"Getting out of the bubble": Motivations of International Study for young women in The Netherlands

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Abstract:

This research explores the motivations and experiences of young women studying abroad in the Netherlands in their pursuit of international study. The research was felt to be needed due to the evident gap within existing literature surrounding the motivations for international study and also to address the lack of focus on women's experiences more specifically. A total of 15 interviews were conducted with female students studying at the University of Groningen, in line with grounded methodology. The results of this study show that the decision to pursue study abroad in the Netherlands can be divided into three topics; the decision to pursue higher education, the decision to study outside country of origin and the choice of destination. When deciding to pursue study abroad generally the following motivating concepts were created by the researcher during analysis: 'escaping prejudice', 'independent personality', 'new experiences' and 'influenced/Inspired'. Each concept describes an aspect of identity or experiences which the women of this study found influential in making the decision to study abroad. Overall, this study is useful in indicating that a fresh and inductive approach is required for investigations into study abroad motivations, and that further research is required to explore the female over-representation within international study.

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1. Introduction

Studying abroad is now almost universally promoted and encouraged within higher educational institutes, with the European Commission encouraging a standard of 20% of all graduates having spent some time abroad during their studies (Van Mol, 2014). There is a widely held opinion that exposure to various cultures encourages openness and integration, as well as enhancing job opportunities and language skills (Jessop-Anger, 2008). As cultural diversity has grown in all nations, universities have also made a concerted effort to attract international students not only for diversity and associated prestige but also as they are able to charge higher fees to these individuals (Sovic & Blythman, 2012). In 2007 more than 3 million students studied outside their country of origin, which is an increase from the approximately 1.9 million international students reported in 2000 (OECD, 2009). Erasmus, the leading European organiser of international study, is the main entry point for most European students to access international study and in 2013-2014 the organisation recorded a total of 272,497 mobile students (European Commission, 2015). This is not solely a European trend of growth as it has also been identified in the US where the number of international students has also been steadily increasing, reaching 271,000 in 2010-2011 (Twombley et al., 2012).

Initially international students were predominately drawn to Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, Australia and the US, however non-English speaking countries such as Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands now also attract large international student populations (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). In the Netherlands, it was the success of an International Management Program at the University of Masstricht in 1987 which promoted the development of further international programs within, not only the Netherlands but, the whole of Europe. In 2017 the Netherlands had the fifth highest percentage of international students in Europe. Over 11% of students in higher education originated from outside of the Netherlands, predominately originating from other European Union Nations (CBS, 2019). The Netherlands attracts a large majority of German students, however despite the proximity many authors have indicated that these students may still experience elements of culture shock due to differences in education styles and teaching methods (Tempelaar et al., 2007).

International study is a rich and complex topic that has produced a large body of research. Many authors have attempted to address the consequences of studying abroad, its benefits and drawbacks on the students themselves as well as the host countries, to either condemn or promote the practice in different contexts. Adaptation and integration, success or failure, has been most commonly investigated (Ibrahim, 1990, Kitsantas, 2004), with authors focusing on how students are shaped by their experiences of studying and living abroad (Sovic & Blythman, 2012, Rienties et al., 2012), how language barriers are broken down (Howard, 2019, Pellegrino Aveni, 2005) and the emotional and psychological toll that culture shock can have on young people in new surroundings (Hajar, 2019, Miller, 1993, Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

However, one of the more overlooked areas of the phenomenon of international study is the motivations for students to do so. In addition, there has been limited consensus regarding the causal factors for the gender imbalance that has been well documented in the stock of international students. The 2018 Erasmus+ annual report stated that out of their student population, 61% were women (European Commission, 2019), and Van Mol (2021) identified that over-representation of women is occurring across all subjects and consistent in all countries. Timmerman et al. (2018) argue that studies into migration dynamics require a theoretical background rooted in gender, as gender roles, relationships and identities are contextually embedded and have an impact on all stages of the migratory process. Many authors argue, not only that migration systems are gendered but, that individual circumstances, familial relationships, wider economic context, transportation, and systems of knowledge are also gendered. As a result of these cumulative factors, female migration may be discouraged or encouraged at certain times and places (Sinke, 2006). Focus on push and pull facets of migration have directed the discourse often around external stimulus rather than internal motivating factors. This gap can only be addressed by redirecting the topic towards the subjects themselves as independent agents, who are influenced by internal drivers as well as environment and relationships.

The over-representation of women within international study has been broached on occasion by authors such as Bryant & Soria, 2015, Van Mol, 2021, and Lee et al., 2009, all of whom suggested varying causal factors. For example, there are suggestions that male students are more influenced by

peer interaction whereas women are encouraged by authority figures and their own academic progress (Bryant & Soria, 2015). Van Mol (2021) additionally posited that parents played a crucial role in encouraging the pursuit of international study, particularly for daughters. However, this was the result of Van Mol's (2021) application of Personal Investment Theory (PIT) to existing survey data, to identify correlations between parental education levels and study abroad participation through the lens of gender. As a result of trying to apply PIT and limited data produced by surveys from as far back as 2006, other motivating factors were not included, thus limiting the scope of the study. As the study was quantitative it can only identify patterns and correlations instead of allowing understanding of personal motivations directly from students themselves.

Other research has looked more into the personality factors which might make an individual more likely to pursue international study. For example, Lee et al (2009) argued that the rising trend of Korean women pursuing higher education in the United States was due to the emergence of "female alpha psychology" (p. 1217), denoted by the possession of confidence, strong ego, and determination to succeed and outperform their male counterparts. This links to research which has hinted at the presence of a 'migrant personality', suggesting that certain personality types are more drawn towards international study (Gomà-i-Freixanet, 2016). Since studies have indicated that men and women across cultures define their personalities in similar ways, it could be argued that female personality traits align more with, or facilitate, youth mobility (Costa et al, 2001).

However, these existing studies draw on surveys and preconceived theoretical frameworks based on existing literature to identify relationships between women and their overrepresentation in international study. Often rigid hypotheses guide the research, with researchers hoping to prove or disprove their initial belief which prevents the exploration of other factors. Additionally, secondary survey data often limits the scope of interacting motivators and does not allow for a deeper understanding of personal experiences which might prove important if more directly investigated. A qualitative approach would be more beneficial in revealing the relevance and extent of personality as a factor and allow for more nuance when capturing international students' motivations. Inductive, qualitative research is largely missing from the literature, suggesting a disconnect between theory and the actual subjects of the research themselves. Research and theory that is built upon qualitative

descriptions of experiences and perspectives of female students themselves (rather than an extension of existing concepts and theory) using a grounded analytical approach, has been overlooked and therefore current literature fails to represent the narratives of international students themselves.

1.1. Objectives & Research Questions

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the motivations of young women to pursue international study in the Netherlands. Women were specifically chosen due to an absence of focus on women's experiences within this research topic, despite an over-representation of women within the international student stocks (European Commission, 2019, Van Mol, 2021). Additionally, it was felt that the unique standpoint of these women was a valuable resource, capable of providing entirely distinctive findings and a voice to an overlooked subject.

The key research question was designed to understand the motivators behind women's decision to pursue international study. To explore and discuss these factors in relative isolation, participants were also questioned regarding their motives to pursue higher education outside of their country of origin or long-term residence to reveal how the attraction to international study is different from the elements encouraging homeland higher education. Follow up questions related to the ways in which gender identity and relations were felt to impact young women's decision to study abroad and how the Netherlands specifically was selected by the women as a destination country.

The primary research question is: 'How do young women decide to pursue International study, at the higher education level?' and so ultimately why do women migrate for higher education, using the Netherlands specifically as a case study.

Once research began, and through the use of memoing, it was evident that the research question is essentially comprised of three identifiable aspects; the decision to pursue higher education, the decision to pursue study outside of the country of origin, and thirdly the decision of where to study. Therefore, further questions relating to the research question probed possible influences on decision making, destination rationale and the perceptions of international study compared to domestic study/study in country of residence or origin. To ensure a gendered lens was used to investigate these

aspects, additional questions and analyses explored women's over-representation in international student stocks by discussing female role models, understandings of personal identity which are felt to be tied to their gender and their perceived position as women in their home societies, as well as globally.

1.2. Academic and Societal Relevance

Within the existing literature, there has been a limited focus on qualitative and inductive research methods to explore the topic of motivators for international study, which has kept the focus on pre-existing theory and concepts that are potentially outdated or lack a female-centric framework. This research takes an exploratory look at the phenomena of women studying abroad to determine the driving factors influencing women's decision to pursue international study.

This study adds to the literature on international study and pinpoints additional aspects that may require further exploration. Insight into the migratory choices and experiences of young people for higher education may provide useful for better understanding the migratory habits of professionals in the future as well as understanding the next generation's migration patterns. Additionally, it has been established that governments and educational institutes alike promote international study for its perceived benefits and so understanding why women make the decision to study abroad could assist in encouraging even greater participation in the future.

2. Literature Review

To trace the theoretical historical patterns of research on this topic, many researchers have drawn on migration theories more generally and research has shown that women comprise most international migrants (Oishi, 2002). This section explores the ways in which women have been studied with regards to their mobility and again highlights the lack of focus on women in isolation, despite their comprising the majority of international migration. It was at one time assumed that women followed the patriarchal figures in their lives, but evidence now indicates that women are more likely to independently migrate than men (Oishi, 2002). Oishi (2002) investigated factors that influence the temporary migration of unskilled Asian women by drawing on existing migration theories. These were Neo-Classic Economic Theory, Network Theory, Structural Theory and Household Strategy Theory. These theories observe the patterns within different women's demographics and seek to understand female migration however the impact of gender and gender relations themselves are not the key focus.

Economic theory draws on the established idea that mobility is dependent on economic factors, such as labor supply and demand, earning potential and relative GDP of the sending and receiving countries. This has established links to international study, which has often been promoted as a way of becoming a more competitive member of the international labor market, due to intercultural experience being favored by transnational employers (Jessup-Anger, 2008). Network Theory is often discussed with regards to migration as it is widely assumed that migration is more likely to occur if an individual has social relationships and networks which facilitate movement to a certain area, through the provision of social support but also through support with the practical aspects of mobility, integration, and employment (Oishi, 2002). Students may also be drawn to study in a certain foreign nation due to previously established social networks and ties to the country, which make the prospect of migration less daunting. Structural theory implies a certain degree of exploitation of migrants from less developed nations by larger more developed and industrialized nations which manipulate existing structures to attract migrants. This can be identified within migration patterns of students within Europe, with 83% of all foreign students choosing to study in

G20 countries, while 77% of all foreign students are enrolled in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (OECD, 2013).

