International Student Mobility: An Identity Development Task?

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Abstract

Based on the review of literature on internationalization of education and on identity formation processes in young adults, this cross-sectional study aims to investigate to which extent self-perceived dimensions of identity are associated to the main motivations to study abroad. The participants in this study were 429 international university students of different nationalities. Findings revealed that the motivation to study abroad for personal growth is strongly associated to the commitment and in-depth exploration identity processes, whereas the motivation to study abroad with the aim of changing life style and enlarging job opportunities is positively associated with reconsideration of commitment and in-depth exploration. Furthermore, identity achieved students showed the highest motivation to study abroad for personal growth, while the motivation to study abroad to positively change life-styles and work conditions is strongly associated with the positive facet of identity crisis, which is otherwise called searching-moratorium status. Based on these results, the present survey provides useful questions and hypothesis for future research.

Keywords: international student mobility, internationalization, education, identity status, identity formation processes, motivation, study abroad.

Introduction

International mobility may be defined as the human phenomenon of movements across territories. According to Suárez-Orozco (2001), globalization demanded a substantial increase in movements across international borders, whose main effect, besides others, is internationalization of education. Apart from economic benefits (Altbach & Knight, 2007), the society recognized that internationalization of education contributes to training and providing to the labour market professionals who can work in international and multicultural settings (Pandit, 2009). According to Bracht et al. (2006), internationalization of education plays an important role in promoting vertical and horizontal social mobility. They contend that student mobility is important not solely for learning processes, but also for positive impact on life and career after graduation.

Student mobility eases professional integration and wields positive effects for labour market as well as for European economy. The European Union supports governments and non-profit organizations in promoting exchange programs aimed at increasing the knowledge of and sensitivity to other cultures, practices, traditions, beliefs and communications (Jabbar, 2012). The European Ministers of Education (1999) promoted internationalization of education with the aim of harmonizing the entire academic system. Moreover, the European Commission (2013) has drawn up the Life Long Learning Program with the purpose of fostering interchange, cooperation and mobility between education and training institutions so that they may become a world quality reference.

The *ERASMUS* program, launched in 1987 and recently merged with the *SOCRATES* program, is the most visible outcome of internationalization of education. In 1987, 3.244 students participated in the *ERASMUS* program. According to a study conducted by the European Parliament (2010), the number of *ERASMUS* students has progressively increased over the decades and today over 2 million young adults study abroad. Though it is likely that several uncertainties may affect the pace of internationalization, the long-term projection predicts that, by 2025, perhaps 15 million young adults will study abroad (Altbach & Knight 2007).

Within this context, one relevant question emerges: Why do students move abroad to study? In this article, we reported some relevant approaches to the study of international student mobility. We introduced the role of socioeconomic issues in leading young to move abroad to study and we mentioned the theory of pull and push factors of migration. We further proposed some evidences on the psychological benefits of the studying abroad experiences. Our approach to the study of the main motivations to move abroad to study is near to the concept of migrant personality proposed by Boneva and Frieze (2001), who suggest that migrant personality could be seen as only one of the variety of factors that determine migratory behavior.

The Migrant Personality is work-oriented, shows high level of achievement and power motivation as well as low level of affiliation motivation and family centrality. In a recent survey, Frieze, Hansen and Boneva (2006), clearly demonstrated that undergraduate students higher in family centrality, affiliation motivation, attending religious services and wanting a job with more time for family, were more likely to want to stay in their home-country, while those higher in work centrality were more likely to want to leave. Starting from these evidences, we conducted a cross-sectional study with the aim of exploring if and how the motivations to study abroad can be traced back to the willingness to define the own personal identity. In summary, we tried to answer to the following questions: In what way the motivations to study abroad are associated to the identity development processes? Or, more specifically, what is the main reason why students who achieved their personal identity decide to study abroad? Furthermore, in what manner the identity crisis is related to the choice to move abroad to study? And, finally, how and to what extent the studying abroad experience can be considered an identity development task?

Findings will be useful to provide some relevant reflections upon the role of identity formation processes in determining the main motivations to study abroad. For this reason, we addressed the analysis of the findings towards some relevant questions for future research on the topic.

Identity formation processes, late adolescents and young adults in contemporary society vis-a-vis the role of international student mobility

Erikson (1950), who made significant contributions to the study of identity formation, pioneered the studies on adolescence, which he defined as the period when the individual establishes his or her personal identity and avoids the dangers of role diffusion and identity confusion. This process, conceived as an actual and complex psychological task, is aimed at replacing the childhood identifications by new configurations which lead the individual to adulthood. In a bid to make a decision about an important life choice (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), university students, who are committed to constructing their role in the society, live through this transition, characterized by a problem-solving behavior, aimed at eliciting information about oneself or environment.

