



Original Article

The impact of social media influencers on the intention to study abroad through the lens of self-determination theory: The case study of undergraduate students in Hanoi

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Abstract: This research explores the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on Hanoi university students' self-improvement motivation and their intention to study abroad. Grounded in the self-determination theory of Deci & Ryan (1985), the research surveyed 574 undergraduate students in Hanoi to assess how students' intrinsic motivation mediates the connection between SMIs and students' intention to study abroad after graduation. The findings reveal that students' self-improvement motivation and study abroad aspirations are most influenced by SMIs' attractiveness, followed by career success, which positions SMIs as ideal role models. Similarity and trustworthiness also positively impact motivation by fostering emotional connections and reinforcing confidence. Meanwhile, relationship proximity has shown no influence, and expertise negatively affects students' self-improvement motivation. The research confirms the mediating role of self-improvement motivation in the link between SMIs and study abroad intention, except in the case of expertise. These findings provide actionable insights for educational institutions to leverage SMIs marketing and design impactful content that inspires students to pursue personal growth and international academic opportunities.

Keywords: Social media influencer, study abroad, self-improvement motivation.

1. Introduction

The rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok has transformed the way Vietnamese students access information. As of January 2024, Vietnam recorded 72.7 million active social media accounts, with high engagement rates across

major platforms (DataReportal, 2024). Among these, 92.7% of users engage with at least one social media platform, including 72.7 million Facebook users, 63 million YouTube users, and 67.72 million TikTok users. In this digital landscape, social media influencers (SMIs), including content creators, experts, and high-achieving individuals, play a growing role in

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shaping perceptions and behaviors, especially among youth in domains such as education and personal development.

In the context of globalization, studying abroad has become a prevalent trend influenced by economic conditions, educational policies, and social factors. Concurrently, the trend of studying abroad is on the rise, with nearly 200,000 Vietnamese students pursuing education overseas and approximately 40,000 students going abroad annually (Ministry of Education and Training, 2023). Popular destinations include South Korea, Japan, Australia, United States, China, and Canada, reflecting the increasing demand for global integration and knowledge acquisition among Vietnamese students. SMIs, in particular, play a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions, attitudes, and decisions regarding international education. Prior studies affirm the persuasive power of SMIs on consumer behavior (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) and highlight social media's role in shaping educational decisions (Peruta & Shields, 2018). However, limited research has examined the direct impact of SMIs on study-abroad intentions, especially in Vietnam. Additionally, personal development motivation, rooted in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), is seen as a mediating factor in educational decision-making. To address this gap, the present study investigates the influence of SMIs on Hanoi students' intentions to study abroad, with a focus on the mediating role of personal development motivation and practical implications for educational communication and outreach.

2. Literature review on social media influencers, motivation, and study abroad after graduation of students and research gap

2.1. Literature review on social media influencers (SMIs)

The concept of SMIs has evolved across various studies. SMIs are independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through social media (Freberg et al., 2011). The appeal of SMIs is not only based on their appearance but also on their social influence, personality, and expertise (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2019). This appeal stimulates personal development motivation and significantly influences followers' perceptions, attitudes, brand image, and consumer behavior (Ohanian, 1990; Kim et al., 2009). Beyond attractiveness, expertise is a crucial factor that enables SMIs to establish credibility, positively affecting brand image and purchase intention (Hovland & Weiss, 1953; Ohanian, 1990).

Additionally, the credibility of SMIs plays a vital role in building trust among potential customers, which subsequently impacts purchasing behavior (Ajzen, 1991; McCracken, 1989). The success of SMIs serves as a motivational factor for followers' personal development, inspiring them to learn and emulate (Bandura, 1986; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). The similarity between SMIs and their followers enhances engagement and influences behavior (Zhafira et al., 2020). The relationship between SMIs and their audience fosters emotional connections and acts as a driving force for self-improvement (Aron & Fraley, 1999; Chu & Kim, 2011). In Vietnam, research on the influence of SMIs on personal development motivation has gained increasing attention due to the rapid growth of media (Ngo, 2018).

