



VNU Journal of Foreign Studies

Journal homepage: <https://jfs.ulis.vnu.edu.vn/>



TRANSNATIONAL AFFINITY AND THE DECISION TO STUDY ABROAD OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Nguyen Thanh Ha*, Nguyen Huong Lam Quynh

*Faculty of English Language and Culture, VNU University of Languages and International Studies,
No.2 Pham Van Dong, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam*

Received 16 July 2024

Revised 21 August 2024; Accepted 18 February 2025

Abstract: Transnationality usually refers to the ties and interactions that connect people and institutions across national borders and has often been studied in the context of migration. However, globalization and the movement of people and ideas, media and goods have allowed transnational ties to be formed, maintained, and developed even before people leave their own country. This qualitative study explores transnational affinity between students and their potential destinations for studying abroad. Through narrative inquiry, the study tells the stories of four young Vietnamese people who developed connections with a foreign country and interrogates the role this emotional bond plays in their choice of destination for overseas education. Analysis reveals the complex and multi-faceted way in which transnational affinity emerges and functions. Foreign language education, media exposure, and personal recommendations help shape emotional connections to a foreign country. Joy acts as both an entry point and a reinforcing mechanism in this process. In addition, transnational affinity entails identity work: the growing ability to visualize oneself in the foreign country as images of the place becomes intertwined with the vision of one's possible self.

Keywords: transnationalism, transnational affinity, studying abroad, decision-making, narrative inquiry

* Corresponding author.

Email address: thanhha86@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.63023/2525-2445/jfs.ulis.5355>

NGHIÊN CỨU TỰ SỰ VỀ KẾT NỐI XUYÊN QUỐC GIA VÀ QUYẾT ĐỊNH ĐI HỌC NƯỚC NGOÀI CỦA NGƯỜI TRẺ VIỆT NAM

Nguyễn Thanh Hà, Nguyễn Hương Lâm Quỳnh

*Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,
Số 2 Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

Nhận bài ngày 16 tháng 7 năm 2024

Chỉnh sửa ngày 21 tháng 8 năm 2024; Chấp nhận đăng ngày 18 tháng 02 năm 2025

Tóm tắt: Xuyên quốc gia thường chỉ các mối quan hệ và tương tác kết nối con người và tổ chức vượt lên khỏi ranh giới quốc gia và chủ yếu được nghiên cứu trong bối cảnh di cư quốc tế. Tuy nhiên, toàn cầu hóa và dòng chảy của không chỉ con người mà cả ý tưởng, sản phẩm, và truyền thông đã tạo điều kiện cho sự xuất hiện, duy trì và phát triển của các mối liên hệ xuyên quốc gia ngay cả khi cá nhân đó chưa tới đất nước khác. Nghiên cứu định tính này tìm hiểu trải nghiệm về kết nối xuyên quốc gia của bốn người trẻ Việt Nam với nơi họ mong muốn đi du học. Qua phương pháp tự sự, nghiên cứu kể lại câu chuyện về sự yêu mến và gắn bó với một đất nước khác và vai trò của kết nối cảm xúc đó trong việc lựa chọn địa điểm du học. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra sự phức tạp và đa diện của kết nối xuyên quốc gia trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa. Giáo dục ngoại ngữ, tiếp xúc với truyền thông và lời kể của người thân góp phần hình thành mối liên kết cảm xúc với một quốc gia khác. Niềm vui vừa là điểm khởi đầu vừa là yếu tố củng cố trong quá trình này. Bên cạnh đó, gắn kết xuyên quốc gia còn liên quan đến quá trình định hình bản sắc qua khả năng hình dung bản thân tại nơi chốn mới và dần dần hình ảnh về nơi chốn đó với khả thể của chính bản thân mình.

Từ khóa: xuyên quốc gia, kết nối xuyên quốc gia, du học, ra quyết định, nghiên cứu tự sự

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the movement of people and ideas has become easier and more ubiquitous; student mobility more feasible (Soong, Stahl & Shan, 2017). According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011), in 2009 more than 3 million international students studied abroad. In 2016, this number reached 5 million (OECD, 2018). In Vietnam, there has been a significant increase in the flow of Vietnamese students moving to other countries for education. It is estimated that roughly 60,000 Vietnamese students were pursuing international education in 2008 and the number rose to approximately 100,000 in 2011, accounting for 2.7% of the international student market (Nguyen, 2013). Three to four billion dollars are reported to be spent annually by Vietnamese families to support their children studying abroad (Phan, 2019). While English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have long been popular “receiving” nations of international students, the number of students coming to Asian Pacific countries is rising, partly thanks to a series of international education policies designed to attract more foreign students (Shields, 2016; Becker & Kolster, 2012).