In their study, Oishi (2002) questioned the validity of Household Strategy theory based on Census data showing that poorer households send more members abroad (therefore implying that the decision is made for the benefit of the household rather than the individual). Oishi's (2002) study revealed that women often made the independent decision to migrate from their households; additionally, they argued that this theory does not account for differences in migration patterns of different origin countries. The study also highlights the vulnerability of women and their exposure to exploitation, abuse, and oppression as migrants. Although this study featured unskilled Asian women—rather than women pursuing higher education more generally—it links to the wider research surrounding migration motivations for women, particularly in highlighting the perceived strength of familial relationships and the impact of gender related vulnerability in forming the decision.

Ruyssen and Salomone (2018) reference economic theory as becoming increasingly pertinent to female migration in line with rising economic independence of women but focus predominately on migration as a means of escaping conflict, persecution, and environmental degradation. However, key focus is given to the impact of gender-based discrimination and its relationship to the female 'brain drain', which alludes to the migration of educated women. Ruyssen and Salomone (2018) evaluate several studies which have sought to determine the connection between discrimination and female migration, weighing up the opposing views that restrictions on women produce a 'push effect' but at the same time could also prevent migration through social mechanisms, as well as through physical restrictions on female mobility. Many studies have indicated that higher levels of discrimination result in a higher 'brain drain', however there is little consensus regarding the correct indicator for gender discrimination, therefore making statistical results based on specific indicators open to dispute (Ruyssen & Salomone, 2018).

Jolly et al. (2005) also reference the escape of discrimination as a factor influencing women's migration, along with economic factors and the significance of the household and family not only in encouraging or preventing migration but also in creating the conditions of gender norms. Therefore, female students may view migration for higher education as a means of escaping restrictive norms and

discrimination, as well as an opportunity to broaden their economic potential. Rather than seek to solely observe gender differences or gender relation structures which promote or prevent migration, the purpose of this research is to explore all the experiences which guide women to pursue higher education abroad. The focus will be on women but not in the ways they differ from men, instead providing a voice to the experiences of women, which is often overlooked or automatically linked with gender-power structures, or gender inequality.

Students constitute a minority within international migrant stocks; however, several studies have investigated their motivations, perceptions, and experiences, prior to, during and after concluding, their time abroad. Cuzzocrea and Manich (2016) questioned students regarding their imagined futures and identified that travel was a significant element of young people's futures as they described a desire for new experiences, freedom, and new cultural perspectives. This was interpreted as revealing youth agency as it alluded to a search for identity and situating oneself within the world. Motivation for studying abroad could therefore be interpreted as being an extension of youth agency and evidence of a trend among young people to travel to search for their identity and enjoy varied experiences. This study looked predominately at how young people express their agency through travel aspirations, however it was not related directly towards young people pursuing higher education and so further exploration would be needed to identify if studying abroad could also be an expression of agency that women specifically relate to.

The long-term economic benefits of higher education are generally perceived to be strong motivators for international study, as outlined in Neo-Classical Economic Theory (Lewis, 1954, Oishi, 2002), particularly due to an increasingly globalized workforce (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) conducted student focus groups and questionnaires in India, Taiwan, Indonesia, and China over a period of several years to identify the 'push' and 'pull' factors of international study and the ways in which they interact to inform decisions to study abroad. 'Push factors' refer to aspects which cause the individual to leave their country of origin while 'pull factors' refer to the elements which inform the choice of host country. Key push motivations were largely academic deficiencies in the country of origin and a desire to explore or gain understanding of the 'West'. Although significant in its illustration of motivating factors, Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002)

study is rooted in established theoretical frameworks on this topic, namely McMahon's (1992) study in international student flows. It is not built from the data itself but rather assigns established concepts and pre-existing theory to confirm a set of hypotheses and therefore is perpetuating potentially outdated ideas.

Haisley and Grandorff (2021) advocate for more empirical approaches towards the international student population, and therefore conducted cross-sectional surveys to identify study abroad motivations of international students studying within the US as well as from students originating from the US. Several factors arose from a theoretical background of Human Capital Theory and International Education flows as described by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). These motivations were 'Language Learning', 'Cultural Exploration', 'Travel and Tourism', 'Academic Enrichment', 'Personal Escape', 'Avoid Social Limitations', desire to 'Work in Another Country', and 'Attitude Toward Host Country'. Quantitative studies on this topic, although useful in identifying larger patterns and trends, often reduce the experiences of individuals into confirmations of preconceived hypotheses which can be more easily generalized for mass appeal, thus participants have less opportunity to describe and explore their experiences in the way that qualitative studies would allow. Rather than generating new theory or seeking to reflect the lived experiences of the participants, this study was heavily influenced by existing literature, which the constructivist grounded theory approach mitigates through the emphasis on an inductive methodology which is aware of existing literature but not directed by it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Salisbury et al. (2009) conducted surveys to identify the processes which lead to US students studying abroad by using different types of capital as the underlying theoretical framework, namely social capital, cultural capital, and financial capital. All these facets were identified as being positively related to participation in studying abroad, with gender also being considered influential due to the higher participation rates of female students. This study was based on longitudinal data collected from first year students at numerous higher education institutes, the majority of which had a liberal arts focus. The study was concerned with the attributes and identity traits that the students had prior to starting their higher education, which necessarily drew them to the option of studying abroad, rather than observing the individual decision-making processes of students. The proposed research seeks to

explore the motivations which led to a decision being made, however the characteristics and attributes of the individual will not be overlooked if revealed to be significant. This research is also contextually embedded as it does not explore the topic over a long period of time, like Salisbury's longitudinal study, but rather provides a snapshot of a specific period. This is significant as the objective is not to provide a comparison of experiences over time but rather gain a sense of how women describe and reflect on their experiences at a certain time in their lives, namely while they are young and still in the process of gaining higher education. The focus is also on long-term study, i.e., obtaining an entire qualification over multiple years outside of country of origin, as opposed to short term study abroad semesters or exchanges which are less of a commitment.

Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015) additionally based their research on students' motivations for international study upon Salisbury's theoretical framework of capital acquired in the years before higher education. The key aspects increasing individuals' chances of studying abroad were artistic ability as well as individuals' desire to broaden cultural understanding, be satisfied with their college experience, participate in student clubs, socialize with friends, and pursue an advanced degree. Salisbury and Luo and Jamieson-Drake observe participation in short-term study abroad programs rather than long-term international study but are relevant in highlighting the importance of previous education and artistic or liberal backgrounds in determining the decision to study abroad.

2.1. Preliminary Conceptual Model

Based on the literature, I proposed the following preliminary conceptual model.

Pursuit of International study at the higher education level is at the intersection of migration and higher education and therefore many have approached the overlap of motivations and experiences of both those seeking to migrate or simply travel and those seeking to pursue further study. This conceptual model was the initial structure based on the literature review, however as this research seeks to inductively construct a theoretical framework, the final conceptual model as discussed in the findings chapter differs from this as participants shared their experiences and revealed their motivations. Additionally, as there is limited existing literature which looks specifically at the

research question or at women's experiences of international study in isolation, this conceptual model is not directly linked to the research objectives but instead is indicative of the more generalised background of this topic in order to create a foundation of awareness but did not necessarily inform the direction of the study. It is also representative of the researcher's position in understanding the topic and interpreting information through breaking it down into sub-categories.

Primarily the literature review sought to determine motivations for mobility and did so through researching the perspectives of migration theories generally as well as female/gender mobility theories, the key motivations identified for both of these are depicted above. The intersection of two theories, which is being explored through this research, is women's motivations to participate in international study. The motivations previously identified for international study generally are shown on the right-hand side of the diagram but may not necessarily resonate with female students' experiences.
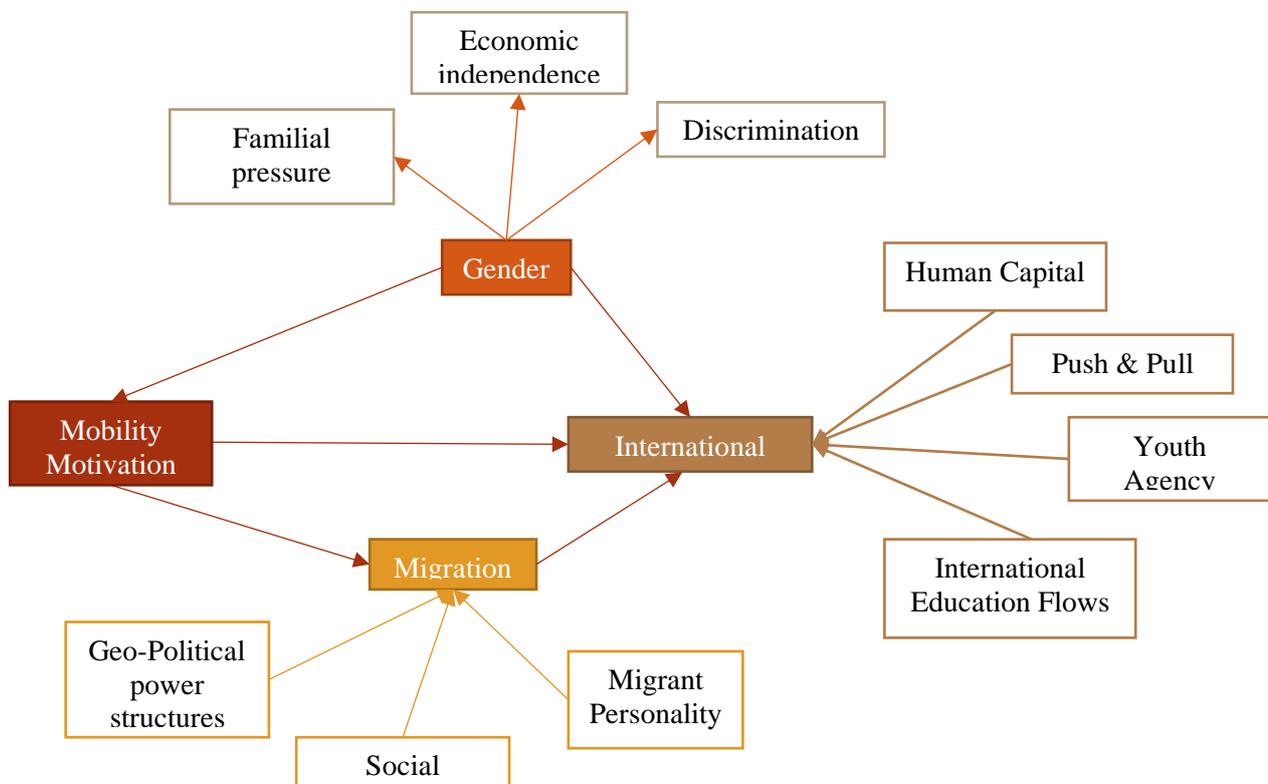

Figure 1. Preliminary Conceptual Model

2.2. Expectations

There are no set hypotheses for this research however there are certain expectations arising from the existing literature as well as the context of the study. For example, it was anticipated that it would be difficult if not impossible to avoid mention or description of the recent COVID19 pandemic and its influence on students' travel patterns and plans. Additionally, as women are the sole participants of this study it was expected that references would be made regarding gender, either overtly or subconsciously, and the way it shapes certain experiences and provides a unique lens through which the decision to study abroad was made. It was likely that references to familial relationships would be made as the literature indicated this may be a more pertinent factor of consideration for women. Additionally, references to youth agency were expected as mentioned in the review of Cuzzocrea and Manich's study (2016). There was also an expectation that desire to obtain certain social capital would constitute a significant motivator for international study resulting from the understanding within the literature that employers and educators alike promote and value studying abroad.

