

Original Research Article

Exploring Filipino Tertiary Students' Experiences in Study Abroad Programs

ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of Filipino tertiary students who participated in international study abroad programs, with a focus on the personal, academic, and cultural transformations they underwent. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive design, the research involved six pre-service teachers from a university in Ilocos Norte, Philippines, who studied in Southeast Asian countries including Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings reveal three central themes characterizing the students' experiences: challenging, fulfilling, and culturally immersive. Financial limitations and language barriers emerged as significant obstacles that shaped the students' initial encounters abroad. Despite these challenges, the participants described their experiences as academically enriching and personally transformative, citing increased pedagogical competence, self-confidence, resilience, and adaptability. Furthermore, the study highlights the formation of meaningful social bonds and intercultural friendships, enhancing the students' global awareness and professional aspirations. The culturally immersive nature of the programs allowed participants to engage deeply with local traditions and perspectives, fostering shifts in worldview and behavior. These experiences align with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory,

emphasizing the role of reflective practice and active experimentation in transformative learning.

This research contributes valuable insights for higher education institutions, policymakers, and program coordinators aiming to support and enhance the international mobility of Filipino students. It underscores the need for improved financial support, cultural preparation, and language training to maximize the benefits of study abroad programs and promote globally competent graduates.

Keywords: study abroad, internationalization, culture, pedagogy, tertiary education

1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Globally, universities recognize study abroad programs as valuable opportunities for higher education students to develop intercultural skills, broaden their perspectives, and gain potential advantages in the job market (Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2015). These programs, typically spanning one or two semesters, provide students with the chance to live and learn in a new country, challenging them to manage their own lives away from their usual support systems. International study has long been associated with transformative and life-altering experiences (Landon et al., 2017).

Study abroad encompasses a diverse range of educational programs that take place outside of a student's home country (Kitsantas, 2004). This includes short-term programs for credit, service learning initiatives, and semester-long exchange programs (Sachau, Brahser & Fee, 2010). Regardless of the duration or focus, study abroad programs provide students with the opportunity to develop a global perspective and are increasingly integrated into the undergraduate experience.

In recent decades, student mobility has gained global significance, with initiatives such as Erasmus+ in Europe, International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) in the United States, University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) for the Asia-Pacific region, Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE), and the ASEAN International Mobility of Students (AIMS) Programme in Southeast Asia. These programs represent various forms of internationalization in higher education, encouraging students to consider studying abroad, whether for short-term programs, study tours, educational exchanges, or longer-term degree programs.

Researchers have investigated the factors influencing a student's decision to study abroad and their program selection. These factors include academic motivation (e.g., alignment of courses with degree requirements), program timing and length (e.g., a winter break program that fits between semesters and does not interfere with summer internships or family commitments), and program destination (Nyaupane et al., 2011). Individuals who influence study abroad program selection include family (Bunch et al., 2013), peers (Zhai & Scheer, 2002), and academic advisors (Bender et al., 2009). Other influential factors include the student's background and home institution (Bunch et al., 2013). The most frequently cited

factor in a student's decision to study abroad is program cost and available funding (Nyaupane et al., 2011; Zhai & Scheer, 2002).

Advantages of Studying Abroad

Study abroad programs offer a wide range of benefits for students, encompassing social, intellectual, personal, academic, and professional development (Perkins, 2017). A longitudinal study using mixed methods, conducted by Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, and Jon (2009), surveyed 6,391 students who had participated in study abroad programs over a decade to assess the long-term impact on their careers, personal beliefs, and overall well-being. The study found that 98.4% of respondents reported a strong or noticeable impact from their study abroad experience. This included significant increases in civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropic activities, and social entrepreneurship related to their current employment.

Furthermore, study abroad has been shown to increase student retention rates in higher education, particularly for students of color (Metzger, 2006). Researchers suggest that study abroad programs foster strong social networks and collaborative skills among participants. These skills contribute to student retention and success in both academic and professional settings. Students who study abroad rely on each other for support, security, and companionship in a foreign environment, all of which are proven strategies for student retention (Dwyer, 2004).