According to Lipura and Collins’s critical review (2020), previous research into international students’ mobility tends to coalesce around three dominant discourses. The first narrative, termed “neoliberal reductionism”, tends to portray international students as rational, strategic actors primarily driven by market forces to maintain and maximize social advantages

and assume the East-West mobility as the typical and desired direction. The second is a narrative of deficiency, which views international students through a lens of what they lack, need, or how they differ, framing them in terms of academic, financial, or agency deficits. Lastly, the narrative of the future focuses on how mobility is driven by students' future-oriented goals. Lipura and Collins (2020) argue that while these narratives are valuable to the study of student mobility, they may be limiting in fully capturing the diversity and complexity of international student experiences. It is important to note that student mobility can be “influenced by factors ranging from economic resources and constraints, geographical imaginations, prior patterns of study, through to opportunism and fancy” (Lipura & Collins, 2020, p. 7).

To provide a more nuanced understanding of how students choose their academic destinations, this paper examines the topic through the lens of transnational affinity, operationally defined as the affection one has towards a foreign country. Involving personal narratives of four young Vietnamese, it explores the emotional bonding that motivates these participants to choose their study destinations, focusing on how these people-place connections form, evolve, and influence participants' decisions and experiences. Vietnamese international student mobility is often researched as “a subgroup within a larger movement of Asian students” (Nguyen, 2013, p. 127) despite the growing trend of studying abroad in Vietnam. Therefore, a more detailed examination, especially in the context of Vietnam, is warranted.

2. Background Issues

2.1. Destination Selection in International Education

The geographies of students' transnational mobility have always been marked by uneven flows (Perkins & Neumayer, 2013; Varghese, 2008). Historically, from the 16th to the mid-20th centuries, education was a key link between European powers and their colonies worldwide. After the World Wars, a similar pattern continued, with superpowers attracting students from their spheres of influence (Varghese, 2008). Nowadays, there is still a dominant South-to-North pattern of international student mobility, where the most common mobility path for students is from Asia or Africa to the highly recognized, research-intensive universities in Europe, North America, Australia, or New Zealand (Perkins & Neumayer, 2013; Lipura & Collins, 2020).

However, there have also been some notable shifts. Varghese (2008) argues that in the era of globalization, “political patronage and colonial legacies have given way to market principles” (p. 22) as students and their family fund their own study and many institutions in host countries depend significantly on the revenue generated by international students.

Research into destination choice of international students has often made use of the push-pull framework. “Push factors” are internal to the source country and trigger a student's decision to pursue education abroad, while “pull factors” are those within the host country that make it appealing to international students. Some of these factors are inherent to the source or the host country, and others depend on the students themselves (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). For example, McMahon's (1992) research highlighted that economic and social pressures in a student's home country drive them to study abroad (“push” factors), while the choice of a specific host country is influenced by various “pull” factors, such as economic, political, and cultural links, as well as the support offered by the host country to international students. Using the same framework, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identify the following “push” factors: the belief that overseas education is superior to local options, difficulty in gaining entry to local programs or unavailability of desired programs domestically, a desire to understand Western

culture, and intentions to migrate after graduation. Students' choice of a host country, on the other hand, is influenced by the country's reputation or profile, parental influences, family and friends' recommendations, cost of international education, and local environment at the host country (including climate, lifestyle).

In short, a combination of structural and personal factors contributes to the selection of study destinations. Notably, the frameworks discussed tend to portray students either as passive subjects influenced by global trends or as rational actors who make decisions based solely on a cost-benefit analysis. In reality, international student mobility could be more diverse and complex. Mobility can sometimes occur purely by chance, with the opportunity to move arising unexpectedly and without careful consideration of the future (Phan, 2018).

There have been efforts to move beyond such limited framing. For example, Phan (2022) notes that when participants decided to pursue their PhDs abroad, their choice of destination was influenced by a combination of family circumstances, financial strategies, practical considerations, and their previous experiences and mobility, which is guided by "a map of aspirations for themselves as this map is made by various aspirational nodes, including knowledge and sharing from those in their close community, knowledge from their own reading, or past experiences of their own" (p. 295).

