their interpersonal experiences during the voyage and the implications for future study abroad programming.



**Figure 1. Primary Themes and Subthemes Reflecting Semester at Sea Students’ Goals for the Voyage**

### Theme 1: Global Citizenship

A common argument for the utility of studying abroad is that it will cultivate a broader worldview, and many programs advertise that their students will become “global citizens” as a result of participation (Zemach-Bersin 2009). The homepage of the Semester at Sea website promotes the program to students with the message “Come home with a global perspective” (Semester at Sea 2022). The academics section of the website includes an entire page dedicated to global citizenship, defining global citizens as “members of a world community who contribute to and respect the worlds’ values and practices, and cultures” (Semester at Sea 2022). Media savvy Generation Z students are highly likely to seek out information about study abroad on program websites, which are commonly the first reference point for students considering study abroad (Bishop 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that over three quarters (81.7%) of the current sample of students reported at least one goal related to their desire to cultivate *global citizenship*.

The majority of responses within this theme (78.3%) highlighted students’ excitement to take advantage of the opportunities provided by Semester at Sea in order to *gain global knowledge and experience*. Respondents expressed interest in developing a better understanding of the world and many elaborated that they wanted to learn more about the history, politics, and belief systems of other cultures through first-hand experiences in-country. Examples included:

*Learning more about and experiencing other cultures to have a more well-rounded perspective of the world.*

*Gaining a real-world education through travel.*

*Apply knowledge in-country.*

*To learn more about other countries – cultures, languages, traditions, the way people live elsewhere.*

*See the world, immerse myself in new cultures, explore new perspectives, opinions.*

Beyond their determination to cultivate global knowledge, students were eager to engage with individuals from different cultures. Previous findings indicate that, in general, study abroad students expect to meet, interact, and make connections with locals (Sánchez, Fornerino, and Zhang 2006; Krzaklewska 2008; Badstubner and Ecke 2009; Nyaupane, Paris, and Teye 2010; Anderson and Lawton, 2015). In accordance with this, the remaining 21.7% of coded responses within this theme described respondents' goals to create *intercultural connections*. While some students simply wanted to "Meet locals" or "Talk to locals," the majority were interested in more enduring relationships:

*Make international friends to talk [with] and visit.*

*Make great personal friends with locals in-country.*

*Engage in the lives of people in ports.*

*Have great personal connections in-country.*

*New global friends to visit later in life.*

Questions have been raised about whether short-term study abroad programs have the capacity to produce meaningful intercultural experiences for students (Dietrich 2018). In their review of students' foreign language use during study abroad, Allen and Dupuy (2012) noted that students generally report "rare to nonexistent contact with people from the host community" (p. 473). The current sample of students faced a particular challenge due to the nature of the Semester at Sea voyage itself. Rather than spending their semester in one foreign country, Semester at Sea participants visited eleven countries over the span of three and a half months, typically spending only 4-5 days in each port. Because of this limited contact with host communities, students had few "natural" opportunities to create long-term connections.

However, the Semester at Sea program is also uniquely posed to support students' global citizenship in other ways. All students were required to participate in a Global Studies course, which provided in-depth information about each host country to prepare students for port visits. In addition, faculty-led mandatory field programs combined this targeted shipboard instruction with in-country contact with host communities (such as visiting a women's shelter in Ghana) to facilitate students' cross-cultural experience. Likely as a result of these programmatic initiatives, students reported that they ultimately met 90.4% of their global citizenship goals. It appears that Semester at Sea provided an avenue for the current generation of students to participate in cross-cultural exchange within a structured environment that they felt promoted their intercultural knowledge and engagement.

## Theme 2: Need to Belong

Generation Z has been described as "the 'We' generation," characterized by a focus on community engagement and connection (Seemiller and Grace 2016). Semester at Sea's "floating campus" offers these students a uniquely community-centered study abroad experience, during which they can expect to "[make] lifelong friends and [share] a world of experiences together" (Semester at Sea 2022). Therefore, it is not surprising that the second most common theme regarding students' goals for the voyage, identified by 73.1% of respondents, reflected their *need to belong* with their shipboard peers. Students were highly focused on forging meaningful, long-lasting friendships, and almost a quarter (19.1%) of the

responses assigned to this theme involved some variation of the phrase “make lifelong friends.” Respondents emphasized both the importance of connecting with diverse individuals from “different backgrounds” (a commonly used phrase), and their desire to find others with similar values and interests. Examples included:

*To meet a diverse group of friends who were as open to learning as I was.*

*Make friends outside my home institution, group of like-minded people.*

*Gain new friends who also have a passion for seeing the world.*

Despite the program’s focus on creating a shipboard community, and the fact that students had prior familiarity with an average of three people onboard, 86.7% of respondents expressed concerns about their ability to make friends during the voyage. There are several factors that are likely to have contributed to these worries. For many students the trip represented the first time that they experienced semi-independent travel. This may have strengthened their determination to find friends who they could rely on for support during the voyage. In addition, students anticipated spending days at a time sailing together between visits to host countries. Because the ship had no internet access, their primary source of contact during this time would be their shipboard peers and almost half (40.1%) of respondents expressed concerns about their ability to “fit in” and find people who were like them onboard. One respondent wrote that they worried about, “Being able to fit in, finding belonging.” Another noted that they were anxious about being seen as “the weird kid who no one wanted to be friends with.” It makes sense that, in this context, finding peers who they liked and could connect with was of utmost importance. Finally, there is evidence that the members of Generation Z are especially vulnerable to stress. A national survey found that 9 out of 10 Generation Z respondents reported experiencing at least one symptom of stress in the last month, and 35% described “bullying/not getting along with others” as a significant source of stress in their life (American Psychological Association 2018).

While the insulated nature of the shipboard community may have contributed to their worries, it also appeared to play an instrumental role in allowing students to forge meaningful connections. Over three quarters (79.8%) of respondents ultimately reported that they met their goals regarding peer connections while onboard the ship. Although students didn’t specifically acknowledge the lack of internet access in their responses, it’s likely that this was a contributing factor. Unlike a traditional college campus (whether at home or abroad), living onboard without access to the online world forced the shipboard population to congregate together. All students ate in one of two dining halls each evening, and it was typical for students to sit with a wide range of peers due to space constraints. Students also spent much of their free time “hanging out” around the ship, which facilitated connections through participation in the same clubs and activities, shared hobbies, and even just striking up conversation. Many respondents noted that they spent “most of their day” when the ship was at sail with friends and among their peers. Their responses highlighted the communal culture onboard, such as, “I spent most of my time in common areas meeting people and saying hi to people I know,” and, “I hop around a lot and say hi to a lot of people, I usually will be going somewhere and stop to talk because I run into someone I know.” When students were asked about the settings and environments in which they made friends during the trip, 27.9% of respondents reported some variation of the phrase “around the ship” (representing the most

commonly reported setting). It appears that, in general, students met their social needs primarily via incidental interactions prompted by physical proximity.

These results are encouraging when considering the importance of friendships for emerging adults as a whole, and for study abroad students in particular. During a period characterized by uncertainty (Arnett 2006), close relationships are essential sources of comfort and reassurance, and community belongingness appears to be a critical factor in emerging adults' identity exploration (Wood et al. 2018). In a review of Generation Z's social media use, Turner (2015) argued that many members of this generation seek out online interaction to gain a sense of belonging that they are unable to obtain in real life. Some evidence suggests that a similar phenomenon may be apparent among study abroad students, most of whom have access to the internet during their trip (Mikal and Grace 2012; Wooley 2013; Hofer et al. 2016). While some students felt that communication technology had a positive impact on their study abroad experience (such as allowing them to keep in touch with loved ones back home), others felt that it detracted from their ability to be in the moment and fully immerse themselves in their new environment (Hofer et al. 2016). Hofer and colleagues (2016) found that frequency of contact with parents was negatively associated with study abroad students' autonomy development; similarly, Mikal and Grace (2012) noted that study abroad students' use of the internet for support seeking and social networking was negatively associated with their goal achievement. In comparison, the Semester at Sea program created an environment that facilitated in-person interaction and fostered a sense of shipboard community, allowing students to move past their fears and develop meaningful friendships. These friendships, in turn, appear to enhance the study abroad experience, creating a sense of safety and connectedness that allows students to pursue learning opportunities that they might not otherwise experience (Harper 2018).

