

Fall 2017

# Oh the places we have gone: the interplay between study abroad and social media

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Oh the places we have gone: the interplay between  
study abroad and social media

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Senior Seminar: Thesis

Professor Richter

Fall 2017

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## Introduction

Travel and social media are becoming more and more intertwined as society progresses with technology. Social media allows individuals to update people, in almost live time, with what they are doing while they are abroad. Most college study abroad programs are a good example of this. This study looks to explore how social media and study abroad interplay with one another and to look to see if there is a fear of missing out (FoMO) if students don't interact with social media in a certain way while they are abroad. The paper will explore this by first providing a literature review focusing on social media, traveling and fear of missing out, then talk about the significance of the research on society and the Communication Studies field. Once the base of literature is well known, the paper will discuss the methodology used for gathering and researching the topics. Once all the data is compiled and collected, the paper will discuss the patterns and themes in the findings. Finally, the paper will go over limitations and talk about areas for future research.

## Research Question

The following study considers the relationship between social media, specifically Instagram, and study abroad programs for college students. In order to explore this topic, this research will look at three main research questions.

RQ1: How do students interact with social media while they are abroad?

RQ2: What goes into the construction of study abroad posts?

RQ3: Do study abroad students feel the need to post travel photos on social media, due to fear of missing out (FoMO) and validation from society?

The working hypothesis for this research question is that the students are trying to avoid missing out on expected and traditional travel experience. Even though the students are supposed to be having the time of their lives, I believe that there is a fear of missing out on the shared and typical travel experiences from others who have traveled to the same places and that students post photos to be included in the typical travel experience, and have a validation of their study abroad experience from others. This affects traveling standards, such as where to travel and what to see while you are there. For example, when students go to Paris, they usually post a picture with them in front of a famous monument, such as the Eiffel Tower, to showcase their experience. Can an individual really say they went to Paris if they don't have a picture of the Eiffel Tower?

This validation of the student's study abroad experience comes from the number of likes and comments they get on a photo. If a photo doesn't go as well as they hope for, it can leave a student feeling unsatisfied and can make them feel less validated about their study abroad experience. Students are so eager to share what they are doing with those back home and to see if they think that their travel experience was a success or not.

## Literature Review

### Social Media

The use of social media is becoming a common way to communicate and connect with others. According to Joinson (2008), social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become very popular in the last few years. This shows that more and more people are starting to become connected in a space where time and distance are not a factor. This is important to note because the boundaries of location, time, and availability are starting to shrink and allow for more people to connect with one another and at a faster rate (Milbourne, 2015). Along with making connections easier, social media also allow for individuals to share more with others.

With social media, communication is becoming more interactive with the use of sharing, photos, locations, thoughts and feelings with one another (Albrechtslund, 2014; Sinn, 2014). Similarly, Marcus (2016) argues that social media has helped provide spaces for individuals to connect based on mutual interest, morals, and so on. Chu (2011) adds, that social media allows for people to have more self-disclosure than those who are not on social media. By sharing more with individuals, social media helps build communities. This allows for space where users feel as though they have a safe space to share and interact with others about what is going on in different aspects of their lives. The way individuals create this space is the way in which they utilize social media.

### How Social Media is used

The literature identifies here, that there are three main ways in which individuals use social media. This section will look at how social media is used to

document and record users lives; how individuals use social media to create how they want to be seen by others; finally, how social media is used to stay connected with others. These three aspects of using social media are important because they can help give better insight into the need that social media fills within in the user's lives.

#### *Using Social Media to Document Lives.*

One way social media is used is to document and record what the users do from day to day. Social media allows for its users to record and show others what they are doing in their everyday lives, within an interactive way of photos, likes, and comments (Burgess, 2007; Sinn, 2014). Albrechtslund (2014) states that social media is a way to share mundane activities through the user's photos, moments, likes and so on. This sharing of everyday life captures how individuals live their lives and allow for individuals to go back and reminisce about things that happened in the past, and see what they have done with their life.

#### *Using Social Media to convey sense of self*

Social media helps present an image of the user is to others; whether it is a realistic or more of desired persona of the user. Through social media people try to personalize their pages with their "personality" to show their friends; some users convey themselves truthfully, while others convey themselves in partial truths to come across a certain way to others, (Sinn, 2014). Uimonen (2013) also adds to this by stating that social media, such as Facebook, is a way of virtually recreating yourself for others to find and to get to know. Social media allow individuals to

create a certain persona for them. Going beyond creating an image on social media, users use it to stay connected and informed with their friends and families.

### ***Staying Connected with Social Media***

Social media allows for an easier way to stay connected and interact with others. The predominant reason individuals use social media is to keep up with their families, friends, and acquaintances (Joinson, 2008; Uimonen, 2013; Sinn, 2014). Connecting on social media is easy and does not require a lot of energy. Individuals are able to see what is going on in others' lives with photos, status and in a much quicker way. Individuals no longer have to take the time to reach out to their friends and families one at a time, but rather check in and interact with them in one sitting of scrolling on social media. They are able to like, share, and comment on different people's posts in a matter of minutes. Social media doesn't just help individuals connect from day to day activities, but also when users travel far distances.

### **Travel vs. Tourism; Travel Photography vs. Tourism Photography**

#### ***Travel***

Traveling was not always as popular and accessible as it is in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, travel was reserved for those who could afford it and was a social status marker (Larsen, 2004; Urry, 2011). It was not common for the ordinary public to go and travel around the world. Tourism was not a mass occurrence and the depiction of places did not travel as well through objects, such as paintings, therefore people did not feel the need to have to go out and travel (Urry



2011). It was not a big part of the ordinary culture to travel and to think about traveling. This started to change with the invention and progression of the camera.