According to Marcia (1966), the adolescents, while going through the psychological processes of *exploration* and *commitment*, take into consideration a wide array of options (related to goals, values and beliefs), and finally choose those that best fit their life conditions. In this way, the author provided a classification of individuals based on their crossing the two dimensions of *exploration* and *commitment*. The four identity statuses proposed by Marcia are as follows: *Achievement*, which is the result of an active exploration leading to the choice of a strong configuration of identity commitment; *foreclosure,* which comes out from strong commitments not undertaken from the exploration of other alternatives; *moratorium*, which is the outcome of an active exploration of different alternatives; this, however, does not lead to definitive commitments; and finally, *diffusion* which refers to adolescents who are engaged neither in the exploration of different identity alternatives, nor in specific commitments. Moreover, Marcia (1980, 1993) argues that the identity statuses are associated with some psychological characteristics. More specifically, identity achieved adolescents generally show high level of self-esteem, autonomy and reasoning in terms of moral values; they also maintain good relationships and communication with their parents, which entitle them to receive a strong support in the individuation process. Subjects in the *moratorium* status, despite being open to new experiences, score low on measures of extroversion,

emotional stability, and conscientiousness, and their relationship with parents is generally ambivalent. Adolescents in the *foreclosure* status are not open to new experiences, even if they are highly committed. They are rigid, but also conformists, because their parents strongly encourage them to accept family values. Finally, identity *diffusion* adolescents generally present negative characteristics, such as low levels of self-esteem, autonomy, and reasoning.

Recently, Crocetti, Rubini and Meeus (2008) extended the Marcia's (1966) paradigm of identity. They administered the Utrecht Management of Identity Commitment Scale (U-MICS) to a sample of Italian and Dutch adolescents and showed that a three-factor identity model (which comprises the three identity processes of Commitment, In-depth exploration and the new dimension of Reconsideration of commitment) fits better to data than does a one or two factor model (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010) and can be empirically derived in similar ways across the two different European countries (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra & Meeus 2012). The new process of *reconsideration of commitment* is, on the one hand, similar to the in-depth exploration process in encouraging the search of different commitment alternatives. On the other hand, it is different, because it leads to replace current commitments with new possible alternatives (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008). Based on the three-factor identity model, Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx and Meeus (2008) derived five identity statuses. Four of them resemble those of Marcia's classical classification (*achievement*, *diffusion*, *moratorium*, *foreclosure*). The fifth cluster is labelled as *searching moratorium*. *Moratorium* and *searching moratorium* represent the two facets (negative and positive, respectively) of the identity crisis (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx & Meeus, 2008). In other words, if adolescents in the *searching moratorium* status look for new commitments on the basis of an existing commitment (even if unsatisfactory), adolescents in the *moratorium* status reconsider their identity choices, but they are neither committed to nor actively motivated toward an in-depth exploration. If the subjects in the *moratorium* status are low on commitment and in-depth exploration, but high on reconsideration of commitment, their peers in the *searching moratorium* status are high on all the three identity dimensions.

Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood and the Role of Socio-Cultural Context

The outcome of identity formation depends largely on the psychological dimensions formed during childhood, such as trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry (Para, 2008). Several researches (Meeus, 1996; Meeus, Iedema & Maassen, 2002) focused on the importance of psychological dimensions which lead to possible outcomes of identity formation. Besides, they reveal that commitment and exploration are intertwined processes, related to a variety of personality factors, such as self-concept clarity (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee & Lehman, 1996), the Big-five personality dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, contentiousness and emotional stability (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006) and parent-adolescent communication processes (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens & Beyers, 2006b; Meeus, Oosterwegel & Vollebergh, 2002b; Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007).

Furthermore, sociological and social psychological literature amply demonstrates that identity formation outcomes depend not solely on inner and psychological processes, but also on social dynamics and cultural contexts. Enough agreement exists on the recent transformations of life course in European societies. More specifically, many authors (Kuijsten, 1996; Cavalli & Galland, 1996; Corijn & Klijzing, 2001; Iacovou, 2002; Billari & Wilson, 2001) demonstrated the progressive delay in performing the various stages of life: End of education, entry into labour market, exit from parental house, creation of a new family and the birth of children. Arnett & Taber (1994) consider that, in the western societies, these changes are due to laying strong emphasis on independence and individualism. In fact, in these cultures, the entry into adulthood is defined and marked individually. Consequently, it is based on the achievement of residential and financial independence, as well as on the attainment of cognitive self-sufficiency, emotional self-resilience and behavioural self-control. Thus, in the contemporary West, the passage from adolescence to young adulthood is a gradual process and may take many years (Arnett & Taber, 1994).

In fact, unlike in the past, when this transition was marked by specific social events (such as marriage and parenthood), today it has no defined borders. Moreover, the authors argue that the increasing median age of marriage (for many young people in contemporary society, marriage takes place at the age of 25-30 years, or later) contributes to declining significance of marriage during the transition to adulthood.

Finally, the great importance being given to achieving self-fulfilment is linked to the large increase in the number of students in higher education and to encouraging young adults to delay their exit from family home (Ribolzi, 2012).

International student mobility: Adapting capacities, benefits, identity changes and motivations to study abroad

Though the studying abroad experience is stimulating and gratifying, it could be also stressful (Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Leong & Chou, 1996; Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003; Pedersen, 1991). Indeed, international students have to cope with various stressful situations, such as finding a house, adjusting to new climate, learning new languages, and exploring and adapting to new educational and cultural systems. Moreover, they have to even cope with ethnic and religious discrimination, besides learning to negotiate conflicting cultural values (Yakunina, Weigold, Hercegovac & Elsayed, 2013).