### Theme 3: Personal Growth

Over half of respondents (64.3%) wrote about goals related to *personal growth*. Many recognized the trip as an opportunity to push themselves academically and over half of coded responses within this theme (55.2%) reflected respondents' desire for *academic development*. They were eager to explore new classes and take advantage of transferable credits to complete required coursework in an exciting environment far from their home institution. Some of these responses included:

*Gain credit to count towards my major and gain knowledge for my future.*

*To see and study theater internationally.*

*Learn about psychology through a global mindset.*

*To take classes while traveling and get an education outside of my home university.*

Multiple students wrote about their determination to flourish in shipboard classes, including: "get all A's," "achieve a 4.0," and "get a good GPA." Evidence suggests that study abroad has a positive association with students' academic achievement; for example, 90% of Cardwell's (2020) study abroad student sample felt that their academic abilities were strengthened over the course of their trip. Cardwell's students attributed their academic success largely to their personal development during the trip, including feeling more confident and being able to see things from a different perspective.

Semester at Sea students also expressed a variety of hopes regarding their *personal development* during the voyage, representing 44.8% of coded responses within this theme. The

concept of personal development is central to study abroad and is consistently cited as a salient outcome for students (Kauffmann and Kuh 1984; Maharaja 2018; Firmin et al. 2013). Emerging adults are in an age of possibilities during which they have an “unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives” (Arnett 2006:7). Accordingly, responses emphasized students’ determination to engage in self-exploration and self-betterment, such as:

*To figure out more about myself and where I wanted to go in life.*

*Learn more about myself and goals for the future, learn more about what/who I prefer to surround myself with during times outside of class.*

*Become better spoken, find peace in who I surround myself with.*

Semester at Sea students appeared to see the voyage as a chance to have a transformative experience outside of the confines of their “everyday life,” although not all of them were sure about exactly what this would entail. Francis and Hoefel (2018) suggested that for Generation Z “the self is a place to experiment, test, and change” (2018:4), resulting in members of this generation valuing identity exploration. The members of Generation Z are also used to uncertainty, both at the societal and personal level (Hernandez-de-Menendez, Díaz, and Morales-Menendez 2020). Consistent with this theoretical framework, many respondents were interested in personal exploration and growth without any strictly defined parameters, instead writing about general goals such as “learn about themselves,” “learn from others,” and “grow as a person.”

Reflecting Generation Z’s focus on interconnectedness (Seemiller and Grace, 2016), students were highly interested in becoming more socially aware and involved. McKay and colleagues (2022) noted that leaving the safety net of one’s home network and “saying ‘yes’ to new experiences and people” (2022:427) is integral to the study abroad experience, and Semester at Sea students wrote extensively about their determination to do so. Examples included:

*To not restrict myself to my best friend and the ship, and to continue to branch out.*

*Become more comfortable talking to new people.*

*Open up, get involved.*

Overall, students were motivated to participate in a variety of activities, events, and programs that were offered during the Semester at Sea voyage. While reflecting on their favorite social activities onboard, respondents wrote enthusiastically about their involvement in community programming such as movie nights, dances, and evening seminars. Another way that students demonstrated their desire to push themselves to try new things and get out of their comfort zone was through their in-country travel. Their responses highlighted the necessity of figuring out how to manage opposing desires, plan independent excursions, and navigate foreign locations.

Many of the challenges Semester at Sea students faced were not unique to study abroad; a significant portion of college undergraduates report experiencing stressors such as changes in social activities, working with people they don’t know, and finding themselves in unfamiliar situations (Acharya, Jin, and Collins 2018). However, unlike traditional college programs which allow students time to acclimate and work towards accomplishing their goals, study abroad represents a unique and time-limited opportunity. While the majority of respondents’ personal growth goals (82.4%) were met, the Semester at Sea program forced

students to push themselves and learn to tolerate and manage discomfort within a relatively short period of time.

#### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Along with a variety of strengths, such as a large sample size (representing over half of the Semester at Sea shipboard student population) and associated quantity of responses, the current study included a few limitations. First, the data were gathered from students' reflections during the last week of their semester abroad. Therefore, it is possible that some responses may have been affected by hindsight bias or cognitive dissonance. Students may have retroactively reported on goals that they developed throughout the course of the voyage based on their experiences. Alternatively, they may have been more motivated to report that their goals for the voyage had been met because of their imminent return home. Future research should consider implementing a pre-post design examining students' goals at the beginning of their study abroad trip and which goals had been met at the end. In addition, students in the current sample were invited to participate immediately after completing their final exam in the core Global Studies course, which may have impacted the extent of their responses. Recruiting participants at a different time may have encouraged more in-depth reflection.