Kasravi (2009) found that study abroad experiences contribute to increased self-awareness, cultural consciousness, appreciation for the arts, career influence, and intercultural competence. A review of studies by Clarke et al. (2009) suggests that business students who participate in study abroad programs return with greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and a more global perspective compared to their peers who did not study abroad. This finding supports other studies that argue that students develop a broader worldview and become more tolerant of diverse ideas after spending time abroad (Douglas & Jones-Ridders, 2001; Anderson et al., 2006; Pence & MacGillivray, 2008; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Klein & Wikan, 2019).

A study conducted by San & Htwe (2023) in Myanmar revealed that both undergraduate and postgraduate students have shown increased interest in study abroad programs in recent years, with many applying for scholarships to participate. Most participants reported increased intercultural awareness, open-mindedness, ethno-relative views, positive attitude changes, skill development, and appropriate and effective intercultural behaviors after their study abroad experiences. However, a few participants reported receiving less friendliness from the host population than they had anticipated.

Students also report experiencing personal growth as a result of studying abroad. REXISEN, Anderson, Lawton, and Hubbard (2008) surveyed 54 students who had recently participated in study abroad programs. Prior to their trips, the researchers assessed the students' personal beliefs related to intercultural sensitivity, acceptance of new cultural norms, and their perceptions of other cultures (positive or negative). These factors were combined to create an Overall Development Score that was analyzed by the researchers.

Challenges to Studying Abroad

While study abroad offers numerous benefits, several challenges and barriers often prevent college students from participating. These obstacles can be categorized as financial, motivational, academic, and personal. Financial constraints, including college tuition and living expenses, particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, can

significantly hinder participation (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). Motivation to enroll in a study abroad program, often influenced by academic requirements, especially for STEM majors, and pre-existing intentions to study abroad upon entering college, can also play a role (Salisbury et al., 2009). Additionally, some students harbor reservations about studying abroad, including discomfort with travel, inadequate language skills for communication in a foreign country, and a general lack of understanding about other cultures (Williams, 2005).

Further research has raised questions about the reported positive outcomes of study abroad programs. Forsey et al. (2012) found that while 14 Australian students reported enjoying their study abroad experiences, they struggled to articulate specific learning outcomes. Koyanagi (2018) argues that simply sending students abroad is insufficient, emphasizing the importance of evaluating the real impact of these programs for higher education institutions.

Beyond individual student factors, several institutional and systemic barriers can impede participation in study abroad. Financial constraints (Curry, 1999; Gordon, Patterson & Cherry, 2014), fear (Szekely & Krane, 1997; Gordon, Patterson & Cherry, 2014), personal constraints and obligations (Dooley, Dooley & Carranza, 2008; Hackney, Boggs & Borozan, 2012; Gordon, Patterson & Cherry, 2014), lack of knowledge about study abroad opportunities and limited institutional support (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011), limited knowledge of available programs and their relevance (Naffziger, Bott & Mueller, 2008), the length of time away from school, work, and family (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw & Staughan, 1999; Kim & Goldstein 2005; Vernon, Moos & Loncarich, 2017), and a lack of fit within the academic program or major (Doyle et al., 2010) all contribute to the challenges of participation.

Study Abroad Programs for Filipinos

Filipinos participating in outbound student mobility has increased constantly over the years. Data showed that the number of students studying abroad almost doubled in 2017. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) said the number of Filipinos studying in foreign countries has almost doubled compared to the data some 10 years ago.

As for the Philippines, the national literature on international education in the country is substantially biased towards higher education (Bernardo, 2002, Angeles, 2009, Dunne and Edwards, 2010) in that they focused on activities such as student mobility, student and faculty exchange, research collaboration, and the provision of student services (e.g., organizing international student organizations, visa assistance, acculturation programs, etc.). However, at present, the Philippine higher educational system is burdened with systemic inadequacies to take full advantage of opportunities in becoming international (Bernardo, 2002).