The loss of familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse determines the need to reorganize the use of social and psychological tools that allow one to orient in everyday life, and this experience can be a source of cultural shock (Adler, 1975) - a term later replaced by Zheng & Berry (1991) with 'acculturative stress'. During the past few decades, many studies appeared on 'culture shock', because this new term fits the concept of cultural adjustment better. This is because the term 'shock' sounds negative, whereas the term 'stress' sounds as a process involving both positive and negative aspects (Selye, 1974). In fact, as demonstrated by various studies, acculturative stress can be managed and reduced by several psychological and social factors. For example, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) showed that social interaction with hosts plays an important role in international students' adjustment. More recently, Yakunina, Weigold, Hercegovac & Elsayed (2013) applied a mediation model to a sample of 336 international students with different nationalities. The authors used personal growth initiative, hardiness and universal-diverse orientation as predictive variables of positive adjustment and low levels of acculturative stress. They showed that personal growth initiative positively predicts adjustment to the host country, independent of acculturative stress. On the contrary, hardiness eases adjustment and reduces acculturative stress. Finally, universal-diverse orientation predicts international students' adjustment only indirectly, because it primarily acts on reducing the subjective experience of acculturative stress (Yakunina, Weigold, Hercegovac & Elsayed, 2013).

Currently, one of the most common areas of study on this issue relates to benefits and personal growth. International mobility experiences play an important role in stimulating independence, decision-making and dealing with the daily demands of life in new and unfamiliar settings (Gmelch, 1997). Many authors (Steinberg, 2007; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Williams, 2005; Black & Duhon 2006; Kitsantas 2004; Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001; Kehl and Morris, 2007; Jabbar, 2012) showed that the study abroad program enables students to achieve academic progress and intellectual development (such as extension of knowledge, acquisition of problem solving and language skills), besides intercultural skills (enhancement of tolerance towards others, self-confidence, global awareness, cultural sensitivity and decrease of ethnocentrism) and professional benefits (employment opportunities, sense of direction for future career choices, sense of responsibility). In a recent survey, Bohrer (2012) commented that the studying abroad experience is viewed by students as a defining moment in their youthful life, which will continue to have a significant influence on their future life.

Most respondents claimed that studying abroad represents an opportunity to improve their maturity, self-confidence and the capacity to tolerate ambiguity. They further think that it allows them to understand their cultural values and biases in a better manner, and thus to develop a more sophisticated way of looking at the world. Finally, almost all the participants maintained that study abroad affects subsequent educational experience, particularly in influencing the decision to expand or change academic majors. Rundstrom (2005) mentions that U.S. students, who had an international exchange experience, exhibit greater change in their intercultural communication skills after a semester-long stay abroad, than the change shown by students who stayed on the campus. Moreover, they could acquire greater intercultural proficiency, increase openness to cultural diversity and become more global-minded than the students who did not have an exchange experience. To sum up, they perceive themselves as being more proficient, approachable and open to intercultural communication and this is because they found the solutions that best fit their new life conditions.

Another interesting issue linked to the studying abroad experience deals with the identity change due to the adjustment to the new society.

According to Varchevker and McGinley (2013), 'all migrations put the sense of identity under pressure, but the individual's capacity to deal with this pressure and to integrate external and internal changes is likely to affect the sense of identity in a positive way'. In this regard, Kroger and Green (1996) consider travel as a factor that can bring about identity change. Sussman (2002) reports similar results for a group of U.S. teachers who lived in Japan for some years.

Moreover, some authors (e.g., Schmitt, Spears & Branscombe, 2003; Sassenberg and Matshke, 2010) focused on the impact of extensive but temporary intergroup contact on international students' personality and social identity. Their findings reveal that the youth who study abroad are prone to form a new social identity, as exchange students, when they feel rejected by the host society.

As argued above, literature on international mobility has focused on adaptation of international students in the host country, as well as on the benefits and identity changes related to the studying abroad experience. Another important issue is linked to the main motivations which lead students to study in a foreign country. Several researches argued that internationalization of education is driven not solely by economic factors (Altbach & Knight, 2007), but also by experience, travel and educational and leisure motivations (King, 2002). From a socioeconomic point of view, it was emphasized the role of 'push' and 'pull' factors in international migration. Demand-pull factors draw migrants into industrialized countries and supply-push factors push them out from their own countries (Martin, 1993). According to Rumbaut (1991), the main motivation that leads refugees to migrate from their own countries is the perceived threats to their life and liberties. In other words, they are 'pushed' out from their own countries by their perceived life conditions. On the contrary, migrants who voluntary move to another country are 'pulled' by the perceived hopes for a better future and economic opportunities.

Altbach (1998) adapted the 'push-pull' model to the international student mobility phenomenon. More specifically, the author argues that some students were pushed by unfavourable conditions in their home countries, while others were pulled by scholarships and other opportunities in host countries. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the economy and environmental conditions do not constitute the solely motivating factors of migration. For example, Tidrick (1971) found that Jamaican lower class students were less likely to want to leave their country of origin than middle and upper class students. Later, Boneva and Frieze (2001) found no clear relationship between the desire to emigrate and the overall economic conditions within a particular country. On the other hand, they argued that even under the most restrictive emigration policies, some individuals take high risks and leave, whereas others stay even under 'open door' emigration policies and unfavourable economic conditions (Boneva, 1991). Other studies (Caudill & DeVos, 1956; DeVos, 1973, 1983; Tidrik, 1971; Bedmar, Llorent, Mata Justo & Messina, 2013) further suggest that the need for achievement pushes individuals to move to another country, while the affiliation motivation produces the contrary effect (Scott & Scott, 1989). To sum up, individuals who want to emigrate to another country are more work-oriented, show higher levels of achievement and power motivation and lower affiliation motivation and family centrality than those who do not want to leave their country of origin (Boneva and Frieze, 2001).

