

Advancing Global Citizenship of Underrepresented and Hypersegregated U.S. Students in Higher Education through Virtual Exchange

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ABSTRACT

The celebration of diversity is at the heart of global education initiatives. Yet, participation in study abroad and related programs in the United States – a purported ‘melting pot’ of races and cultures – remains, disproportionately, the domain of affluent whites. Against this background, this study seeks to learn from the experiences of underrepresented and hypersegregated students in international virtual exchange (IVE), an educational experience involving sustained interaction between geographically separated participants using technology and trained facilitators. Using a survey, semi-structured interviews, exchange field notes, and the researcher’s own abroad experiences, the data revealed five main themes: ‘Virtual connections beyond the classroom,’ ‘Bias reduction,’ ‘Color matters,’ ‘Equality in digital space,’ and ‘One step closer to abroad.’ Findings suggest that U.S. universities and other educational institutions serving underrepresented groups can increase student international experiences by promoting IVE on their campuses and encouraging more professors to include exchange as a component in their courses.

Keywords: virtual exchange, hypersegregation, global diversity, inclusion, cultural competency

INTRODUCTION

Global citizenship education helps students develop the critical intercultural competency skills needed in the multicultural 21st century world. Research has

shown that participation in international exchange positively influences everything from one's ability to adapt to different cultures to marketability in a global job marketplace (Angelova & Zhao, 2016; Batardière, 2019; Ciftci & Savas, 2018; Commander, Schloer, & Cushing, 2022; Fitzgerald & Lemieux, 2010; Kolm et al., 2021).

Before COVID-19, travel abroad was a common approach to global citizenship development. However, study abroad costs are often prohibitive – per-semester exchange costs range from US\$8,000 to more than US\$25,000 (Fusco, 2019; Palmer, 2022) – so international experiences traditionally have been limited to students with private funding or government support. Indeed, federal government reports show that only about one in ten U.S. college students pursues studies in another country before graduating (Institute of International Education, 2020; Redden, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2017).

In contrast to study abroad, international virtual exchange (IVE) is a relatively low-cost online educational experience involving sustained interaction and communication between geographically separated participants using technology managed by trained facilitators (Gutiérrez & O'Dowd, 2021; Helm & Acconcia, 2019). Analyzed at the macro level, IVE has the potential to promote world peace by bringing students around the world together instantly for dialogue and friendship. In addition to advancing language learning, established IVE scholars report that exchanges foster greater understanding of differences in world views, beliefs, and practices in an increasingly polarized world (Helm, 2013; O'Dowd, 2021).

The history of IVE as a model of global citizenship education is relatively short due to its technology-era application. In the 2000s, the practice grew when educators began informal video-based exchanges with global counterparts using then-new video conferencing tools. Initially, IVE was primarily for second language acquisition and federally-subsidized peace-building projects; but its use expanded to include serving as an affordable alternative to or first step towards international travel (Marcillo & Desilus, 2016; O'Dowd, 2016; Starke-Meyering, 2010).

As the number of IVEs have grown, so has the number of studies dedicated to gaining insights into participants' experiences. Most of the research thus far has sought data on participants' language learning motivation and cultural competence development. One area that has not been fully examined, particularly in the U.S. context, is the participant's past exposure to and experience with diverse ethnic and racial populations. This study operationalizes that demographic using the term *hypersegregation*.

The term *hypersegregation* was coined by University of Chicago sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton who in the 1980s and 1990s wrote extensively about the role classism, suburbanization, and de facto segregation at play in educational attainment, job security, and other socio-economic factors in the United States. In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Massey and Denton defined segregation along five dimensions – unevenness, isolation, clustering, concentration, and centralization

– and determined that ethnic groups with high scores on several of these dimensions tend to be hypersegregated (Massey & Denton, 1993). According to Massey and Denton, experiencing just one of the five dimensions removes that group from full participation in the larger society and limits their access to its benefits. However, “multidimensional layering of segregation” (p. 74) can produce isolation among generations from the culture, norms, and behaviors of the mainstream society. Employing the Massey-Denton hypersegregation definition and recognizing long-existing barriers to greater diversity in international exchange, this study aims to answer these research questions:

RQ1: Does participation in an international virtual exchange (IVE) influence interest in international travel and intercultural competence development in students from underrepresented groups in study abroad?

