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Japanese college students' study abroad decisions: Perspectives of Japanese study abroad administrators

Richard Porter
Texas Tech University, US: *richard.porter@ttu.edu*
Noriko Porter
Washington State University, US: *nori_porter@wsu.edu*

This paper examines the factors that impact Japanese students' decisions to study abroad from the perspectives of Japanese study abroad administrators. In-depth interviews of five study abroad administrators at Japanese universities were qualitatively analysed. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to identify various immediate and distant environmental factors related to students' decisions to study abroad. The results suggested mixed findings for factors affecting contemporary Japanese students studying abroad, such as the 'inwardness' of Japanese students and the success of current Japanese government and corporate efforts to internationalize higher education. In addition, the study found that the Japanese cultural pattern of conformity and dependent parent-child relationships are affecting students' choice to go overseas. These findings have implications for (1) study abroad administrators to use culturally calibrated strategies in facilitating study abroad participation through greater involvement of peers and parents, and (2) policymakers to provide more individual scholarships than targeted institutional support.

Keywords: study abroad; Japan; higher education; international office administrator; qualitative

INTRODUCTION

In response to the rapid globalization of the world economy, universities around the world are increasingly emphasizing the importance of global competencies. Such skills are considered critical for students and nations to be able to compete and succeed in the global marketplace and for promoting understanding and peaceful cooperation among nations. Study abroad is one primary way for students to develop these global competencies. However, it is not well understood how cultural patterns in different countries affect the factors associated with students' decisions to study abroad. These factors may differ between students from those identified as more 'individualistic' cultures, such as the United States (US) and Australia, and students from those identified as more 'collectivist' cultures such as Japan (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000). Understanding the factors that influence Japanese students' decisions to study abroad is especially critical in Japan, where the numbers of students participating in study abroad programs has declined dramatically over the past two

decades. Although participation in short-term study abroad programs has rebounded over the past few years (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2020), the downward trend continues for participation in long-term programs (Institute for International Education (IIE), 2019a; JASSO, 2020). The goal of this research is to explore the factors associated with current Japanese college student study abroad decisions from the perspective of study abroad administrators at Japanese universities.[1]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic increase in international student mobility. According to a report by the IIE (2019b), 5.3 million students studied outside of their home country in 2019, an increase from two million in 2001(165%). In the midst of the worldwide increase in student mobility during that period, one of the countries that has stood out as anomalous is Japan. The number of Japanese students studying in the US, which had been the most popular destination, declined by 61% from 46,872 students in 2000 to 18,105 students in 2019 (IIE, 2019a). This decline contrasts with other East Asian countries, such as Korea and China, where the trend has been in the opposite direction (IIE, 2019a; Park, 2016). For example, Korea, which has a population of just 51 million compared to 126 million in Japan, sent 52,250 students to the US in 2019. The downward trend in Japanese participation in study abroad is especially evident for longer term study abroad programs (Shimmi & Ota, 2018), with the number of Japanese students choosing to study abroad for more than one year accounting for less than 2% of all Japanese students who study abroad (JASSO, 2020).

Factors associated with Japanese college students' decisions to study abroad

Previous studies have suggested a wide range of factors associated with this decline in Japanese college students' participation in study abroad programs (e.g., Kuromiya et al., 2016; Ota, 2013; Park, 2016; Takehara et al., 2016). Some of the common factors identified in these studies are prohibitive financial burden, incompatibility with the Japanese academic calendar, lack of English ability and confidence, potential negative impact on future employment, and the "inward tendencies" of contemporary Japanese students.

Financial burden

A family's financial capacity can factor into the decision to send children to study abroad. The cost of study abroad in the West is viewed as one of the primary obstacles for Japanese college students (Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; Ota, 2013). In particular, the rising cost of college tuition in Western contexts has made the decision to study abroad even harder for Japanese students (Ota, 2013). That said, economic burden may not be the primary factor contributing to low participation by Japanese students in study abroad. Although Japan, China, and South Korea all experienced substantial growth in

[1] The original version of this paper was previously published as an online article at Child Research Net (www.childresearch.net). The revised paper is published here with permission from CRN. Child Research Net is a Japanese web-based child research institute promoting interdisciplinary and international activities under the philosophy "Children are our future". CRN's activities are supported by Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute.

purchasing power parity (PPP)[2] from 1999 to 2017 (Index Mundi, 2020), PPP increases in China and South Korea have been mirrored by substantial increases in participation in study abroad programs in the US. In Japan's case, the number of students studying abroad in the US has dropped by over 60% since 1999 (IIE, 2019b), even though Japan's PPP increased by nearly 84% over the same time period (Index Mundi, 2020). These divergent patterns among East Asian countries cast doubt on the validity of a straightforward economic explanation for decreasing participation by Japanese students in study abroad programs.