Over the past decades, the Philippines has recognized the significance of fostering a curriculum that not only emphasizes local knowledge but also integrates a broader global perspective. Acknowledging the interdependence of nations and the pressing global challenges such as climate change, economic volatility, and technological disruptions, there has been a growing consensus within the Philippine education sector to reevaluate and recalibrate the curriculum to produce globally competent graduates. This paradigm shift in the Philippine education system entails the integration of innovative approaches and strategies that are tailored to equip students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and mindset to engage effectively on the global stage (Hara, 2023).

A study titled 'The Learning Experiences of Filipino Students in an International Exchange Program in Thailand' by Khamkhong et al. (2024) , seven students from Iloilo State University of Fisheries Science and Technology (ISUFST), escorted by two teachers, participated in an international exchange program for one month at Phranakhon Rajabhat University (PNRU), Thailand. They engaged in various activities, including observing classes, assisting in teaching, joining cultural shows, and taking a trip to an ancient city.

They expressed the opinion that the program was successful, that they appreciated the experience very much, and that they wanted to return to visit Thailand again. The organizers were also pleased, as they saw that Thai students had a chance to speak English and befriend foreign students. The Filipino students felt that they grew both academically and culturally. The independent stay in Bangkok, away from their families, also helped them gain a deeper understanding of their lives, thoughts, and personal desires.

Research Gap

The global landscape of higher education increasingly emphasizes internationalization, with study abroad programs becoming more accessible to Filipino tertiary students. However, despite the growing participation, a significant gap exists in the literature concerning the lived experiences of Filipino students in these programs.

Research Objective

This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of Filipino tertiary students in study abroad programs, looking into the challenges and meaningful experiences they encountered, and examining how these experiences shaped their personal, academic and social developments.

Research Question:

1. What characterizes the experiences of Filipino study abroad program grantees?

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative research methodology. Haradhan (2018) describes qualitative research as a form of social action that stresses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality. According to Shakouri (2014), qualitative research is a means to empower individuals to share their stories and hear their voices in a study the researcher is interested in. Specifically, the study used a qualitative descriptive research design. This design describes phenomena rather than explain them. A commonly cited reason for employing a descriptive approach is its ability to offer clear and direct accounts of individuals' experiences and perceptions, especially in contexts where existing knowledge is limited (Sandelowski, 2010). This design is often considered suitable because it acknowledges the subjective aspects of the issue, captures the diverse experiences of participants, and presents the results using language that closely mirrors that of the original research question (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

Hence, utilizing a qualitative descriptive design, the researcher identified and classified the experiences of Filipino students who were part of study abroad programs of their institution. The said approach and design helped the researcher in answering the research question and addressing the gap identified.

Population and Locale

The researcher interviewed 6 participants from one of the universities in Ilocos Norte, Philippines. The participants had varied exchange destinations for their study abroad program: 1 participant went to Thailand, 4 participants went to Indonesia, and 1 participant went to Vietnam. All participants were called Southeast Asian (SEA) Pre-service Teachers.

The choice of 6 participants was based on a study titled "A Phenomenological Exploration into Psychotherapists' Experiences of Their Breath Awareness in Psychotherapy" by Premachandra (2015) who aimed to recruit six participants only. The rationale was to ensure the generation of adequate meaningful themes from the data, aligning with Smith et al.'s (2009) suggestion of a sample size between three to six participants for such studies. This range allows for identifying similarities and differences without overwhelming the researcher with data. Moreover, the inclusion criteria for this research study required participants to be

currently enrolled undergraduate students of an institution for higher learning. Furthermore, participants must have completed a study abroad program, regardless of the program's duration, location, or subject matter. This criterion ensures that the study focuses on a population with shared experiences of international immersion and cultural exposure, allowing for a focused analysis of the impact of study abroad on undergraduate students. Six participants are appropriate for this study vis-a-vis the duration and practicality of this study and it's quantitatively enough to establish a strong foundation for the objective of the study.