RQ2: In what ways do IVEs expand a student’s identity and cultural competence in the global world?

The development of cross-cultural competence is a growing concern for education and industry alike. This study takes a much-needed look at students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds who are underrepresented in the growing practice of virtual exchange. The experiences shared by the interview participants provide meaningful implications for concerned stakeholders: students, VE facilitators, scholars, university leaders, inclusion advocates, policy makers and others. While there is adequate research on diversity in study abroad and international inclusion in IVE, very little empirical research has explored U.S. diversity in IVE. By focusing on answering these research questions this study serves to contribute valuable new knowledge that will help improve global citizenship development in the U.S. and around the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to World War I, creating opportunities for student international, cultural exchange was an informal process, planned by a student’s family and usually involving long-distance travel. Students would enroll by mail directly into a foreign university and were required to arrange their own travel plans and program of study (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991, as cited in Gaines, 2012; Twombly et al., 2012). At that time, most students who undertook to study abroad were male graduate students, often training for the ministry or for medicine, who would travel to Europe to complete their education or gain expertise in fields beyond the scope of American universities. In more recent years, researchers began to point to the benefits of any type of sustained exchange for geographically separated students from different cultures. The authors of a 2011 United States Institute of Peace report on international exchange stressed the importance of international virtual exchange as a scalable and affordable complement study abroad:

Recognition is growing that not only presidents and politicians determine whether we live in a safe and secure world: citizens, activist, and non-state actors also do. The skills, character, and knowledge required to be a responsible and constructive leader in a globalized world therefore need to be cultivated across even broader segments of society. Further, because it is increasingly imperative that citizens have global and linguistic competency (if they are to succeed in the twenty-first century framework), all young people need opportunities to gain these skills. Our collective ability to solve complex global problems requires that many more people be exposed to the learning and knowledge that international exchange programs offer (Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011, p. 2).

In response, colleges and universities have begun to explore ways to give a much larger audience of students international learning experiences. Some schools have expanded global studies departments and modified curriculum and foreign language requirements for all students (Al' Abri, 2011; Elrick, 1999). Others have created administrative-level offices dedicated to programming on global cultures and international partnerships. The cultural competency that Himelfarb and Idriss contend international exchange programs offer doesn't just reward the governmental and economic goals of a nation state. Waidehi Gokhale, CEO of Soliya Connect, a landmark virtual exchange program that focuses on critical thinking and conflict resolution, said that college-aged youth are at a "critical point of identity crystallization" and that productive cross-cultural dialogue at this stage can foster the development of a more complex and informed social identity (Gokhale, personal communication, 2017).

After COVID-19 decreased workforce and student mobility, awareness of the potential of digital internationalization and the need for stronger international online cultural competencies – or IOCCs – (Kolm et al., 2021) grew. In a 2020 International Association of Universities (IAU) study of the pandemic's effect on higher education in 109 countries, 60% of participants reported that COVID had increased virtual mobility and/or collaborative online learning on their campuses (Marinoni et al., 2020). As emphasis on IOCCs increases, without intervention and dedicated research, students in and from the most hypersegregated communities, once again, are at the greatest risk of falling behind.

Though recent books, conference workshops, and the popular press have included IVE under the umbrella of diversity and inequality research in global exchange (National Association of International Educators, 2020; Grynspan, 2007), there is very little empirical research focused specifically on racial and ethnic diversity in U.S. IVE. There is, however, extensive literature on diversity in study abroad. Scholars have found relatively consistent reasons for the disproportionate percentage of First Generation (FG) and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students in study abroad and related international exchange education. Since the early 1990s, the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) has conducted studies on study abroad disparities. Many studies have cited their findings, which have been expanded and modified

over the years. Lists have included limited finances, lack of faculty support, marketing and institutional practices, cultural norms and family attitudes, historical patterns, and fear of discrimination (Brux & Fry, 2010; Lopez-McGee et al., 2017; Seid, 2021).