These expectations will be compared to the ultimate findings of this study to again provide comparison to the prevailing views of the existing literature.

3. Methodology

As this research explores the experiences motivating women to study abroad, it requires the production of qualitative data which is highly contextualized and interpretive (Hennink et al., 2020). Inductive reasoning was used for the conducting this research, so rather than seeking to test a hypothesis, hypotheses are generated though the interplay of data collection and analysis. This research takes an exploratory focus, seeking to understand the perspectives and experiences of women in relation to international study. This is in line with a phenomenological framework which focuses on interactions and experiences of individuals within a specific context to observe their subjective feelings, thoughts, and insights into a particular life event—in this case, their personal connection to and understanding of their own international study (Wisker, 2011).

Grounded theory provides the basis of this research analysis and data collection but, more specifically, constructivist grounded methodology is the form which is used throughout to gather and analyze data (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory forms the foundation of this research, as it is the version which will be most insightful when addressing the research objective. The women participating in this study have unique and contextually situated knowledge and understandings of their own experiences, while the researcher recognises that they too have situated knowledge which could impact the interpretation of data. As a result, it is key to address the point that knowledge and theory generated during this study is constructed in interaction by the individual and the researcher, both of whom have complex personal backgrounds and systems of understanding and interpretation. Prior research has focused either on *quantitative methods,* which sought to identify general patterns and trends within international study or *qualitative methods,* which had predetermined theories and frameworks which sought to confirm or deny established hypotheses. For example, Mazzarol and Soutar's quantitative study (2002) of push-pull factors utilised survey data from several countries and over the period of several years. The questionnaires were translated into the respective languages and a wide variety of students were questioned from those entering secondary school to post-graduates. The vast nature of this study, which sought primarily to prove the existence of push-pull factors, although useful in identifying correlations, could not go into any real detail as to why students felt motivated to pursue international study or select a specific country of destination. The study provided little insight into the decision-making processes of the students and did not attempt to differentiate based on factors of age, gender, or socio-economic status. To direct this body of knowledge back to the experiences of the subjects themselves, a grounded theory approach is needed so that data can be inductively explored, and theory built as it arises rather than in adherence to preconceived hypotheses. The voices of the students which were being studied within previous literature have become somewhat diminished throughout these deductive research processes, therefore grounded theory is used to remain close to the actual experiences of female students and investigate their motivations for international study without the dominance of pre-formed expectations or hypotheses.

3.1.Paradigm

The key approach for this research is grounded theory and therefore qualitative data will be collected to explore the experiences of women studying abroad and their motivations for doing so. Grounded theory was established by Glaser and Strauss in their seminal book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Fundamentally, Glaser and Strauss were disillusioned with the process of verifying existing theory rather than focusing on the creation of new theory and therefore they formulated a new research approach with inductive principles and a number of associated methodological features; namely, the constant comparison method, theoretical sampling and saturation, coding, and memo writing (Kenny & Fourie, 2014).

Over time, a divide emerged between the perspectives of Glaser and Strauss concerning the future direction of grounded theory. Strauss, along with Corbin, produced a new text outlining their view of grounded theory, which primarily explored the importance of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism as the underlying principles of grounded theory and additionally promoted the use of literature reviews prior to research being conducted highlighting that an open mind is more significant than an empty mind (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Glaser was highly critical of this description of grounded theory and from that point onwards their approaches continued to diverge from their original text. Researchers now often establish whether they are pursuing the Strauss or the Glaser approach to grounded theory due to the ideological disagreements between them (Birks & Mills, 2011). Grounded theory is based in the collection and analysis of data, with the aim to create a theory, constructed from the ground up and therefore rooted in the data (Khan, 2014).

Strauss and Corbin (2008) discuss the way in which methodology has an intrinsic relation to the nature of knowing and the creation of knowledge and therefore they place a distinct focus on the underlying principles of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. Many authors have referred to Strauss and Corbin's version of grounded theory as "evolved" while Glaser remained traditional, this places the different strands on a spiral of development rather than as binary opposites (Mills et al., 2006).

As evolved grounded theory began to look more at the construction of knowledge and truth, it delved deeper into the relationship between the participant and the researcher, placing the researcher in the position of author, reconstructing the experiences of the subjects (Mills et al., 2006). This again led to a fragmentation of grounded theory, with Charmaz (2014) proposing a constructivist grounded theory. This form argues that previous versions still assumed an external reality or objective truths in line with a post-positivist perspective rather than the belief in a social reality which is constructed by its members (Mills et al., 2006). Constructivist grounded theory is used in this research as it recognises the role of the researcher in the construction of a theory, and researcher positionality is particularly aligned with the subjects in this researcher (Charmaz, & Smith, 2003).

Oktay (2012) argues that grounded theory is most appropriate in circumstances where the theoretical background has become too abstract to be of practical use. Existing literature has placed excessive focus on deduction, based on the theoretical assumptions of the past, rather than investigating the contemporary experiences of students. The building and development of theory was the central driving force of this research and once a theoretical framework was inductively established and coded concepts tentatively formed, these guided the direction of further interviews until theoretical saturation was identified (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

3.2. Intensive Interviews

Intensive interviews comprised the body of this research in line with constructivist interviewing practices used as part of grounded theory. To allow participants to expand and explore their feelings and thoughts on the topic, the researcher simply provided occasional queries or probes to allow conversational style interviewing to occur. The primary feature of intensive interviews is flexibility, and therefore participants were encouraged to lead the direction of discussion while the researcher remained open and receptive (Charmaz, 2014). Within grounded theory, the term 'emergence' is often used to describe the process by which theory arises during interviews, organically and without prior assumptions or hypotheses being posited by researchers (Birks & Mills, 2011).

There are a number of set practices within established grounded theory that were observed in this research, including purposive sampling, theoretical saturation, and the constant comparison method. Intensive interviews and memos were used to collect and record data and observations, with analysis primarily carried out using coding. Codes set during initial stages of analysis subsequently formed the basis of theory and provided direction for further interviews. Interviews ceased once theoretical saturation was identified since no new theory or concepts were being revealed.

Charmaz (2014) describes six key characteristics of intensive interviews, which were drawn upon in this research to adhere to the principles of grounded theory. These characteristics are:

- Participant selection which focuses on those with first-hand experience

- Main objective as achieving detailed responses

- Elicit detailed responses and pursue unexpected themes, hints or discussions which may arise

- Use of open-ended questions

- Explore in detail participant experiences and viewpoints

- Focus on understanding the participant perspective

These points are all indicative that intensive interviewing aims to place the interviewer as close to the participants as possible in terms of perspective and understanding, in the same way that participant observation encourages understanding through engagement in activity. Gaining the perspective of the participant allows the researcher to more accurately construct theory based off of the experiences shared. These key points all resonate with the objective of this research, and therefore confirm that intensive interviews are the most suitable method for conducting this research. As the focus of the research is on women's motivation to live and study abroad, the purposively selected participants were all young women living in The Netherlands currently and who are pursuing HE in some form.

3.3. Sampling

The sampling method was initially purposive, with the researcher selecting those who identify as women, who were willing to participate, and who were suitable for the purposes and topic of the research (Babbie, 2013). Recruitment was done using informal student networks such as group chats

and online message boards on social networking sites since these forums have members which adhere to the subject requirements (Hennink et al., 2020). Following principles of purposive sampling (Flick, 2015), participants were required to be female, be engaged in higher education and be studying in a country outside of their country of origin or long-term residence. Women have a distinct standpoint and perspective and therefore their views and motivations should be explored so that the generation of knowledge is open to their unique voices. This study did not have the intention of focusing explicitly on gender but rather amplifying the testimonies of young women in isolation from other genders. However, a comparative look at this topic, through the inclusion of all genders, would allow gender to be more abstractly focused on and contrasted, to highlight differences and similarities in experiences. This is not perceived as a limitation to this study, as the focus on women allowed for greater detail and exploration into their experiences and perceptions and due to the over-representation of women within international student stocks, extra focus on women's responses is not without foundation or representativeness.

The sample, which contains 15 international students, appears small, yet has been shown to provide informative results in similar studies of internationals students.

Charmaz (2014) highlights the works of Glaser (1998) and Stern (1994) in support of smaller sample studies, as they indicated that data collection exists for the purposes of developing conceptual categories and so smaller sample sizes can be sufficient and streamline research. For example, Maleku et al. (2021) drew on data from a focus group with 11 participants to gather information regarding feelings of belonging and identity in transnational spaces for international students in the US. Like Maleku et al. (2021), this research adopts a phenomenological approach to investigate why women choose to study abroad.