Data Gathering Tool

The researcher employed a semi-structured interview with the participants. This kind of interview is common and a popular data collection method in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are crucial because they allow researchers to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of participants. In their article "Situating and Constructing Diversity in Semi-Structured Interviews," McIntosh and Morse (2015) discussed the use of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research. They argue that this method allows researchers to address diverse perspectives and experiences by providing a balance between structured questions and the flexibility to explore topics in depth. The rationale for employing semi-structured interviews is to facilitate the construction of knowledge through an interactive dialogue, enabling participants to express their experiences and viewpoints while allowing researchers to probe for deeper understanding.

Data Gathering Procedure

This study utilized a convenient-purposive sampling method in which participants were intentionally sought after by the researcher. In looking for potential participants, the researcher ensured that their participation is voluntary, and they have the right to withdraw from the interview if unexpected circumstances may arise. Before conducting the interview, the researcher explained to the participants the gist and purpose of the research and ask for their permission if they are willing to be part of it. An informed consent was given, ensuring that their responses will be kept in confidentiality. Afterwards, when all of them agreed to the request, the researcher had provided them with the interview guide questions through a word document format. The participants answered by typing out their responses using the word document. For follow up questions, the research sent them via messenger app. The choice of gathering the data through electronic mode was due to time restriction and the locations of the participants who are deployed to different schools in the province as part of their internship program. In addition, codes such as P1 (Participant 1) until P6 (Participant 6) were used to keep the participants' name off the record.

Data Analysis

Gildberg, Bradley, Tingleff, and Hounsgaard (2015) suggested the application of thematic analysis in qualitative research. They emphasize its utility in systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, which is particularly beneficial in qualitative studies aiming to describe and understand individuals' lived experiences.

The study used qualitative data collected from Filipino tertiary students who participated in a study abroad program. The researchers employed semi-structured interviews to gather rich, detailed information about the participants' experiences. After collecting the data, the researcher undertook data familiarization by thoroughly rereading the data, highlighting key phrases, words, and concepts that emerged. This involved immersing in the participants' narratives and identifying patterns and commonalities.

Consequently, the researcher began the initial coding of the data, assigning labels to specific sections of the text that represented key ideas or themes. This phase involved open coding where the researcher created codes based on the data itself.

The researcher then grouped similar codes together, looking for emerging themes that represented broader patterns in the data. This step involved identifying recurring concepts, relationships between codes, and overarching ideas that connected the participants' experiences. After refining the theme, the researcher interpreted the themes in relation to existing literatures. The researcher connected the themes to relevant research findings,

providing a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and their implications for the field of education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations permeated all stages of this research. Informed consent were obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of data and secure storage, protecting participant identities and sensitive information. Data analysis adhered to principles of transparency and rigor, avoiding bias and ensuring the accurate representation of participant experiences. All research practices were conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines and regulations, prioritizing the well-being and autonomy of participants throughout the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Findings

This section of the research paper presents the answers of the participants and sheds light on their relevance to other scientific studies. Based on the answers extracted from the participants, the researcher was able to identify patterns and codes and group them into themes to provide a general picture of their collective experiences. The study abroad program served as an avenue for participants to have rich and transformative experiences, impacting their personal, academic, and cultural development. The findings highlight several key themes, each supported by direct statements from the participants and findings from other studies. The three themes mentioned below characterized the study abroad program experiences of the informants.

Theme 1: Challenging

Context: This theme presents the challenging aspect of study abroad programs with regards to financial constraints and language barrier.

a. Monetarily-oriented

Participants acknowledged the financial implications of the program, with P1 stating, "There were factors that made me weigh things out such as finances since the program was not majorly funded by the university, some expenses incurred shall be personally funded."

P2 said, "Key factors influencing my decision were the overall cost of travel and accommodation in Thailand and the knowledge of who would be accompanying me." P3 also stated that her primary concern was the financial feasibility of the program.