### *Travel Photography*

Photography helped shift the way that places from all across the world were shared with the 'ordinary' public. With the invention of the half-tone plate in the 1880's, circulation of photograph became cheaper and could be shared in newspapers, periodicals and so on (Larsen, 2004; Urry, 2011). Since it then became cheaper to distribute travel photos, it became easier for the working and middle class to see and experience these places even though they still did not have the means to travel on their own. This shows a slight shift from the middle and working class to not being able to participate in traveling, to be able to get a sense of it without having to spend the funds on it.

With the ease and comfort of being able to see travel photos from home, Larsen (2004) states that individuals started to "armchair" travel, and had become familiarized with these places, that once seemed so far away. There was no need for individuals to go and use their limited funds and resources to travel when they could see everything from the luxury of their own home. As time progressed, these photos made the world more visible and created a desire and need to go and experience these places in person (Urry, 2011; Larsen, 2004). With the help of photography, it helped start the era of mass tourism to new and unique places.

### *Tourism*

With everyone craving to travel the world as they had seen it in photographs, it helped shift travel into tourism. The first known wave of mass tourism occurred

amongst the working class in Britain (Urry, 2011). In others words, there were more people than ever going and exploring unique and different places all around the world that they had seen only in pictures. Individuals wanted to go to the same places they have seen and read about and do everything that other tourists had done, in order to feel as though they had gotten the whole traveling experience while they were there. Photography started to become more popular in tourism once the technology made it cheap and covenant enough for the general public to use.

### *Tourism and Photography*

When thinking about tourist, many people think about foreigners walking around with their personal camera taking as many pictures as they can. This started with the invention of the Kodak camera. The Kodak camera allowed anyone to use photography as a leisure activity (Larson, N/A). Urry (2011) adds on to this by saying that Kodak allowed individuals to take their own personal travel photos, even if they were the same as others, they were still from their own experience. With the feeling of having to compare and keep up with other tourist photos, it affects what other tourist do and takes pictures of.

With other tourists to compare travel experience with, it puts pressure and standards for what travelers should do and photograph when traveling. Tourist went through rolls and rolls of films, or thousands of shots on digital cameras to get just the right shot of the iconic monuments and places, such as the Tai Mahal, or Ha Long Bay (Garlick, 2012). There is a sense of pressure to make sure you capture the typical tourism experience, and to go sightseeing to capture the right image then

move on to the next in order to make sure you get them all (Robinson, 2014; Urry, 2011). In sense, you have to capture certain elements of your travel, to prove and ensure you didn't miss out on the normal or typical travel experience for that particular location. This shows how photography has formed a standard for what to do while traveling in different places. This leads to a shift in the culture of travel. As the relationship between tourism and photography become more complex, so does its effect on travel culture. Photographs have now become an important way in which people experience the world (Garlick, 2002). With tourism photography, it allows users to share and capture moments in time and space and then share with others (Urry, 2012; Garlic, 2002). Urry (2012) add to this that not only do tourist capture moment while traveling, but that is now the lens in which tourist use to see the place they are in. In short, this means that instead of enjoying the monuments and breathtaking places in a new place, tourists are more concerned about finding picturesque spots to capture in their photos This is important to help understand how photography has affected the way in which people travel and spend their time when traveling. With technological advances, such as social media, the role of tourism and photography become more accessible and instant.

### *Social Media and Travel*

Social media use is similar during times of travel as using it from day to day. With social media becoming more accessible, even overseas, it has become more integrated into traveling experiences. This includes travel for leisure (tourism) and travels for more academic purposes (study abroad). Traveling with the easy access to social media has its pros and cons for both leisure and academic travel. This

means that the general public not only has access to easily photograph their travel experience but also creates a culture that feels the need to capture their experience or it will be lost forever.

### *Social Media and Tourism*

Within the literature, social media helps travelers document their travels. While tourists are out exploring, they more often than not, are looking for popular monuments and locations, looking for the best angle to capture the moment to ultimately share with others online (Albrechtstlund, 2014; Jurgenson, 2012). Uimonen (2013) adds on to this, that tourists even have devices now that allow them to take photos and almost immediately post them online to their personal social media accounts. This allows tourists to easily document their travels almost instantly as it is happening. This also allows for the users to stay connected with others and keep them updated on what is going on. Although social media helps with traveling there are some cons and limitations to what it adds to tourist experiences.

With advantages of tourism with social media, there are also disadvantages. The first disadvantage is that tourists tend to go through the motions of documenting their travel experience rather than enjoying it. Albrechtstlund (2014) elaborates that tourists go sightseeing without actually looking at the sights, but are rather looking for the best way to capture the experience to be shared in an almost ritualistic way. This shows that tourism has shifted from experiencing other cultures, to going to famous sites and monuments and taking pictures so we can show others we were

there but not taking the time to truly experience it. This leads to the reason why tourist post pictures.

The second disadvantage to traveling with social media is that travelers are constantly looking for attractions that will photo well and also generate a lot of likes and interest in their social media. The tourist start to develop a gaze for how to capture their travel experience in ways that will generate the most interactions with others through likes and comments (Jurgenson, 2012.; Albrechtslund, 2014.) This shows that tourist starts to go to popular and unique places, not necessarily for the experience that comes with it, but rather the photos and attention they will receive for it. This is important to note and look at because it can cause gaps between traveling and learning about a new culture, and just existing in the space.