Incompatibility with the Japanese academic calendar

Japan's academic calendar has made it difficult for Japanese students, particularly at the post-secondary level, to take a break to participate in long-term study abroad experiences (Lassegard, 2013). The traditional Japanese university schedule, which starts in early April and ends the following March, differs from that of most universities outside Japan. This makes it challenging for Japanese universities to form exchange partnerships with foreign institutions.

Lack of English ability and confidence

Japan's English language curriculum is often faulted for its failure to develop communicatively competent or confident students who are able to gain admittance and succeed at foreign institutions (Hayase, 2017). In spite of substantial investment in English education (students study English from middle school through high school, and increasingly starting in elementary school), the average combined TOEFL score of Japanese students (72) is lower than students from other non-English-speaking countries in Southeast Asia, such as Korea (83), Taiwan (83), and China (81) (Education Testing Service, 2019). Several studies of Japanese students have revealed lack of language ability and confidence to be the first or second most common reason cited by Japanese students for not studying abroad (British Council, 2014; Takehara et al., 2016).

Negative impacts on employment prospects

The hiring patterns of employers in Japan often discourage students from participating in study abroad (Ota, 2013). Lack of incentive for gaining study abroad experience in relation to future employment was one of the common reasons cited by Japanese students as a reason for not studying abroad. About 70% of Japanese students do not think or do not know if employers value university graduates with study abroad experience (British Council, 2014). The traditional hiring schedule rigidly adheres to the Japanese academic calendar (Ota, 2013). Students who delay graduation or graduate on a different schedule get out-of-sync with the hiring cycle, which places them at a real or perceived disadvantage with their peers who remain in Japan.

Students' "inward tendencies"

The supposed "inward tendencies" of contemporary Japanese college students is another reason cited for Japanese students' non-participation in study abroad (Park, 2016). "Inward tendency" refers to a reluctance among contemporary Japanese students to venture beyond the comfort and security of the familiar, safe context of their home

[2] PPP is a measure that many economists prefer when looking at per-capita welfare.

country (Arima, 2014; Ota, 2013). Yet, some researchers have questioned this assessment of the current generation of Japanese students (e.g., Ota, 2014). Based on several surveys of Japanese youths' views on globalization, Ota (2014) concluded that Japanese youths typically fall into one of two categories: those who are strongly oriented toward study abroad and those who are weakly oriented toward study abroad. The latter group cited lack of English language ability, worries about living overseas, and not having an interest in living overseas as reasons for their hesitance.

Recent internationalization initiatives by Japanese Government

The decline over the past decade in the number of Japanese students studying abroad around the world compared to other countries in the region is of great concern to the Japanese government and the private sector (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2018). The resulting shortage of Japanese youth with cross-cultural competencies is viewed as a challenge to the long-term health of the Japanese economy and Japan's leadership role in the world. The Japanese government has recently introduced a number of initiatives aimed at developing a future workforce that has a more global mindset and experience, including the *Tobitate* Scholarship program, whose goal is to foster human resources that can succeed in the global field (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2020).

Justification for the current study

Most previous studies that investigated factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad have been based on opinions from experts and on student surveys (e.g. Kuromiya et al., 2016). To the authors' knowledge, no studies have investigated current trends in Japanese college students' study abroad participation from the perspective of professionals who work in university study abroad offices in Japan. Study abroad administrators work directly with current students at Japanese universities and are responsible for implementing university and government initiatives to encourage study abroad participation. Thus, they are in a unique position to evaluate Japanese government and university initiatives, and student motivational factors; understanding these administrators' perspectives may result in better-informed government initiatives and more effective ways to encourage greater study abroad participation. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine factors impacting the decisions of Japanese students to study abroad from the perspective of Japanese study abroad administrators based on in-depth interviews.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We employed a qualitative research method to capture the complex interplay of cultural and social factors that potentially influence a student's decision to study abroad. Specifically, we took a phenomenological approach, which is utilized to gain insight into the common or essential experiences of a group (Creswell, 1998). We reasoned that a phenomenological approach, which focuses on peoples' subjective lived experiences and their interpretations of those experiences, would be beneficial for identifying commonalities among the perceptions of these Japanese study abroad administrators, who are key players in the current efforts by universities to increase the number of Japanese students that study abroad.