In line with Lipura and Collins's (2020) proposal to "consider the more-than-rational and more-than-economic drivers of student mobilities" (p. 12), our research focuses on exploring the emotional bonding between international students and their study destination and its role in their decision making, aiming to provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

2.2. Emotional Connection to a Place and the Imaginaries

Emotional connection to a place has often been studied as a phenomenon termed place attachment, a concept popularized since the 1970s in all branches of social sciences (Lewicka, 2010). Place, in this concept, is often distinguished from *space*—an environment structured by the world where objects and events occur. When imbued with social meanings, understandings, and cultural expectations, a space can be called a place, thus, in simple terms, a place is "meaningful location" (Lewicka, 2010). When we know more about a new and strange space and start to endow it with value and meaning, it becomes a place (Tuan, 1977). This creation of a place can be built up from human interactions, experiences, and perceptions of the material world (Halperin, 2014). Scannell and Gifford (2010) suggest that cognitive factors, including one's beliefs and knowledge about a place, influence whether it becomes personally significant.

Research on place attachment is divided between two distinct approaches: the qualitative tradition, which originates from geographical studies of the sense of place, and the psychometric tradition, which stems from early community studies (Lewicka, 2010). In both of these traditions, place is often studied as something to be experienced directly.

Can one feel connected to a place they have never been to? In immigration scholarship, it has been noted that second generation immigrants may feel an emotional pull toward the ancestral home country, although less than the first generation (Huang, Hung & Chen, 2018). Huang, Ramshaw and Norman (2015) find that second generation Chinese-Americans' visit to China is characterized by four themes: language and appearance, search for authenticity, family history, and sense of 'home.' In addition, since their attachment is not tied to a particular location, they could maintain a connection to their ancestral homeland without physically visiting their family's place of origin. In tourism contexts, the physical, social, and emotional

attributes of a place could impact how a person finds himself or herself attached to the place (Nghiem-Phú, 2016). The more individuals learn and understand about a place through the assistance of place images, the more likely they are to form an attachment with that place.

In international student mobilities research, the ‘pull’ factors clearly attend to the dimension of place. However, as discussed above, they are typically framed in terms of rational, cognitive evaluation. Emotional factor, if any, is often limited to the vague notion of ‘interest’. For instance, in a study of Chinese students studying in Japan, participants mentioned that a strong interest in Japanese culture was a motivating factor (Lo et al., 2019). Similarly, in Vietnam, twenty out of fifty-five interviewees in Nghia’s (2019) study expressed a desire to study abroad to experience foreign cultures. Specifically, they were inspired by depictions of “Western cultures or interesting festivals in other countries” in movies, which fueled their wish to travel and experience these cultures firsthand (Nghia, 2019, p. 764).

2.3. Defining Transnational Affinity

Transnationalism is often broadly defined as referring to “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states”, a condition that “preceded ‘the nation’” but has been especially intensified with new technologies (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447).

In this study, we operationally define transnational affinity as affection and attraction one has towards a foreign country. This emotional bonding could be the result of direct or indirect experience, but our inquiry specifically focuses on the indirect one. As such, it places transnational affinity at the conjunction of place-attachment and imagination within the transnationalism framework.

In existing literature, there is very limited use of this concept. A search of ‘transnational affinity’ on Google Scholar yields 181 results, most of which use it as descriptive, rather than a conceptual phenomenon. Yet, its existent use shows a high degree of broad consistency, describing a state of connectedness beyond physical national boundary. Stanfill and Valdivia (2016), studying transnational affinity in the context of football fandom in the World Cup, describe affinity as ‘allegiances’ and find that “Supporters neither simply cheer their origin nation nor their current nation of residence, but rather have multiple and shifting allegiances based on context” (p. 12). Warne (2000), in his study of three music scenes within French youth cultures, write:

The fact that these physical sites extend far beyond the boundaries of localized experience, and even beyond national boundaries, is indicative that each of these cultures is expressive of transnational affinities: the need to have physically visited these sites is in fact irrelevant. Their importance is symbolic or imaginative, and they form the markers of an imaginatively constituted transnational space, which in its expansiveness and range is frequently in marked contrast both to the physical space actually available to or occupied by the scene in question, and to traditional notions of national culture and identity. (p. 264)

Ultimately, although a familiar phenomenon in a globalized world, transnational affinity remains an undertheorized concept. This study explores one manifestation of this phenomenon by delving into the stories of young people pursuing overseas education. Within the constraints of this research, we set out to examine a few stories in which the aim is not to draw out definite generalizations, but rather personal and distinct narratives in which each person makes sense of their own experiences.

3. Mode of Inquiry

This study employs narrative inquiry to study how transnational affinity is formed and influences participants' selection of overseas study destinations. According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative inquiry can be understood as a means of conducting qualitative research in which stories are adopted to describe human action. It is noteworthy that stories do not necessarily deal with twists, dilemmas, or dramas; mundane stories could also be potent in helping people clarify their sense of the world (Crites, 1971).