2.2. Literature review on motivation and self-improvement motivation of undergraduate students

Motivation is defined in various ways across studies. Vroom (1964) describes it as the expectation that effort leads to high performance and rewards, while Gardner (1985) sees it as a combination of effort, goal achievement, and a positive attitude toward learning. In SDT, motivation is divided into intrinsic motivation, which is engaging in activities for inherent satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is performing activities for external outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Some studies have shown that motivation influences students' intention to study abroad (Zhuang & Carnes, 2015; Yang, 2007). Self-improvement motivation, which pushes individuals to enhance their abilities and knowledge for long-term goals, is key in educational settings. Self-improvement motivation encourages students to overcome challenges and achieve goals (Vijeh, 2014). Sun & Li (2012) suggest that self-improvement motivation is linked to self-awareness and personal progress, guiding decisions such as pursuing international education. Additionally, research highlights that self-improvement motivation mediates between external influences, like SMIs, and students' intentions. Malik et al. (2023) note that SMIs inspire students' self-development, leading them to exert more effort in their educational and career decisions, with self-improvement motivation playing a central mediating role (Mandel et al., 2017).

2.3. Literature review on study abroad

The main competitive educational markets are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, France, and Japan. Factors like education quality, employment prospects, and cultural experience influence students' decisions to study abroad (Mazzarol &

Soutar, 2002). Support from home institutions and perceived benefits outweighing costs also play a role in the decision to study abroad (Tan, 2015). Risks, safety, and convenience are important considerations (Relyea et al., 2008; Goel & Schnusenberg, 2010). Study abroad intentions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2021a), with policies, educational quality, and family support being significant (Hoang, 2024). Cultural motivation, success motivation, social pressure, personal characteristics, and financial resources affect students' decisions (Truong & Ng, 2023). The desire for career opportunities and international education quality also impacts study abroad intentions after graduation (Phan & Trinh, 2016).

3. The conceptual framework and hypothesis development

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and autonomy in personal development. It posits that fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) enhances intrinsic motivation (IM), which boosts self-improvement and learning. When these needs are unmet, motivation decreases. SDT also explains how extrinsic motivation (EM) can be internalized when the social context fosters autonomy, competence, and positive relationships. In the context of students, SDT offers a framework for understanding how autonomy and voluntary engagement in learning can drive motivation, such as the intention to study abroad.

According to Sun and Li (2012), self-improvement motivation is the psychological process of striving for a more positive self-perception to achieve progress and growth. Students with high self-improvement motivation are more likely to pursue international learning opportunities to enhance their skills and career prospects (Soutar & Turner, 2002).

When doing a study about the attractiveness of SMIs, AlFarraj et al. (2020) studied two aspects: Personality and admiration, while Kim et al. (2009) found that it promotes positive cognition and enhances motivation (Ohanian, 1990). In addition to attractiveness, the level of expertise factor is considered to have the ability to build trust and persuasion (Van der Walde et al., 2009), thereby influencing people to inspire and motivate their followers. Other studies suggest that trustworthiness emphasizes the honesty and consistency in the information that the SMIs convey (Ohanian, 1990), which strengthens the followers' trust in the SMIs.

Furthermore, the success of SMIs also contributes significantly to inspiring followers through social learning (Bandura, 1986), urging them to follow the influencer's plans and actions to achieve similar success and increase motivation. In addition, similarity refers to the followers' perception of similarity with the SMIs such as ability and lifestyle. Indeed, greater similarity will promote stronger attraction, trust, and understanding (Ruef et al., 2003). Finally, relationship closeness refers to the social interaction between the SMIs and followers on social media and in real life. This connection promotes interest and enhances students' self-improvement motivation (Chu & Kim, 2011). Hence, six hypotheses are proposed as follows:

H1: The attractiveness of SMIs positively impacts the self-improvement motivation of students.

H2: The expertise of SMIs positively impacts the self-improvement motivation of students.

H3: The trustworthiness of SMIs positively impacts the self-improvement motivation of students.

H4: The career success of SMIs positively impacts the self-improvement motivation of students.

H5: The similarity between SMIs and their followers positively impacts the self-improvement motivation of students.