In addition to a phenomenological approach, we used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for developing interview questions and analyzing data. According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), human development and behaviour are influenced by the environmental contexts in which an individual is directly or indirectly immersed. Ecological Systems Theory provides a scheme for systematically examining multiple factors influencing Japanese college students' study abroad decisions including factors in the students' immediate environments such as family, peers, and schools (Microsystem) and the relationships between these environments (Mesosystem). It also provides a scheme for examining the influence of systems that affect students more indirectly, including Japan's educational, economic, and political systems (Exosystem). The overarching attitudes and ideologies of Japanese culture (Macrosystem) are particularly important in evaluating factors associated with Japanese students' decisions and views toward study abroad. Finally, Ecological Systems Theory also provides a scheme for examining historical events, timing, transitions, and changes that occur over time, which are also critical for understanding the situation that current Japanese students face (Chronosystem).

Authors' background and epistemological assumptions

Both authors of this study have experience working at higher education institutions in Japan and the US. The first author, a US native, has worked as an international educator at universities in the US for 23 years in addition to his career as a college English instructor at a university in Japan for six years. As Director of International Programs at one of the institutions he worked for in the US, he administered a study abroad office for over three years. The second author is a Japanese native who has experience teaching at universities in both Japan and the US. We believe our backgrounds enable us to provide a thick description of the study participants' perceptions, which involves paying attention to contextual detail in interpreting social meaning and understanding its relevance (Schwandt, 2001).

Our epistemological assumption is that our experiences working in universities in both countries and working directly with Japanese students allow us to better understand and interpret interviewees' responses with greater depth. In order to mitigate distorting effects of our preconceptions and biases, the first author, who conducted the interviews, kept a reflective journal regarding the interview process, including his assumptions and feelings, so that he could assess his own preconceptions. These reflections were also shared with the second author. The approach was used as a means of "bracketing," which is a process through which a phenomenological researcher intentionally acts to mitigate the distorting effect of his bias and preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Method

Participant selection

All of the university study abroad program administrators who participated in this study had studied abroad themselves at various Western institutions. Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit Japanese study abroad administrators who (1) were working in international affairs/study abroad offices at Japanese universities at the time of the survey and (2) had received doctoral degrees from English-speaking institutions outside Japan. There were primarily two reasons for these sampling criteria. First, it was

anticipated that, because of their bi-cultural study abroad experiences and involvement in coordinating study abroad programs, they would be able to provide profound insight into students' motivations and the efforts of Japanese universities to promote study abroad. Second, it was assumed that individuals with these qualifications would be highly proficient in English and would be able to articulate their informed cross-cultural perspectives through in-depth interviews conducted in English.

The first author contacted potential research participants through connections made as a member of the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), which is the largest association of international educators in the world. Next, Japanese NAFSA members working at Japanese universities provided a list of potential participants from their professional networks in Japan. This was the most expedient means of contacting potential participants because international education offices at Japanese universities typically do not publish the email addresses of their staff on their websites.

A total of 15 study abroad administrators from 15 Japanese universities, including private and public universities, were initially recruited for the study through the first author's NAFSA connections. The initial screening process included explaining the details of the study and evaluating the educational and occupational background of each participant. Five of the 15 individuals contacted consented to participate in the study. All of the participants were women with terminal degrees from English-speaking institutions outside Japan. They had worked in an international office at a four-year university in Japan from two to 15 years. Three (Ai,[3] Rie, Yuri) worked at top-tier public universities, one (Mari) at a top-tier private university, and one (Kei) at a lower-tier public university. Four out of the five participants' institutions (Ai, Mari, Rie, Yuri) were located in large urban areas, while one (Ai) was located in a rural area. All of the participants' work involved the promotion of study abroad opportunities in the context of an office that promotes and supports study abroad.

Data collection

The Human Subjects Committee at the first author's institution granted authorization to conduct the interviews. Data collection took place over a period of four months in the spring of 2016. After initial contact or referrals, the first author contacted the potential participants via email to inquire if they would be willing to participate in the study. Once written consent was obtained, the participants were asked to answer two sets of interview questions. The questions were formulated based on Bronfenbrenner's multi-layered system of relationships (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). Specifically, those systems were divided into students' "immediate" environment (microsystem, mesosystem) comprising family, peer, and school, and the students' "distant" environment (exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) comprising the education system, employment system, government policy, culture, and time.