### *Social Media and Study Abroad*

Study Abroad and social media interactions have some similarities to leisure traveling. The first similarity is that students who study abroad use social media document their experiences. Bizirgianni (2013) indicated that most young travelers indicated that they use their social media profiles to communicate and express their experiences while abroad and traveling. Both academic and leisure travelers feel the need to document their experiences and are able to do so easily with social media. With the students sharing their experiences on social media, it relates to wanting to communicate and stay connected with others.

While studying abroad students valued staying connected to their friends and families. During the duration of their study abroad period, students indicated that they used social media in the same way as back home, but emphasized that they

also used it to talk to their friends and families and keep everyone up to date on what they were doing (Hetz, 2015). It is important to understand how, for studying abroad, social media plays a slightly different role in communicating to others while they are gone.

Another similarity between study abroad and leisure travel and social media use, is that it can act as a buffer between allowing students to truly immerse themselves in the new culture. While they are there they are constantly looking for interesting places to snap a potential profile, or post pictures incorporating the monuments behind them (Hetz, 2015; Albrechtslund, 2014). Study abroad students are starting to shift from no longer prioritizing enjoying the experience of being in a new place, but rather locating where their next photo on social media could be. Along with the similarities, study abroad allows for different social media use than just leisure traveling.

The first difference in how social media is used for abroad, is that it can help with culture shock. Students who go abroad can often experience culture shock of a new places customs and can become extremely homesick because of it. With social media allows students to not to feel as cut off from their own culture and enjoy the new culture more (Huesca, 2013.). This allows for students to stay connected enough to things they are familiar with. Transitioning from feeling more comfortable in a new culture, social media also helps students plan their trips.

The second way in which study aboard students utilize social media a little bit differently is by using it to help think of and plan new destinations. Students look at the internet and at their friend's past trips to get ideas of where to go and things

to do (Dillon, 2016; Bizirgianni, 2013). This shows that for young students, that their predominate why for searching for travel information is through close friends and families on social media. It shows that students want to have shared experiences with others who have also gone to those places.

### **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**

Fear of missing out, or FoMO, is where individuals feel the need to be connected at all times or feel as though they need to participate in different activities, in fear that they will miss out on an important event, experience, or moment (Przybylski 2011; Conlin, 2016). Fear of missing out is important to understand because it connects with the well-being and psychological health of individuals (Przybylski, 2011). Tarsha (2016) adds on this by explaining that those with fear of missing out tend to have more anxiety about disconnection, and have a greater need to fulfill the need to be included. New technologies and social media create new factors in increasing the phenomena of fear of missing out.

### ***FoMO and Social Media***

Social media and fear of missing out have strong connections to one another. Individuals with higher indications of fear of missing out tend to rely on social media to feel connected with others more, even when they should be doing other things like participating in class (Przyblyski, 2011; Tarsha, 2016). Social media allows those with high levels of fear of missing out to have an outlet that allows them to feel connected to others and to be part of a community. By feeling connected and knowing what is going on, individuals feel more a part of the community and society they are in as a whole. Although social media can help those

with a large amount of fear of missing out, it can also contribute to individuals having a fear of missing out as well.

Social Media has made it easy for individuals to feel connected to others, but because of this it also makes it easy to feel left out. Social media allows for information to be shared so fast and is constantly updated, that individuals feel the need to constantly check it and make sure they are up to date on what is going on around them. Since social media allows individuals to have constant access to the internet, when they don't have access to their devices it creates greater feelings of missing out (Mibouren, 2015; Conlin, 2016). Social media creates a sense of urgency on knowing the most updated information of those that are connected to an individual's social media account. It creates a cycle of needing social media to feel connected but also increasing the fear of missing out when the users are unable to connect to it. In addition to the digital world, fear of missing out is amplified when it comes to traveling.

#### *FoMO and Traveling/Study Abroad*

After reviewing the literature, it was found students who travel abroad and participate in social media have a specific relationship with FoMO. When students were asked about FoMO while abroad, they did not feel like they were missing much from back home because of geographic location, but also that they realized they were having the time of their lives (Hetz, 2015). Social media could help bridge the gap between study abroad students and fear of missing out on opportunities back home, by allowing students to stay connected and interact with those back home.



Although some did not admit to feeling FoMO while abroad, realized that their friends and families back home did.

Students who studied abroad knew that those back home were jealous of their adventures and contributed to their friends FoMO. For some students, social media creates a competitive environment to post things that will make their friends jealous of their adventure and get the most likes and comments, and inspire others to go out and try and match their travel experience (Hetz, 2015; Dillon, 2016). This shows how students who travel abroad might not experience FoMO on things back home, but could have some other fear of missing out on their study abroad students, especial when comparing their trips to others.

## **Significance**

### *To Society*

It is important to study social media and how it affects travel because travel is becoming more and more integrated into the culture. The world is also becoming more and more global. This can be seen in activities, such as study abroad programs within universities, and how easy it is to connect and access information from across the world. By studying how social media influences travel, it will be easier for individuals to realize and understand why they choose to go and do certain things, specifically people's travel habits.

### *To the Field*

This study is important for the field of communication studies because social media is becoming a dominant part how individuals communicate with one another. Social media use is an important aspect of most individual's lives and has become

part of an everyday routine (Hetz, 2015; Milbourne, 2015). Along with social media becoming an integrated part of people's lives, so is globalization. Now, more than ever individuals can access information and contact people states, and continents apart. With this globalization comes more traveling as tourist and study abroad programs. It is important to understand how social media affects travel, to see if it helps or hinders individuals travel experiences with how people communicate.

## **Methodology**

This research consisted of two different qualitative methods. The first approach consisted of interviews with students who have studied abroad through a program, ranging from one month to a whole school year. During these interviews, questions were asked to better understand the role of social media and students study abroad experience. The second method is a content analysis that was done by exploring students photos posted on Instagram while they were studying abroad. The photos were coded based on a number of likes, comments, hashtags did this, and locations used in the post, then analyzed. Then the photos were analyzed to see if there are predominating themes of typical and successful study abroad post.