Methods

Procedure

An English online questionnaire was posted in various social networks, international forums and web sites dedicated to *ERASMUS* students. A brief cover letter was used to introduce the main objectives of the study and to invite students to fill out the questionnaire. All students completed or were carrying out the *ERASMUS* program when the research was in progress. All the subjects participated in the survey voluntarily.

Participants

A total of 429 university students, aged 19 to 30 yrs ($M = 22.9$; $SD = 2.44$), completed the online questionnaire. Among them, female students were 292 (68.1%) and male students 137 (31.9%). 392 (91.4%) students came from Europe, 23 (5.4%) from Asia, 12 (2.8%) from America and 2 (0.5%) from Africa. The percentage distribution of the subjects, classified by gender and continent, is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of subjects by gender and nationality

	Gender		
Continent	Female	Male	Tot.
Africa	-	0.47%	0.47%
America	1.17%	1.63%	2.80%
Asia	0.47%	1.63%	2.10%
Central Europe	13.75%	4.66%	18.41%
Eastern Europe	3.50%	0.47%	3.96%
Northen Europe	2.10%	0.93%	3.03%
Southern Europe	37.06%	17.48%	54.55%
Western Europe	10.02%	4.43%	14.45%
Not Classified	-	0.23%	0.23%
Tot.	68.07%	31.93%	100.00%

Because most students were from Europe, it was considered necessary to subdivide that continent into five geographical regions: Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Southern Europe and Western Europe. No such subdivision was considered necessary for other continents (Africa, America and Asia), because students from those continents were relatively much fewer. Finally, only one subject was coded as 'not classified', because he did not provide the required information.

Measures

The self-report questionnaire included a separate form to collect brief personal information on age, gender, country of origin and academic degree.

To assess identity processes we administered the English version of the Utrecht Management of Identity Commitment Scale (U-MICS) by Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus (2008). The scale had 13 items on a five-point Likert scale (1- completely untrue, 5- completely true): Of these, five items measure commitment, five assess in-depth exploration, and three measure reconsideration of commitment. The same items can be used to assess identity dimensions in different domains: Educational, professional and relational identity. Because this study assessed the relational and educational domains, the final scale was composed of 26 items.

Finally, the motivation to study abroad was assessed through a 9-item questionnaire (M-SA Questionnaire) built for the specific purpose of the study. The participants were invited to express their degree of agreement to the nine statements in a five-point Likert scale (1- completely disagree, 5- completely agree). The items of the scale were constructed with the aim of covering two main areas of the motivation to study abroad: Personal Growth and Change of life style and job opportunities.

Data Analysis

The main goal of this cross-sectional survey is to assess if and how the identity processes are associated to the motivations to study abroad. To this end, first and foremost we tested the psychometric properties of the English version of the U-MICS (Crocetti, Rubini and Meeus, 2008) by the means of a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA); afterwards, we applied several exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the M-SA Questionnaire to identify an interpretable factorial solution. In order to confirm the internal validity of the emerged 2-factor solution, we further applied a CFA. Secondarily, we analysed the associations between the three identity processes (*Commitment*, *In-depth Exploration* and *Reconsideration of Commitment*) and the two factors (*Personal Growth* and *Change*) of the motivation to study abroad by means of the Pearson's correlation indexes. Moreover, we subdivided the sample into the five identity statuses (*Achievement, Foreclosure, Moratorium, Searching Moratorium and Diffusion*) by means of a two-step by Gore (2000) cluster analysis. Finally, we applied a One-way ANOVA to assess if and how the motivations to study abroad (dependent variable) change among the identity clusters (independent variable). The analysis were performed by Lisrel 8.80 and SPSS 19 software packages.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of U-MICS

In order to assess the internal validity of U-MICS we tested three nested models by means of a CFA with Maximum Likelihood Method. The three models consist respectively of 1 factor, in which all the items loaded on a single identity dimension;

2 factors, composed by commitment and global exploration (where items of in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment loaded on the same dimension); 3 factors, consisting of commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment. As suggested by Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus (2008), we used parcels of items for each construct as indicators of the latent variables, resulting in 9 parcels. More specifically, we created 1 parcel for commitment and 1 parcel for in-depth exploration consisting of 4 items apiece; 2 parcels for commitment and 2 parcels for in-depth exploration consisting of 3 items apiece; and 3 parcels for reconsideration of commitment consisting of 2 items apiece. No cross-loadings or correlated measurement errors were allowed (Kline, 1998). The subsequent table (Table 2) shows the fit indexes taken into account to assess the validity of the three nested models.

Table 2: Fit indices for the 1-factor, the 2-factor, and the 3-factor models

	Model fit indexes							
	N	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	$RMSEA$	$NNFI$
1-Factor model	429	1098.753	27	40.69	0.62	0.48	0.32	0.30
2-Factor model	429	395.118	26	15.20	0.81	0.82	0.20	0.75
3-Factor model	429	71.520	24	2.98	0.97	0.98	0.07	0.97

Note: GFI: Goodness of Fit Index. CFI: Comparative Fit Index. RMSEA: Root of Mean Square Error of Approximation. NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index.