The interviews began with a framing question, "Tell me about the impact on your students' choice of whether or not to study abroad that the following more immediate environmental factors have had." Then the first author asked specifically about each immediate environmental factor (family, peers, school) and followed up on the

[3] Aliases have been used to protect participants' identities.

participant's response by asking for clarification or seeking concrete details (Seidman, 1998). The same procedure was followed for distant factors (education system, employment system, government policy, and culture and time), beginning with the framing question, "Tell me about the impact on your students' choice whether or not to study abroad that the following more distant environmental factors have had".

The responses to interview questions were collected via email (Kei, Yuri) or phone (Ai, Rie, Mari) depending on each participant's preference based on time considerations and level of comfort with the medium of communication. Three of the participants expressed a stronger preference for email communication because of the time difference between the US and Japan. They also felt that this would give them an opportunity to reflect on the questions and articulate their answers more concisely in English. Both groups were asked the same series of open-ended questions with follow-up questions according to their responses. As for the email interviews, follow up questions, clarification questions, and responses were handled via multiple emails. Because many Japanese study abroad administrators also teach, allowing as much flexibility and accommodation as possible with respect to the interview method helped us recruit a larger number of participants. Phone records were transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Data analysis

Kuckartz (2014) explained that it is not contradictory to construct categories inductively and deductively for analyzing qualitative data. First, we formulated initial categories based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (family, peers, school, education system, employment system, government policy, and culture and time). Next, we identified emerging themes through an inductive open-coding system within each category. This was a process of identifying and naming concepts, comparing the similarities and differences among concepts, and summarizing the concepts into themes.

To check for inter-coder agreement, the first and the second authors independently analyzed the data for the first two participants. The coding for themes were compared, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The two authors then came up with final rules for coding. The first author finished coding the remaining three participants.

RESULTS

To understand the factors affecting Japanese college students' choice to study abroad, we used Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development as a framework to analyze interviews with study abroad administrators at Japanese universities. Eight categories were created to represent the immediate environment (family, peers, school)[4] and distant environment (education system, employment system, government policy, culture, time) (Figure 1). Two to four themes emerged from each category. The frequencies of each theme are included in the figure.

[4] We excluded the question related to Mesosystem from our analyses because none of the participants had much to say.