Due to the nature of the topic under research, specialist knowledge was not required, and due to the similarities between the demographics of the researcher and the participants it was not anticipated that unknown or abstract phrases or words would be used that would require prior research. All participants spoke English, and interviews were conducted in English (however it was often the case that English was not the participants' first language). Conditions of acceptance into the university based on English language ability differs between faculties; however, most courses admit

those with a minimum score of 6.5 in the International English Language Testing System or proof of English qualifications within prior education. The English language requirement for the entry into the University of Groningen ensured that communication would be relatively simple during the interviews, however clarification was given if participants appeared to struggle with certain phrasing of questions, these were then simplified in future interviews to reduce further confusion. Interviews were conducted both in person and using the WhatsApp video function, when necessary, as a result of Covid19 restrictions. WhatsApp was used as this was the application through which initial communication was made, ensuring that participants had familiarity with its functions and use. Video communication, although placing a distance between the participant and the researcher, still enabled the open flow of conversation, and initial set up and discussion of the pandemic each time allowed for rapport to form and therefore discussion was not hindered.

The principle of theoretical saturation was used to conclude the study in a suitable manner. This principle, as first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) states that the data collection period may end once the researcher can adequately justify their conceptual model and feel confident that further research would not yield any contrasting concepts (Bryant, 2019). Due to the process of simultaneous analysis and data collection throughout this study, conceptual themes were identified and built upon as they arose, therefore the researcher was in the best position to evaluate whether the sample size was sufficient through the observation and development of a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014). Following a period of initial interviews, an additional period of theoretical sampling occurred which focused the subsequent interviews on the theoretical elements that were identified throughout data collection (Flick, 2015).

University of Groningen

Participants for this study were only recruited from RUG rather than from a range of universities across the Netherlands. This was primarily because of convenience—due to easy access to RUG's international students. Additionally, the university is among the largest and oldest universities in the country and so therefore it was felt to be somewhat representative of the HE throughout the Netherlands. The Netherlands higher education system has a binary focus, RUG is one of 13 research

universities in the country while there are also 40 universities of applied sciences (Reumer & Van der Wende, 2010).

In 2020, RUG was ranked 69th in the Academic ranking of world universities and 80th in British magazine *Time's Higher Education,* world university rankings (University of Groningen, 2021). The university has 11 faculties, with more than 120 English-taught master's degree programmes and more than 35 English taught bachelor's degree programmes (University of Groningen, 2021).

In larger cities in the Netherlands, international students possibly have widely different opinions and perspectives on their motivations for international study, and it was initially considered a limitation to this study that participants only study at one singular university. However, throughout this research, participants were reluctant to discuss their attraction the city of Groningen specifically. Some subjects indicated that their location within the Netherlands was not only far less significant than the decision of the Netherlands in general, but also that they engaged in no prior research or contact with the university before arriving.

4. Data Collection

In this research, few research questions were constructed prior to the interviews in order to stay as close to the views of participants, without forcing the direction of discussion. This is in line with constructivist interviewing practices which promote the free and open exploration of topics and ideas as they arise. However, main topics of interest were somewhat guided by the literature review, for example the inclusion of questions regarding the influence of family and relationships in motivating international study. Questions established prior to the interviews were entirely flexible, being put forward only if they fit naturally into discussion and removed if consistently found to be irrelevant in furthering understanding.

Probes within interviews were used to guide towards gathering opinions and perspectives on home countries and home education, the desire to pursue higher education, the motivations behind the pursuit of international study, the role of gender through women role models and gender roles within experienced cultural contexts, and perception of the Netherlands as a desirable study destination.

Initially, open-ended questions were used to establish the topic of discussion rather than allude to or define any theories, therefore allowing the subject to direct the themes of the research. After this primary exploration of experiences and perceptions some initial coding and memo writing took place to identify recurring ideas and establish the analytical direction of further interviews.

Following this stage, prominent themes were tentatively established and categorized to create a theoretical direction for the research which then informed theoretical sampling for further interviews to take place with a more defined focus on established ideas (Charmaz, 2014). Ultimately, the aim was to have a defined "Theoretical Centrality" (p.88), which could be evaluated and assessed during final analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This method is described as comparative and interactive as it requires reflection during the period of data collection, however this allows the researcher to stay as close to the words, and experiences of the subject as possible so that the data informs the research, rather than the researcher leading or directing the participant towards certain existing theories (Bryant, 2017). Interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim to enable coding so that the researcher stayed close to the actual data rather than ascribing personal perceptions and concepts. This also allowed the researcher to remain fully focused during the interview to maintain conversational style speech with the participant (Charmaz, 2014). However, some field notes were also taken to refer to the context, environment, and body language of the participant, and to make a note of key ideas would require more in-depth probing.

Additionally, memos were used throughout the research, including prior to, and following the period of data collection and analysis. The use of memos has been established as a necessary part of grounded theory research, which allows the researcher to constantly evaluate and check in, not only with their own thoughts and ideas, but also the research process itself (Birks & Mills, 2011). Analysis particularly benefits from the use of memos as the researcher can take time to step away from active data collection and analysis and instead reflect on what has been revealed and decide the best ways to proceed. As grounded theory permits the data to lead the investigation, few plans can be made that are not subject to re-evaluation at a later date, and flexibility on the part of the researcher is essential (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, memos provide a space where the researcher can openly communicate

their ideas and feelings and adjust or evaluate existing plans in response to the emergence of data and concepts (Birks & Mills, 2011).

As the study was exploratory in nature, the participant led the discussion and therefore probes, or further questions, were used to elicit further detail and continue conversation-style responses. Constructivist grounded theory places data collection at the foreground and allows the data to lead the analysis so that both may inform each other and the overall image of the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Because of the grounded theory approach, there were limited preconceptions regarding the topic, and analysis was woven into the data collection process to develop ideas which emerge in real time during the research (Bryant, 2017). Since pre-existing theoretical frameworks for this topic exist within the literature, the use of a grounded approach places the data from intensive interviews at the forefront so that the responses from women themselves led the process of exploration, rather than seeking to confirm or disprove existing hypotheses.

A method of constant comparison was utilized during data collection to draw connections and theory from interview data simultaneously so that the direction of the study is led by the participants themselves (Bryant, 2017). Hallberg (2006) describes the constant comparison method associated with grounded theory as a central principle of the approach. Fundamentally, constant comparison refers to the simultaneous collection and analysis of data and the comparison of analyses to identify similarities and differences which may lead the research into a new direction or point to areas which require further investigation (Hallberg, 2006).

For the purposes of analysis, data was coded to identify the insider's perspective and stay close to the meaning given by the participant within the raw data (Charmaz, 2014). This is to avoid making any assumptions or placing meaning derived from other sources upon gender and other themes which may arise during this research. Coding was used to group and categorise recurring thoughts and ideas in order to identify key themes emerging from raw data. Initially codes are simply titles under which ideas can be grouped, these then form categories which subsequently evolve into concepts as part of the process of theoretical elaboration (Bryant, 2017). Initially, in line with the principles of grounded theory, open coding will be used to record recurring aspects within each transcript (Birks & Mills, 2011). Open, or initial coding breaks down the data to allow for comparison

more easily between points of interest. Open coding utilised both gerunds and in vivo codes in order to fully capture incidents and remain close to the actions described in the interview (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The use of gerunds, which are verbs ending with 'ing' thus making nouns, are favoured within constructivist grounded theory in order to identify actions and processes (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017). However in vivo codes, which are directly quoted from the transcript, were also used to remain close to the meaning given by participants and generate concepts (Manning, 2017).

Following initial coding, focused or selective coding took place in order to draw links between and within the codes and therefore "elevating the level of conceptual analysis" (p.97, Birks & Mills, 2011). This process was guided by the constant comparison method which helps codes reach a higher level of abstraction which transforms them into concepts and theory (Bryant, 2017). Open coding was used to go through the transcript line by line and identify emerging patterns and themes within the data without preconceptions dictating the analysis (Glaser & Holton, 2004). The creation of substantive codes from the process of open coding and constant comparison ultimately produced formal theory (Morse, 2009). Atlas.ti was utilised for coding—it has been made freely available and its features allow for the clear depiction of codes and, ultimately, concepts.

Hierarchical coding assisted with constant comparison, as it allows the analysis to begin broad with open coding being used to go through transcripts line by line, followed by selective and conceptual coding drawing together ideas and finally theoretical coding (Hallberg, 2006). Each of these stages involves the comparison of codes which can help draw out links and direct intensive interviews until theoretical saturation can be attained. The constant comparison method was used throughout this research. After each interview, the recording was transcribed and coded, and after this was performed several times, the results were compared, at which time similarities and differences were identified, and recurring theoretical codes were introduced into subsequent interviews to allow for deeper investigation. Constructivist grounded theory, which is the form of grounded theory that most aligns with this research, identifies that the researcher themselves define the incidents in the data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

4.1.Study Population

For this research it was identified that theoretical saturation was achieved after 15 in-depth interviews had been conducted. Participants of the study ranged from age 19 to 30 and are enrolled in a wide variety of different subjects from varying faculties. In total, six participants are in the process of completing their master's degrees while the remaining nine participants are first year bachelors' students. As shown in the table, two participants were studying Arts degree subjects, while three were completing Law programmes, and the remaining 10 were undertaking Science degrees. Of those interviewed, four were from the Faculty of Spatial Science, while three were taking Psychology, three were taking various Law courses and two were taking International Relations & International Organisation (IRIO), the remaining women studied Medicine, Computer Science and Clinical and Psychosocial Epidemiology.

The countries of origin of the participating women span from across four continents, with two participants identifying as North American, eight as European, three as Asian, and two as African. No direct focus was placed on obtaining participants from a variety of subjects, and instead focus was shifted to gathering subjects whose countries of origin were representative of the international student population. In an article produced by the University of Groningen (2020) it was stated that during the academic year 2019-2020, 23.4% of students at the university were international, coming from over 120 countries. Of the 7,683 international students enrolled, 2,274 were German, with the next majority being from Romania (445 students), followed by the UK (441 students), Italy (405 students) and China (353 students) (University of Groningen, 2020). Participants were recruited initially using purposive sampling, primarily through student groups chats on the app WhatsApp.