As reported in Table 2, fit indexes clearly revealed that the 3-factor model provided the best fit to the data. Furthermore, in order to compare the goodness of the 3-factor model with the 1- and 2-factor models, we tested the significance of the $\Delta \chi^2$ (Byrne, 2001). Results demonstrated that the 3-factor model fits the data significantly better compared both to the 2-factor model ($\Delta \chi^2 = 323.598$, $p < 0.001$) and the 1-factor model ($\Delta \chi^2 = 1.027.233$, $p < 0.001$)[1].

Exploratory and Confirmatory factor analysis of the M-SA Questionnaire

In order to analyse the factor structure of the M-SA Questionnaire (Lattin et al., 2003), we firstly performed several EFAs with Maximum Likelihood Method. Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 849.794$; $df = 36$) was significant ($p < 0.001$), and the Kaieser Meyer Olkin measure was adequate ($KMO = 0.73$). Due to the low inter-correlation among factor scales, the EFA supported the use of the Varimax Rotation. The Kaiser's Rule (Keiser, 1959) suggested the extraction of three factors, with 44.05% of explained variance. Since the item 1 returned a loading value less than 0.30 and factor 3 showed a Cronbach's α value less than the cut-off of 0.70 (Guilford, 1956), we rejected the 3 factor solution. In order to explore the adequacy of an alternative factor solution, we employed Horn's (1965) Parallel Analysis (PA), because it has been shown empirically to give more accurate results (Faraci, Craparo, Messina, & Severino, 2013). In our data-set, PA determined two factors to be extracted, suggesting the adequacy of a 2-factor solution. The latter revealed that items 1 and 2 showed loading values towards the first factor less than 0.30. For this reason, we excluded the above mentioned items. Table 3 below shows the rotated factor matrix of the 2 factor solution thus obtained (with 7 items), which returned the 48.67% of explained variance and adequate Cronbach's α values for each factor.

Table 3: M-SA Questionnaire (7-items). Two factor solution: rotated factor matrix

Items	Factors	
	1	2
Item 5. I think that studying abroad and getting in contact with cultures and habits different from those of mine could provide an opportunity for my personal growth	.748	
Item 4. I think the going-abroad experience will enable me make new friends and improve my social skills	.720	
Item 6. I think the going-abroad experience will enhance my self-confidence	.649	
Item 3. I decided to study abroad because I think it gives me an opportunity to enrich my cultural baggage	.547	
Item 9. I would like to work abroad in future because I am unsatisfied of job opportunities in my country		.935
Item 8. I would like to live abroad in future, because I am unsatisfied of my current life and I would like to do something to change it		.698
Item 7. I would like to study abroad to improve my knowledge and enlarge job opportunities	302	.356
Cronbach's α	.76	.70

The emerged bi-dimensional structure of the M-SA Questionnaire was further tested by means of a CFA[2], in which no cross-loadings or correlated measurement errors were allowed (Kline, 1998). The uncorrelated 2-factor model emerged to be on the whole acceptable (Table 4). Nevertheless, the ratio of the chi-square statistic to the degrees of freedom is slightly higher than the cut-off of 3 (Jöreskog and Söbom, 1996; MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). For this reason, we conducted a post-hoc analysis with the aim of detecting misfitting parameters in the model (Byrne, 2009). The squared multiple correlation value of the item number 7 returned a very low value (0.13), and this means that it does not contribute to explain the second factor in a satisfactory manner. Moreover, as one can see in Table 3, item 7 cross-loaded in both the factors obtained by means of the EFA. In order to improve the accuracy of the measure, we proceeded eliminating the item number 7. The uncorrelated 2-factor model with 6 items showed excellent fit indexes (Table 4), as confirmed by the comparison of the AIC and CAIC measures with the model with 7 items (Hu & Bentler, 1995; Bandalos, 1993).

Table 4: Fit indexes for the 2-factor models of M-SA Questionnaire with 7 and 6 items

	Model fit indexes								
	N	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	NNFI	AIC	CAIC
Uncorrelated 2-Factor model with 7 items	429	47.781	14	3.41	0.97	0.96	0.07	0.94	924.01	959.4
Uncorrelated 2- Factor model with 6 items	429	13.02	10	1.30	0.99	0.99	0.03	0.99	746.82	777.19
Split 1	213	6.718	10	0.67	0.99	1.00	0.00	1.00	-	-
Split 2	216	13.157	10	1.31	0.98	0.99	0.03	0.99	-	-

Note: GFI: Goodness of Fit Index. CFI: Comparative Fit Index. RMSEA: Root of Mean Square Error of Approximation. NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index.

In order to test the stability of the uncorrelated 2-factor model with 6 items, we randomly subdivided the total group into two sub-groups and we performed again a CFA in each half of the sample. As shown in table 4, the so obtained fit indexes are excellent. We thus definitively reject the uncorrelated 2-factor model with 7 items and we accepted the uncorrelated 2-factor model with 6 items[3] (Cronbach's α values: PG = 0.76; CH = 0.79).
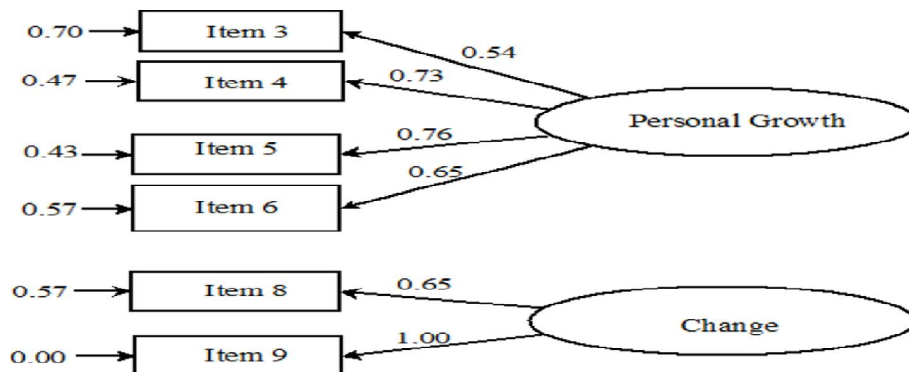