Narrative inquiry is well-suited for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of individuals' lived experiences. Since stories are fundamental to how individuals make sense of their lives and communicate meaning (Bochner & Riggs, 2014), this approach is particularly valuable in examining significant life choices, such as studying abroad, within the broader context of personal experience.

This study involved four participants, each assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy. They had varying degrees of affinity toward different countries and were in different stages of their academic journeys: Huyen My was making plans to study in Spain, Thu Ha and Thuy Duong were already studying in Korea and Germany respectively, and Linh Chi had returned to Vietnam after finishing her studies in Taiwan. Our aim when selecting informants was to collect diverse narratives that allow us to see the nuances and variations in the origin and expression of transnational affinity. None of the destinations were English-speaking countries. While this was not an intentional criterion, it emerged as a significant pattern that aligns with the previously discussed trend in which the dominance of English-speaking countries is being challenged.

The process of working with all four participants involved semi-structured interviews about their life stories, their encounters with their destination countries, and their perceptions and attitudes towards such places. An additional round of interview was conducted after the initial stories were shaped to clarify and add more details. All interviews were held online due to geographical barriers, especially as two informants were living overseas. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition to interview transcripts, our additional conversations and observation of the participants' social media also gave further insight into their life stories.

Data analysis consisted of two phases. In Phase 1, the stories were constructed collaboratively with the participants to ensure they represent the spirit of their experiences. The purpose is to "produce stories as the outcome of the research" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15) and help to place the participants' decision within the historical and developmental dimension of their personal context. In Phase 2, we identified emerging themes related to place-based attachment to address the research problem more generally. This resembles what Polkinghorne's (1995) termed 'paradigmatic analysis' and is a common method in qualitative studies. The dual process helps to balance the particularities and the broad patterns. The participants provided informed consent and were involved in the analysis and interpretation of their narratives, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented.

4. Narratives of Transnational Affinity

4.1. *Thu Ha (Korea): From a Teenage Interest to Unwavering Dedication to a Dream*

Thu Ha, a 23-year-old student of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Sejong University, Korea, is getting ready to graduate. Growing up in Hanoi, she shared a room and a love for Korean dramas with her sister. "*Boys over Flower*" (2009), a story about a group of

high school students, their school life and struggles, and “*Empress Ki*”, a fictional story about a charismatic empress, were her first encounters with Korea. Even now when she has seen hundreds of films, Ha can still sit down and watch these two over and over again. She didn’t know then, but what started as a fascination with Korean food and pop culture would later transform into a carefully planned future, built on perseverance and determination.

When Ha entered secondary school, she struggled with loneliness and found it difficult to fit in until she discovered her classmates’ fascination with K-pop, which she saw as a bridge to connect with them. She immersed herself in learning about the industry, even though her true passion lay more in belonging than in the music itself. These connections to Korea continued to grow in her high school years, now in a new area: Korean cuisine. Over time, her love for Korean food expanded into a broader appreciation of Korean culture, making Korea feel increasingly familiar and appealing.

At the same time, Ha was uncertain about her future and struggled with making career decisions. As she turned to the *Ikigai model*—a Japanese framework for finding one’s purpose, she realized that among the four guiding questions of *Ikigai*, she could confidently answer only one: “What do I love?” The answer was Korea. Even though her understanding of Korea was still limited to pop culture and food, she knew that her passion for the country outweighed her interest in any other place. “If it wasn’t Korea, I wouldn’t want to go anywhere.”

Determined to turn this thought into reality, Ha then resolved to learn Korean and pass the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK). Without informing her parents about her study-abroad plans, she enrolled in a local test-prep academy. Despite the crowded classes and minimal teacher attention, she diligently reviewed lessons at home, expanded her vocabulary, and immersed herself in Korean vlogs to enhance her language skills. This intense routine, though exhausting, never dampened her enthusiasm. She said:

I don't know how to explain it. Learning Korean makes me feel happy. Normally, for example, if I have to learn English, I feel very tired, like I have to remember something. But when learning Korean, it feels like a hobby. I look at it and want to learn. I learn for fun, not because I force myself to remember the grammar or vocabulary.

When her parents first learned about her plan, they were shocked and skeptical. They believed an English-speaking country would provide better opportunities. Ha realized that part of her parents’ hesitation stemmed from the fact that she rarely talked about Korea at home, making her decision seem impulsive. To bridge this gap, she became more open about her aspirations, frequently discussing the universities she was considering, her language studies, and the steps she was taking to prepare for her future.

Over time, her persistence convinced her family. “I studied [Korean] from 11th grade to 12th grade, and my parents saw that I kept studying consistently and remained passionate and hardworking. They gradually understood”. With this newfound approval, Ha pushed herself even harder. The stress of juggling multiple responsibilities meant she could barely afford an eight-hour sleep, but she persisted.