Other studies have included concern about language differences (e.g., Gaines, 2012; Hembroff & Ruzs, 1993), lack of family and community support (e.g., Lu et al., 2015; Salisbury et al., 2011), lack of prior international travel (e.g., Gaines, 2012; Hembroff & Ruzs, 1993; Lu et al., 2015) and concern about delay in graduation (McClure et al., 2010) on their lists. Some have concentrated on the fear of international racism as it relates to African Americans and a cultural sentiment that study abroad “is not for black students” (Craig 2009, as cited by Gaines, p. 24); indeed, some report that the hashtag #TravelingWhileBlack has reinforced fears on social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram (Alderman et al., 2022; Dillette et al., 2019). In a study of perceptions of study abroad among students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) Gaines found that “Black students considering studying abroad often encounter myths and unpersuasive dialogue about other countries and being Black while studying abroad” (Gaines, 2012, p. 30). She identified peers, family and media as the main influencers promoting this perception. In addition, Gaines said Black students’ fears were influenced by limited information about the experiences of Blacks who have studied abroad, since the population of past study abroad students is so much smaller than that of Whites who have studied abroad.

Though fewer in number, some research has focused on the perceptions and experiences of the Latinx community with regard to education abroad. In addition to financial concerns, several studies suggested that students from immigrant backgrounds may be less intrigued by travel to another country to study and learn about another culture since they navigate different cultures in their everyday lives (Goldstein & Lopez, 2021; Orb, 2004). Indeed, a study comparing Latinx and first-generation White students’ intent to study abroad with that of continuing-generation White students found that characteristics such as adventurousness and language interest were much more important to continuing generation (CG) White students than the other two groups (Goldstein & Lopez, 2021). Other studies have found that Latinx students are just as interested in education abroad as their White counterparts, but they tend to delay international travel to after college because of a desire to remain near family and not delay individual graduation deadlines (McClure et al., 2010).

Yet, research continues to identify international exchange as a high-impact educational practice (HIP) with various academic, social, and career benefits (Bell et al., 2021; Kuh, 2008; Tolan & McCullers, 2018). In Lu et al.’s 2015 series of focus group discussions with African-American students who had recently studied in China, participants said their experience made them “more academically curious and globally competitive” (Lu et al., p. 448). Several made plans to begin foreign language studies, including Mandarin; others began pursuing more study abroad and travel opportunities for the next year.

In a narrative analysis of the stories of African-Americans who had studied abroad in both Africa and other parts of the world, Bruce concluded that a theme around “a heightened level of awareness of and psychological commitment to the African American experience emerged” (Bruce, 2012, p. 115). Himself of Black African descent, Bruce has studied and worked in Kenya and Mexico. Interestingly, Bruce’s interviewees detail numerous experiences with race and color that their White counterparts simply did not encounter. However, it is by living those difficult experiences – as well the positive ones – that allows for true self-actualization, Bruce said. “International travel is freedom; For the African American collegians I interviewed, studying abroad embodied the freedom to explore the world and their relationship with it” (Bruce, 2012, p. 160).

A 2021 study that contrasted indices of student success of ‘ethnic minority’ and White students with those of their counterparts who did not participate in an overseas educational program found that the ethnic minority students who studied abroad were more likely to graduate on time and with a higher GPA than their counterparts who did not (Bell et al., 2021). Furthermore, while the study also found improvements in GPA averages and timely graduation when contrasting White study abroad students and their counterparts, the difference was less pronounced than what was found for the ethnic minority group.

Theoretical Frameworks

This research topic is underpinned by landmark communication and social psychology theories on contact (Allport, 1954; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2011), dialogue (Bakhtin, 1994; Bohm, 1991; Freire, 1970), and identity (Brooks & Pitts, 2017; Hecht, 1993; Tajfel, 1974).

An early model that informs inequality and power dynamics in international virtual exchange is Gordon Allport’s contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). Allport, author of the groundbreaking book *The Nature of Prejudice*, argued that the best way to reduce tensions between disparate groups is through mediated contact. If left unchecked, Allport said, racial and ethnic segregation can foster varying degrees of prejudice in individual personalities ranging from hate speech to outright violence (Allport, 1954).

Allport’s hypothesis – eventually termed contact theory (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Hodson et al., 2018) and intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998) has been the foundation for numerous reformulations and research concentrations over the years (Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In a 2017 review of two decades of research on contact theory, Yale psychologist John Dovidio and collaborators from Oxford University found that recent work had begun looking more at what transpires during intergroup contact that leads to a reduction in prejudice (Dovidio et al., 2017).

