Examining the Portrayal of U.S. Host Families and Exchange Students on Study Abroad Websites: A Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study uses content analysis to document the representation of the homestay experience, focusing on the portrayal of U.S. host families and exchange students on 16 study abroad programs' websites. Despite the surge of international students coming to the United States for secondary education and the pressing need to recruit host families, not much is known about how study abroad websites represent the U.S. homestay experience. The results of this study suggest that study abroad websites provide a traditional representation of U.S. host families, characterized by two White host parents (with or without children) hosting predominantly White and Asian exchange students. Inter-reality comparisons reveal an over-representation of White host families and Black exchange students in study abroad programs' websites, though the representation of White and Asian exchange students appears consistent with the shares of White and Asian exchange students expected in reality. Implications for study abroad programs are discussed.

Keywords: content analysis, exchange student, host family, study abroad, website

Within the last decade, the United States has experienced a steady growth in the number of students who come to the United States during high school (Farrugia, 2014). According to the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, there were approximately 24,000 new secondary-school student exchange visitors in the United States in 2018, with the top three destinations being Texas, Michigan, and California (Durrani, 2019). Although study abroad programs offer a variety of living arrangements, high school–age exchange students enrolled in a J-1 visitor program are usually placed with a host family.

Living with a host family (i.e., the homestay experience) has often been portrayed as an idyllic arrangement that promises the highest amount of language gain, transformative experiences, and first-hand cultural immersion (Kobayashi & Viswat, 2015). This romanticized portrayal of host families is promoted on study abroad websites through pictures, videos, and testimonials, which allow the audience to get a feel for what living with a host family might look like. However, study abroad websites may not always offer an accurate representation of the homestay experience; rather, they often highlight its positive characteristics to increase recruitment of students and host families (Bishop, 2013).

The literature on media effects (e.g., Aubrey, 2010; Barkin, 2018; Zimmerman, 2021) predicts that such portrayals might contribute to a dominant representation of host families and exchange students that is culturally attractive, yet inaccurate. In her analysis of study abroad websites, Bishop (2013) outlines a predominant "study abroad rhetoric" that overemphasizes "first-hand" cultural immersion, while unveiling tendencies of cultural homogeneity. Teng and colleagues (2015) also suggest that advertisements for study abroad act as a marketing tool to depict desirable scenes of leisure and generate positive attitudes toward the homestay experience. Through these dominant representations, media can shape the audience's expectations (Scheufele, 1999). Yet, without knowing what content is featured in study abroad websites (and to what degree it is consistent with reality), it is difficult to speculate on its possible influence on the audience. Thus, this study considers how study abroad websites depict specific characteristics of the homestay experience, the members of the host family, and the exchange students.

Drawing from framing theory (Scheufele, 1999), this study uses content analysis to explore how U.S. host families and exchange students are portrayed in images displayed on study abroad websites pertaining to secondary education. This study also uses inter-reality analyses to examine whether socio-cultural characteristics of host families and exchange students are consistent with known demographic data about the population of host families and exchange students enrolled in U.S. secondary schools. Understanding how the study abroad experience is represented in online content—particularly images—can further elucidate how study abroad providers may construct and reinforce a specific narrative of the homestay experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students and the Homestay Experience

The host family is at the core of the homestay experience (EF, n.d.-b). The U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs defines a host family as a family unit with at least one adult who undertakes the responsibility of hosting, providing room and board, and sharing their common space with sojourners from other countries. Although host families can provide hospitality to a variety of sojourners (e.g., *au pairs*, visiting scholars), this study focuses on U.S. families hosting foreign students enrolled in J-1 cultural exchange programs during secondary

school (Sustarsic, 2020). The J-1 visa is one of two types of nonimmigrant visas that high school students can obtain to participate in an exchange student program through a private, nonprofit organization. Federal regulations for J-1 visas require host families to be volunteers who do not receive financial compensation. Instead, they are motivated to host students for companionship, learning, and promotion of one's cultural values (Di Silvio et al., 2014).