When choosing a university, Ha considered both academic reputation and affordability. She ultimately decided on Sejong University, a well-regarded institution offered strong academic programs. Its suburban location made living costs more manageable. After the national high school graduation exam, Ha anxiously waited for the results. The moment she saw “Congratulations” on the screen, she was overwhelmed with joy. The memory of that day remains etched in her heart.

Now, five years later, Ha’s life in Korea is fulfilling. Ha has made a stable life for herself

with a cozy apartment, good friends, and a sense of belonging. However, Vietnam remains her true home. She plans to return, potentially opening her own beauty clinic.

4.2. Huyen My (Spain): From a Distant Concept to an Attractive Possibility

Huyen My, a 21-year-old Tourism and Hotel Management major at RMIT University, juggles classes, runs a small homestay, and interns at the Asia-Pacific Tourism Association. Her goal for the year is to graduate with honors. My's parents work for the government, and her younger brother is still in secondary school.

Initially, My saw Spain as distant and unremarkable, encountering it only in her tourism courses and during her internship, since the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is based in Madrid. Her interest in Spain blossomed after watching the Spanish series “*Skam España*”, which follows a group of 16-year-olds and their coming-of-age stories. This newfound passion led her to start learning Spanish, despite her busy schedule and the demands of her studies. Speaking of Spanish films, she shared:

I enjoy Spanish films because they tend to be quite realistic and not overly wild. The details are not exaggerated, and more relatable to me. The gentle and pleasant feeling comes from the very everyday and life-like details. In contrast, when watching American series, I cannot relate to the events because I have never experienced such wild things and have no intention of smoking weed, drinking alcohol, partying until late at night or anything like that.

Her initial steps into learning Spanish were delightful. She bought beginner coursebooks and used the Duolingo app, quickly grasping the language thanks to her background in English and Chinese. She found the language particularly “expressive and fun”, which aligned with her perception of Spaniards as open and energetic. This connection deepened as she watched more Spanish films and read articles, reinforcing her positive image of Spain and its people. She said

Everything I've heard about Spain is bright and vibrant, from the lifestyle and mindset to the weather and climate, and even the golden sunshine stretching over the long beaches. Whenever Spain is mentioned, I picture a beautiful, sunny summer on the beach. I've never heard anything particularly bad about Spain.

As My entered her final year at RMIT, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted her plan to study in Australia, leading her to take an internship at the Asia-Pacific Tourism Association. There, she connected with Spanish colleagues who often shared about their vibrant lifestyle and love for the beach, further igniting her desire to experience Spain firsthand. With graduation approaching, My is planning her future in Spain, conducting research on master's programs, and contacting study abroad agencies for scholarship opportunities. Her days are filled with anticipation and joy, with a playful Spanish song as her morning alarm, setting a festive tone for each day. Although open to other destinations, Spain's established tourism industry, top-ranked academic institutions, and the promise of a balanced lifestyle appeal to her. My is ready to embrace a new chapter full of growth and adventure.

4.3. Thuy Duong (Germany): From External Influences to Personal Aspiration

Before moving to Germany, Thuy Duong, a 22-year-old Vietnamese student, faced a period of uncertainty. Duong was in her final year of high school in Vietnam, grappling with the stressful decision of whether to pursue her studies domestically or abroad.

Initially, Duong's parents considered New Zealand because a close acquaintance was living there. However, her cousin Nhung, who was studying in Germany, intervened and convinced both Duong and her parents to choose Germany instead. Nhung's love for Duong and the desire to have her close by were strong motivations. She painted an appealing picture

of Germany, emphasizing its free education system, which was a crucial factor for Duong's middle-income family. Duong's excitement grew as Nhung described Germany's beautiful landscapes and vibrant culture.

My cousin loves taking photos and checking in, so she posts a lot of pictures on Facebook. The city always looks so vibrant in her photos, so I started getting excited when looking at them, imagining my future life there. Gradually, I began to feel that Germany might suit my taste, and my curiosity grew day by day. I became more motivated and driven, without feeling like my parents were forcing me to study and take exams to go there. In the end, everything needs to come from internal interest and passion to be long-term, right?

Duong began learning German, her first step toward this new adventure. She rode seven kilometers on her old motorbike to attend classes at a language center. The support of her close friend, who also planned to study in Germany, was invaluable. They studied together, keeping each other motivated through the tough phases. Despite the initial challenges of mastering a new and complex language, Duong was motivated by the thought of experiencing the beauty and opportunities that Nhung had described. Her German teacher at the language center further fueled her enthusiasm with vivid stories of life in Germany, from the picturesque dormitories to the changing seasons. As a nature lover, she was particularly impressed by descriptions of “flowers at every street corner”.