Another theoretical approach that supports the equity-building intentions of virtual exchange is the idea of open dialogue. In contrast to debate or, even, discussion, open dialogue seeks mutual listening, learning and reflection along

with sharing and communicating (Bohm, 1991; Burbules & Bruce, 2001). In open exchanges, increasing understanding among two or more participants is the goal rather than persuasion or the answering of a specific question (Burbules & Bruce, 2001).

Dialogue theory in multicultural settings has been re-examined with the growth of digital communication in recent years. Maha Bali, whose research explores equity and justice issues in education, addresses three main types of problems associated with “putting the rhetoric of web-based intercultural dialogue into practice” (Bali, 2014, p. 209). She identifies them as those related to the use of technology; dialogue as the predominant pedagogy; the predominant use of English; and the dynamics of interculturality itself (Bali, 2014). Bali argues that dialogue assumes, incorrectly, that all members have equal power to speak, but actually privileges students comfortable with spontaneous and oral communication, rather than reflective and written communication.

The theories above underlie some the most compelling inclusion and equality challenges that have emerged in IVE. Along with the review of literature on the overall growth of international virtual exchange as a platform for scaling college students’ global experiences and increasing cultural competence, these theories frame the need for more research on the experiences of students from hypersegregated backgrounds who have participated in IVE. With more data, IVE scholars, facilitators, and global inclusion advocates will have the information they need to effectively recruit more underrepresented student populations to exchange opportunities.

METHOD

This study utilized a two-stage research approach consisting of a survey and semi-structured (Creswell, 2007) interviews to explore the research questions. The first stage, which lasted about four months and overlapped with the second two-month, interview-based phase, involved the distribution and collection of data from an 18-question survey using Qualtrics. In addition to these primary data sources, data from a pilot interview, archives from TopHat (the student engagement platform used in two large-scale exchanges co-facilitated by the researcher); and the researcher’s experiences as an African-American female studying and living abroad in four countries all informed the study.

Survey

The 18-question survey instrument—completed by 42 students at three large, diverse universities in the South and Midwest—had four functions: 1) to member check the respondents; 2) to gather sociodemographic information; 3) to obtain feedback on the students’ views of their exchange experience; and 4) to identify students’ “willing to participate in a 45-60-minute virtual interview about their personal experiences and views about intercultural exchanges with students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.”

The study's target population was U.S. college students who had completed an IVE between 2018 and 2021. Qualified students were identified by emailing IVE directors, facilitators, and scholars at several southeastern and midwestern universities as well as IVE organizations such as UNICollaboration, the International Virtual Exchange Conference (IVEC), and the SUNY Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Center. The email introduced the study and asked recipients to forward a survey link to recent IVE participants. In the email students were invited to take an optional 5-7-minute survey – accessed through a link and QR code at the bottom – that would help universities improve their understanding of online exchange in the global context.

The survey began with a consent form that detailed the voluntary nature of the survey, confidentiality, benefits and risks, and contact information for the researcher, her department and the university's institutional review board. If a student provided consent, they were then asked two member-checking questions followed by three questions designed to determine more about the type of exchanges the student engaged in and how often. After those questions, respondents were asked to rate their overall IVE experience on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "very unsatisfied" and 5 being "very satisfied." The last 12 questions were either socio-demographic or designed to determine the student's pre-college exposure to diversity and international travel.

Interviews

As the survey link and QR code were circulated, the researcher began analyzing respondent data and closely reviewing the surveys of those who said they were willing to participate in a 45-60-minute interview about their exchange experiences. Aiming to inform the research questions and purpose of the study, the researcher then began a sociodemographic coding of the data. In the coding, she also earmarked all students who responded that:

1. They had "never traveled outside my country."
2. They had never participated in a study abroad program.
3. The neighborhood(s) they "grew up in before going to college" was "homogenous" where they shared "the same racial or ethnic background with 90% of other residents."
4. The racial and ethnic diversity they experienced -- in school, place of worship, and part-time jobs -- before going to a college that was "homogeneous," where the respondent shared "the same racial or ethnic background with 90% or more of the other residents."
5. Their mother's or father's education was "unknown," they did not finish high school, or the highest degree earned was a high school diploma.