The homestay experience is both a catalyst and a fruitful context for international students' acculturation. Living with a host family often yields positive socio-cultural and interpersonal outcomes that contribute to students' linguistic fluency, personal growth, and increased cultural competence (Spenader, 2011). Yet, living with a host family has also been associated with potential challenges that can hinder adjustment and increase acculturative stress (Kobayashi & Viswat, 2015; Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014).

Some of these challenges might be amplified by how study abroad providers construct specific expectations surrounding the study abroad experience (Teng et al., 2015), as programs may not adequately address such challenges in their promotional materials or during predeparture orientations (Bishop, 2013). Host families and exchange students often enter this experience anticipating mostly positive outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, feelings of closeness, mutual learning) but fail to consider potential relational or socio-cultural challenges. Media effects literature, specifically framing theory (Borah, 2011; Scheufele, 1999), provides theoretical grounding to explain the role of media in shaping or reinforcing the audience's expectations—in this context, who host families and exchange students are and what they look like. Thus, the following section explains how framing theory can be applied to the context of study abroad promotional materials.

Framing Theory: The Effects of Media Portrayals on the Audience

Framing theory suggests that media can influence the audience's attitudes, knowledge, or perceptions of reality through a process called framing (Scheufele, 1999). "To frame is to select some aspects of reality and make them more salient … in such a way as to promote a particular meaning" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing can occur through language choice, imagery, tone, and the overall presentation of information. By emphasizing certain aspects of reality over others (i.e., making them more salient), media can draw attention to certain features of an issue while downplaying others, which, in turn, can affect how individuals define, interpret, or evaluate a particular story or other information for themselves (Aubrey, 2010).

By making certain aspects more salient in the message, frames activate certain constructs and trains of thought in the receiver's mind, which then can be used in subsequent judgments. In other words, when people hear, see, or read specific media, the concepts (or ideas) that are semantically related to such frames become accessible and available in their minds, which then can be used to interpret or evaluate a particular issue. The type and magnitude of framing effects

depend on several factors, including the characteristics of the message, the channel, and the audience (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Scholars have demonstrated framing effects using a variety of methods (e.g., experiments, surveys, case studies) and across a range of issues including stem cell research (Nisbet et al., 2003), health and body-related self-perceptions (Aubrey, 2010), government spending (Jacoby, 2000), and many others. This study applies framing theory in the context of study abroad promotional materials to document and understand how host families and exchange students are represented. Study abroad promotional materials might attempt to convey the "ideal" image of the perfect homestay (Bishop, 2013) by highlighting certain aspects of living with a host family while purposefully excluding others.

It is important to consider how the way study abroad websites frame their information might privilege specific interpretations of reality. I first explore how study abroad websites represent U.S. host families and exchange students and then use inter-reality analyses to examine the degree to which such portrayals are consistent with reality.

Representing the Homestay Experience: Why Media Portrayal Matters

The way host families are represented on study abroad websites matters for several reasons. First, media representations can affect the audience through cognitive mechanisms related to the audience's existing knowledge (Shrum, 2002). By repeating certain representations of reality, these representations become more salient and reinforce the audience's understanding of a specific topic, issue, or social group. For example, frequently portraying Blacks and Latinos as lawbreakers in TV news reinforces the cognitive association between these groups and criminal behaviors even though this may not be consistent with reality (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Second, media representations can also affect stereotype formation and internalization of such stereotypes in members of the social group represented. Because groups look for representations of themselves in media, the presence (or absence) of that group in media "serves as a marker for members to know that they carry weight in society" (Williams et al., 2009, p. 820). For example, the absence of Blacks in leading TV roles might lead Blacks to internalize feelings of unimportance and powerlessness.

Third, media representations are more likely to influence the audience in cases of high perceived similarity. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002) suggests that the way images are presented on TV influences how viewers interpret and respond to the portrayed behaviors. When the audience perceives that the TV model is similar to the self, they are more likely to enact the portrayed behavior (Williams et al., 1995).

Implications for International Students' Acculturation

The way study abroad programs frame their online content suggests important implications for exchange students' acculturation, which become

evident when host families and exchange students experience a violation of their initial expectations. While exchange students often report violated expectations in terms of their lack of independence, low family cohesion, and insufficient time spent participating in family activities, host families most frequently complain about students' lifestyle, use of technology, interpersonal interactions, and noncompliance with family rules and local customs (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004).