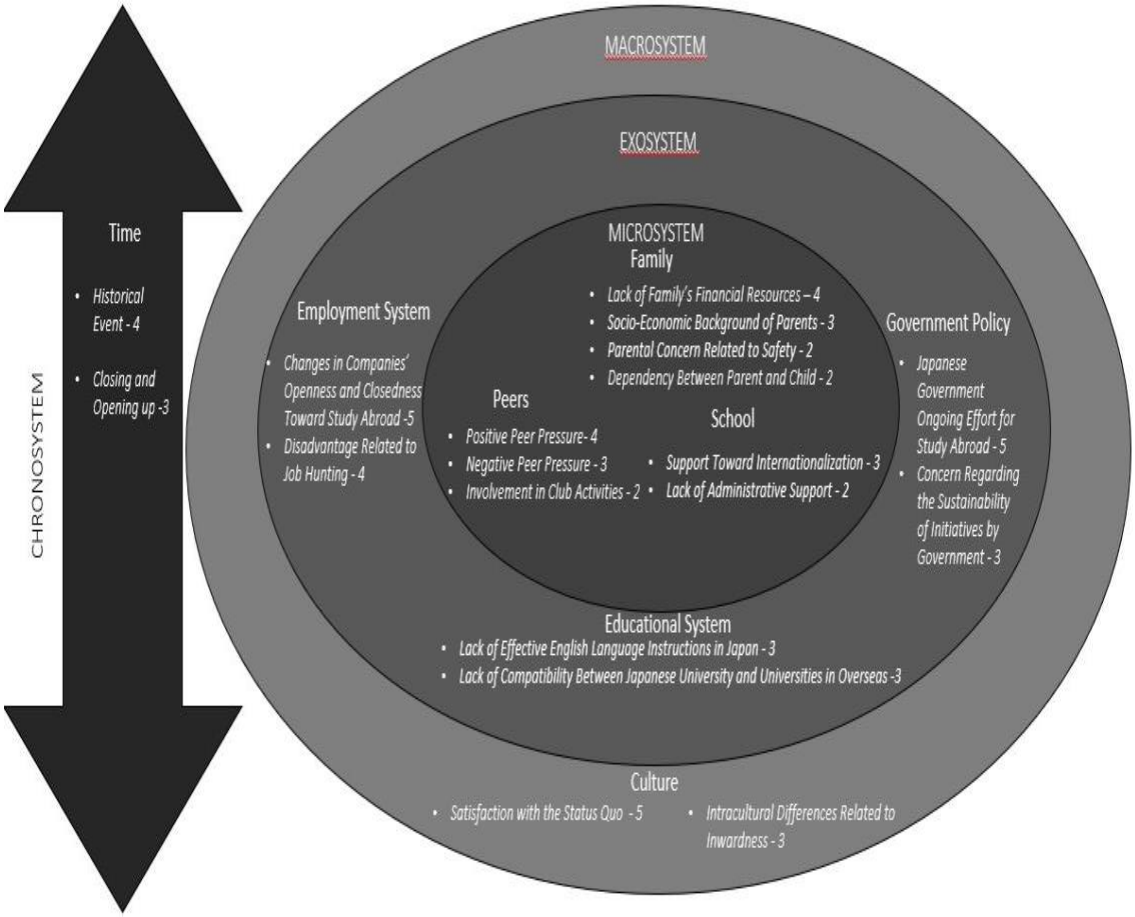

Figure 1. Themes related to Japanese college students' study abroad decisions based on Bronfenbrenner's Systems Theory

Immediate environment

Family

The main themes that emerged related to the family factor were *Lack of Family's Financial Resources*, *Socio-Economic Background of Parents*, *Parental Concern Related to Safety*, and *Dependency Between Parent and Child*. Four participants identified family financial support as a primary factor that influenced students' study abroad decisions (*Lack of Family's Financial Resources)*. Relatedly, *Socio-Economic Background of Parents* has influenced their perceptions toward their children's opportunities to study abroad. Rie explained:

> The family environment is quite different. As you know, a socioeconomic gap is increasing in Japan. There are a number of students at the poverty level who are struggling to get the money to attend universities.[5]

The participants noted that scholarships and government support are crucial to on-going efforts to encourage lower-income families and rural families to consider study abroad.

[5] The English grammar of the interviewees was corrected by the first author.

Parents often discourage their children from participating in study abroad due to safety concerns (*Parental Concern Related to Safety).* For example, Ai shared that parents canceled trips to France and Thailand after recent terrorist incidents. *Dependency Between Parent and Child* often becomes an obstacle related to Japanese students' decision to study abroad. Kei discussed the Japanese mother-child closeness as the obstacle to study abroad in terms of helicopter parents:

> They are too anxious about the future success of their kids. It seems that they want to continue the connected relationship they had when their kids were younger. This pattern negatively affects students' attitudes and choices regarding study abroad in the form of strong control.

Peers

The main themes that emerged related to peer factors were coded as *Positive Peer Pressure*, *Negative Peer Pressure*, and *Involvement in Club Activities.* Four of the participants identified different ways that *Positive Peer Pressure* impacted Japanese students' study abroad decisions. For example, returning or current study abroad students have a positive impact by lowering psychological hurdles to study abroad participation (e.g., "Many students are willingly updating photos on SNS (Facebook, Instagram, and Line) during study abroad to share their experience with their friends." (Kei)). The participants also pointed to the dominant Japanese cultural pattern of conformity to group norms in their discussion of study abroad. Ai noted that if they join a community where everyone studies abroad and enjoys intercultural learning, they are easily motivated to study abroad. However, peer pressure can also manifest itself mainly in a strong tendency to conform to the normative progression to graduation and the job search (*Negative Peer Pressure*). The participants indicated that if students perceive that they will be left behind by their peers in the job search, this can serve as a strong deterrent to study abroad participation.

Involvement in Club Activities tied with a strong group mentality in Japan, tends to discourage or distract students from participating in study abroad. Club activities are a big part of the life of college students in Japan. Consequently, even though students initially intended to study abroad, they ended up changing their minds (e.g., "My students sometimes come to me and say, 'Well, teacher, I am really enjoying my club activity, so I don't want to leave Japan.'" (Mari)).

School

The main themes that emerged related to school were coded as *Support Toward Internationalization* and *Lack of Administrative Support.* Three participants positively commented on the financial support for study abroad from higher administrators or alumni. For example, Rie talked about the scholarship for exchange students to study abroad that come from a university alumni group. At the same time, two participants also noted a *Lack of Administrative Support* for study abroad, due to institutional budget cuts or lack of financial resources. Ai expressed her frustration in relation to lack of staffing in the international office (e.g., "We always lack staff working for the university. A couple of the members tried to develop programs, but the staff complained because they cannot really handle all of the additional administrative work").