## **Participants/ Subjects**

This study consisted of ten individuals who have studied abroad while in college. All ten of the students studied at the same uni-sex university and are working on their undergraduate degrees. The age ranges of the participants were from 20-21 years old, and all identified as female. The study looked at those who have studied abroad from one month to one year (summer and semester programs). Four of the participants studied in England (three in London and one in Oxford);

two studied in Paris, France; one in Seville, Spain; one in Hirakata, Japan; one in Rome, Italy; one in Muscat, Oman. Out of the ten participants, five of the students studied through the university programs, three studied through university-affiliated programs, and two studied in programs not attached to the university. In addition to the interviews, each of the interviewees gave consent for the researcher to code and analyze their post to Instagram while they were studying abroad. For each of the accounts, ten photos were randomly selected and code and analyzed for patterns. A convenience and snowball sampling were used to gather all participants for the study from the Hollins University campus. Each participant signed a waiver form consenting to the interview and allowing the researcher to look at and analyze their photos from their time abroad.

### Procedures

A mixture of interviews and content analysis were used to help get a variety of data. These methods were picked to look at why individuals feel the need to post on social media while abroad, and to see if they interact with social media differently a while abroad. Together they helped reveal patterns in how individuals interact with social media while abroad and how it affects our travels while there.

The first method of interviews had a total of 10 participants. All interviews were done in person, by the same interviewer, using an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of 28 questions (see Appendix A for complete interview guide). Every participant was asked all the questions, along with following up questions if need be to get a better understanding or more clarification for the data. All interviews were recorded after the interviewee signed a consent form. All the

interviewees were encouraged to relax, answer questions honestly, and to think of the interview as more of conversation. This was done to help the interviewee feel more at ease and willing to talk with the interviewer.

For this method, a convenient and snowball sample was used to find participants. The convenient sample was used to find the first wave of participants, and then a snowball sample was used to gather the other wave of participants. After the interviews had been conducted and recorded, the interviews were then transcribed. Once all the interviews were transcribed, they were looked through with a content analysis, to analyze of all the data and find any major themes and/or patterns with how individuals use and interact with social media while abroad.

The second method is a contextual analysis of social media post. For this method, the ten Instagram accounts of each of the interviewees were looked at. For this process, each photo while they were abroad was assigned a number. The photos were then randomly selected by drawing the numbers from a bag, one by one until ten photos were picked. For those who did not have 10 photos, all of their photos were used and it was noted on how many they had total. There was no replacement since the research is not looking to represent a population. There will also be a content analysis of the subject matter of all the photos posted during their study abroad post to see if there are common monuments, locations and so on.

The data was obtained through a convenient and snowball sample, and every participant signed a consent form to allow their photos they posted to be used for the research. Once all the photos were collected, they were coded using a coding sheet based on a coding scheme. The coding scheme was used to look at two main

things. The first was what elements are used and not used in social media when abroad, such as hashtags, comments, likes, tagging people and places, and adding a location. Second, they were looked at for patterns on what the subject matter of the photos is, such as iconic monuments, locations, or actions that makeup travel experience.

### **Analysis**

For the analysis of the first method of the interviews, the transcripts were looked over for patterns and themes. There was an initial reading of all the interviewees. Then, each question was looked at for all the responses to help better look for patterns and themes. There were multiple readings of the transcripts again to make sure that there was evidence to either support or disregard themes and to make sure there were no themes or patterns missed. After the transcripts had been read thoroughly, and the themes and patterns have been identified, they were formally written down with descriptions, examples and evidence.

For the second analysis of the content analysis, the coding sheets for each account were looked at. There was math, to find averages and percentages and to look at the relationships between the different aspects of the Instagram posts and to see what goes into creating a typical study abroad post to best represent the experience. There was also an analysis of the content of all the photos during their time to see if there are common themes such as location, monuments, and so on.

### **Findings**

After a close look at the data gathered from the interviews and photo content analysis, many themes and patterns emerged surrounding how students interact

with social media while they are abroad, how they constructed their study abroad post, and a better insight if there is an underlying fear of missing out if students didn't post their travel photos on social media.

### **Social Media Usage While Abroad**

When trying to answer the question of how students interact with social media while they are abroad, three major themes emerged. Students mainly used social media to stay connect and update others back home, document their experience, use it to be inspired on where to travel.

#### ***Connection and Updating***

One of the most common reasons for using and interacting with social media while students were abroad was to keep contact with friend and family and to be able to update them on what they were doing while they were abroad. Many of the students said saying such as "I wanted to let my family know that I was alive". All of the students interviewed talked about how it was one of their main ways to connect with others back home. They often connected with them by posting pictures and albums to show what they were doing. This shows that even though students were thousands of miles away with time differences, that keeping these connections are important, and were mostly accomplished by posting travel photos of themselves. These photos have another job, beyond just updating their friends back home.

#### ***Documenting***

The second theme found in the findings of this question was that students used social media to help document their trip. Six out of the ten students said that they use social media to help document their study abroad journey in some way

shape or form. This documentation was done by posting pictures and using the location feature on their social media platforms. Students said, that in part, they posted on social media because it would help remind them what they did by showing them a year from now and throughout their life and would help prompt them to reminisce on their study abroad experience. The location feature also let them document where they have been and gave them something similar to a map of where they have gone. This shows that students value being able to share and documenting their trips and mostly fall to social media to do this. Beyond document their travels, students also looked to social media to help get inspired and find ideas on where to travel to next.