The stories Duong heard from her teacher and cousin, combined with her own research through Vietnamese expat groups on Facebook, created a sense of connection to Germany. She read posts about local festivals, beautiful sceneries, and everyday life, which allowed her to visualize herself adapting to this new environment. Duong's extroverted nature made her particularly excited about the prospect of participating in events like Oktoberfest, reminiscent of her childhood visits to a local craft beer spot with her father.

As Duong prepared for her move to Germany, she felt a mix of emotions: excitement about the adventure ahead, gratitude for her supportive family and friends, and a bit of anxiety about leaving home. Yet, she was determined and hopeful, driven by the vivid and positive images of Germany painted by Nhung and her teacher. This blend of emotions carried her through the challenges of preparing to study abroad, making her journey to Germany a deeply personal and transformative experience.

4.4. Linh Chi (Taiwan): From Reluctant Beginnings to Deliberate Pursuit

Chi, a 23-year-old Vietnamese, studied International Tourism Management at Tamkang University, Taiwan. Her path to studying abroad was filled with emotional highs and lows.

Chi grew up in Hanoi, living with her single mother and younger brother. In 2014, Chi's mother suggested she apply to Foreign Language Specialized School, a prestigious high school in Hanoi. Chi aimed for the English class but fell short of the requirements, landing in the Chinese class instead. This initially filled her with disappointment and frustration, as she knew little about China or its language. The high tuition fees added to her distress.

However, Chi's perspective began to shift during her first semester at CNN. Her school participated in the “*Chinese Bridge*” competition, an international contest showcasing students' Chinese language skills, and this event opened up a new opportunity for her. Passionate about dancing, Chi took on the challenge of choreographing a performance for the event. Despite her initial doubts and the pressure to create something impressive, the final performance was a success, earning cheers and applause. This achievement brought Chi a deep sense of joy and accomplishment, gradually softening her negative feelings towards studying Chinese.

As Chi continued her studies, she became more interested in Chinese culture. Watching Chinese romantic dramas and listening to their soundtracks helped her improve her language skills while providing comfort and entertainment.

Mainly it was because of my listening to music and watching movies, so I began to like Chinese culture a bit more. Plus, I also have a friend who studied Chinese, so I had someone to talk to. Then, I began watching Chinese shows, like *Street Dance of China*, and I found myself enjoying it more.

Chi's journey took a significant turn during her senior year when she learned about a scholarship program for a university in Taiwan. Encouraged by her mother, Chi applied and won a full-ride scholarship, allowing her to pursue her passion for tourism. The prospect of studying abroad excited her, but she also felt anxious about leaving her family and familiar surroundings.

Arriving in Taiwan, Chi faced challenges adapting to a new environment and culture. However, her prior knowledge of Mandarin and cultural insights gained from her studies helped her navigate this new phase. She made friends with local students and explored various cities, deepening her appreciation for Taiwan's beauty. One of her favorite discoveries was a small, charming bookstore, where she found solace and inspiration. Chi dreams of visiting China in the future.

5. Understanding Transnational Affinity

The narratives above provide an opportunity to theorize transnational affinity in the context of international student mobilities. Participants in this study develop affinity toward the destination country rather than other scales of locale (such as city or institution). This is consistent with Lewicka's (2010) suggestion: "Countries are rooted in a common history and particularly strong, socially constructed symbols of group belonging and group identity, and therefore evoke particularly strong emotional reactions" (p. 212).

The participants' connection to the destination country varies significantly. The first two participants, Thu Ha and Huyen My, demonstrate a strong emotional bond, characterized by determination and persistence in the face of challenges. In contrast, the other two participants show a weaker emotional attachment, relying more on chance or external support to sustain and achieve their mobility goals. Common to all participants is the fact that while affinity is important in their decision to study abroad, it exists in conjunction and in tension with other influencing factors. All participants have to grapple with the issue of cost, and the availability of financial support (in the case of Linh Chi), or free tuition (in the case of Thuy Duong) plays an important role in their eventual decision. Huyen My, although unwavering in her love for Spain, admits that this plan may not work out and she may have to resort to another destination.

Regarding the development of transnational affinity, the narratives reveal three important contributing factors.