It is possible that some of these interpersonal tensions might arise because of how prospective host families and prospective students constructed their expectations about the host family experience. While students do not necessarily expect that the host family will replace or replicate their own family of origin (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004), they expect to "do stuff" and be included in family activities—as promised by the fun-filled pictures and testimonials offered by study abroad websites (Teng et al., 2015).

Implications for Recruitment of Host Families and Students

The way host families and exchange students are portrayed on study abroad websites, specifically with regard to race and demographic characteristics, has implications for the recruitment of host families and exchange students. If study abroad websites most frequently portray White host families or White exchange students, people who see these images might be less likely to think about U.S. host families or exchange students as non-White because those social groups are relatively inaccessible (as cognitive constructs) in their minds (Shrum, 2002).

Because groups who appear less often in media content can become invisible to the audience, it is essential to ensure the presence and visibility of additional social groups, especially among study abroad programs who pride themselves in the cultural diversity of their host families (EF, n.d.-a). Predominantly White representations of host families may prevent non-White U.S. host families from identifying with such representations and thus make them less likely to host an exchange student. Similarly, predominantly White representations of exchange students might lead U.S. host families to assume or expect that their exchange student might (or should be) White. This is an important consideration because, as noted by Durrani (2019), "For most J-1 programs the student does not choose the host family; the host family chooses a student they think will be a good fit for them." If most host families are represented as White, it might reinforce the expectation that host families are (or should be) White because they are the most frequently represented in study abroad websites. Therefore, ensuring an accurate portrayal of host families and exchange students is essential for capturing the diversity of cultures and ethnicities among study abroad programs.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The previous section clarified how media portrayals can influence how prospective host families and exchange students construct expectations surrounding the homestay experience. To speculate on such effects, it is essential

to first understand how host families are represented in study abroad content. Therefore, this study has two primary goals. The first is to examine how U.S. host families and exchange students are portrayed on study abroad websites. The second is to assess the extent to which such portrayals are consistent with reality by conducting inter-reality comparisons regarding host families' and exchange students' racial diversity in the pictures. Below, I provide a rationale for each goal and the associated research questions.

Host Family Type

Host families come in all shapes and sizes, differing in, among other characteristics, personal background, racial makeup, economic class, and lifestyle (CIEE, n.d.). Study abroad programs emphasize that anyone can become a host family, and that there is not a single (or best) type of host family (EF, n.d.-a). However, no empirical evidence has assessed the extent to which such diversity is present in U.S. host families' representations. Research on family representations in prime-time TV has found that the U.S. family is generally portrayed in a sentimentalized way as formulaic and oversimplified (Moore, 1992; Skill et al., 1987). This (mis)representation might also be true for U.S. host families in study abroad websites, which might lead the audience to develop a view of host families based on stereotypical norms. Therefore, the first research question explores the frequencies of family *types* (defined in the Method section) represented on study abroad websites:

> RQ1:   What types of host families are most frequently represented in study abroad websites' images?

Host Family and Exchange Student Racial Portrayal

This study also examines the most frequently occurring racial portrayals of host families and exchange students. Racial portrayal is defined as the perceived race of the host family and exchange student as identified by the coders conducting the analysis, not necessarily the self-reported race that individuals in the picture might identify with. Research on minority groups' racial portrayals has found that, despite their large presence in the United States, minority groups have been traditionally under-represented across media (Williams et al., 2009). Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found that Latinos were under-represented on prime-time TV compared to Whites and Blacks and that Blacks were the most negatively stereotyped minority group.

Given that foreign exchange students come from all over the world (Farrugia, 2014), racial diversity should also be reflected on study abroad websites. Failure to capture such diversity might lead prospective exchange students to perceive that students of certain races are more likely to be hosted by U.S. host families. In addition, a prospective U.S. host family might see the images portrayed on study abroad websites and develop an expectation that their exchange student will be of a certain race. Because cross-cultural exchanges have been primarily constructed

as White spaces, characterized by neocolonial Westernized ideologies that perpetuate racial homogeneity (Bishop, 2013), the second research question asks:

RQ2a: How frequently are different races represented among host families in study abroad websites' images?