### *Inspiration*

Social media helps influence and motivate students to travel to specific destinations. Eight out of the ten participants said that social media does, in fact, influence their decisions on where they want to travel. Participants talked about the variety of social media platforms they use, such as Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, Tumblr, Pinterest and other blog platforms. Through the usage of these different media platforms, the students talked about how they were influenced by both friends and popular media outlets.

Friends' social media was indicated by the participants to be the most common way they would look at for ideas to go and travel. 90% of the interviewees mentioned looking at their friend's social media, and 50% said that it was their main source for trying to decide where to travel. Students 3, 2, and 4 all talk about seeing photos from their friends and having the desire to go to these places, and some even

went on trips because they saw the photos from their friends. Student 2 illustrates this by saying "Photos from my friends going to the same places. So when they went to Paris they had a picture of themselves and the Eiffel Tower, or when they went to Amsterdam they had pictures in front of these really popular red sign in Amsterdam that everyone goes to take pictures in front of. So those are the ones I wanted to go see too". This indicates that students look at other students for where they should go, and creates a culture of expected travel destinations, while they are abroad.

The second way students were inspired to go to places was popular culture. Students said they would look at popular blogs and look at videos that were popular and trending on social media platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Youtube. Student 8 told a story about how she scheduled two entire trips based on videos she found on Facebook. The first trip was to the Blue Lagoons in Iceland, and the second was in Milan for the sole purpose to get pizza from a place she saw in the video. Another student echo's this with a story about going to a Coplay Café that she only found through video bloggers on Youtube. This shows that popular social media outlets are also used in influencing and creating the expected or typical travel narrative.

### **Construction of Travel Abroad Social Media Post**

#### ***Subject is Important***

The data indicates that the subject of the photo is very important when it comes to picking a photo to post on social media. Eight out of ten participants stated that their photos needed to be aesthetically pleasing or pretty. When looking at the photos, out of the 87 photos looked at, 49.43% of those photos subject matter



revolved around iconic places and landscapes. Some of the photos used the places as a background for individuals in the photo, while others were just the places and landscapes scenes on their own. Subjects of monuments and actions tied to capturing 16.09% of the total photos and the rest of the subjects consisted of photos that did not fit into any of the other three categories. This shows that the students mainly depicted their travels through main places, which indicates that students are drawn to those types of locations more. Even though the subject of the photos was important, it is also important to include the location in the photo.

### *Location, Location, Location*

It is crucial to include a location for travel abroad photos that the student's post. 90% of the students interviewed said that they used locations while they were abroad. The one student that did not sure the location application on Instagram, was only because it was not enabled on her phone and she usually hashtagged the location on her photos so it was still prevalent in her post where she was at. When asked if they felt like they used locations more abroad than back home, seven out of the ten said they did. Of the photos looked at in the Instagram accounts 66.67% of them used the location feature on the social media platform. The locations can be broken up into two categories of specific and vague locations.

The locations were split into two categories of specific and vague locations, and most of the photos used specific locations. Out of the 58 photos that used locations, 47 of them used specific locations to let others know where they were. An example of this would be someone putting Big Ben as their location if they have a picture of it in the background, instead of London, England. The students tended to

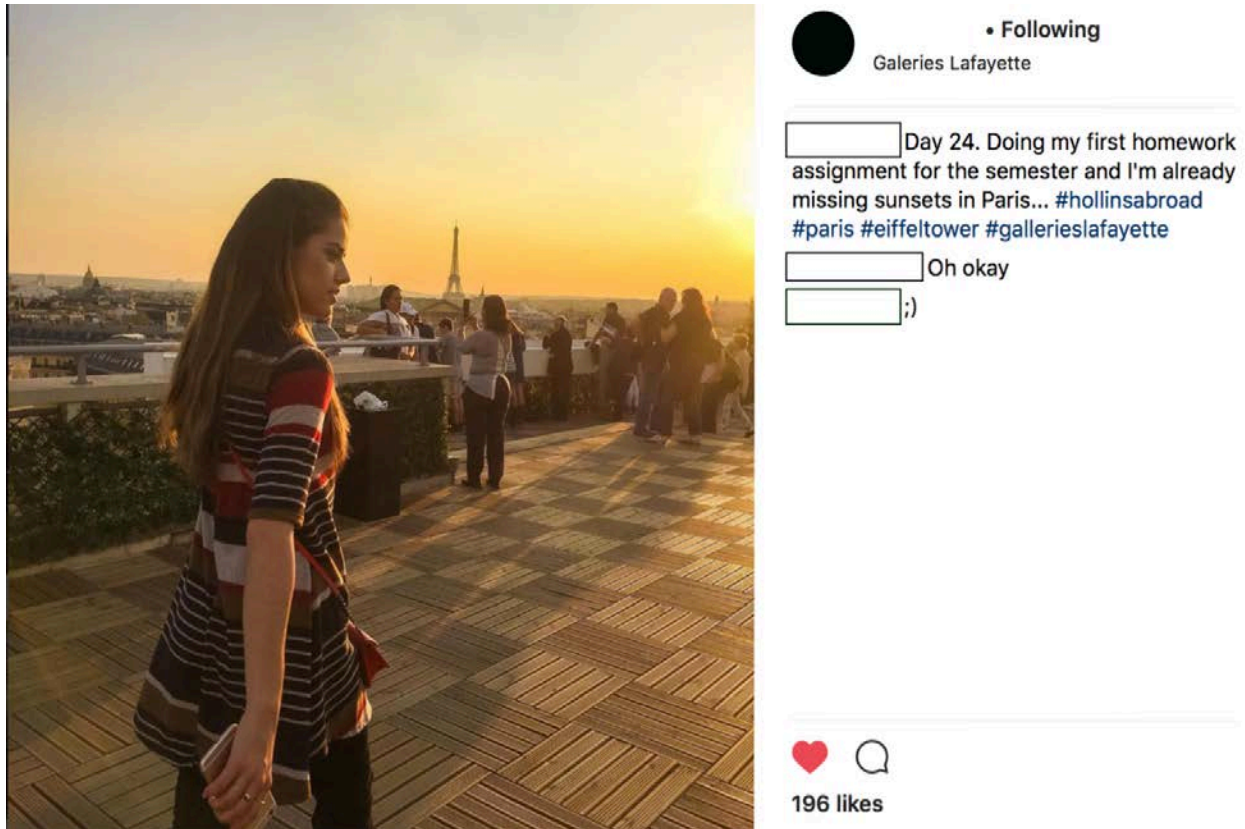
use the most specific location that they could, such as restaurant names, street names and so on. When one student was asked why they used locations so much they said that it had to do with the fact that they will most likely never live there again and wanted to use the locations while they could. By using the locations the students mapped where they were while also sharing and making sure that people knew exactly where they were. This was amplified with the use of hashtags.