First, *foreign language education* plays a significant role. Proficiency in a foreign language serves as a bridge for intercultural communication, providing learners with insight into the country's norms, behaviors, and cultural practices. However, more relevant to our inquiry is the fact that learning a language creates emotional connection as well as more opportunities for connection to the place. All four participants underwent the process of learning their destination country's languages. While Thu Ha, Thuy Duong, Linh Chi achieved high language proficiency and could communicate well with native speakers, Huyen My was still a beginner at Spanish. Regardless of their proficiencies, the affective evaluation of the language

adds to their connection. Their language classes functioned as a place to nurture their interest. In addition, exposure to and mastery in the language also allow them to access more materials, get immersed in the descriptions of life and people in their target countries. Notably in the case of Linh Chi, she made a distinction between China and Taiwan as places, but asserted that it was her familiarity with the Chinese language that anchored her emotional connection to Taiwan.

Second, *media* has long played a crucial role in spreading ideas and forming “imagined communities” where people feel connected despite not knowing each other personally (Anderson, 1983). Exposure to foreign media influences perceptions and attitudes toward other countries and their citizens as well as behaviors and decisions. For example, Braga's (2007) study on Albanian migrants finds that in isolated Albania, exposure to Italian television provided a rare glimpse into the outside world, influencing people's perceptions of the West and their aspirations for migration. In addition, those with greater exposure to foreign media were more likely to migrate, while those with less exposure had fewer opportunities to imagine a different life elsewhere. Such media effects are present in the narratives of all four participants with the most profound impact seen in the case of Thu Ha and Huyen My. Thu Ha's early exposure to K-pop and K-dramas shaped her view of Korea as “magical” and “dreamlike,” while My developed a fondness for Spain through relatable films and cheerful music. Thuy Duong discovered Germany's festive culture via social media, and Linh Chi's engagement with Chinese movies, music, and books fostered a positive impression of China.

Another important way individuals learn about foreign countries is through personal recommendations from those close to them. International students planning to study abroad frequently consult friends and relatives with prior study abroad experience for advice; for those making this decision for the first time, personal recommendations can be particularly influential (Maulana, 2022). This impact can best be seen in the case of Thuy Duong, who developed a strong connection to Germany through personal insights shared by her cousin and teacher. She also credited her cousin as the determining factor: “Every time I think back, it's true that I was persuaded by my cousin to go to Germany”.

In addition to these three contributing factors, transnational affinity in these cases appears to be deeply intertwined with joy—whether sparked by engaging with media, discovering a language, or forming personal connections. In My's case, the pleasure of watching Spanish films and learning the language gradually transformed Spain from a distant concept into a preferred destination. Similarly, Chi's experience of successfully choreographing a dance for the “Chinese Bridge” competition replaced her initial reluctance with a newfound appreciation for Chinese language culture. These instances suggest that joy acts as both an entry point and a reinforcing mechanism for transnational affinity, making it not just a rational or strategic connection but an affective and deeply personal process.

Moreover, transnational affinity is also connected to the growing ability to visualize oneself within the space through a feeling of compatibility between one's identity and the place. This visualization involves imagining one's life in the destination country and perceiving it as where one can thrive, develop, and belong. As the place becomes more than just a physical location but a possible version of one's future self, emotional attachment deepens, and transnational affinity reinforces the desire for mobility. As such, transnational affinity entails identity work.

6. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the personal stories of four young Vietnamese people who have chosen a foreign country, Korea, Spain, Germany, and China, as a study abroad destination. Analysis reveals the complex and multi-faceted way in which transnational affinity emerges and develops. Through foreign language education, foreign media exposure, and recommendations from those personally closest to them, one can form and develop their emotional connection towards a foreign country. Dominant throughout the stories is the role of joy and identity work: Experiences of joy—whether through cultural engagement, personal achievements, or meaningful connections—intersect with self-identification, as individuals acknowledge an alignment between their personal values, aspirations, and lifestyle with what the destination has to offer, which shapes how they perceive, relate to, and ultimately commit to their chosen destination.

In the times of transnationalism when sociocultural, political, and economic practices are diffused beyond the borders of nations, people's sense of belonging to places has been modified dramatically (Tedeschi, Vorobeva & Jauhiainen, 2020). Further research could be conducted with participants who form a transnational affinity towards different countries, ranging from English-speaking to non-English-speaking countries. Longitudinal design may be used to study the development of transnational affinity over time. It may also be interesting to see how different transnational affinity is when it is attached to a specific city, region, or institution rather than a country. These locales, at different scales, may reveal more insights into the experience of living in a globalized world.