Distant environment

Education system

The main themes that emerged related to the education system were coded as *Lack of Effective English Language Instructions* and *Lack of Compatibility Between Japanese Universities and Universities in Overseas. Lack of Effective English Language Instructions* was addressed by three participants, as Japanese students often lack confidence in their English proficiencies. Kei explained that "Generally in Japan, English teachers focus on the grammar, reading, and vocabulary that will be on the test, especially entrance exams. Practical uses of English are often ignored". The three participants, however, recognized the recent positive changes being implemented by the Japanese government, such as teaching English beginning in elementary school and an increase of English taught courses at the college level.

Lack of Compatibility between Japanese Universities and Universities in Overseas often becomes an obstacle to students' decision to study abroad because it involves a risk of delayed graduation and additional educational expenses for students. Institutions sometimes failed to support students through their unwillingness to approve transfer credits for study abroad exchange programs. For example, Yuri noted that the differences in school schedules in Japan and universities overseas (such as starting early April vs. the end of August) discourage students from studying abroad.

Employment system

The main themes that emerged related to the economic factor were coded as Changes in *Companies' Openness and Closedness Toward Study Abroad,* and *Disadvantage Related to Job Hunting*. All participants made comments related to *Companies' Openness and Closedness Toward Study Abroad* returnees. Four participants pointed to different ways that recent changes in business circumstances and hiring practices have begun to favor students who chose to study abroad. Mari stated that "Japanese companies are increasingly evaluating students to determine whether they are globally-ready or globally-minded. Maybe students will receive that kind of message from companies and be encouraged to go overseas." According to the four participants, however, inward-minded business attitudes are still very common in Japan, which often make it difficult for returning study abroad students to find a job. Kei explained, "When they employ new graduates, they commonly give priority to graduates from prestigious Japanese universities and those with personal connections rather than students with experiences and skills acquired by studying abroad." She further indicated her concerns as "in extreme cases, students with study abroad experiences are negatively classified as individuals who failed to adjust to life in Japan . . . Returnees can be seen as too individualistic".

Disadvantage Related to Job Hunting was addressed by four participants as a reason for not doing study abroad. In Japan, students begin the process of looking for a job in their junior year and are typically hired immediately after graduation. Consequently, students who study abroad are sometimes excluded from this regimented process. This rigidly timed hiring schedule often discourages students from doing study abroad out of concern that their peers will gain an advantage over them in the job search. For example, Mari shared the experience of returning study abroad students:

> Most of the time, they must start job hunting activities quite soon after returning to Japan. Job hunting activities, norms, and customs are distinctly Japanese, so they really have to follow all the rituals of meeting people who are older and adjusting to the company culture.

Government policy

All of the participants acknowledged the positive contribution of the current government and private sector initiatives to send more Japanese students to study abroad (*Japanese Government Ongoing Effort for Study Abroad*). For example, Kei said, "The Japanese government has been doing really well as far as providing funding for universities and sending more students out".

At the same time, three participants expressed *Concern Regarding the Sustainability of Initiatives by the Government* at universities, such as (1) strict rules and restrictions regarding the usage of government funds, (2) reductions/shortages of government funding after the initial approval, (3) instability of government funding based on political changes, and (4) unequal distribution of government funding (mostly distributed to top universities). Mari said that "We wrote all the proposals and action plans based on the funding that we expected to receive, but the amount was reduced. We still need to keep our promises in our proposal, but that is impossible".

Culture

The two themes that emerged from the cultural factor were *Satisfaction with the Status Quo* and *Intracultural Differences Related to Inwardness.* The participants described the characteristics of contemporary Japanese students as a cultural pattern of satisfaction and complacency (*Satisfaction with the Status Quo*). Ai explained that her students used to be more adventurous, but they are now comfortable in their nice friend circle, and they just do not want to go out. Mari described her students as not being willing to take risks, face severe challenges, or change.

Three participants pointed out *Intracultural Differences Related to Inwardness*. In particular, two participants mentioned that female students are more willing to take the risk to study abroad if they have opportunities and resources when compared to male students. Mari described the two opposite patterns related to inwardness: "Some parts of Japanese societies are opening up quickly and really aggressively, but the rest of Japanese society is really closing and inward-looking. I see the gap between those two different types of people".