Figure 1: Completely standardized solution of the uncorrelated 2-factor model of the M-SA Questionnaire. All factor loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1 above reports the completely standardized solution of the uncorrelated 2-factor model of the M-SA Questionnaire. The Personal Growth factor (PG), refers, on the whole, to the willingness to study abroad to enrich the own cultural baggage and to improve social skills and self-confidence, while the Change (CH) factor expresses the awareness of a dissatisfaction with one's own life and job conditions and opportunities and the willingness to study abroad to act a positive change.

Identity clusters

In order to classify the subjects into the five identity clusters, the scores of the relational and educational subscales were first summed up (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008) and the scores of the three identity dimensions were transformed into a set of z-scores. Finally, a two-step procedure (Gore, 2000) was used to extract identity clusters. The plausibility of several solutions (with three, four, five and six clusters) was investigated. The five-cluster solution (Figure 2) was retained on the basis of the principles of meaningfulness, parsimony, and explanatory power[4].
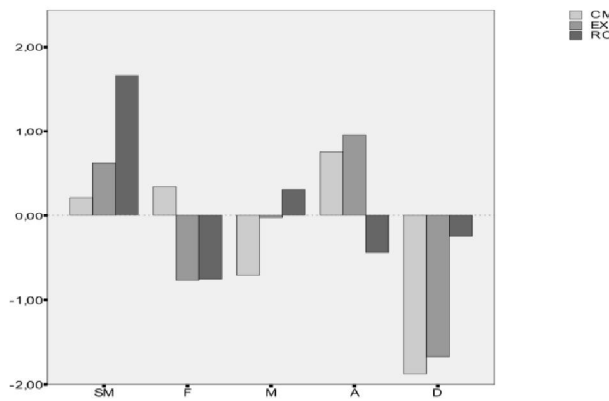
Figure 2: Identity clusters and *z*-score for Commitment (CM), In-depth exploration (EX) and Reconsideration of commitment (RC). Note: SM = Searching moratorium; F = Foreclosure; M = Moratorium; A = Achievement; D = Diffusion.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in the *z*-scores of the three identity dimensions revealed a good exploratory power ($R^2 = 53\%$ for commitment; $R^2 = 61\%$ for in-depth exploration; $R^2 = 62\%$ for reconsideration of commitment). Also, the goodness of the five-cluster solution was assessed by replicating the analysis within the two sub-groups obtained by randomly subdividing (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2001) the original group. To assess the degree of agreement between the classification (Landis & Koch, 1977) performed in the total group and those in the two sub-groups, the *K* statistic by Cohen (1960) was used, which revealed an excellent agreement: $K = 0.82$ for the first sub-group and $K = 0.78$, for the second sub-group.

Results

The first aim of this survey was the exploration of the relations between identity processes and motivations to study abroad.

Table 5: Correlations between motivations to study abroad and identity processes

Motivations to study abroad	Identity processes		
	Commitment	In-depth exploration	Reconsideration of commitment
PG	.25**	.22**	-.08
CH	-.11*	.15**	.25**

Note: *p = .05 **p = .01

Pearson's correlation coefficients reveal significant relationships between PG factor and the dimensions of both commitment and in-depth exploration (Table 5). The CH factor emerged to be positively related to in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment. The latter dimension revealed the strongest association, wherea a negative association emerged with commitment.

The second aim of this survey was to assess if and how the motivations to study abroad depend on identity statuses. One-way ANOVA reveals that both PG ($F= 6,854$; $p < 0.001$) and CH ($F= 9,300$; $p < 0.001$) factors vary significantly according to the identity clusters. In order to explore the significant differences between each pair of identity clusters, Games-Howell post-hoc test was applied. Table 6 shows the mean *z*-scores of motivations by identity clusters.

Table 6: Mean *z*-scores of motivations to study abroad by identity clusters

Motivations to study abroad	Identity statuses				
	Searching Moratorium (*n* = 61)	Foreclosure (*n* = 117)	Moratorium (*n* = 120)	Achievement (*n* =104)	Diffusion (*n* = 27)
PG	-0.04	*0.09*[D]	*-0.14*[A]	*0.28*[M/D]	*-0.74*[F/A]
CH	*0.43*[F/A]	*-0.41*[SM/M/A/D*]	*0.14*[F]	*0.01*[F/SM]	*0.18*[F*]

Note: Bold values are significant at least at *p* < 0.05. Significantly different means are marked with the initial of the cluster from which they differ. Initials marked with * signify an almost achieved significance.