A recent survey has found that financial challenges, particularly securing financial aid and managing overall costs, remain the biggest barriers to studying abroad. The Voice of the Students: Study Abroad 2024 survey by Terra Dotta gathered insights from roughly 300 college students about their study abroad experiences. While many students highlighted positive aspects, the survey also pointed to key issues that still need attention. Notably, 67% of students said that financial concerns could stop them from participating in study abroad programs. Nearly half also indicated they would need assistance just to understand what financial aid options are available. Besides tuition and program fees—which can include costs for passports—students studying abroad often face additional expenses such as airfare, housing, meals, and travel during their stay (Hogan, 2024).

b. Linguistically Limited

Participants faced challenges in communication and instruction due to language differences. P1 stated, "Common Filipino strategies like recitation, discussion, gamification, and

collaboration—although also used in Vietnam—were difficult for me to implement effectively because of the language barrier."

P2 also said, "... Language barrier added another challenge, as English proficiency varied among the local population."

As highlighted in both formal observations and personal reflections of P4, educators often struggle to gauge student comprehension, which can hinder the clarity and effectiveness of instruction. P5 specifically noted the difficulty in determining whether students truly understood the material, underscoring how language barriers can disrupt not only content delivery but also the ability to build meaningful teacher-learner connections. These challenges reflect the broader complexities of teaching in linguistically diverse environments, where communication breakdowns can compromise both instructional efficacy and student engagement.

When international students arrive in a new country, they are faced with an overwhelming amount of new information. As they go through the process of acculturation, they interpret these unfamiliar experiences based on their own existing knowledge and perspectives. Since these interpretations are subjective, language barriers can impact each student differently as they try to make sense of and adapt to their new environment (Sawir, 2005).

Theme 2: Fulfilling

Context: This theme encompasses the meaningful and fulfilling aspects of study abroad programs in relation to the participants' academic, personal growth and social connections.

a. Academically-Enriching

This subtheme reflects the participants' general improvement in their pedagogical skills.

Participants emphasized a heightened awareness of diverse teaching approaches and the benefits of technologically advanced classrooms. P2 stated, "Experiencing diverse teaching methodologies and technologically advanced classrooms broadened my pedagogical perspective," reflecting a common theme across responses. This aligns with existing research highlighting the positive correlation between exposure to diverse teaching practices and enhanced teacher efficacy (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Furthermore, the participants' immersion in a multicultural and multilingual educational landscape directly influenced their understanding of contextually relevant instruction. This resonates with research demonstrating the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in promoting deeper understanding and critical thinking (Bransford et al., 2000) and the importance of differentiated instruction in meeting the diverse needs of learners (Tomlinson, 2014).

The program's success in fostering a deeper understanding of student-centered and engaging learning environments is further supported by the participants' reflections on their experiences. The statement from P4, "The program allowed me to immerse myself in a diverse educational landscape where I could observe and apply varied teaching methodologies such as inquiry-based learning, project-based instruction, and differentiated strategies tailored to student needs," directly highlights the program's effectiveness in providing practical, hands-on experience. The emphasis on creating contextually relevant learning experiences reflects a growing awareness of the importance of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018).

b. Self-Developing

This study reveals significant personal growth among participants resulting from their immersive teaching experience. Participants demonstrated increased self-confidence, adaptability, and resilience while navigating unfamiliar cultural contexts. This aligns with research highlighting the transformative potential of international experiences (e.g., Paige et

al., 2017; Smith, 2019). P3's statement, "I discovered a capacity within myself to step outside my comfort zone and thrive in unfamiliar situations," exemplifies the development of self-efficacy, a key outcome of challenging experiences (Bandura, 2012). This enhanced self-efficacy extended beyond personal growth, positively impacting participants' confidence in their teaching abilities. The ability to adapt to diverse learning environments and respond effectively to unexpected challenges fostered resilience, a crucial attribute for educators in increasingly complex and dynamic educational settings (e.g., Day & Gu, 2017).

P6 also said that her journey abroad has made her realize the world is too big not to be explored and it allowed her to do things she hadn't experience or was not able to do in the Philippines.

Moreover, P4 said: "The opportunity to teach English in a foreign language context honed my ability to communicate with clarity, creativity, and empathy. Truly, the program redefined my understanding of what it means to be an educator. It taught me that teaching is not confined to textbooks and lesson plans, but rather rooted in human connection, empathy, and the ability to respond meaningfully to the needs of every learner."

c. Socially-Engaging

Participants formed social connections and friendships with fellow participants and local student. P2 stated, "Most importantly, the connections I forged with my students and the friendships I developed while traveling with my friends remain incredibly significant."