RQ2b: How frequently are different races represented among exchange students in study abroad websites' images?

Host Family Socio-Cultural Characteristics

This study also explores which socio-cultural characteristics of U.S. host families are most frequently represented on study abroad websites, given that online promotional materials attempt to highlight the most attractive features of living with a host family. Study abroad programs pride themselves on showing the variety of activities that students can participate in during their programs, including typical American holidays like Thanksgiving or Independence Day (Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014). Since these "typical" American activities are rooted in specific values, this study uses previous research on U.S. national and regional values (Kohls, 1988) to identify cultural elements that might be included in the portrayal of U.S. host families:

RQ3a: How frequently do U.S. cultural and family characteristics occur in study abroad websites' images?

RQ3b: What are the most frequently portrayed U.S. cultural and family characteristics shown in study abroad websites' images?

Inter-Reality Comparison

The second goal of this study is to assess whether the racial representation of host families and exchange students depicted on study abroad websites is consistent with reality. Using inter-reality analyses, this study compares the frequencies of host families' and exchange students' perceived races observed on the websites with those observed in reality. Inter-reality comparisons allow researchers to assess discrepancies between the reality portrayed by the media and other social indicators collected outside of the media, providing evidence of which social groups are under- or over-represented in certain media content (Dixon & Linz, 2000). There are no known data sources on the racial composition of host families; therefore, this study uses demographic data from the American Community Survey coupled with data on the geographic placement of J-1 visa holders from the International Youth Exchange Statistics (IYES) to infer the potential racial distribution of host families.

RQ4a: Is the racial distribution of host families observed in study abroad websites' images consistent with the racial distribution of host families in the United States?

Similarly, the representation of exchange students' races in study abroad images is compared with data from the IYES report on the countries of origin for J-1 visa holders, which is used as a proxy for race (as described in the Method section). This inter-reality analysis assessed whether the exchange students' perceived race in the pictures matches the expected race from the IYES data:

> RQ4b: Is the racial distribution of exchange students observed in study abroad websites' images consistent with the racial distribution of exchange students inferred from the IYES report?

METHOD

This study uses an integrative content analysis approach to explore how U.S. host families and exchange students are represented on study abroad websites. The integrative approach to content analysis can be defined as "the empirical or logical linking of content analytic data with extra-message variables measured on source, receiver, channel, or message context characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 52). One of the benefits of the integrative approach is that it extends the purely descriptive function of traditional content analyses to make inferences about the source or the receiver of the message using additional data. This study is grounded in the link between the message (i.e., study abroad promotional material), the receiver (i.e., prospective host families and prospective foreign exchange students), and reality (i.e., demographic data from the American Community Survey and the IYES report).

Sample and Units of Analysis

The sampling frame for this study was constructed from two sources: Metro Parent (www.metroparent.com) and the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (BECA). Metro Parent regularly updates a list of "Best Foreign Exchange Student Programs for Host Families" and includes the 25 most popular programs that offer placements with U.S. host families (Clark, 2019). BECA provided a list of 42 U.S. study abroad exchange programs for non-U.S. citizens who come to the United States for cultural, educational, or professional exchange. Programs offering professional or humanitarian exchanges were not considered. The final sampling frame included 16 websites that partner with host families to host a student for at least one semester in high school (see Table 1).

The units of analysis were the images of U.S. host families displayed on the websites of the study abroad programs listed in Table 1, except for RQ2b and RQ4b, where each exchange student was the unit of analysis. The author was responsible for the unitization process and provided detailed instructions to the coder on how to code each unit of analysis. For each website in the sample, the author searched for all the web pages dedicated to host families and downloaded every available picture of exchange students with host families. A census approach was used to ensure that all images from the 16 websites were included. A total of 335 images were considered, though three images were dropped from the sample due to poor image quality. The final sample consisted of 332 images.