After the survey analysis and coding, the researcher sent emails to all the students, thanking them for agreeing to an interview and then asked them to select

three time slots on a Doodle scheduling document. Because the study was conducted immediately following a winter break, more than one email was sent to some students and, for those who approved the contact option in the survey, texts were also sent. After the recruitment period and a pilot interview with a non-U.S. cohort who had completed an IVE, the researcher interviewed the six students, described socio-demographically in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted over a six-week period using Zoom. They lasted from 34 minutes to 1 hour and 5 minutes. In every case, the student used the Zoom name card and the researcher her Zoom profile photo instead of live video. In all cases, the interviews were recorded and, later, transcribed. In addition, the researcher took notes during each interview using a guide that she designed for the study which juxtaposed interview questions next to notes outlining the related research question(s), aligning theories, and the general lines of inquiry. After all interviews were complete and transcribed, the researcher used Braun and Clarke's 6-Step Analysis (2006) for identifying themes in qualitative research, with an emphasis on reviewing and re-analyzing found themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings in this study suggest that participation in an international virtual exchange can positively affect a student's interest in the global world. All the participants in this study said their exchange experience influenced their interest in at least one of the three areas explored: international travel; global careers, working/volunteering abroad; and learning more about people from other cultures.

Virtual Connections Beyond the Classroom

While virtual exchange provides a structured platform for student interaction and sharing, many of the more engaged students took steps to establish and maintain friendships outside of the IVE space. In a Spring 2021 exchange platform co-facilitated by the researcher, for example, a student from Hong Kong contacted an African-American female student in the U.S. and asked if she would share her Instagram account "for more convenient communication" after having trouble connecting on the course-provided platform. She replied with her profile name and the two ended up being among the most active posters in their group,

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Race	Class	Major	SA	Travel	Mother Edu	Father Edu	Neighborhood Integration	Community Integration	IVE Rating
P1	19	M	W	So	Edu	N	N	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	S Integrated	V Integrated	3
P2	50	F	W	J	Arts and Humanities	N	2+	HS D	Associates	Homogenous 90%+ same	Homogenous 90%+ same	3
P3	19	F	A	So	Health	N	2+	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	V Integrated	V Integrated	5
P4	23	M	L	Se	STEM	N	2+	HS D	DNF HS	V Integrated	V Integrated	5
P5	21	F	A	Se	Business	N	2+	Master's	Ph.D.	V Integrated	Homogenous 10%-less	3
P6	29	M	B	J	Poly Sci	N	O	HS D	Unknown	Homogenous 90%+ same	V Integrated	4

Note: Race (A = Asian, L = Latinx, B = Black, W= White); Class (Se = Senior, J = Junior, So = Sophomore); SA = (Has) Studied Abroad; Mother Edu = Mother's highest attained education (HS D = High School Diploma); Father Edu = Father's highest attained education (DNF HS = Did Not Finish High School); Neighborhood/Community Integration (S Integrated = Somewhat Integrated, V = Very Integrated)

indicating a possible connection beyond the structured exchange. Later in the semester, the group again broke out of the mold of meeting on a virtual platform and, instead, chose to use YouTube to develop an entertaining video presentation about their course topic. Other students in the exchanged swapped email addresses and worked around government fire walls to share recipes and YouTube music clips.

Interview Participant #1 (P1), a 19-year-old student who grew up in a mostly Jewish community and had never traveled outside of the United States, said he has always followed people from all over the world on Instagram. But, he said, participating in an IVE gave him a chance to develop friendships with people in another country who, like him, had never traveled outside their countries, and sustain it on the social media site. He said he is keeping in touch with several of his new IVE friends now on Instagram:

We're at a time now where people are better about separating the government from the people. There's now easier international communication. On Instagram, people all over the world are posting and sharing.

Indeed, the potential exists for students to post screen shots of their exchanges – several on the Spring 2021 exchange platform produced straight-face-then-funny shots – and other images and comments about their IVE experiences on social media platforms. Consequently, the student-initiated moves to connect virtually beyond the classroom that P1 mentions inadvertently exposed virtual exchange to a larger, more diverse audience, including those not currently enrolled in a college or university. P1 said he that he has never been interested in study abroad because of the cost, planning and potential delay to graduation. “It’s such a large commitment,” he said. But now that he has participated in an IVE, P1 said he thinks a lot more about international travel and is even curious about a person’s background when he meets someone with an accent. Said P1, “I think almost all communication helps peace building.”