Since the start of the new millennium, women have consistently made up over 60% of the study abroad student population (Dietrich 2018; Kim and Lawrence 2021; Siddiqui and Jessup-Anger 2020), and this discrepancy has become more pronounced in recent decades (Di Pietro 2022). Scholars have noted that women tend to perform better in higher education, which is associated with a higher likelihood of studying abroad, and are more likely to choose academic fields that encourage study abroad participation (Salisbury, Paulsen, and Pascarella 2010; Cordua and Netz, 2022). Generation Z women outpace men in higher education enrollment and graduation rates (Parker 2021), suggesting that the study abroad gender gap may continue to widen among this cohort. Consistent with previous research, and with the student demographics of other Semester at Sea cohorts, approximately 80% of the current sample were women. Semester at Sea, in particular, represents a unique environment that may be especially attractive to women. In comparison to other short-term study abroad programs, Semester at Sea students have a high level of supervision and support from faculty and staff onboard, and students in the current sample mostly traveled in groups with their peers in-country. This likely lessened the risk of experiencing harassment or other victimization while abroad. Evidence suggests that women tend to place a higher emphasis on the establishment and maintenance of close relationships as compared to men (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015), which may provide another explanation for women's self-selection into the highly communal Semester at Sea program. Having a predominantly female sample may have influenced our results, which indicated that students viewed social connection and belonging as an integral part of their study abroad experience. Future research integrating targeted recruitment of male study abroad students would allow for a better understanding of the male perspective and could provide more insight into the underrepresentation of men in these programs.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Semester at Sea program (a faculty-guided study abroad voyage that incorporates multiple foreign destinations in one semester) appealed to students due to its targeted

combination of experiential learning, community focus, and instructional scaffolding. The majority of students in the current sample reported that they gained intercultural knowledge and experience as a result of their onboard classes and faculty-led in-country field programs. They were also able to establish a sense of community and belongingness with their shipboard peers and found opportunities for identity exploration and personal growth throughout the voyage. For the current generation of “digital natives,” use of social media and other online communication platforms may be partially motivated by anxiety and isolation (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al. 2020; Turner 2015; Lyngdoh, El-Manstrly, and Jeesha 2022), and it is likely that this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lewis, Trojovsky, and Jameson 2021; Garfin 2020). Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating targeted initiatives focused on community-building and promoting social bonds among student cohorts, both in study abroad programs and on college campuses. Facilitating in-person interaction and connections as a part of the college experience will likely play a critical role in helping students to create more meaningful relationships in real life. The current sample’s responses highlighted their desire to grow and better themselves, and our results provide encouraging evidence that, with appropriate support and guidance, Generation Z students can continue to challenge themselves and explore opportunities outside of their comfort zone.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

**Siri Wilder**, M.S. received her B.A. from Whittier College in 2017 and her M.S. from the University of Texas at Dallas in 2022, where she is currently completing her doctorate in psychology. Her research interests include relational processes underlying committed and casual sex relationships and young adults' attitudes toward sexuality. She was the inaugural recipient of the UT Dallas IRB HIVE award, recognizing positive contributions to human subjects research, and in 2022 received the UT Dallas President's Teaching Excellence Award for Teaching Assistants. In addition to her research and teaching, she has enjoyed working on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in several committee roles.

**Christina L. Scott**, Ph.D. is an associate professor of psychology with Whittier College in Los Angeles and earned her Ph.D. in social psychology at Kansas State University. Her program of research has spanned a range of topics focusing on women's personal and sexual empowerment, including friends with benefits relationships and women's sexual arousal.

Currently, she is investigating perceptions of single mothers-by-choice and changing attitudes about motherhood. Christina has taught university courses in Shanghai, China and as a faculty member with Semester at Sea. She will be teaching at the University of Tokyo and Kyoritsu Women's University in Tokyo, Japan in 2023 as a Fulbright Scholar.