### **#Hashtags**

Hashtags were used to help increase and enhance student's social media post. Hashtags were used by 60% of the participants while they were abroad and 35 out of the 87 photos analyzed use them. About 40% of the students said that they used them more abroad than back home. All but one student said that they did use hashtags to gain more traffic to their post. The type of hashtags used the most, as indicated by the students, were mainstream/popular ones, the programs, locations, and finally some said they used it ironically. All the photos that had hashtags had no more than five and ranged mainly from two to four. The hashtags helped elevate the post and make them feel more complete. The hashtags helped enforce other elements of the post as well.

In the post, students would hashtag their locations, even if they already put a location in the designated spot for it on Instagram. Students would put their specific location in the designated location, and then hashtag the broader locations or things in the surrounding area. For example in student 8's photo (pictured below), they put the location of the building they were in and then proceeded to hashtag the broader

location, and even the monument in the distance. This amplification shows, that students want people to know exactly where they are in the photos, and leave no doubt in their minds that they are where they say they are.



**Do study abroad students feel the need to post travel photos on social media, due to fear of missing out (FoMO) and validation from society?**

When trying to answer this question, it becomes a lot more complex with the themes and how they interplay with one another. The first theme talks about how many of the students looked for certain places and things to take pictures off and how they felt if they were unable to accomplish this. This then feeds into the next theme of the students needing to be some sort of proof that they went to these places and when that proof needed to be presented. Once the proof was laid down, it then leads to the third theme of needing engagement with the media texts.

### *Iconic Places for Iconic Photos*

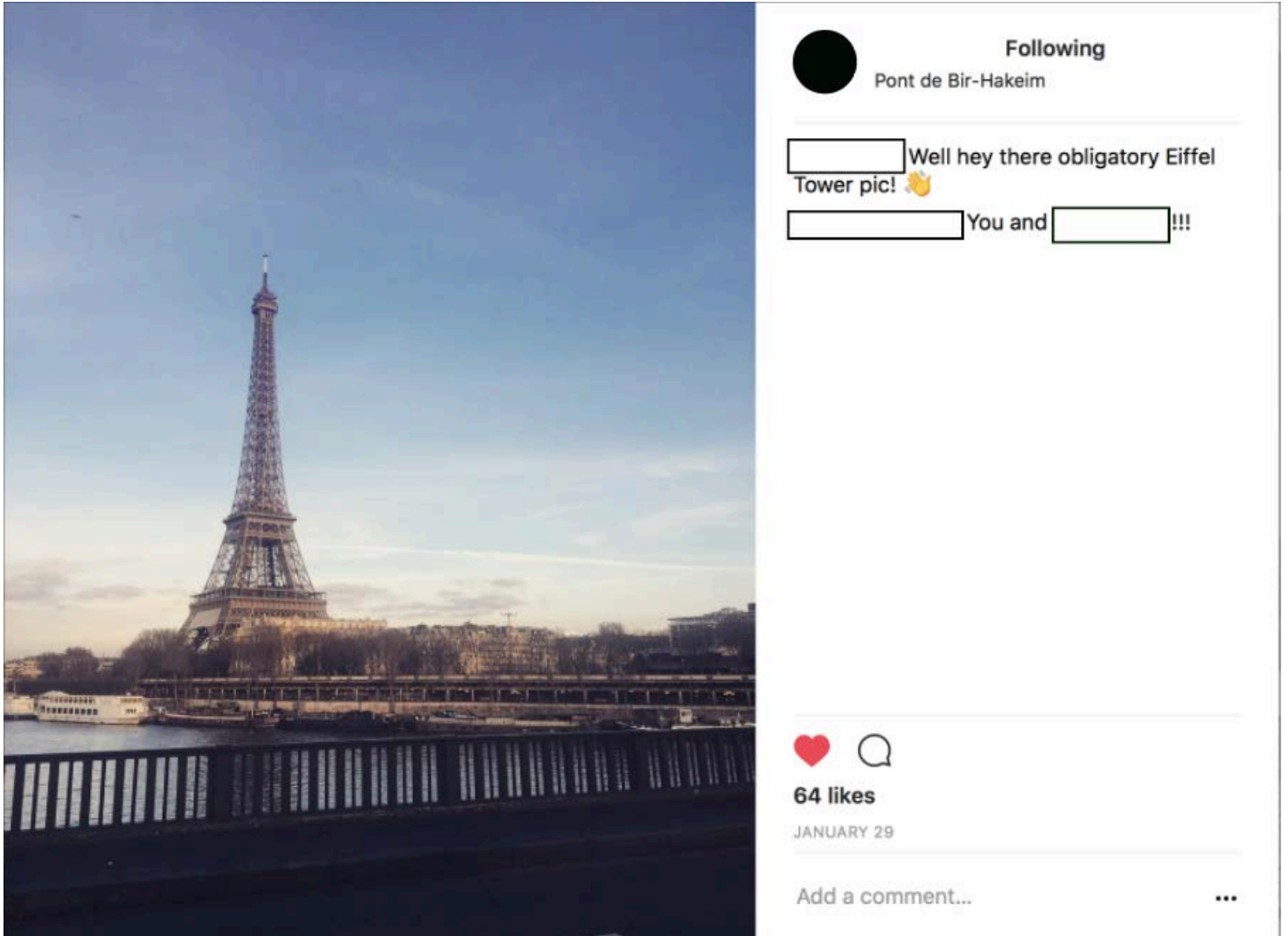
Students admitted to seeking out iconic places and monuments, with the purpose of taking pictures of or with the specific destination. Seven out of the ten participants said they sought out these iconic places and 5 of those seven admitted to feeling like they were missing out if they did not go to these locations. Student 2 says, "If I went to Rome and didn't take a picture in front of the Coliseum or in Spain in front of the Spanish Steps, didn't see everything I could have seen". One of the students, who did not say they necessarily went to places to see these iconic places, said that "I didn't seek them out to take photos, but I was not going to go there without taking a photo". This shows not only going to these places, but taking pictures while students are there is a very important factor for students when choosing to go, and that students feel like they have missed an important opportunity. Students also feel that if they do not go to these places that they have let people down.