H6: The relationship closeness between SMIs and followers positively impacts the self-improvement motivation of students.

These six factors were chosen for their comprehensive representation of both intrinsic influencer characteristics (attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and career success) and extrinsic social dynamics (perceived similarity and relationship closeness). These elements collectively shape students' motivation for self-improvement and their intentions to pursue international education, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the influencers of social media on academic and personal development aspirations.

Finally, the characteristics of SMIs, such as attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and success, not only directly influence but also indirectly affect the intention to study abroad through the self-improvement motivation of students. Moreover, Lee et al. (2018) highlight that SMIs impact acts as a catalyst, shaping future decisions such as studying abroad.

Accordingly, the authors apply STD to examine the positive impact of self-improvement motivation on students' intention to study abroad. Below is the remaining

hypothesis proposed and Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework of this study.

H7a: Self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between the attractiveness of SMIs and students' intention to study abroad after graduation.

H7b: Self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between the expertise of SMIs and students' intention to study abroad after graduation.

H7c: Self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between the trustworthiness of SMIs and students' intention to study abroad after graduation.

H7d: Self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between the success of SMIs and students' intention to study abroad after graduation.

H7e: Self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between the similarity of SMIs and students' intention to study abroad after graduation.

H7f: Self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between the relationship closeness of SMIs with their followers and students' intention to study abroad after graduation.

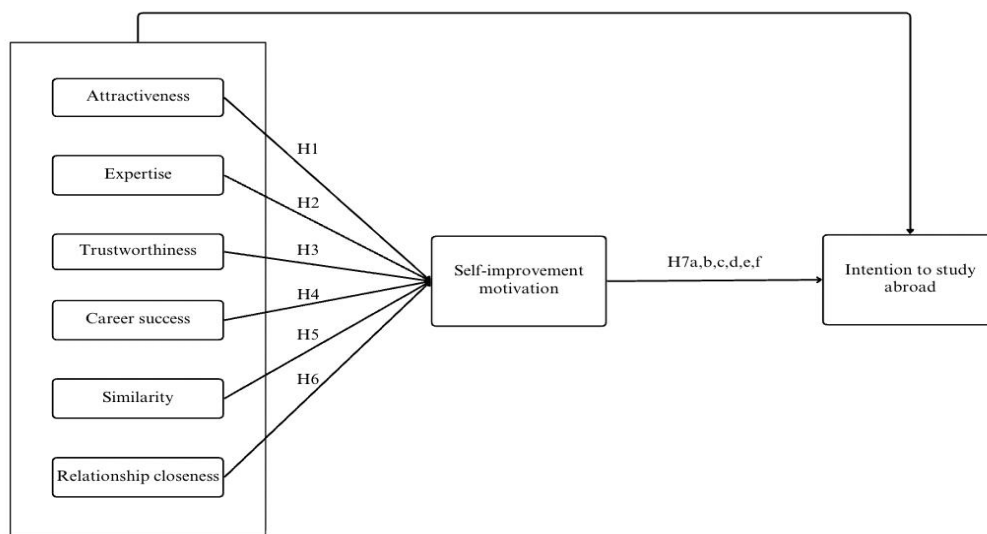


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Source: Authors.

4. Methodological approach

Questionnaire and measurement

The survey questionnaire consists of two sections: the first gathers demographic data, while the second measures items related to the hypotheses. All items are adapted from established measurements, tailored to the context of SMIs in higher education in Vietnam. Specifically, the “Attractiveness” (6 items) and “Trustworthiness” (5 items) factors are adapted from Thuy (2024). The “Expertise” factor (5 items) is based on Ohanian (1990), Hovland and Weiss (1951), and Freberg et al. (2011). The “Career Success” factor (4 items) draws from Chae (2018) and Jin and Phua (2014). The “Similarity” factor (5 items) is based on Martensen (2018), and Dreifaldt and Drennan (2019). The “Relationship Closeness” factor (5 items) is from Thuy (2024). The “Self-Improvement Motivation” factor (3 items) is based on Deci and Ryan (2020), and the

“Intention to Study Abroad” factor (3 items) is adapted from Nguyen (2021b).

