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Do you Dare to Study Abroad? Examining Cross-Cultural Differences in the Role of Covid-19 Post-Pandemic Stress on Study Abroad Intentions and Country Image Formation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Covid-19 pandemic caused worldwide panic and disruption in traditional work, travel, recreational and educational consumer behaviors. Since early 2020 there was an expectation to follow rules that changed frequently. While some countries (ex: USA) declared pandemic to be over, in some places of the world (ex: China) consumers still face the uncertainties of ever-changing rules and behavior restrictions in governmental attempts to eradicate the Covid-19 virus. Trauma resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic will likely be a strong determinant on future intentions to participate in study abroad with variance among culturally diverse groups.

Long periods of isolation and confinement created a universal feeling of increased anxiety, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and alcohol abuse on a global level (Pierce et al. 2020; Flaherty et al. 2020). Students planning or already participating in exciting and inspirational educational journeys as participants of their universities' study abroad programs found themselves in a state of severe despair and disappointment. In addition to the *traumatic stress* stemming from the Covid-19 era, individuals around the globe are experiencing additional negative triggers when forming their behavioral intentions. *Fear of contamination* is a major factor especially in the service industries. It was found to be a great concern for students contemplating travel abroad during the Covid-19 era (Jayasimha et al. 2021). The pandemic created a high level of uncertainty for consumers engaging in non-essential travel (Flaherty et al. 2020). While study abroad programs are enriching, they are hardly considered essential type of travel. The chaos stemming from students unable to return to their home countries during Covid could result in future lower demand for study abroad experiences. Plus, students' perceived destination images are likely to have been changed after the pandemic. These new destination images affect their travel intentions, as well as perceptions towards study abroad. While students whose study abroad programs were interrupted were offered substitute activities such as independent studies, refunds or online learning options (Martel 2020), these options are hardly

comparable to an on-site in-person experience. In turn, *economic stress* can be expected to have a snowball effect on future study abroad intentions among global young consumer cohorts.

We posit that the cultural differences stemming from the long-lived differences in institutional global environments of particular countries will determine the extent of these global young consumers' intentions to travel and study abroad in the current post-pandemic era. Specifically, this work examines the culture's effects on consumer intentions (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) based on the differences between individualistic versus collectivistic consumers with regard to their response to and acceptance of risk or uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2001). Further, we explore perceived destination images of students that are interested in study abroad after the pandemic. We base our work on our small pilot study conducted at a regional southeastern US university in 2019. Based on our future findings, we aim to generate marketing and promotion strategies for the travel and study abroad destinations.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural differences, Individualistic versus collectivistic cultures, Consumer behavior, Travel and study abroad intentions, Post-pandemic era stress, Global young consumers*

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Helena F. Allman (Ph.D. in Business Administration: Marketing, University of South Carolina) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Commerce at the University of West Florida where she teaches marketing and international business courses. Her research interests include branding strategies, product line extensions and the impact on consumers' decisions to purchase them, covering global brands and their country-of-origin influences on consumer behavior based brand strategies. She has studied cross-cultural differences in the business environment, behavior and decision-making – particularly important in the global economy. Helena's work has appeared in such publications and proceedings as the *Journal of International Marketing*, *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *Society of Marketing Advances*, *Academy of Business Research*, and *Academy of International Business*. Her research has won recognition, including the *Best Research Dissertation Proposal Award* from the *Society of Marketing Advances* in 2012. In her spare time Helena enjoys spending time with her husband and daughter and traveling to her home country of Slovakia.

Hilmi A. Atadil (Ph.D. in Hospitality Management, University of South Carolina) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Commerce at the College of Business, University of West Florida. His research focuses on decision-making behavior and attitudes of consumers, destination image formation, as well as the strategic management of organizations in the Hospitality and Tourism industry. He is the 2015 recipient of the Outstanding Scientific Paper Reviewer in Information Technology Award by International CHRIE. Ata's work has been published in *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, and *Tourism Management Perspectives*, among others. His teaching focuses on implementing class participation activities making students to perform creative and critical thinking. From high impact practices to creativity exercises, students are introduced to joyful and educational class participation activities to form a collective learning environment in his courses.

Harriette Bettis-Outland (Ph.D. in Business Administration: Marketing, Georgia State University) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Commerce at the University of West Florida where she teaches marketing courses. Harriette spent two years in banking and eleven years with IBM, where she was a systems engineer and a sales manager. As a systems engineer, she helped configure IBM mainframe systems for such major clients as Ford Motor Co., Amoco Chemicals and General Motors. As a sales manager for IBM's Lotus Division, Bettis-Outland developed and implemented strategic plans with executive management for such clients as Michelin, Milliken & Co., and GlaxoSmithKline Pharmaceuticals. She focuses her research on customer relationship management; marketing strategy with a focus on long-term planning; dissemination and use of market intelligence to improve competitive B2B customers; organizational learning; strategic executive trade show management; and trade show exhibition marketing research. Harriette's work has been published in *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, among others. She also has been co-editor of two special issues for the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*.