Table 1: List of Study Abroad Websites and Number of Images

Program website	N of images	Percentage
International Cultural Exchange Services (ICES)	101	30.4
Youth Exchange and Study (YES)	49	14.9
Academic Year in America (AYA)	46	13.9
Academic Year in the USA (AYUSA)	25	7.5
American Field Service (AFS)	23	6.9
Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE)	11	3.3
Education First (EF)	15	4.5
International Student Exchange (ISE)	16	4.8
Program of Academic Exchange (PAX)	11	3.3
World Link	12	3.6
Foreign Links Around the Globe (FLAG)	8	2.4
Youth For Understanding (YFU)	7	2.1
STS Foundation	3	0.9
Rotary	2	0.6
BECA Exchange Programs	2	0.6
CCI Greenheart	1	0.3
Total	332	100

Measures and Development of Coding Schema

Host Family Type

Host family type was assessed based on the Council on International Educational Exchange classification (CIEE, n.d.), which includes: (1) two-parent host family without child(ren), (2) two-parent host family with child(ren), (3) single-parent host family with only the host mother, (4) single-parent host family with only the host father, (5) only host sibling(s), (6) either host mother or host father with host siblings, and (7) same-sex host parents.

Perceived Race

The perceived races of the exchange student and host family were measured with the following categories: (1) White, (2) Black, (3) Asian, and (4) other race. Consistent with previous literature (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), skin tone was used as the primary feature to code for perceived race. The coder also used other contextual clues (e.g., clothing, captions) to help determine perceived race. For example, if the caption mentioned the student's country of origin, this was used as a contextual cue to code for race.

Host Family Socio-Cultural Characteristics

The coding scheme for socio-cultural characteristics of U.S. host families was created using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Kohls' (1988) categorization of "Values Americans Live By" and host family literature guided

the development of the initial categories. This scheme was tested on images not included in the sample to assess whether the initial categories were present and whether additional ones emerged inductively. The final coding scheme included eight U.S. socio-cultural characteristics measured with the following categories: *hospitality* (e.g., greetings and welcomes at the airport), *patriotism* (e.g., displays of the U.S. flag and/or symbols), *holidays and seasonal activities* (e.g., Christmas, Thanksgiving, Independence Day), *special moments* (e.g., graduation, prom), *affection* (e.g., hugging, kissing), *family identity* (e.g., matching clothes, markers of identity), *leisure* (e.g., recreational activities, traveling), and *cross-cultural exchange* (e.g., cultural exchange and learning).

Coding Procedures

The author and a graduate student served as coders for this study. The graduate student coded 90% of the sample, while the author coded 10% of the sample ($N = 332$). The author and the graduate student held weekly meetings to practice using the codebook and to clarify potential issues. Between each meeting, new sets of pictures ($n = 25$) were coded independently, and inter-coder reliability (ICR) was calculated for each variable using Krippendorff's α. The author revised the codebook for variables reporting low reliability during the practice sessions. After three practice sessions, sufficient ICR was achieved, and the coders started coding the final sample. The final reliability sample ($n = 35$; 10% of the final subsample) was selected using an online random number generator and was coded independently by the two coders. Krippendorff's α was calculated for each variable and acceptable ICR was achieved. Two variables (*affection* and *cross-cultural exchange*) were excluded due to ICR below .70 (Krippendorff, 1980). ICR for each variable is available upon request.

Inter-Reality Analyses

To answer RQ4, inter-reality analyses were used to determine whether the racial distribution of the host families (RQ4a) and of the exchange students (RQ4b) observed in the study abroad websites' images were consistent with reality. The racial makeup of exchange students in the United States was calculated using country of origin from the IYES report. The IYES report does not provide the students' races, so the author inferred race based on students' countries of origin: Students from Europe, Oceana, and Canada were coded as "White." Students from the Asian continent (e.g., China, South Korea, Japan, India, Pakistan) were coded as "Asian." Students from Sub-Saharan Africa were coded as "Black." Students from Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and North Africa were coded as "other race." Even though the (sub)continent of origin is not identical with race, the country of origin can be used to infer race for the inter-reality analysis (RQ4b).