The line-graph in Figure 3 clearly shows that PG is the highest motivation in the achievement status, followed by foreclosure, searching moratorium and moratorium statuses. Finally, PG motivation dramatically decrease in the diffusion status.
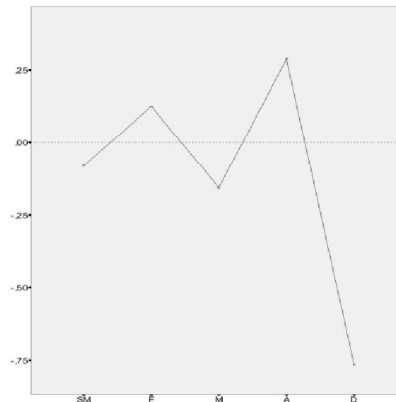

Figure 3: PG factor mean *z*-score by identity clusters. Note: SM = Searching moratorium; F = Foreclosure; M = Moratorium; A = Achievement; D = Diffusion.

Games-Howell Post-hoc test further reveals that students in achievement status shows significantly higher score than those in moratorium ($p < 0.01$) and diffusion ($p < 0.01$) statuses. Besides, no significant difference emerged between identity achieved students and those in searching moratorium and foreclosure clusters. On the other hand, students in diffusion cluster showed scores significantly lower than those in foreclosure and achievement status, whereas it does not differ significantly from students in moratorium and searching moratorium.
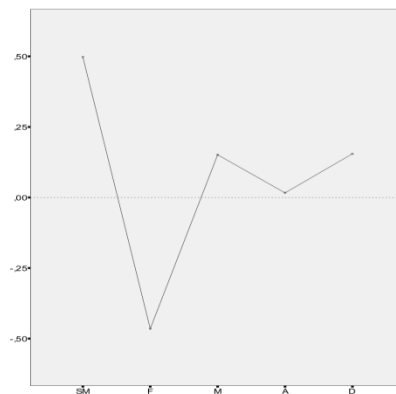

Figure 4: CH factor mean *z*-score by identity clusters. Note: SM = Searching moratorium; F = Foreclosure; M = Moratorium; A = Achievement; D = Diffusion.

Figure 4 above clearly shows that the individuals in the foreclosure cluster got the lowest mean score in CH factor; moreover, they revealed a significant, or at least, an almost achieved significant difference from each one of the other statuses. On the contrary, students in searching moratorium status revealed the highest mean *z*-score. Nevertheless, they significantly differ exclusively from students in foreclosure ($p < 0.001$), and achievement ($p < 0.05$) statuses.

Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned above, the main purpose of this study was to analyse the main associations between the motivations to study abroad and the self-perceived dimensions of identity in a group of international *ERASMUS* students. To this end, we addressed the analysis of the findings towards some relevant questions for future research on the topic.

Firstly, we wondered in what way the motivations to study abroad are associated to the identity processes. Correlation analysis revealed that the greater the commitment and in-depth exploration processes, the stronger is the motivation to move abroad to enable a sort of cultural and personal development (PG motivation); at the same time, no relationship emerged between the PG motivation and the reconsideration of commitment process.

We believe that this result could be traced back to the intrinsic nature of commitment and in-depth exploration. Indeed, literature has amply demonstrated (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Meeus, 1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999) that commitment is linked to the clarity, consistency and stability of self-beliefs (Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus 2008) and contributes to the psychological well-being and adjustment. On the other hand, in-depth exploration implies that adolescents deal with existing commitments in an active and responsible way (Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus, 2008); moreover, it is related to the Big five personality dimensions of extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006), whereas it is not associated with parental psychological control (Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007; Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus, 2008; Barber, 1996). To sum up, coherently to their own adaptive nature, the two identity processes push out students to study abroad with the aim of growing from a personal and cultural point of view.

Second, the future perspective to positively change life styles and job opportunities (CH motivation) is strongly and positively related to the reconsideration of commitment process. In a similar manner, CH motivation and in-depth exploration show a positive association, even if it is slightly lower. Finally, a negative relation emerged between CH motivation and commitment. Since reconsideration of commitment refers to 'the comparison between current commitments and other possible alternatives, as well as to youths' efforts to change present commitments because they are no longer satisfactory' (Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus, 2008, p. 209), we argue that this process would act as an inner 'push' factor towards the studying abroad experience. In other words, moving abroad to study would represent an attempt to explore new commitments in new life-contexts, because the present commitments - and the opportunities provided by the home-country - are no longer satisfactory.

The second set of questions relevant for our study is: What is the main reason why the identity achieved students decide to study abroad? Furthermore, in what way the identity crisis is related to the choice to move abroad to study?
[5]

One-way ANOVA returned significant differences among the five clusters both in Personal Growth and Change motivations. From the analysis the PG and CH motivations to study abroad within and among the five identity clusters emerged interesting findings.

First of all, the identity achieved students showed the highest PG motivation compared with the other clusters. According to the identity profiles emerged from previous studies (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008), identity achieved individuals present the healthiest personality profile, few psychosocial problems, and a self-perceived good quality of parent–adolescent relationships, and this would account the highest motivation to study abroad for personal growth in this cluster.

Moreover, students in the achievement status showed to be significantly higher in PG motivation compared with individuals in the moratorium cluster. Individuals in moratorium status show many psychosocial problems, such as depressive symptoms, school anxiety, generalized anxiety symptoms and direct aggression. This profile would explain the lower PG motivation in comparison with the identity achieved students.