Time

The main themes that emerged related to time and socio-historical conditions were coded as *Historical Events* and *Closing and Opening up*. *Historical Events* impact Japanese student openness to participating in study abroad. One feature of current historical events is the patterns of international tensions and terrorist acts, both internationally and in Japan's geographical region, East Asia. For example, at the time of this study, there was growing political tension between Japan and China, which resulted in a declining number of Japanese students studying abroad in China, according to Ai. Yuri and Ai. They also pointed to recent natural disasters that had occurred in Japan (e.g., Tohoku earthquake in 2011), and the subsequent economic difficulties the country experienced, as having a significant impact on study abroad participation.

Three participants commented on the particular historical context that students find themselves in and its impact on Japanese students' openness or closedness to participating in study abroad (*Closing and Opening Up*). One implicit example of the recurrence of this theme was Kei's description of the way that businesses in Japan were opening up due to the pressures of globalization, but also were struggling to adjust to these new realities and unable to change some of their traditional practices to create a welcoming environment for returning study abroad students. Yuri explained that the institutions are trending toward globalization, which subsequently affects study abroad trends as follows:

> Our students see changing patterns in academic culture. We have more international scholars than before, and many professors go to international conferences and have international collaborations. These influence students to think about the importance of overseas experiences.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that impact the decisions of Japanese college students to study abroad from the perspectives of Japanese study abroad administrators. As found in previous literature (e.g., Kuromiya et al. 2016; Ota, 2013; Park, 2016; Takehara et al., 2016), the current study also identified a wide variety of environmental factors associated with contemporary Japanese students' choice to study abroad, such as financial burden, incompatibility with the Japanese university schedules and curriculum, the inwardness of Japanese students, and the lack of English ability and confidence. Our study specifically identified mixed views regarding some of the key issues affecting contemporary Japanese students' decisions to study abroad: (1) Japanese corporate hiring practices and business culture, (2) Japanese students' inwardness, (3) Japanese government internationalization initiatives, and (4) financial barriers to study abroad. Furthermore, our findings suggested an association between Japanese cultural patterns and students' study abroad decisions: (1) conformity and harmonious relations and (2) dependency between parent and child. Based on the findings of this study, we will discuss research implications for a variety of constituents, which include policymakers and university administrators in Japan, admissions and recruiting personnel at universities outside of Japan, and study abroad researchers.

In our study, Japanese corporate hiring practices and business culture were referenced as an obstacle for Japanese students' decision to study abroad, which was also identified in previous research (Lassegard, 2013). The responses from the participants revealed concerns related to the timing of the job search, the lack of enthusiasm in hiring students with study abroad experience, and delays in graduation. However, the participants also noted an increase in the global mindset of some large Japanese corporations, which might influence the vision of life trajectories for contemporary students. Along with globalization, Japanese companies recently started underscoring the importance of diversity management (Takai, 2016). Future research may benefit from exploring the 'global' mindset of Japanese companies in relation to the recent emphasis on diversity.

Our findings support previous literature suggesting that Japanese students' satisfaction with the status quo and lack of confidence and initiative are often a hindrance to study abroad (Kuromiya et al., 2016; Ota, 2014). As pointed out by Ota, our study also found

two categories of Japanese youths concerning inwardness, a group that is strongly orientated toward study abroad and a group with a weak orientation toward study abroad. Female college students appear to be more open to study abroad compared to their male counterparts. Japanese female students' generally stronger aspiration toward internationalization was also found in a recent study of Japanese college students (Arima, 2014; Kawano, 2013). Based on the survey conducted of Japanese college students, Arima found that female students had more frequent exposure to different cultures than male students, and more positive attitudes toward working abroad and marrying non-Japanese than male counterparts. In relation to this notion, future researchers may find it profitable to analyze the benefits of study abroad, paying specific attention to career trajectory differences between male and female students. According to the World Economic Forum (2015), Japan has the worst gender gap, next to South Korea, among all industrial nations.

Most of the participants in this study agree that the recent increase in study abroad participation is due in part to the on-going Japanese government internationalization initiatives. Some participants did express concerns, however, about the sustainability of these programs when and if this support comes to an end. In addition, as addressed by Rappleye and Vickers (2015), concerns related to the increasing workload of faculty and international officers as a result of this political effort were expressed by some of the participants. This finding suggests the importance of prioritizing international endeavors at the institutional level and adjusting the budget in a way that will maintain programs that begin with an infusion of resources initially provided by the central government and a recognition of the need for adequate staffing.