After several students had been recruited, the rest were gained using snowball sampling, as it was identified that most subjects had more interaction with fellow international students than with native Dutch students. Additionally, many of the participants reside in large-scale student housing, and therefore proximity had ensured that they had become familiar with a diverse range of women from different countries, different faculties and of differing ages. The women that were interviewed spoke openly and in detail about their experiences, which led them to study abroad, as well as the struggles

they faced in being accepted into international study, the stress and pressure forced onto them by the pandemic, the bureaucratic difficulties of migration and their perceptions of the treatment of international students by their university.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS

ID	Age	Degree Level		Country of Origin	Faculty
1	19	Bachelors	BSc	Germany	Faculty of Behavioural & Social Sciences
2	19	Bachelors	BSc	Romania	Faculty of Behavioural & Social Sciences
3	21	Bachelors	BA	Germany	Faculty of Arts
4	26	Masters	MSc	UK	Faculty of Spatial Sciences
5	21	Bachelors	LLB	US	Faculty of Law
6	19	Bachelors	BSc	Germany	Faculty of Behavioural & Social Sciences
7	19	Bachelors	BA	Namibia	Faculty of Arts
8	20	Bachelors	BSc	Romania	Faculty of Science & Engineering
9	20	Bachelors	BSc	Greece	Faculty of Medical Sciences
10	30	Masters	LLM	Nigeria	Faculty of Law
11	28	Masters	MSc	Mexico	Faculty of Spatial Sciences
12	26	Masters	MSc	Myanmar	Graduate School of Medical Sciences
13	19	Bachelors	LLB	Russia	Faculty of Law
14	22	Masters	MSc	China	Faculty of Spatial Sciences
15	24	Masters	MSc	Indonesia	Faculty of Spatial Sciences

Table 1 shows a list of participants with relevant information, including their age, degree level, country of origin, and faculty of study.

The intensive interviews were expected to last a maximum of 60-minutes with most ending organically after 30-40 minutes. Although this may appear a short period of time, it was felt to be sufficient for the purposes of this research and due to the level of pre-existing familiarity between the researcher and the participants due to positionality. Rapport building conversation occurred organically before the official start of the interview to ensure the women felt comfortable discussing their experiences and feelings. Additionally, the informal conversation style nature of the intensive interviews allowed participants to go almost immediately into significant detail, which yielded rich information that was relevant and interesting to the researcher. Initially, a rough interview guide was used to direct the flow of conversation towards the women's motivations and experiences. However, it became quickly evident that without further probes conversation quickly faded, therefore a more comprehensive interview guide was established. The interview guide, as shown in Appendix 3., represents the final set of questions that were often utilised during the conversation to maintain discussion, however throughout the study these questions often changed, either as a result of differing topics arising naturally during the interview or because of notable topics being brought forward in previous interviews. The majority of the time participants had nothing further to contribute to the interview; however, on occasion participants used it as an opportunity to talk more informally about their feelings and their treatment as an international student, or to be more openly critical of their university, or the Netherlands generally, and the way in which one or both failed to meet some of their expectations. Some participants questioned the researcher on their personal experiences and how they in turn would answer the questions posed in the interview. This was interpreted as somewhat seeking the approval of the researcher for their responses and therefore encouragement was given on the validity of their answers before officially ending the interview.

The following memo was written during the early stages of data collection after it had become clear that a more detailed interview guide was needed to direct the interviews. Initially, it was unclear the extent to which this could be done due to the principles of grounded theory promoting inductive reasoning and conversation style interview processes. However, after more-thorough research it was

identified that adding more direction to the interviews would provide richer and more focused data, and after doing so the interviews began to last longer, more information was given, and participants became more open about their experiences.

MEMO-27/5

After conducting the first interview I have been re-evaluating my interview guide. Initially I assumed the participants would just naturally open up and share in detail their experiences, however it was difficult to elicit detailed responses. I have been reading a chapter by Charmaz and Belgrave and it has given me insight into the extent to which I can probe and question participants. Initially I believed I could not ask many questions due to the nature of grounded theory; I did not want to lead to the participant towards certain themes. However, I think more direction, in a semi-structured form is necessary and so I have re-written the interview guide.

Charmaz, K. & Belgrave, L. L. (2012). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In Gubrium, J. F., Holstein, J. A., Marvasti, A. B., & McKinney, K. D. (2012). *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781452218403

4.2. Ethical Considerations

The FSS Ethical Research Committee at RUG upholds that research must adhere to the principles outlined in the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2018). The five main ideals are honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility. Due to the nature of grounded research, which places data at the forefront and allows it to lead the direction of theory, honesty is evidently a priority along with the principle of scrupulousness which is apparent by the use of established social-scientific methodology.

Transparency and responsibility will be addressed prior to data collection to ensure that all subjects are aware of the research purpose and able to provide informed consent to participate in the study. During data collection and analysis, ethical issues will also be recorded and reported should they arise. This research is being independently conducted, separate from any non-academic input or sources thus allowing the data to be clearly collected and presented without outside interests affecting the validity of the results. All subjects will sign a letter of consent after confirming they have read the

outline of the research and have been made aware of how their data will be used, collected, and distributed during the study. Recordings will be made of the interviews however these will be destroyed once transcription has been completed. To ensure confidentiality, all notes and recordings will be kept on an external hard drive which will be kept in a secure location. Identifiers mentioned or alluded to within the interviews will be removed to protect the individual and maintain respondent anonymity (Hennink et al., 2020).

The key ethical principles which this research will follow are obtaining informed consent, accurate recording of data, the protection of participant privacy, maintaining confidentiality and avoiding deception (Hadley, 2017). To ensure these principles are known to and understood by participants, a letter (Appendix 1) was sent to all research subjects describing the study, their role and rights within it, and the steps which will be taken to protect their data. Subsequently, a letter of consent (Appendix 2) was sent to participants to ensure that they have read and understood the contents of both letters and confirm their agreement to participate.

4.3. Researcher Positionality

A common issue with interview-based research is positionality, or the situatedness of knowledge produced. Positionality is based on the reflections of the researcher regarding their own perspectives and influences and the subsequent impact that has on how they gather and interpret information (Pasquini & Olaniyan, 2004). To identify how researcher positionality impacts the development and practice of research, Holmes (2020) recommends the practice of reflexivity, enacted through several key stages. In this research my own position was largely influenced by my gender, as a result of lived experience, my identity as a feminist, and the input of sociological academic references throughout my own pursuit of higher education. This influence is evident not only in choice of topic but also the selection of the research sample. As a woman, I identified a unique standpoint, translated into research through the reference of feminist epistemologies, and critical feminist theories, such as standpoint theory. Standpoint theory promotes the idea that social structures are perceived differently through the different lenses of struggle and places inherent value on the female perspective (Harding,

2004). This resonated strongly with me, having studied this theory in depth and independently having identified an absence of female perspective within academic research throughout my own education. This theory therefore defined the parameters for this research study. Although feminist epistemology has been criticized for generalizing the experiences of women under one heading when they assume multiple social identities, the researcher feels that the experiences of a diverse group of women deserve particular attention within social research (Littlewood, 2004). Participants recognize the researcher as female, and as having experienced the same major life events as themselves due to also being an international student. This permits open and easy discussion surrounding a phenomenon that both the interviewer and interviewee have personal experience with, thereby eliminating potential tensions surrounding researcher expertise or specialized knowledge. My position as a member of the group that I am studying additionally allowed me easy access to participants and facilitated connections being made. I also knew from experience that certain questions would be unlikely to yield much valuable information and therefore could be overlooked, ultimately streamlining interviews. Questions regarding funding for example were unlikely to yield much valuable information regarding motivations as undergraduate students typically receive support from parents or government loans, while masters' students are more likely to fund studies themselves or pursue scholarships. My expectations for this research, whilst predominantly formed through the literature review, were reinforced by my own personal experiences as a woman studying abroad. However, being in the same demographic also made me vulnerable to mixing my own experiences with those of the participants. There was potential for some level of transference to occur as I may have been tempted to share or reveal personal experiences and therefore, vigilance was needed to maintain objectivity and a degree of professionalism when conducting the research. Overall, however, the insight and familiarity afforded me through my positionality was beneficial in obtaining detailed accounts and gaining understanding of the women interviewed and their unique perspectives.

5. Analysis

Analysis of the transcripts was first done through line-by-line coding using gerunds and in vivo codes throughout the process of data collection. Once all transcripts had been analysed during a phase of initial coding, codes were observed for similarities and grouped accordingly to streamline codes and place emphasis on the overall themes produced during the interviews. This form of Axial coding is recommended within grounded theory literature to make connections between initial codes and to thus facilitate a stage of higher conceptual analysis (Birks& Mills, 2011).

The following code groups were tentatively established during analysis:

1. Academic & Career

2. (Relationships) Family→ Father→ Mother→ Wider family→ Siblings→Friends/peers

3. (Personality) Feelings→ Personality→ Freedom/Independence→ Travel/Migration

4. Gender

5. Language

6. (Financial Matters) Money/Funding

7. (Home vs Away) → Travel/Migration→Netherlands→ United States→ Home→ Culture

There are, however, certain levels of overlap between these categories and they are, therefore, viewed more as fluid structures which allow for ideas and themes to be organised and focused in order to isolate significant motivations for international study. For example, funding was often heavily linked to participants choosing the Netherlands specifically, and gender was often strongly tied to perceptions of home culture versus perceptions of the Netherlands as a more liberal and equal society.

5.1. Context

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, many aspects of student life have altered in the academic year 2020-2021. As a result, this was a salient topic in many participants' observations and experiences leading to their study abroad. The memo below was written during initial coding.

MEMO: The pandemic did not result in doubting the decision to move, but rather it was viewed as an inconvenience in timing, to travel, forming social connections and physical study.

"ID#11: Umm I think it was because of the pandemic. Yeah, that that's when a lot of worries came around. I mean, I think, yeah, it is hard to to imagine a new academic year and during the pandemic and I didn't know how things were going to work out. I think it was mainly that and I don't know if doing that in [country of Origin]. Would it be less stressing or as uncertain, but definitely migrating with all the restrictions and cases and whatever going on. It was definitely a factor that affected me very, very much. Very much."

Many of those interviewed reside in large international student housing, which is to a certain extent recommended by the university. As a result, these students had more interaction with their peers during the pandemic, and many discuss valuing this experience, as loneliness and isolation formed their primary concerns before arriving in the Netherlands.