P2 also cited, "Most importantly, the connections I forged with my students and the friendships I developed while traveling with my friends remain incredibly significant. The shared experiences and bonds created during that time are something I cherish and recall often. In fact, I still message my friends from time to time and we update each other about what's happening in our lives."

In addition, P4 stated that "Most of all, what lingers is the human connection. The friendships formed, the kindness extended by mentors and student buddies, and the shared learnings in the face of linguistic struggles have left an indelible mark. These experiences taught me that at the heart of education is relationship, between teacher and student, between cultures, and between individuals striving to understand one another."

Their answers are supported by Bochner's (1977) functional model for the development of overseas students friendship patterns, one of the first studies concerning friendship networks of international students. It suggested that international students belong to three distinct social networks, each serving a particular psychological function: The primary, monocultural network, consisting of close friendships with other sojourning compatriots functions as a setting to rehearse, express, and affirm culture-of-origin values. Secondary or bi-cultural network, consisting of links with host nationals has an instrumental function and it facilitates students' academic and professional aims. Finally, the third, multi-cultural network consists of friendships with other non-compatriot foreign students and it provides students with the sense of companionship and social support based on the shared experience of foreignness (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

Theme 3: Culturally-Immersive

Context: This theme portrays the firsthand experiences of participants in navigating and learning from new cultural environments and practices.

The opportunity to study abroad offers students a lifetime opportunity to experience life in other culturally different environments, and to see the world from the position of their host country or culture (Ogunleye, 2025).

Participants engaged in authentic cultural experiences, fostering a deeper appreciation for the host country's traditions, values, and way of life. P3 expressed, "I was grateful to witness Vietnam's food, dance, music, and life culture. This may probably be the most meaningful part of my journey—that I was able to experience their culture in such an authentic way..."

This supports research emphasizing the importance of cultural immersion in promoting intercultural understanding and global citizenship.

According to P3, one of the most meaningful aspects of the journey was learning a few simple terms in Bahasa that she can use in her daily life, which made her feel like a local.

P4 also shared, "I witnessed firsthand how culture and language can serve as powerful tools for connection. The shared laughter, the eagerness to learn, and the mutual appreciation of one another's heritage created an atmosphere of warmth and unity that was deeply moving." Similarly, P5 discovered that not until she performed it (the Indonesian dance) on their culminating program, she realized that if you really want to know one's culture, you have to live with it.

The collective answers of the participants are supported by the transformative learning process of Hogan (2016b). He described transformative learning as "processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world." Based on an extensive literature review of several transformative learning perspectives, Hoggan identified six categories of transformative outcomes that are byproducts of transformative learning. These six categories of transformative learning outcomes include changes in worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, behavior, and capacity (Hoggan 2016b).

Ontology and behavior are present and evident within the meaning of the participants' answers. Ontology deals with a person's mental, emotional, and physical existence in the world.

P3's statement, "This may probably be the most meaningful part of my journey," reveals a profound shift in her affective experience. The authentic cultural immersion in Vietnam evoked a sense of deep meaning and gratitude.

Moreover, learning a few simple terms in Bahasa and feeling like a local demonstrates an increase in P3's linguistic and cultural understanding. This experience enhanced her ability to connect with people from different backgrounds.

P4's observation that "culture and language can serve as powerful tools for connection" reflects a change in their ways of being. They now view culture and language as instruments for building bridges and fostering understanding, suggesting a shift in their perspective on human interaction.

On the other hand, behavior refers to change in cause of action. These changes include social actions, actions that are consistent with new perspectives, professional practices, and skills.

P4's description of shared laughter, eagerness to learn, and mutual appreciation of heritage highlights social actions that contribute to a positive and unifying atmosphere.

P5's realization that "if you really want to know one's culture, you have to live with it" signifies a shift in their perspective on cultural understanding. They now recognize that true cultural understanding requires active participation, immersion, and embodied experience.