Pilot test

Prior to the official distribution of the survey questionnaire, the authors conducted two pilot tests. The first one is for face validity. Two experts were asked to read and provide feedback in terms of terminology. From these scholars' readings, further adjustments to the terminology were made. Second, a preliminary study was conducted with a sample size of 50 to test and refine the measurement scales for the official study.

Participants

Respondents in the research were current undergraduate students from the first year to final year from 34 universities in Hanoi, aged from 18 to 25 years old and all followers of SMIs. They were asked about their perceptions of SMIs, and impacts on their self-improvement motivation and influence on their intention to study abroad after graduation.

Data collection

An online survey was conducted to collect data over two months (11.2024 - 01.2025) using Google Forms, targeting students in Hanoi. The author employed a non-probability sampling method combining convenience sampling with the snowball technique, which was employed to ensure diversity and objectivity. Following Hoogland and Boomsma (1998), the minimum sample size for structural equation modeling (SEM) was set at 200. A total of 620 responses were collected, with 574 deemed valid after removing incomplete entries, resulting in a 92.5% response rate. However, upon further review, the author identified 20 responses that may not be entirely valid, as the respondents did not view the content of the SMIs. This is acknowledged as a limitation and highlights the need for improved data screening in future studies. Despite this, all 574 responses were retained to avoid potential bias from subjectively excluding data, and a comparative analysis with a reduced dataset (554 responses) showed no significant differences, confirming that the inclusion of the 20 responses did not affect the study's conclusions.

5. Research results

5.1. Demographic and basic information of respondents

The sample consisted of 574 participants, including 240 males (41.8%) and 334 females (58.2%). Regarding university affiliation, students from 34 educational institutions participated, with the National Economics University contributing the largest proportion (226 respondents, 39.4%). In terms of academic year, first-year students made up 5.6% (32), second-year students 14.6% (84), third-year students 44.9% (258), and fourth-year students 34.5% (198). Regarding the daily time spent viewing SMIs content, most participants (60%) reported spending 30 minutes to 3 hours daily viewing SMIs' content. Regarding monthly income, 50.5% earned less than 5 million VND, with smaller proportions in higher income brackets. For study abroad expenses, 29.6% (170 respondents) could spend under 50 million VND, 25.6% (148 respondents) between 50 and 200 million VND, and 23.7% (136 respondents) between 200 and 500 million VND. The lowest expenditure group was those willing to spend over 500 million VND, with 13.6% (78 respondents) allocating between 500 million and

1 billion VND, and 7.3% (42 respondents) willing to spend more than 1 billion VND.

5.2. Measurement validation

The authors use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 24.0 to validate the measurement model. All results of multiple fit indices are satisfactory with relevant indices such as CFI, NFI, IFI, TLI, RMSEA or Chi-square/degree of freedom are higher or lower respectively acceptable levels (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Items with factor loadings below 0.5 are removed, ensuring the convergent validity of the data. Composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) values are also above acceptable levels (0.7 for CR, 0.5 for AVE). For discriminant validity, we compare the values of AVE with the square of correlation coefficients. As all AVE values are higher than the respective squared correlation coefficient, we may conclude that discriminant validity is not a problem in this study.

5.3. Results of structural equation model

The research team conducted a multicollinearity test by analyzing the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The test results show that the average VIF value is 1.388. According to Hair et al. (2009), $VIF < 2$ indicates no multicollinearity, while $VIF > 10$ confirms its presence. Therefore, the research model does not suffer from multicollinearity issues.

5.4. Hypothesis testing results

To test hypotheses H1-H6, the research team performed SEM analysis using AMOS 24.0. The empirical analysis indicates that 46.8% of the variance in Self-improvement motivation (DL) is explained by the independent variables (attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, career success, similarity, and relationship closeness). Additionally, only the p-value for the relationship between CG and DL is greater than 0.05, proving that CG has no significant impact on DL. Therefore, the research team decided to reject hypothesis H2.

Furthermore, the p-values for all other relationships are below 0.05, and the regression coefficients are positive, indicating that the effects in the model are in the same direction. Based on this, the research team accepts hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H5, and H6.