ID5: *"It has its ups and downs, but for the most part, I've been really grateful to be living in a student house because I've been able to meet people, which has been really important during the pandemic, because we're so isolated from like our university in general"*

ID3: *"Um, they actually recommended it in one of their presentations for international students. So this is why I knew about it. And also the fact that you shared a kitchen with so many people was a plus for me during corona times because I was afraid that otherwise I would not find, yeah, friends."*

None of the participants expressed concern about their own safety and health during the pandemic, but instead focused on how it had altered their experiences and how travel arrangements and online study had provided stress. Several subjects discuss returning home and sometimes getting stuck for long periods outside of the Netherlands due to the pandemic. A number of the interviews were conducted using WhatsApp video partially out of concern for safety but also as several of the subjects were not currently residing in the Netherlands but have in fact returned home for the duration that classes remain online. Some had returned home as a means of lowering costs by residing with family,

others had gone home to visit and become stranded due to the pandemic whilst others were feeling the strain that isolation and online learning was putting on their mental health and had returned home to seek comfort from company.

> *"Researcher: How long have you been studying in the Netherlands?*
>
> *ID#1: I mean, in theory, I have been studying for almost a year, but I just, um, went to live there for like two months and went back home because of corona. But I studied all the time online."*

Overall, the pandemic did have the effect of altering plans, and many felt they had missed out on an authentic student experience; however, this did not alter their opinion of studying abroad and none expressed outward concern or regret over leaving home during this time. These students have had a unique experience, the extent of which none of them anticipated before moving, outside of an understanding that their classes would be available online. A degree of determination is evident in the transcripts of these interviews, that in spite of the pandemic each participant made the choice to come to the Netherlands, even if their stay was of short duration. Therefore, although the circumstances of the pandemic are somewhat unprecedented, the respondents did not give any indication that it hindered their decision to study abroad, indicating that these women were strongly motivated to pursue international study regardless of any other wider contextual factors.

6. Findings

The findings section of this research has been divided into the following headings:

1) Masters' vs Bachelors'
2) Country of Origin
   a. These first sections discuss the different and similar views held by masters' students in comparison with bachelors' students and the differences and similarities in views and experiences on the basis of country or continent of origin.

The remaining headings look in detail at the topics or feelings which were recurrent during interviews and therefore indicate significance to the women who participated. Ultimately, in order to address the research question, these sections can be divided into internal and external motivating factors.

3) Academic & Career

    a. The desire to obtain an international qualification in order to stand out in the job market, was listed among the key motivating factors for study abroad. Participants had an awareness that a higher education qualification would benefit them with their careers in the long term and studying abroad was seen as a practical yet fun and freeing way of gaining extra credit towards their futures.

4) Relationships (Not influenced)

    a. Extended Family

    b. Parents

    c. Role Models

5) Personality & gender

6) Home vs Away

    a. Positive View of Home Education

7) Internal vs External Motivating Factors

1) Masters' vs Bachelors'

The key differences between the experiences of post-graduate and undergraduate students revolved predominantly on future careers and employability. All of the master's students interviewed had completed their bachelor's degrees in their countries of origin and spoke about international study predominately as a way of gaining specialised knowledge that would be more practical when applying for jobs in the future. There was also a greater degree of awareness from the master's students about the benefits of studying abroad in impressing employers and making oneself stand out from a crowd on a job application. Many of the master's students had worked following their undergraduate studies and found that they could not proceed further in their field without greater qualification. However, there was also an acknowledgement that studying, and especially studying abroad, is more relaxed

and comfortable than full time employment and opens up opportunities for further travel and leisure time.

2) *Country of Origin*

Naturally, country of origin had a significant impact on these women's experiences and motivations. Participants from Romania, for example, were highly critical of their home countries and spoke openly about the possibility of never returning. On the other hand, participants from Germany all viewed the Netherlands as secondary to their home country in a number of ways, discussing how their failure to access German higher education was the key motivator in their decision to pursue study abroad and they were eager to return to Germany after their studies. Several participants discussed how the Netherlands feels 'safer' to them than their home countries, namely participants from Romania, Namibia, and Mexico, and also related this to their view of the Netherlands as a place of higher gender equality when compared to their homes.

For the purposes of this research, Russia is being included as a European country, namely due to similarities with Romanian participants in testimony regarding home education, and perceived gender norms and familial contexts. The UK and US participants also shared some similarities; in their positive overall views towards their home education, in their criticism of education systems generally and in criticism of the Netherlands, and their inference that they did not have long-term plans to study abroad but rather felt it was the correct time for a significant life change. Participants from Africa spoke positively about education in their countries of origin but were critical of socio-economic inequality and the lack of privilege which often restricts access to higher quality education, and by extension their own privilege in being able to pursue study abroad.

Participants from Asia more often discussed how they were able to fund their studies abroad through gaining access to scholarships, but generally their views of Europe were that it was expensive and more difficult for them to access under different circumstances. Additionally, many had regrets over the course that they had chosen as they felt it did not align with their interests, however they had accepted the first university to offer them a scholarship out of fear of waiting and losing the opportunity. The desire to leave one's home country was identified as a key motivator for

international study. Many of the participants were looking for the easiest and most acceptable mode for 'escape'. This feeling of wanting to travel, or experience new cultures/lifestyles, to gain perspective through distance, to escape prejudice based on their gender, or to broaden their horizons academically was an important element for many of the women interviewed.

3) *Academic & Career*

<u>Employability vs Following Interests</u>

'Academic and Career' concerns, although distinct and separate are necessarily linked when tracing motivations for the pursuit of international higher education. Many of the students identified that studying abroad would give them an edge in a job interview scenario or stand out on a job application, while others spoke more generally about employability through acquiring qualifications. It should be noted that this was never considered a primary motivation for international study, but a motivator for pursuing higher education in general, and often as a secondary motive or by-product.

However, master's students in particular spoke about specialising their knowledge and obtaining a more 'practical' qualification, as if their bachelor's provided the space for pursuing their personal interests and passions while a master's degree would advance their learning and place them in good stead for their planned future careers.

> *ID#14:" First I would say it's because I'm kind of interested in this subject and I do want to learn more about Urban things and second because you have master's degree, like I can get a more decent job because of a master's degree."*

This was also somewhat supported by bachelor's students who predominantly described their passion or interest for their subject as guiding them to RUG, in combination with several other motivators. For bachelor's students, subject selection was led by a desire for knowledge and a pre-existing interest or skill set, without much reference to future plans or careers. This can be seen in the following quote, as a woman studying International Relations describes how she arrived at the subject and at RUG by following her primary interest in politics.

> *ID#3: "yeah, as I said, I was really interested in politics, so I found this new program coincidently on the Internet. Actually, I was like, oh, that sounds interesting. And then there*

were like yeah, and you do like a little bit of law and history and economics and like a little

bit of a politics, obviously, I for me just sound like that gives you the tools to understand, well,

world politics on a broader basis, so.

4) *Relationships*

<u>Not 'influenced'</u>

When discussing influential people in the decision to study abroad a number of participants argued that no one 'influenced' them and rejected the term, choosing instead to qualify their own independence of thought. The following memo indicates how this issue arose quite quickly during the interviewing process. The rejection of the word 'influence' was interesting in that it revealed a level of valuing independence, and therefore the question was not changed throughout the interviews, except to ultimately include the phrase, 'who was important' so that respondents could more easily open up about their support systems and influences without feeling that they had been directed by outside sources.

The majority of participants stated that they did not consider how studying abroad would affect their relationships with friends and family remaining at home. If they did consider it was in no way an element which restricted their movement, and many discussed making a commitment to maintaining long-distance relationships and finding value in this.

4.a) Extended Family

Another important distinction shown by the quote from participant ID#7, is the description of an 'inner circle'. Many other participants alluded to the fact that any discouragement that they received was typically from wider family, whose opinion they overall value less, or from acquaintances who they felt could not truly understand their personality and motives for moving. Whereas the majority of encouragement came from the closest to them, or their "inner circle". It appeared that when it came to motivation for studying abroad, that as long as the inner circle was supportive then criticism from additional family was unable to challenge the decision. This again highlights the strength of immediate family as a motivator for international study.

ID#12: "Yeah, I think my aunt once asked me why I wanted to, you know, do my further studies because she said,' oh, why don't you just stay here and, you know, like get married or something', you know? But I was like, oh, I need to do this, you know, like, well, I didn't really tell her my all of the things that I wanted to do. But I just tell her that I just want to, you know. Yeah. Get my masters and, you know, get a Yeah. Study there. So yeah, she was like, okay, well I'm not very convinced, but OK."

ID#7: "Yes. Um, the cousin of my dad was completely against studying in the Netherlands, but that was mostly because of him wanting me to study medicine like the rest of that part of my family. So it was more like the idea of, um, following in the footsteps of. All right."

R: "So were your family supportive of you studying abroad?
ID#9: Most of my family, yes, of course. I have some uncles that they're like, oh, you. Why are you leaving the country? You'll get you'll regret it and stuff like that."

Each of these quotes reveals that participants were not at all affected by these words of criticism from their wider family, but instead saw them as representing the kind of outdated ideals that many sought to escape by travelling and studying abroad. ID#12 does not even attempt to explain to her relative all the reasons she has for studying abroad, possibly to avoid argument or out of fear of not being understood. All participants received support and encouragement from their immediate family and friends, although initially it was often the case that one parent or friend required extra convincing as to the value of studying abroad, but also regarding safety and the excessive distance separating relations.

4.b) Parents

The role of mothers in influencing the decision to study abroad was somewhat divided. Some participants had the full support and encouragement of their mothers. Participants were very aware of their mothers' expectations of them and often alluded to a degree of pressure in measuring up to those expectations. Others viewed their mothers as role models who provided them with the independence, bravery, and international perspective they felt had directed them towards international study.

ID#5: And then like my one mom was really positive about it and really excited. And it was like a good idea and that it would be like a good experience. And my parents were not thrilled when I said that I wasn't going to college [after high school] and that I was going to travel. So it was nice to have, like, one of them be excited about this next step.

Others faced greater scepticism from their mothers; however, this was largely related to their choice of subject, choice of location and concerns over safety and wellbeing.

> ID#4: For instance, I was looking at going to Russia to study and [mother's name] wasn't having any of it. Like I even applied, I was wanting to apply for these United nations voluntary position in the Gaza strip. And my mom was like, no, you can't do that. Whereas I would have taken if I was on my own, I would have taken that risk. But I guess it's like taking into account the worry of people that care about me I guess, but that was very extreme extremes.

This participant went on to state that her mother's disapproval of a location would most likely always rule it out, but that disapproval was rare and therefore taken very seriously when proffered.

Fathers, although mentioned less frequently, were often seen as inspirational due to their own travels and adventures. They did have little influence however on the decision to study abroad outside of this and were either mentioned by participants as having concerns over safety and therefore approving of the Netherlands, or as having inspired an international outlook earlier in life.