Regarding the financial burden as a factor related to study abroad for Japanese college students (Ota, 2013), the current study found increasing economic disparities between Japanese students. The Japanese international affairs' administrators perceived and reported a significant difference in family incomes, which made it difficult for low-income or rural families to pay for study abroad. In addition, there was a difference in career trajectory between the wealthy (predominantly urban dwellers) and poorer, low-income or rural Japanese students. Students from rural areas see themselves in careers that do not necessarily reward those with international experience, while students from urban areas, especially those attending top-tier universities, perceive the benefits of working in global industries and the rewards of international experience. This finding has implications for policymakers. Based on these findings, the government should consider providing more *Tobitate* scholarships to individual students at a variety of institutions, especially students from low-income families, rather than additional funds for select targeted institutions.

The Japanese cultural pattern of conformity and harmonious relations (Davies & Ikeno, 2002) was also identified in this study. Along with parental expectations, students' study abroad choices were often related to the norms of the groups that they associated with (peer pressure) and their immersive involvement in school club activities (Shimmi & Ota, 2018). Shimmi and Ota explained that Japanese college students' participation and priority in club activities is one of the reasons for their preference for "super-short-term" study abroad programs. This finding coincides with the results of a cross-cultural study of Japanese college students (Tsuboi, 2013). Compared to college students in other Eastern Asian countries, Japanese students are mostly categorized as "collegiate" types who tend to enjoy social life on campus more than academic achievement. It

would seem helpful and important for study abroad administrators to consider different ways that they can take advantage of peer influence and design programs that take this dynamic into account. Two ways to do this would be to work directly with student clubs to design study abroad programs and make sure institutions take full advantage of returning students to expose current students to the benefits of study abroad.

Another cultural pattern found in this study was the dependent relationship between parent and child in Japan. Historically, beliefs about cultivating closeness between parent and child have been emphasized in Japanese parenting, which is believed to be a precursor for academic success in Japan (Rothbaum et al., 2000). The pattern of contemporary Japanese parents and children, revealed in this study, is a desire to remain dependent and an experience of separation anxiety when considering study abroad. Although 'helicopter parents' who pay extremely close attention to a child's academic experience also exist in Western contexts, Japanese parenting may be slightly different because many children also prefer to remain dependent. Rather than resisting parental involvement as an intrusion into the student's life and an obstacle, study abroad administrators may need to consider creative ways that they can persuade parents of the value of study abroad and team up with them in their efforts to convince students to study abroad.

Based on the findings from this research and our review of the current literature, we would like to make a few recommendations for higher education professionals overseas, who are interested in attracting more Japanese students. First, it may be helpful to remain as flexible as possible regarding English language requirements. While Japanese students do not generally score as high on the TOEFL compared to student in other nations, Japanese students receive a lot of English training from elementary school and are often 'false beginners'. So, for example, it would be helpful to consider accepting other English standardized tests such as *Eiken*, an English language test conducted by a Japanese public-interest incorporated foundation. Second, given the situation with COVID, universities should seek to bridge students into their degree programs by offering online courses in partnership with Japanese universities. Online coeducational courses are currently being strongly promoted in Japan (Porter, 2020). There are advantages to starting a degree online before traveling to the host country, and that configuration should be creatively pursued.

CONCLUSION

Several limitations of this study should be kept in mind. First, the sample was small and not random. As mentioned earlier, the lack of staffing at international offices in Japanese higher education made it difficult to recruit participants. Some of the study abroad administrators were also teaching faculty, along with responsibilities related to study abroad, which subsequently made it difficult to spare time for in-depth interviews. In addition, many international offices at Japanese universities post limited email information for their staff and, therefore, it was difficult to recruit many participants. Second, all but one of the participants were from top-tier universities and were recruited from the largest international educators' organization, NAFSA. This may have excluded some personnel from international offices with smaller university budgets that cannot support NAFSA membership and conference participation. The findings of this research might have been different if the participants had been from universities with lower financial resources, prestige, and support from the Japanese government.

Despite the limitations mentioned above, to the authors' knowledge, this was the only study that analyzed factors associated with Japanese students' decision to study abroad from the perspective of professionals who promote, encourage, and support student decisions to study abroad. In addition, the participants' bi-cultural experience (Japan and Western contexts) contributed to their ability to critically evaluate the characteristics of current Japanese college students as well as on-going globalization efforts by the Japanese government, corporations, and higher education institutions through an implicit comparative lens. Further research is needed to develop effective strategies for encouraging Japanese students to study abroad through an increase in sample size and by systematically recruiting the study abroad administrators from a wide range of regions and levels. Such research would not only extend our understanding of globalization in Japan, but also inform policy and practice in ways that will encourage more study abroad participation in Japan and other nations.

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