Many of the students also admitted to going to certain places and taking pictures for fear that they would miss out of the typical and expected travel experience. Student 5 told a story of going to a town famous for their ramen, and did not get any before she had to return back and her host mom was astonished and told said phrases such as "how could you have gone there and not have done that?". The students expressed that there were typical and popular things that they felt like they had to go see, student 2 adds on to this by saying "I really, when I went to Paris, wanted to see the Eiffel Tower and the Love Lock Bridge, because those are things that everyone sees when they go there". This, in turn, creates the culture of people expecting and assuming what students did while they were abroad solely

based on the locations of where they went. Students were afraid to admit that they had not gone to certain places when family and friends asked them about it. This is important, in part, because it shows how there are certain expectations for students who go abroad, and there is a fear of not meeting these expectations. Because of this fear, students feel the need to provide evidence and proof of their experience.

*Pics or it didn't happen and there is a Due Date*

Most of the participants said that they felt that part of the reason that they posted photos was to provide proof to others that they have certain things during their travels. Four out of the ten students stated without any prompting that they felt that they had to have pictures to prove that it really happened. This is seen from many students through quotes such as this from student 9, "Yeah, you got to have your Eiffel Tower picture if you to Paris, because how else would people know you went there". Student 3 adds on to this with "I would see people taking pictures of the grand canyon of Oman, and I was like "I need a photo of that " because if I didn't take a photo did I really go and if I didn't go, was my trip really worth it?" This can also be seen in one of the participant's photos with the caption "Well hey there obligatory Eiffel Tower pic!". These examples show how students feel the need to document their travels and to present them to their friends and family. Not only do students feel the need to photo, but also many expressed that they felt there was a deadline, by which they should have it done.



Since social media has the capability to update people in live time, it has created a sense of urgency for students to post their travel photos. Even though many students felt that posting photos is a normal thing, they felt like it had to be done by a certain time. Student 3 talked about how she wasn't sure if she could post photos after something had already happened because she was thought of it as seeming "fake". Student 4 reiterated this by stating that she felt like there was a timeline of when she could post or it was late and felt bad if she posted something

after it had already happened. This desire to have photos and post them leads to students wanting engagement from their travel photos.

### *Engagement*

Since students feel the need to present their photos while they travel abroad, it creates a desire for engagement. Seven out of ten of the interviewees said that they keep track of the number of likes and comments on their post, and another two said they looked at it sometimes, but also talked about how it mostly had to do with their limited access to Wi-Fi. Student helps depict this by saying “I love seeing people like and comment on my photo and I think part of that is validation”. This shows that students are actively watching and looking for people to engage with their post on social media. If a post does not get as much attention it can lead to students feeling unsatisfied.

For many of the student's interview, they valued engagement with their post and felt disappointed if their post didn't get as many likes as they like. This can be seen with students 4 and 6, who expressed that they initially felt disappointed if one of their posts didn't do as well as they thought it might. Another student points out that in our society worth can be measured by likes and engagement with our photos. For some students, they are not trying to become famous on Instagram but want to others to be excited for them. Student 4 adds to this by stating that for her “the more people liked it the more people seem to like be interest in what I was doing and excited about the more excited I got and the more grateful I was to be there”. This indicates that the study abroad students value the opinions and acceptance of others for their travel experiences. Even though students showed that there is a fear of

missing out when it comes to travel abroad and the use of social media, they did not let it control their whole study abroad experience.

### *Ultimately it's for me, myself and I*

It is important to note, that even though students exemplified a fear of missing out if they did not go to certain places and share it on social media, most of them came to the conclusion that they didn't have to let others control their study abroad experience. All the students said that no matter what, that their study abroad experience was unique and that in the end, they decided not to care what others thought. One student said "I felt like everyone was going and they seemed to have an amazing experience from their photos when they went there, but then I spent too much time trying to go to all the iconic places in Paris and I didn't really get to enjoy Paris. So when I went to Germany and Amsterdam I just went to the places that I wanted to go..." This transcends into the students not feeling like they have to post every picture they take and share it with others on social media. This shows that students during and after their experience feel like their study abroad was complete whether they felt like they fulfilled all the expected requirements from them while they were aboard or not.