4.c) Role Models

Friends and peers were often referred to during interviews in a number of differing contexts. Participants described feeling more open or comfortable with travel due to the exposure and good reports from their peers or because their peers are accompanying them in their international study. Several participants were recommended for international study by friends or peers who had previously engaged in study abroad programmes. The following quotes all indicate that peers had an important influence on many of the women to pursue international study.

> ID#1:" I mean because I knew that my friends would come as well. I felt more confident and more comfortable in that."

In this quote it is the comfort taken from knowledge that friends would be joining them abroad, that gave this participant the confidence and motivation to pursue international study. In contrast, other participants, aware that they were leaving friends behind, took comfort in the strength of their

relationships, and so were able to travel alone. Whether participants described themselves as brave or not, each one found a mode of thinking or perspective which gave comfort and thus allowed them to leave their countries of origin.

> *ID#5: "There is this guy I knew my sophomore year in high school who was also in my world history and art history class, and he like left high school for his junior and senior year and actually studied in the Netherlands. And I wouldn't like and I kind of remained friends with him after high school to an extent. And it's not like we ever had a conversation of like he was like, you should do this or like that. We didn't like even to speak about decision, the decision before it was made. I think I kind of just told him that I had applied and been accepted and stuff. But I think on a subconscious level, he definitely, like, influenced me."*

For this participant, just seeing that one of their peers was able to pursue international study inspired them and allowed them to consider this previously abstract idea as something valuable but also something attainable.

> *ID#11:" […]it was also the fact that when they came back from their exchange programs, and they seemed so happy that they had really made a good decision going there, even if it was just for summer or something they were. And yeah, just even one of them told me you would love to do that, because in Mexico I would actually hang out with many international students. They're like, yeah, you're going to do well there".*

Often participants acknowledged the influence of their peers in setting them on the course of international study, particularly if it was an option that they themselves had not previously considered.

Additionally a couple of participants highlighted that it was teachers who had set them on the path of international study. It was evident that before the intervention of these teachers, the participants had not considered international study. One of the participants' teachers had studied abroad themselves and therefore suggested utilising their connections in the US specifically to open up the opportunity of studying abroad, however this was ultimately decided against by the participant who felt the bureaucratic and financial hassles of moving to the US outweighed the benefits of experiencing study there. The other teacher however felt that their student had certain skills and

talents within her chosen field which would be best cultivated at a foreign institution, and actually recommended RUG specifically for its reputation in the subject matter.

Siblings influence as role models was also revealed as an important motivator to many participants. Initially reference to siblings was not included within the interview guide for this research as it was not identified during the literature review as being a particularly significant motivator for international study. However, participants began to naturally discuss their family situations, and would often refer to siblings primarily if they had been influential in the decision to study abroad. Of the women who mentioned siblings during their interview, the majority had older brothers who had left home earlier to study abroad. This was not only referred to as being inspirational to their own decision, but also revealed to younger siblings how accessible the process would be. It was also revealed that many parents felt more secure allowing their daughters to travel to the Netherlands knowing that their older sibling would be nearby or knowing that the older sibling had previously had a safe and valuable experience studying abroad.

5) *Personality & Gender*

In terms of personality traits, many participants talked about valuing and wanting to gain independence and freedom by being separated from family and their home cultures. It was not necessarily that participants felt restricted by family, but instead that they wished to test themselves and push the boundaries to see if they could survive when separated. Most women, even when talking about their fears or concerns surrounding international study, described an attitude of determination, which is likely why even the circumstances of the pandemic did little to deter them from pursuing study abroad. An independent personality can therefore be seen as a motivator for international study as these women wanted to portray themselves as courageous, determined and willing to try new experiences which would take them away from all that they were familiar with. This desire to be seen in a certain way, as bold and unique, was the factor which motivated them to study abroad when they were introduced to the idea, but many were also searching for a way to establish their independence and were looking for this opportunity without it being suggested to them.

ID#9: "Well, I become more independent, although I'm kind of still dependent on my family economically. But I've done things that I could never imagine I will be able to do before. I start looking for houses on my own. I made a bank account on my own.

R: Was that something that you, like, wanted to do when you study abroad, like get more independence?

ID#9: Yeah, it was I highly value independence as a person".

This participant stated that she valued independence as a character trait and therefore was searching for a way to nurture and explore this within herself, becoming aware that international study would provide her with the opportunity to do this.

Participants from various faculties discussed having an international approach and wanting to pursue travel or experience new cultures and perspectives from a young age. When probed on the topic of travel, participants displayed a feeling of valuing and desiring travel as a way to broaden perspectives, meet new and different people and experience varied cultures. Many felt that travel was necessary for young people, in order to develop an understanding of diversity.

Seeking independence, as well as looking for a country perceived as more liberal, was often linked with the participants' views on gender, or rather how their gender restricted them within their home countries, and as a result, forcing young women to adopt an attitude of defiance or determination. When asked to consider the ways in which their gender may have impacted upon their decision one participant responded, "*Well, I think that women look for education more than men. I don't know if that's correct at all. Um, it's just. It's just what I've seen as well in school, it always feels like, um, females are the ones who put in more effort and are more dedicated to actually studying and. They also seem to seem more determined to pursue their dreams, um, academically speaking."*

When participants brought up the influence of gender it was often in a way that positioned themselves at odds with the cultural gender norms of their home countries.

ID#10: "Because I wouldn't be regarded as such in my country. Yeah, I'm a woman. I'm supposed to get married. And if I keep staying there, I would be either traumatized being reminded, you know, you're 30, you cannot go to school. You know, you should not be doing

all of that. But here, I'm very far away from anybody. So, you barely can see me. You really

can't remind me…"

One participant noted how she wasn't even consciously aware of the level of pressure she was under to prove herself in her home country until she experienced independence and freedom in the Netherlands.

> *ID#9:" I didn't know this back then, but I was actually under a lot of pressure back in Greece*
>
> *to prove myself to everybody just because I was not supposed to pursue the career I wanted to*
>
> *pursue. And here is just the normal thing. So it was so much more really no one would ask me*
>
> *how I decided to become a doctor or, wow, that's so difficult, why you don't chase another*
>
> *career."*

Often participants had an awareness of gender stereotypes, around their subject, and around international study and felt like they wanted to prove themselves by rebelling against these stereotypes. Gaining independence was a significant part of this.

> *ID#5: "But like just as a woman, I've always tried to be independent and strong willed and*
>
> *stubborn and outspoken and opinionated because I think those are things that women are not*
>
> *always congratulated on or those are traits that are not always valued in women. But I think*
>
> *that they should be so like in a very roundabout way, I do think that studying abroad was just*
>
> *another contribution to that image."*

Additionally, the aspect of safety was often mentioned, usually in relation to parental concerns, and even if older siblings were already studying abroad. This can be seen as a motivation for destination choice, however some participants admitted feeling unsafe in their home countries, particularly as women, and therefore study abroad in general was a way for them to experience greater freedom through feelings of increased security. The Netherlands was frequently identified as a 'safe' country, which participants sometimes found useful in convincing parents to allow study abroad.

> *ID#12: "Well, at first they weren't very positive about it because in my country, well girls or*
>
> *women, they are not very they're not supposed to, like, live alone or, you know, like they think*
>
> *that women are not strong enough to live alone or something or depend on themselves. So,*

they were like, are you sure? Like, if they're going to be safe, how are you going to be safe and things like that."

ID#3: Um, but then in the end, um, where I travel to and where I live now are rather safe countries. Most of the women are safe but it's safer for a man. I don't feel unsafe here.

Generally, the Netherlands was viewed as a 'safe' country by most respondents, either feeling safer or as safe as their home countries, which was often described as a factor which cemented their decision to choose the Netherlands or allowed parents to become more comfortable with the idea of moving.

6) *Home vs Away*

Participants were asked to consider the differences between their home nations and the Netherlands during the interviews. Non-western European participants identified the Netherlands specifically as economically powerful or liberal in a way that was considered advantageous when compared to obtaining a degree in their home countries. Overall, participants showed little prior knowledge or experience of the Netherlands, excepting occasional city breaks in Amsterdam, and in fact many were critical of the Netherlands. When queried, few participants described feelings of culture shock, and many described that their choice of the Netherlands was partly dictated by their belief that Dutch culture would be accessible and hold few difficulties for adaptation and integration.

The lack of focus on destination country was often linked to just an overwhelming need to leave their country of origin and go anywhere else to experience something new and different. In this feeling, they also felt they were alone and isolated, being at odds with the dominant views of those surrounding them. Phrases such as "escaping the bubble' were used to describe how participants felt restricted by their experiences of home and yearned for new experiences outside of their norms. The term 'escaping', was used by several participants in reference to their countries of origin more generally,

ID#8: Yeah. Uh, they all love me very much and everything, but they don't want to leave their homes so they can't understand my perspective of just wanting to escape and go in a totally different direction.

R: Was that something that you wanted from studying?

ID#7: Yes. Just getting out there, getting out of the bubble.

The factors that appeared more important in choosing a foreign university were access (which university accepted them first), funding (US is too expensive/university which offered scholarships), and access to courses in English.

When queried as to why participants did not choose another university within the Netherlands, responses varied. Some women wanted a location that was similar to home in size whilst others wanted the opposite—to experience a pace completely different from their hometowns. Other participants stated that they accepted the first Dutch university which accepted them or provided them with scholarships, or access to their desired course of study. As a result, the location of the university did not appear to be a significant factor motivating immigration; however, in larger tourist cities within the Netherlands it is possible that students had more knowledge and experience of the location beforehand and therefore it factored into their motivation to study there. For example, student testimonials from the University of Amsterdam frequently allude to the attraction to the university being the history and vibrant lifestyle of being in a large city (University of Amsterdam, 2017).

Positive views of Home Higher Education

A recurring theme of this group was a generally positive outlook on home education. Most participants spoke of higher education in their countries of origin in a positive way, with often only minor criticism regarding subject access or teaching styles. In many cases, it was not the lack of quality of home education which served to 'push' students abroad, but instead a variety of other factors, such as lack of funding, insufficient grades, cultural attitudes towards women in higher education, negative views of the country as a whole and wanting a more internationally recognised degree.