Because there are no known data sources that report the racial makeup of U.S. host families (RQ4a), possible racial distributions of host families were constructed using data from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the

IYES report. In the ACS, respondents are free to list any race they identify with, including multiple races. The ACS does not ask whether respondents are host families. Therefore, the ACS data were supplemented using data on which U.S. states exchange students study in from IYES. The racial distribution of host families was a weighted average of the state-level racial distributions using the number of students studying in each state as the weights.

Since it is not known whether host families are perfectly representative of the general population, alternative distributions were constructed using other demographic variables from the ACS. For example, since host families for J-1 visitors must be volunteers, it is plausible they would have higher-than-average incomes. Thus, distributions were constructed based on various cutoffs for household income: $100,000 and above, $150,000 and above, $200,000 and above, $250,000 and above, and $500,000 and above. Likewise, it is plausible that host families are more highly educated than the general population, so a distribution was constructed for household heads with a bachelor's degree or more.

Table 2: Actual Share of Host Families that Are White under Different Assumptions about Their Characteristics

Household income	Overall	BA or More	Empty Nester	HS-Age Children	HS-Age Children and BA or More
$100,000 or above	.826	.844	.908	.859	.859
$150,000 or above	.835	.850	.916	.868	.868
$200,000 or above	.840	.856	.924	.870	.869
$250,000 or above	.845	.861	.925	.880	.877
$500,000 or above	.856	.867	.923	.887	.871

Note. BA = bachelor's degree, HS = high school. The table shows, for each income and characteristic combination, the share of households that are White (from the ACS), weighted by the share of J-1 exchange students in each state (from IYES). BA or more refers to the education of the household head. Empty nester refers to households age 50 or above with no children in the household. HS-age children refers to households with children between the ages of 15 and 18.

Two additional distributions were constructed based on the age of the household head and number and age of children. Since "empty nesters" might be more likely to host exchange students, the first distribution was constructed for household heads above age 50 with no children in the household. Conversely, parents with high-school-age children might be more likely to host, so the second distribution was constructed for households with only high-school-age children. Lastly, a distribution was constructed for households with high-school-age children where the household head has a bachelor's degree or more. The inter-reality analysis thus compared the observed racial distribution from the study abroad website pictures with these various distributions that could plausibly proxy

for the true racial distribution of host families. The racial distributions under these sample restrictions are shown in Table 2.

RESULTS

A total of 332 images, drawn from 16 study abroad websites, were analyzed. A total of 347 exchange students were present in the images, where some images contained more than one exchange student. Of the 347 exchange students in the images, 62.2% were coded as women ($n = 216$), 37.2% were coded as men ($n = 129$), and 0.6% were coded as unable to tell ($n = 2$).

RQ1: Host Family Types

The first research question examined the most frequently occurring family types in study abroad websites. The most frequently occurring family type was two host parents with children ($n = 134$; 40%). The next most common family types were two host parents without children ($n = 53$; 16%), host sibling(s) only ($n = 45$; 13.3%), host mother only ($n = 43$; 13.0%), host mother or host father with host sibling(s) ($n = 35$; 10.5%), host father only ($n = 21$; 6.4%), and same-sex host parents ($n = 1$; 0.3%). Two-parent host families accounted for more than half of the total sample ($n = 188$; 56.6%).

RQ2: Host Family and Exchange Student Race

The second research question examined the most frequently occurring racial portrayals of host families (RQ2a) and exchange students (RQ2b). White host families were far more likely to be represented than any other group, accounting for 97.0% ($n = 322$) of the sample. Black host families were represented in only 1.2% ($n = 4$) of the sample, and host families of other races were represented in only 1.8% ($n = 6$) of the sample. No host families in the sample were Asian.

White exchange students were also more likely to be represented than any other group, accounting for 61.4% ($n = 213$) of the sample. Asian exchange students accounted for 25.1% ($n = 87$) of the sample, Black exchange students accounted for 8.1% ($n = 28$) of the sample, and students of other races accounted for 5.5% ($n = 19$) of the sample.