Overall, the standardized regression coefficients and hypothesis test results are summarized in Table 1.

The hypotheses H7a-f illustrate that self-improvement motivation mediates the relationship between SMIs' attractiveness,

expertise, trustworthiness, success, similarity, and relationship closeness with students' study abroad intentions.

To test these hypotheses, the research team conducted a Bootstrap analysis using the Indirect Effects tool in AMOS 24.0, yielding the Table 2.

Table 1: Standardized regression coefficients of independent variables on the intermediate variable personal growth motivation

	Standardized regression weights (γ)	p-value (Sig.)	Hypothesis	Test results
DL \leftarrow HD	0.274	***	H1	Accepted
DL \leftarrow CG	-0.066	0.112	H2	Rejected
DL \leftarrow TC	0.153	***	H3	Accepted
DL \leftarrow TH	0.104	0.007	H4	Accepted
DL \leftarrow TD	0.202	***	H5	Accepted
DL \leftarrow QH	0.072	0.045	H6	Accepted

Chi-square = 592.494; degree of freedom = 566; Cmin/df = 1.047; normed fit index (NFI) = .943; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .009; The Tucker-Lewis coefficient (TLI) = .997 and Comparative fit index (CFI) = .997

Note: *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Source: Authors.

Table 2: Standardized regression coefficients for the mediating effect of personal growth motivation on the relationship between independent variables and study abroad intentions

Independent variable (X)	Mediating variable (Z)	Dependent variable (Y)	Direct effect			Indirect effect	Total effects
			X \rightarrow Y	X \rightarrow Z	Z \rightarrow Y		
HD	DL	YD	0.043 (0.447)	0.308 (0.002)	0.553 (0.002)	0.093 (0.001)	0.136 (0.008)
CG	DL	YD	-0.096 (0.100)	-0.088 (0.112)	0.553 (0.002)	-0.027 (0.075)	-0.122 (0.033)
TC	DL	YD	-0.241 (0.002)	0.222 (0.003)	0.553 (0.002)	0.067 (0.002)	-0.174 (0.006)
TH	DL	YD	0.175 (0.009)	0.154 (0.003)	0.553 (0.002)	0.047 (0.002)	0.221 (0.003)
TD	DL	YD	0.042 (0.508)	0.316 (0.002)	0.553 (0.002)	0.095 (0.001)	0.137 (0.015)
QH	DL	YD	0.149 (0.009)	0.097 (0.089)	0.553 (0.002)	0.029 (0.049)	0.178 (0.003)

Mediating effect

H7a: HD \rightarrow DL \rightarrow YD	Hypothesis accepted, full mediation effect
H7b: CG \rightarrow DL \rightarrow YD	Hypothesis rejected
H7c: TC \rightarrow DL \rightarrow YD	Hypothesis accepted, partial mediation effect
H7d: TH \rightarrow DL \rightarrow YD	Hypothesis accepted, partial mediation effect
H7e: TD \rightarrow DL \rightarrow YD	Hypothesis accepted, full mediation effect
H7f: QH \rightarrow DL \rightarrow YD	Hypothesis accepted, partial mediation effect

Source: Authors.

The mediation test results in Table 2 show that the p-value for the total effect of CG on YD is greater than 0.05, indicating no statistical significance, so hypothesis H7b is rejected. For HD and TD, direct effects on YD have p-values greater than 0.05, while indirect effects have p-values below 0.05, confirming that DL fully mediates their impact, supporting hypotheses H7a and H7e. Meanwhile, TC, TH, and QH have both direct and indirect effects with p-values below 0.05, indicating that DL partially mediates their impact, supporting hypotheses H7c, H7d, and H7f.