### **Limitations**

Although this research has opened up great insight into how study abroad students interact with social media and how social media influences and fosters an expected culture of documenting travel, it does have some limitations. These limitations include not having a diverse group of participants and only looking at Instagram for social media content analysis.



The first limitation of this research is the participant pool. The research did not have a very diverse group of participants. The participants of the research all identified as females ages 20-21. The students also all attend the same, all women's, Liberal Arts University. The research could be stronger if it had more variety of individuals regarding gender, age, school, and programs. A way for this research to be taken farther in the future would be to look at coed schools and to try and get a wider range of perspectives from

The second limitation of the study is that the research only looked at social media post on Instagram. Even though Instagram is a popular photo-sharing platform, there are others such as Facebook. The research could have yielded different results if other social media platforms were analyzed beyond just Instagram. An area for future research would be to focus on the ways travel abroad experiences are influenced by the wide variety of the different social media accounts.

## **Conclusion**

This study is significant because it takes a deeper look into student's relationship with social media while they study abroad. Students use social media while they are abroad to help connect, document and be inspired to travel. They construct their social media in ways that help them remember where they were and what they did, while also making it prevalent to others exactly where and what they are doing. Students do have some fear of missing out on shared and typical travel experiences, and feel the need to go to these iconic places and monuments, and then

prove that they were there with photos on social media. Although students feel this way, they are also able to step back and realize that their travel experiences were their own, and that in the end, they do not need prove anything to anyone.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

Purpose of Interviews: To collect different accounts of individual's experiences with social media and their travel broad trips.

Introduction: First off, thank you for taking your time and coming out to talk to me. The interview shouldn't take more than 45 minutes if that is all right for you? I want this interview to be more of a conversation between us. The questions are just here to guide us, but you are more than welcome to elaborate on anything you wish. My objective with this interview it to better understand your study abroad experience and its relationship to social media use, specifically Instagram.

#### Questions

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) What pronouns do you use?
- 3) Where did you study abroad?
- 4) How long were you there?
- 5) Did you travel to other places while you were there and if yes where did you?
- 6) Did social media influence any of your decisions on where to go? Why or why not?
- 7) What social media outlets did you find those on?
- 8) Where they popular outlets or friends?
- 9) What would you define an iconic place to be?
- 10) Are there certain places or monuments you think of for certain locations? Why or why not?
- 11) Did you seek out iconic places to take photos? Why or why not?
- 12) Do you feel like you are missing out if you don't go to iconic places? Why or why not?
- 13) Do you feel like you miss out if you don't share your photos on social media? Why or why not?
- 14) How did you interact with social media while abroad?
- 15) Why did you post travel photos?
- 16) Describe your typical travel abroad posts on Instagram.
- 17) What goes into choosing your photos to post?
- 18) What goes into taking your photos while traveling?
- 19) What was the subject matter of most of your photos?
- 20) How do you use hashtags in your post, if all?
- 21) Did you feel like you used them more while abroad as opposed to when you are back home? If so why?
- 22) Do you think you use more hashtags to get more traffic?
- 23) How do you use location on your Instagram post?
- 24) Do you use the location more abroad than back home?
- 25) Do you keep track of when people like/comment on your post?
  - a. If yes, why?

b. If not, why do you think others do?

26) How do you feel when a post doesn't get as much attention as you thought it would?

27) Do you feel like the more people who like your photos, the more validation of your travel experience?

28) Have you ever taken a photo down because it didn't do as well as you wanted it to?

*Closing Remarks* Thank you so much for taking your time and talking to me. Your interview will greatly help my research. Thank you again for all your help.

## Appendix B: Coding Scheme

### *Images*

- Look at what the image is.
  - Is it an iconic location?
    - In this instance, an iconic location refers to a place that is been made popular to tourist by constants advertisement and pictures captured by other organizations and other travelers.
      - Examples: Paris, London, famous parks, towns, rivers, lakes, High Lands, and so on.
  - Monuments?
    - Popular and important monuments, statues, and buildings that symbolize a place.
      - Examples: The Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, Empire State building and so on.
  - Typical Action?
    - Events or actions that are common in a certain location.
      - Examples: Climbing the Eiffel Tower, Riding on the London Eye, Looking for the Northern Lights in Iceland, and so on.

### *Hashtags*

- Look at if Hashtags are used
- How many do they have?
- What they consist of
  - About the picture or place, the picture was taken?
  - About the program, they are in?

### *Locations*

- See if there is a location used
- If the location is the actual location.
- If the location is made up by the poster to be creative or witty.

### *Captions*

- Is there a caption?
- What does it referee too?
  - The action
  - The place
  - The monument
- Is it in the native language of the place or of the speaker?
- Does it include a date?
- How long is it?
  - A sentence
  - A couple of sentences
  - A paragraph
  -

### *Likes*



- How many likes does the image have?

*Comments*

- How many comments does it have?
- What are the comments made up of?
  - About the person in the image?
  - About the location?
  - About wishing they were apart of it?
  - Other- anything else



## Appendix D: List of Participants

- Student 1: London, England; two semesters
- Student 2: Seville, Spain; one semester
- Student 3: Muscat, Oman; two months (summer program)
- Student 4: Hirakata, Japan; one semester
- Student 5: London, England; one semester
- Student 6: Paris, France; one semester
- Student 7: Oxford, England; month and a half (summer program)
- Student 8: London, England; one semester
- Student 9: Paris, France; one semester
- Student 10: Rome, Italy; one semester