Bias Reduction

All six interviewees reported not only bias reduction in pre-conceived notions about their exchange counterparts but also an increased affinity for people from another part of the world. In addition, the students engaged on the platform threads expressed “mutual” empathy around being students juggling exam studies and paper deadlines. These sentiments supported the overarching ideas underlying Allport’s contact theory (1954) and Gaertner and Dovidio’s related common ingroup identity and recategorization theories (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).

Interview Participant #4 (P4), a 23-year-old Latino whose mother has a high school diploma and father did not finish high school, described his experience as “awesome” and “eye opening” because, without even leaving home, he could immerse in another culture and language with friends thousands of miles away. Raised in a Mexican-American neighborhood in Chicago, P4 said some of

the exchange, which was often conducted on the Chinese social media site WeChat, was actually more like people watching. For instance, he said his Chinese exchange partners shared pictures of *Gundam* plastic model kits and dishes they had made or eaten. After the semester ended, he said he had a renewed interest in recipes for *luosifen*, a popular Chinese dish known for its pungent smell. Said P4, “It was a lot similar to people watching without leaving home.”

Interview Participant #5 (P5), a 21-year-old business student and daughter of immigrants united in an arranged marriage in Delhi, India, said she had “always known about” the greater Asian world but she found the exchange still rewarding because it offered her direct connections with people living in another country:

Once you talk to a person directly, it makes you have a different perspective of the world.... A lot of people think people in different countries are so different but when you talk to them to you realize you have a lot in common. We are all people, we are all the same, we are going through the same stuff.

Color Matters

Growing up in a mostly Black, impoverished neighborhood in the South, Interview Participant #6 (P6), 29, felt relatively fortunate. He and his mother lived with her parents, who owned their home. His grandfather was a respected pastor and community leader and Sunday mornings revolved around dressing up for a day of worship, fellowship, and big meals with his extended church family. Though his first three years were in de facto segregated schools, P6 was tapped in his fourth year to attend a racially-diverse magnet school and it was there that he first met kids and teachers – including one African-American mentor – who talked about their travels and places they wanted to go next: “Travel is much more talked about in those diverse settings than in other neighborhoods,” he said. “I remember dreaming of wanting to visit Japan or The Netherlands and other places.”

By the time he was in high school, however, P6 said he had begun to understand that his grandparents probably didn’t have the resources to send him off to Western Europe or Asia. And, he also had developed a greater consciousness of the role his skin color played in how people – in the United States and other countries – might view and treat him:

Most documentaries and the blogs on the Internet I read were very much white people traveling. As a Black American, you always wonder how Black people are perceived in other countries.

Like P6 growing up in the South, P4 said he dreamed of going to Russia one day when he was growing up in Chicago. P4, who describes himself as a “brown-skinned *mestizo*,” said that sentiment changed, though, when he mentioned his interest to his new bosses at a Russian-owned business where he worked part-time in the IT department. He said they warned him that he might not have the same experience as his white-skinned U.S. counterparts. They described the gang

members of the *gopota* subculture in suburban Russia and said they might target him because of his phenotype.

They said I would have to go to hugely populated cities in order to remain safe. They made it clear they knew that some of them might be offended at the sight of someone not their skin color.

The experiences and views of Mexican-American P4 and African-American P6 are those held by many people of color, including the researcher, who has traveled or lived abroad since the age of five when she attended kindergarten on a U.S. Air Force Base near Tokyo. While all people may fear travel to dangerous international 'hot spots,' white-skinned youth generally are less likely to fear non-U.S. travel. In addition, many countries have either a history of colonialism or centuries of mostly white tourism in which they are viewed as affluent people of high-status deserving respect. In contrast, darker-skinned travelers are more likely to be stereotyped and assumed to be immigrants or local blue-collar workers, not travelers on vacation.

Equality in Digital Space

Interview Participant #3 (P3), a 19-year-old nursing student who was born in the Philippines but grew up most of her life in the greater New York City area and the South, said after participating in an exchange said she found a manner of connecting in the IVE space that she has not while visiting other countries. One of the two youngest interviewees, P3 had travelled more than most. She has gone to Mexico, Japan, France, and Italy in addition to returning to the Philippines several times. Moreover, she said, while growing up she had an uncle, studying for the priesthood, who lived several years in Spain and also studied philosophy in India. In her global studies exchange with students from China, P3 said she was able to share and analyze videos with her counterparts and, also, meet them while they were living in their environment and she in hers. She said the virtual space offered a more neutral platform, which allowed everyone to feel they had an equal share of the space.