5. Discussion

The SEM analysis results indicate that SMIs have a significant influence on students' self-improvement motivation and study abroad intentions. Students are more affected by SMIs with whom they feel a sense of similarity or emotional connection, highlighting the importance of shared traits in fostering self-improvement motivation and study abroad aspirations. This finding aligns with the studies of Al-Darraj et al. (2020) and Supriyanto et al. (2023). The trustworthiness of SMIs has a

positive impact, reinforcing students' confidence and encouraging them to adopt advice for self-improvement, consistent with the findings of Ohanian (2012). Additionally, SMIs' attractiveness plays a crucial role, as their engaging style and creative content strongly inspire students, in line with AlFarraj et al. (2021) and Torres et al.'s (2019) research. Influencers' career success also positively influences self-improvement motivation, as students perceive them as ideal role models, supporting Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory. However, relationship proximity does not have a significant impact, indicating that direct personal interactions with influencers are not a decisive factor. Notably, influencers' expertise has a negative effect, possibly because students feel distant or unconvinced when influencers promote products outside their domain of expertise. This aligns with the perspectives of Cialdini (2001) and Eisenberg (2014), who argue that persuasion is not solely based on expertise but also on trustworthiness. Furthermore, the study confirms that self-improvement motivation significantly influences study abroad intentions, consistent with Malik et al.'s (2023) research and support Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. Exposure to influencers sharing study abroad experiences on social media has contributed to shaping learning culture and inspiring students to pursue international education (Greenwood, 2025; Lajnef, 2023). Today, exposure to SMIs who share their study abroad experiences can trigger such motivation, reinforcing students' aspirations to pursue international education. The rise of study influencers on social media platforms has significantly shaped the study culture, providing benefits such as motivation and community, which may inspire students to consider study abroad as a means of self-improvement (Greenwood, 2025). Additionally, SMIs have been shown to build strong engagement with their followers, potentially influencing their behaviors and decisions, including the pursuit of international education opportunities (Lajnef, 2023).

Theoretical implications

This study focuses on clarifying how SMIs' influence through characteristics such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, similarity, and relationship closeness with followers positively impacts students' self-improvement motivation, ultimately promoting

their intention to study abroad. Most importantly, it validates the research model, identifies key influencing factors, and introduces a new factor - career success - which significantly impacts personal development motivation and the intention to study abroad, thereby providing a foundational reference for future research. Empirical data confirms that SMIs act as role models, inspiring students to seek self-improvement and global opportunities. This study also applies and extends the practical application of STD theory by determining how intrinsic needs for autonomy and competence drive students' abroad educational intentions.

6. Practical implications and conclusion

Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for the Ministry of Education and Training, universities, and study abroad centers to better understand the factors influencing students' study abroad intentions, enabling more effective recruitment strategies. Additionally, SMIs can identify key factors to guide content creation and enhance individual strengths.

Universities can collaborate with influential study abroad content creators to attract prospective students through marketing campaigns that highlight academic programs, facilities, and career opportunities. Partnering with prominent SMIs or successful alumni can help create engaging content that showcases the university's value. Universities should also encourage student ambassadors to share authentic stories about campus life and academic challenges, while ensuring transparent communication of tuition fees, scholarships, and admission requirements. Digital campaigns with reusable content, like pre-recorded videos and testimonials, can maximize reach.

Study abroad centers should strengthen collaborations with SMIs across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, especially those with educational expertise. They should provide clear information about study programs and scholarships, while organizing workshops and "campus tour" content for realistic international learning insights. Rather than focusing solely on promotional content, partnerships should offer practical value by guiding students in making informed decisions about their academic paths.

SMIs can attract followers by developing a personal brand and sharing experiences about their academic journeys, fostering relatability with students. They should ensure information accuracy, source it from credible platforms, and

host interactive events like Meet & Greet sessions. Instead of positioning themselves as experts, SMIs should focus on storytelling, motivation, and practical advice to inspire students to pursue studying abroad and personal growth.

Limitations and future research

First, due to time constraints, the study focused on a sample of 574 students in Hanoi after data filtering. Survey responses were unevenly distributed across universities, with the majority concentrated in economics and social sciences institutions. As a result, comparative analysis across academic disciplines could not be conducted.

Second, financial limitations restricted the research to Hanoi, meaning that the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of students in this area and may not be generalizable to other regions. Future studies can expand the survey to multiple provinces to obtain more comprehensive and representative results.

Finally, this study explores students' general intention to study abroad, which may not fully capture differences across academic fields. Future research with a more specialized focus is expected to yield findings with greater practical relevance and applicability.

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