Discussion of the Results

This study titled, "Exploring Filipino Tertiary Students' Experiences in Study Abroad Programs," dives into the multifaceted nature of study abroad programs on Filipino tertiary students. The research reveals three overarching themes that characterized the participants' collective experiences: challenging, fulfilling, and culturally immersive. Each theme is supported by significant statements from the participants and relevant literature, offering a rich understanding of the program's influence on the different aspects of their lives. The challenging theme highlights financial, linguistic, and technological hurdles. Financial constraints, a major barrier to study abroad participation (Hogan, 2024), were frequently cited by participants. The study corroborates findings from the Voice of the Students: Study Abroad 2024 survey, which revealed that financial concerns deter many students from participating (Hogan, 2024). Participants also described language barriers impacting communication and instruction, consistent with research highlighting the challenges of

teaching students with limited English proficiency (Sawir, 2005; Smith & Khawanja, 2011; Yoon & Portman, 2004).

Conversely, the fulfilling theme emphasizes the program's positive impact. Participants reported that their experiences were academically enriching, aligning with research demonstrating the positive correlation between exposure to diverse teaching practices and enhanced teacher efficacy (Darling-Hammond, 2000). A sense of self-development or personal growth, including increased self-confidence, adaptability, and resilience, mirrored findings on the transformative potential of international experiences (Paige et al., 2017; Smith, 2019; Bandura, 2012; Day & Gu, 2017). The development of strong social connections, both with fellow participants and local students, supports Bochner's (1977) functional model of international student friendship networks.

The culturally immersive theme underscores the profound impact of cultural immersion on participants' worldviews. Experiences of engaging with local traditions, values, and ways of life support research emphasizing the importance of cultural immersion in promoting intercultural understanding and global citizenship (Ogunleye, 2025). The participants' accounts align with Hogan's (2016b) transformative learning framework, demonstrating changes in ontology (affective experience, ways of being) and behavior (social actions, consistent with new perspectives). The transformative nature of the experience is evident in participants' enhanced appreciation for cultural diversity and their deepened understanding of the importance of active participation in cultural exchange.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the design and implementation of future study abroad programs, particularly for Filipino tertiary students. The documented transformative learning experiences highlight the potential of international education to foster not only academic growth but also significant personal and professional development, including enhanced self-efficacy, adaptability, and intercultural competence. Understanding the challenges faced—financial constraints, language barriers, and technological adjustments—is crucial for developing more accessible and supportive programs. These insights can inform the creation of targeted interventions, such as increased financial aid, pre-departure language training to ensure equitable access and successful participation for all students. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The sample size was relatively small, and the phenomenological approach limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Future research employing larger, more diverse samples and utilizing mixed-methods approaches would strengthen the understanding of the study abroad experience and its long-term impact.

4. CONCLUSION

This study on exploring the experiences of Filipino tertiary students in their study abroad programs reveals significant insights into the transformative impact of international education. The findings emphasize the challenges, such as financial constraints and language barriers, while also highlighting the fulfilling aspects of their experiences, including academic enrichment, personal growth, and the development of strong social connections.

This research is unique in its focus on the Filipino perspective, offering valuable data for refining study abroad programs to better support students' needs, particularly in terms of financial aid, language training, and cultural preparation. The implications of this study extend beyond Filipino students, suggesting that study abroad programs globally can be enhanced to facilitate more accessible, supportive, and meaningful international educational experiences.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 2:

Author(s) hereby declare that generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models, etc. have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts. This explanation will include the name, version, model, and source of the generative AI technology and as well as all input prompts provided to the generative AI technology

Details of the AI usage are given below:

1. The author of this research paper acknowledges the use of ChatGPT as a supportive tool in the writing process. ChatGPT was utilized to assist in brainstorming ideas, organizing content structure, refining language, and enhancing clarity of expression. While all critical thinking, data interpretation, and final analysis were conducted solely by the author, ChatGPT played a valuable role in streamlining the drafting process and improving the overall readability of the manuscript

2.

3.

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