For students who have never had the chance to travel abroad, P3 said she thinks virtual exchange might be a more comfortable platform for opening up about personal lives, cultural differences, political conflicts, faith and other topics because no one is placed in another person's physical and cultural world. P3 said she became close enough to some of the students to talk about perceived cultural differences related to family structures because of the format. Together, she said, she and her counterparts concluded that Asian-American students and Americans, in general, place more emphasis on extracurricular activities while those in China were "more hands on" and likely to use extra time for tutoring and academic studies. "We were able to share the pluses and minuses of our cultures," said P3, who also recognized an additional dimension of identity-expansion around having a common Asian heritage with her Chinese peers in the exchange. "Online there

are a lot of ways to communicate that you do not have (in person). It sort of equalizes things.”

One Step Closer to Abroad

All six interviewees reported not only bias reduction in pre-conceived notions about their exchange counterparts but also an increased affinity for people from another part of the world. In addition, the students most engaged on the platform threads expressed “mutual” empathy around being students juggling exam studies and paper deadlines. These sentiments supported the overarching ideas underlying Allport’s contact theory (1954) and Gaertner and Dovidio’s related common in-group identity and recategorization theories (Gaertner et al., 1993).

Interview Participant #2 (P2), 50, a humanities major who participated in a 2019 exchange involving climate studies with students from China and Hong Kong, grew up in and attended mostly white, suburban schools in four different states. Her father worked for IBM so the family moved for the company as his career advanced. Not until she was in her 20s, she recalled, did she have many multicultural experiences and friends from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. While in her 30s she became involved in a community church and traveled once to Haiti on a mission trip. She said, aside from that trip, her only other travel outside of the United States was to Cancun, Mexico, for her honeymoon.

P2 said her IVE experience did not influence her interest in study abroad as she had been planning more missionary trips to Africa before the COVID-19 pandemic. But, she described the experience as a great opportunity for anyone to experience the global world. “Having that real time one-on-one conversation and exposure highlights that more than just turning on the news,” P2 said. “It helps to put faces with a place to make it more real.” However, more than any of the other interviewees, P2 stressed the limitations of the IVE format.

While “definitely cheaper” and easier to prepare for in contrast to actual travel to another country, P2 said she considered IVE at best “a Plan B.” Students who have never traveled abroad but who take part in international exchange still would not experience what she did in Haiti, she said, where she was able to spend quality time every day immersed in the community:

A really beneficial and successful way to come together is like over a meal... It's more than just consuming food. There's something relational that happens. And so, even if I'm on Zoom in Kennesaw, Georgia, in their own Zoom in Hong Kong, and we're both eating at the same time, it's just not the same thing as your personal contact.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study contributes to the relatively new and growing scholarship on digital intercultural exchanges in higher education. The findings focus on U.S. students previously hypersegregated and economically, geographically, and racially underrepresented. The feedback from the interviews provides insight into how

participants' backgrounds can significantly limit access to intercultural experiences. It also reveals how phenotype and ethnicity can keep individuals separated from mainstream global advancements, whether by systematic oppression or self-imposed choice emanating from fear of racism and rejection in unfamiliar environments. The study's findings can indirectly help IVE facilitators develop better and more diverse exchanges by simply making them aware of the experiences of those from underrepresented groups.

As IVE is still a growing practice, there are some obvious limitations in this study. One is the limited number of students who have even participated in an IVE, no matter their cultural background. Consequently, after much effort, the researcher was only able to conduct six interviews with past IVE participants whose demographic profiles qualified them for the study. Another limitation is the study population. Because research has shown the potential for greater interest and, eventually, participation in traditional international exchanges increases when greater attention is given to them before college (McLellan, 2011), the ideal sample for a study on hypersegregation and IVE would consist of students who still live in segregated communities.

The overall enthusiasm shared by the interview participants, however, suggests much more is to be learned and gained from exploring this topic. Future research might delve further into the shift from 'minority,' 'hillbilly,' and 'immigrant' identities in the U.S. context to the 'American' identity these students take on in international encounters, arguably most profound for those from segregated backgrounds.

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