Similarly to students in searching moratorium and moratorium clusters, those in diffusion status showed low scores in the PG motivation, and this is probably due to the psychosocial problems associated to their own identity profile (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008). Indeed, the diffusion status is characterized by low levels of emotional stability and conscientiousness as well as poor parent–offspring relationships.

Concerning CH motivation, it emerged that, in line with the disposition to reconsider the current commitments and explore new identity alternatives, those students who live through a positive identity crisis - otherwise called searching moratorium status - showed the strongest motivation to move abroad to enlarge job and study opportunities and to positively change unsatisfactory life-styles. Adolescents in the searching moratorium status were described as experiencing a condition of identity conflict which implies that they have troubles following and implementing their current identity commitments. For this reason, they look for more satisfactory commitments (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008). In brief, the students going through a positive identity crisis (searching moratorium) got the highest score in the CH motivation, suggesting thereby the hypothesis that identity crisis is associated mainly to the willingness to study abroad with the aim of changing life and job conditions.

Finally, students in the foreclosure cluster showed the lowest score in the CH motivation. Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx and Meeus (2008) found that the adolescents in the foreclosure status are, on the one hand, similar to the identity achieved individuals (i.e. in reporting low psychosocial problems and good parental communication); on the other hand they emerged to be low in extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience than adolescents in the achievement status. According to Marcia (1996), adolescents in the foreclosure status reported having parents who strongly encouraged them to accept their family's values. As a consequence, students in the foreclosure status are characterized by a more rigid personality profile, because they are fully engaged in current commitments, but reluctant towards exploration of new commitments. The so emerged profile would explain the similarity with the identity achieved students in the PG motivation, and, at the same time, the lowest score in the CH motivation in comparison to the other clusters.

In summary, results of these exploratory study suggest the predominant role of commitment in motivating students to go abroad to study for personal growth. In other words, PG motivation would act as an inner 'pull' factor towards the studying abroad experience. On the other hand, the reconsideration of commitment would represent the 'push' factor which motives young adults to study abroad with the aim of changing life-style and job opportunities. Finally, identity achieved students showed the highest PG motivation and students in searching moratorium showed the strongest willingness to study abroad for change.

In conclusion, we wondered how and to what extent the studying abroad experience may be considered an identity development task. Literature has been demonstrating, till date, the educational benefits of international mobility experiences. Although moving abroad could be stressful, the experience it provides in cohabiting with different cultures, people and values would help one in becoming more autonomous and in developing personal growth. The present research findings provide first-hand information on how this experience is perceived by international students on the basis of the achievement of identity goals. Results suggest, on the whole, that the *ERASMUS* experience could act as the springboard for self-individuation in future life. Indeed, a semester or a year abroad is strongly perceived by the identity achieved students as an experience that promotes their future options and opportunities and trajectories, as well as a tool for personal growth. Moreover, this positive perception seems to have a positive impact on students going through an identity crisis, in a manner that is perceived and used as a tool to positively change their lives. Because international mobility experiences have a strong educational impact on students' lives (fostering autonomy and stimulating new ways of dealing with unusual contexts), it should be given enhanced importance in drafting school and university programs, so as to foster self-development in adolescents and the youth.

Limitations of the Study

[5] The online administration of self-report measures allowed us to reduce the practical difficulties in recruiting *ERASMUS* students. Nevertheless, nationality-wise we obtained a quite diffuse sample of students (even though the majority comes from Western countries). In this case, the risk is to oversimplify specific motivations and identity processes across the different countries. Despite this, factor analysis and reliability of factors indicate an adequate fit with the theoretical constructs. Moreover, the findings are, on the whole, in line with the identity profiles emerged in previous studies. Ultimately, we believe that these results can be considered as a snapshot on the associations between the self-perceived dimensions of identity and the motivations to study abroad, as well as preliminary data to support further researches on the issue. Anyway, because several factors, such as socio-economic status or employment rate of the country of origin, can affect the decision to move abroad to study or work, further research should be conducted to compare nationally homogeneous groups of international students. We further retain that a comparison of the cluster-wise incidences within the two student groups, one who studied abroad and the other who did not, may be helpful to enlighten the role of identity formation processes in making the studying-abroad decision.

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Endnotes

[1] Squared multiple correlation indexes of the items are between 0.42 and 0.81. The reliability of the U-MICS was further assessed for both the relational and educational domains by means of the Cronbach's α. The values obtained are 0.88 and 0.89 for commitment, 0.73 and 0.75 for in-depth exploration, and 0.90 and 0.84 for reconsideration of commitment.

[2] Theta Delta of the item number 9 emerged to be not significant (Significance of TD < 1.98). For this reason, we fixed the Theta Delta value to 0, as suggested by several researchers (Joreskog, 1967; Lawley & Maxwell, 1971).

[3] Squared multiple correlations of the items are between 0.30 and 0.57.

[4] We also obtained identity statuses by the *k*-means clustering method. We examined the plausibility of several solutions with a different number of clusters. A five cluster solution (chosen on the basis of the three theoretical principles of meaningfulness, parsimony, and explanatory power) was selected. This procedure gave almost the same results obtained by means of the two-step by Gore (2000) procedure with a 86 % of correspondence for the five-cluster solution.

[5] Foreclosure *vs* Searching moratorium ($p < 0.001$); Foreclosure *vs* Moratorium ($p < 0.001$); Foreclosure *vs* Achievement ($p = 0.02$), Foreclosure *vs* Diffusion (p = 0.08).

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