RQ3: Host Family Socio-Cultural Characteristics

RQ3(a) asked how frequently the socio-cultural characteristics of the host family occurred in images on study abroad websites. Most images ($n = 248$; 74.7%) included at least one socio-cultural category. The six socio-cultural categories were summed to create an index ranging from 0 to 6 to create a score for the socio-cultural characteristics present in each image. Across the 332 host family images, the average score of the socio-cultural characteristics present was 0.997 ($SD = 0.73$), suggesting that most pictures displayed only one category. For RQ3(b), the most frequently portrayed socio-cultural characteristics in U.S. host families were as follows: leisure activities ($n = 143$; 43.1%), hospitality ($n = 52$;

15.7%), patriotism (*n* = 40; 12.0%), holidays (*n* = 36; 10.8%), special moments (*n* = 30; 9.0%), and family identity (*n* = 30; 9.0%).

RQ4: Inter-Reality Comparisons

One-way chi-square statistics were used for the two inter-reality analyses: One comparing the observed and expected racial makeup of host families (RQ4a), and one comparing the observed and expected racial makeup of exchange students (RQ4b). Table 3 shows the results of the inter-reality analysis for the host families, where perceived race is dichotomized as White and non-White (RQ4a). One-way chi-square tests were run for all the household income–characteristic combinations listed in Table 2. Restricting attention to households making $150,000 or more, Table 3 shows the results of the chi-square tests comparing the observed (i.e., in the study abroad images) and expected (i.e., in reality) shares of White host families. Regardless of the assumptions made about the characteristics of U.S. host families, the inter-reality analysis showed statistically significant differences between the observed and expected racial composition of host families. In the study abroad websites, 97% of host families were coded as White, while the ACS and IYES data suggest that between 83.5% and 91.6% of host families are White.

Table 3: Inter-Reality Analysis of the Racial Composition of Host Families

Household Characteristic	Observed White Share	Expected White Share	Chi-Square Statistic
Overall	.970	.835	208.79***
BA or More	.970	.850	164.97***
Empty Nester	.970	.916	33.41***
HS-Age Children	.970	.868	119.19***

Note. BA = bachelor's degree, HS = high school. Observed share comes from the pictures on the study abroad websites. Expected shares come from the ACS and IYES, where host families are assumed to have incomes above $150,000 and the characteristic listed in the first column. BA or more refers to the education of the household head. Empty nester refers to households age 50 or above with no children in the household. HS-age children refers to households with children between the ages of 15 and 18. The chi-square statistic tests for statistically significant differences between the observed and expected White shares. ***p < .001

Table 4 shows the results of the inter-reality analysis for exchange students (RQ4b). The results suggest that the racial distribution of exchange students observed in the study abroad images was consistent for the most part with the racial distribution of exchange students expected in reality. Even though all chi-square statistics indicated statistically significant differences between observed and expected racial distributions, the observed and expected shares of White exchange students were quite close (61.4% and 66.7%, respectively), as were the

observed and expected shares of Asian exchange students (25.1% and 20.3%, respectively). In contrast, Black exchange students appeared to be over-represented in the study abroad pictures, with 8.1% of study abroad students being coded as Black in the images but less than 1% of students coming from predominantly Black countries according to IYES.

Table 4: Inter-Reality Analysis of the Racial Composition of Exchange Students

Perceived Race	Observed Share	Expected Share	Chi-Square Statistic
White	.614	.667	4.39*
Black	.081	.008	210.15***
Asian	.251	.203	4.53*
Other	.055	.122	14.33***

Note. The observed share comes from the pictures on the study abroad websites. The expected share comes from IYES, where race is imputed based on country of origin. The chi-square statistic tests for statistically significant differences between the observed and expected shares. $*p < .05$, $***p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this content analysis was to examine how the U.S. homestay experience is portrayed in images displayed on study abroad programs' websites. The results suggest that U.S. host families are portrayed in a homogeneous way in terms of host family type and race: More than half of the images in the sample included two-parent host families with or without children (RQ1). The fact that two-parent host families accounted for more than half of the total sample might implicitly suggest that two-parents host families are more culturally attractive than single host parents, who were represented in less than 20% of the total sample. Furthermore, pictures featuring the exchange student with only host siblings (13% of the sample) might also normalize the presence of children as part of the idyllic U.S. host family. Consistent with previous literature (Bishop, 2013), U.S. host families are portrayed in a traditional and oversimplified way. By showcasing only traditional host families with host mom, dad, and children, study abroad programs place the sense of "family-ness" within a dominant field of meaning that normalizes traditional family types.