References

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- Becker, R., & Kolster, R. (2012). *International student recruitment: policies and developments in selected countries*. Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC). <https://research.utwente.nl/en/publications/international-student-recruitment-policies-and-developments-in-se/>
- Bochner, A., & Riggs, N. (2014). Practicing narrative inquiry. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 194-222). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.013.024>
- Braga, M. (2007). *Dreaming another life. The role of foreign media in migration decisions. Evidence from Albania*. World Bank Working Paper. <http://www.edge-page.net/jamb2007/papers/DreamingAnotherLife.pdf>
- Crites, S. (1971). The narrative quality of experience. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39, 291-311.
- Halperin, C. (2014). Circulation as placemaking: Late classic Maya Politics and Portable Objects. *American Anthropologist*, 116(1), 110-129.
- Huang, W. J., Ramshaw, G., & Norman, W. C. (2015). Homecoming or tourism? Diaspora tourism experience of second-generation immigrants. *Tourism Geographies*, 18(1), 59-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2015.1116597>
- Huang, W.-J., Hung, K., & Chen, C.-C. (2018). Attachment to the home country or hometown? Examining diaspora tourism across migrant generations. *Tourism Management*, 68, 52-65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.02.019>
- Lewicka, M. (2010). What makes neighborhood different from home and city? Effects of place scale on place attachment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 30(1), 35-51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.05.004>
- Lipura, S. J., & Collins, F. L. (2020). Towards an integrative understanding of contemporary educational mobilities: A critical agenda for international student mobilities research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 18(3), 343-359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1711710>

- Lo, P., So, S., Liu, Q., Allard, B., & Chiu, D. (2019). Chinese students' motivations for overseas versus domestic MLIS education: A comparative study between University of Tsukuba and Shanghai University. *College & Research Libraries*, 80(7), 1013-1035. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.7.1013>
- Maulana, H. (2022). Studying abroad: Identifying word-of-mouth communication seeking. *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 10(1), 21-30
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). Push-pull factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82-90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403>
- McMahon, M. E. (1992). Higher education in a world market: an historical look at the global context of international study. *Higher Education*, 24(4), 465-82.
- Nghia, T. L. H. (2019). Motivations for studying abroad and immigration intentions: The case of Vietnamese students. *Journal of International Students*, 9(3), 758-776. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v0i0.731>
- Nghiêm-Phú, B. (2016). Country image, country attachment, country loyalty, and life satisfaction of foreign residents in Vietnam. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 16(4), 329-344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1467358415600218>
- Nguyen, C. (2013). Vietnamese international student mobility: past and current trends. *Asian Education And Development Studies*, 2(2), 127-148. <https://doi.org/10.1108/20463161311321411>
- OECD (2018). *Education at a glance 2018: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/19991487>
- Perkins, R., & Neumayer, E. (2013). Geographies of educational mobilities: exploring the uneven flows of international students. *The Geographical Journal*, 180(3), 246-259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12045>
- Phan, A. (November, 2019). Vietnamese students continue to head for US. *Vnexpress*. Retrieved from <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnamese-students-continue-to-head-for-us-4014731.html>
- Phan, A. N. Q. (2022). The why of where: Vietnamese doctoral students' choice of PhD destinations. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 45(3), 283-299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2022.2054978>
- Phan, L. H. (2018). Higher Education, English and the Idea of the West: Globalizing and Encountering a Global South Regional University. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(5), 782-797.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal Of Qualitative Studies In Education*, 8(1), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103>
- Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2010). Defining place attachment: A tripartite organizing framework. *Journal Of Environmental Psychology*, 30(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.09.006>
- Shields, R. (2013). Globalization and international student mobility: a network analysis. *Comparative Education Review*, 57(4), 609-636. <https://doi.org/10.1086/671752>
- Soong, H., Stahl, G., & Shan, H. (2017). Transnational mobility through education: a Bourdieusian insight on life as middle transnationals in Australia and Canada. *Globalization, Societies And Education*, 16(2), 241-253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1396886>
- Stanfill, M., & Valdivia, A. N. (2016). (Dis)locating nations in the World Cup: football fandom and the global geopolitics of affect. *Social Identities*, 23(1), 104-119.
- Tedeschi, M., Vorobeva, E., & Jauhiainen, J. (2020). Transnationalism: current debates and new perspectives. *Geojournal*, 87, 603-619. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-020-10271-8>
- Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and place*. University of Minnesota Press.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011). *Global education digest 2011: Comparing education statistics across the world*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000213517>
- Varghese, N. V. (2008). *Globalization of higher education and cross-border student mobility*. UNESCO.
- Vertovec, S. (1999). Conceiving and researching transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(2), 447-462.
- Warne, C. (2000). Transnational affinities in the European context: The case of contemporary French youth cultures. In J. Andrew, M. Crook, D. Holmes, & E. Kolinsky (Eds.) *Why Europe? Problems of culture and identity* (pp. 255-272). Palgrave Macmillan.