Concerning perceived race, the study abroad images mostly included White host families and White exchange students. Even though these findings align with current research on racial representation across media (Daalmans & Odink, 2019), the prevalence of White host families (RQ2a) and White exchange students (RQ2b) might suggest a preference for a White audience.

The inter-reality analyses for the exchange students (RQ4b) suggested that Black exchange students were largely over-represented in the study abroad images, while frequencies observed for White and Asian exchange students were broadly consistent with the shares of White and Asian exchange students expected

in reality. In contrast, the inter-reality analyses for the host families (RQ4a) revealed a large discrepancy between the racial distribution of host families observed in reality and the one observed in the host family images, as 97% of host families were coded as White in the study abroad images, while the distributions constructed using the ACS and IYES data suggest between 83.5% and 91.6% of host families are White.

Finally, most images contained at least one socio-cultural characteristic (RQ3a), and 43.1% of the images featured the host family engaging in leisure activities such as cooking, eating together, hiking, traveling, playing board games, and attending sporting events (RQ3b). The importance placed on leisure activities might suggest a conceptualization of U.S. "family-ness" based on values like entertainment, fun, and recreation. Study abroad websites might intentionally include images showing recreational activities to promote an idea of having fun with the host family. Excessive emphasis on recreation might lead students to expect that the primary role of their host families is to entertain them, rather than to provide cultural enrichment and education.

The results of this study also carry implications for study abroad programs concerning how and whom they choose to portray on their websites. Study abroad programs that claim to promote "openness, inclusivity, and mutual learning" (e.g., EF, n.d.-a) should strive to include accurate representations of family and racial diversity in their promotional materials. Failing to accurately represent racially diverse host families in study abroad images might lead prospective students to believe that U.S. host families are (or should be) White. Such bias might implicitly suggest that White host families are more culturally attractive and normative than non-White host families (Ward, 2008). The results of this study not only address issues of racial (mis)representation; they also speak more broadly to issues of cultural inclusivity and hospitality, revealing whom U.S. host families might prefer to invite into their homes.

Limitations and Future Direction

Despite its contributions, this study was limited in several ways. First, this study only examined images on study abroad websites, without considering other types of promotional materials such as vlogs or video testimonials that study abroad programs might include on their websites. To gain a better understanding of latent dimensions of the socio-cultural characteristics of host families, future research should apply the same coding scheme to videos, images, and text to examine how they mutually reinforce, complement, or contradict each other.

Second, this study only examined the images on official study abroad websites, without considering user-generated content posted on social media. With the increasing number of people posting their own reviews of products or services (Yi et al., 2019), user-generated content might more accurately reflect the diversity of U.S. host families. Future research should compare images on study abroad websites to user-generated content to assess whether host family types and racial diversity are better represented without study abroad administrators managing the official content.

Third, the race of exchange students and host families was coded based on the race perceived by the coders and not the self-identified race of the individuals in the picture. Although the coders might agree on how to code race, the individual in the picture might have self-identified in a different way. Furthermore, because no U.S. governmental or private agency seems to make demographic data on host families or exchange students publicly available, it was not possible to know the true racial distribution of U.S. host families or exchange students. Without such data, it is difficult to know whether there is a bias toward representing predominantly White host families in the study abroad images, or if there are unobserved characteristics that make Whites more likely to host exchange students. Similarly, country of origin was used to infer students' race, which is a reasonable yet imperfect proxy for race. Future research should use demographic data collected by study abroad programs to refine this analysis.

CONCLUSION

Results of this study indicate that U.S. host families are most frequently represented as White host parents engaging in leisure activities. Though the representation of White and Asian exchange students appears consistent with the approximate number of White and Asian exchange students that study abroad every year, the over-representation of White host families in study abroad websites might be cause for concern for programs who pride themselves on promoting diversity and inclusivity through the homestay experience. These results should encourage study abroad administrators to take concrete steps to promote a more equitable and racially diverse portrayal of U.S. host families to celebrate the family and cultural diversity of the United States.

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