One participant from Romania, when asked about who had influenced her decision to study abroad stated, "*Uh, I think, um, my mom, she's, um, always been very supportive of supportive of the idea of me studying abroad, because she, uh, encountered a lot of difficulties, um, while trying to*

become a therapist in Romania and well, just living in Romania in general." Another Romanian participant was similarly less critical of her home country's higher education than of Romania as a whole, and both participants described wanting to 'escape' or leave the country due to negative experiences.

A participant from Russia felt that the education in her home country has its positives, stating, "*It's good if you're talking about sciences or maths, but internationally it doesn't really hold up in more. I'm not sure what the English term for it is, but more like social sciences, literature, all of that stuff. So it's very good at hammering education into your brain.*" Although having its positives she felt that a qualification from the country would not have international recognition, and additionally she discussed wanting a more personalised and open teaching style which was more sensitive to her learning process. The overall image given by women when discussing their home education is that it is not necessarily bad, but it does not suit their individual needs or desires sufficiently, and when this becomes apparent, that is when they begin the search for study abroad. Most participants had either completed some HE in their home country already, if they were master's students, or had considered applying to universities in their home countries, often as a safety net if they could not enter schools abroad. Some students, namely those from Germany and Greece, had failed to access higher education in their home country, which was their primary reason for seeking study abroad.

7) Internal vs External Motivators

In summary, the motivators described above can be separated into categories of internal and external motivators. This is somewhat comparable to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study of push and pull factors in determining international study. However, as the pull of the destination country appeared considerably less important to the women participants, this terminology does not align with findings of this study. Additionally, it could be interpreted that support of family, funding and gender-power relations within a country of origin are not necessarily motivators in the traditional sense, but rather facilitators, or conditions which increase the likelihood of international study, and exist externally to the individual. It was felt that the terminology 'push and pull' detracted somewhat from the agency of

the individual. This study has found that women value their identity as independent and therefore would never describe themselves as being directed towards a certain path as implied by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). Youth agency and youth mobility have a strong affiliation, with young people linking their own independence and freedom with their ability to travel and explore (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016). Therefore, despite the existence of external factors which may appear to push a person from their home, it is really the result of personal agency and internal motivators in conjunction with external conditions which promote international study. Furthermore, country of study destination was an inconsequential and unimportant aspect for many of the women interviewed. Rather than being 'pulled' towards as destination due to its attractions, the women instead had a series of requirements for their host country. These included, language of study, accessibility of culture, attitudes towards women, access to desired study subject and affordability. Whichever country met a sufficient number of these requirements and was the most accessible was often their final choice.

Additional findings, less pertinent to the research question, are located in Appendix. 4.

6.1. Conceptual Model

This final conceptual model based on the findings indicates that the motivators for women to study abroad were both internal and external. Intrinsically, the women interviewed valued and wanted to portray themselves as having an independent personality and strength which they were able to prove through studying abroad.

Additionally, they expressed that they personally aspired to gain new experiences, and perspective, and they felt that the way to cultivate this was to be placed in a totally unfamiliar culture and environment. They expressed a kind of fear of being stuck or trapped in their home country and culture and had an international awareness that naturally drew them to the first viable opportunity to travel and explore independently.

External motivators relate more to the wider context that these women were living in before making their decision to study abroad and the ways in which these conditions facilitated or influenced them to pursue international study. Many participants spoke about their immediate family or role

models close to them who suggested or promoted international study but who also encouraged and supported them to go through with the process. None of the participants lacked the support of their inner circle which suggests that it is a necessary motivator.

The women interviewed often referred to an awareness of restrictions placed upon them within their origin countries on the basis of their gender and felt that a way of escaping this was through relocation to a country they perceived as more liberal or open-minded. Many also implied that moving from their home country at a younger age would facilitate their long term 'escape' whilst others merely wanted to experience freedom briefly before returning home.
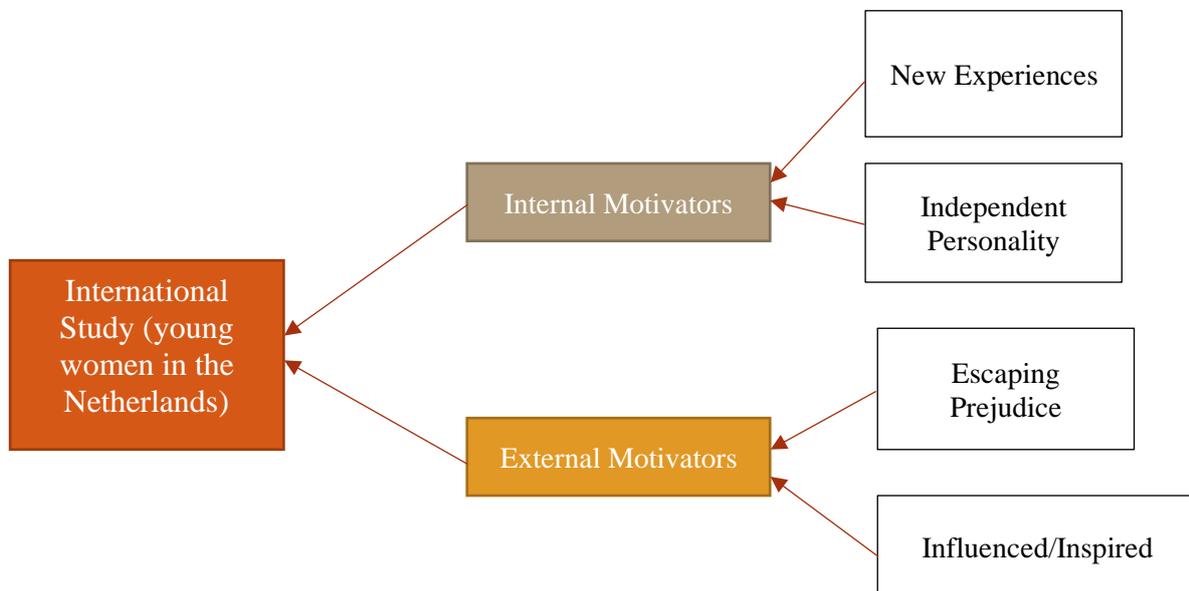

Figure 2. Final Conceptual Model

7. Discussion

The expectations regarding the outcome of this study were mostly met. It was ultimately unavoidable to discuss the pandemic however it did not dominate conversation, and for the most part participants were unaffected by it when making their decision to study abroad. Occasional references to gender were made but this was mostly with regard to the participants feelings of restriction or stereotype within their country of origin. Therefore gender became an important element mainly when discussing the country of destination as it was required to be a location considered more liberal and egalitarian in

comparison to their home country. Interestingly, youth agency and its expression were referred to within interviews. This was largely through the terms 'independence' or 'freedom', which the women often expressed as motivators in their pursuit of international study.

When focusing specifically on the motivators for women (studying abroad in the Netherlands) to study abroad, and taking into consideration the dominant themes from the literature review the findings can be broken into the following concepts:

- 'Escaping prejudice'

- 'New experiences'

- 'Independent Personality'

- 'Influenced/Inspired'

'Escaping Prejudice'

Although no prior hypotheses were formed, the literature review revealed the theory that feelings of discrimination or pressure based on their gender had a significant impact on the decision to migrate. Although in this research these feelings were not always explicitly expressed, as many participants did not want to be open to the idea that their gender in any way shaped their decision, there was an indication that cultural attitudes towards women in their countries of origin did play a role in motivating movement. In these cases, implicit references to gender norms and stereotypes in their home countries were described, or larger systems of oppression invoked to which the women presented themselves as rebelling against. Overall, the women interviewed portrayed themselves as having modern ideals of gender equality, with several explicitly referring to feminist theory, which were at odds with the attitudes of those in their home country in general forcing them to leave in order to escape or as a way to prove wrong those voices of doubt. Additionally, some participants expressed being somewhat unaware of the extent to which the gender norms of their home countries were restricting or pressuring them until they arrived in the Netherlands, however in these circumstances they did express prior awareness of the gender norms within their country.

Within wider literature, this idea has often been described when discussing the mobility of women more generally. Bang and Mitra (2011) for example conducted research to investigate the

female 'brain drain' from developing countries to countries in the OECD. This study identified that educated women have greater incentives to migrate and countries experienced a greater female 'brain drain' when they restrict access to economic opportunities and have high fertility rates, which was used as an indicator of cultural attitudes (Bang & Mitra, 2011). However, Baudass and Bazillier (2014) identified that if gender equality increases in a country the result would be that more women would begin to migrate and fewer low-skilled men.

A key concept associated with this theme is that of social and human capital. Baudass and Bazillier (2014) found that increases in gender equality result in increasing the skill level of all migrants, but that rather than a brain drain, women begin to invest more in human capital. Many of the women in this research spoke openly about acknowledging their privilege, and the levels of social and economic inequality in their home countries which prevents many others from gaining equal opportunities and seeking further education abroad. However, the topic of social/human capital was not fully explored within this research and the findings indicate that further investigation is needed into the influence of this aspect in permitting and motivating international study.

'New Experiences'

Much of the research that has investigated students' motivations for studying abroad has discussed the social and cultural aspirations of young people. Studying abroad was revealed in this research as being considered a safe way for women to independently travel, experience different cultures, meet new people and broaden their perspectives, whilst still pursuing their academic interests and fulfilling the wishes of friends and family. Cuzzocrea and Manich (2015) describe this as something which is typical of young people, and therefore use the term 'youth agency' to represent the aspirations of young people to explore. Agency and individualism are both concepts which were not directly invoked in this research, however the responses from participants indicate that they were aware from early within their lives that travel was something desirable that they would want to pursue and would be an option available to them. The mobility aspirations of young people has repeatedly been linked to early awareness of privilege, and access to social and cultural capital which is a facet of "cosmopolitan openness" (Skrbis et al., 2014, p.615).

'Independent Personality'

A significant aspect of the decision to move so far away from parents was often revealed to be something of a test of independence for the women interviewed. Bagnoli (2009) found from the testimonies of young backpackers, that the independence and freedom of travel had allowed space for young women in particular to construct new gender identities which rebelled from the norms within their origin countries and become a more fluid construction of experimentation and the influence of newfound friends. It was identified through the diary entries of travellers, that an adventurous personality was deemed essential for women choosing to travel alone, and that generally this adventurous nature was perceived as a predominantly masculine trait (Bagnoli, 2009). Lee et al. (2009) proposes a theory of 'alpha psychology' amongst female Korean international students, and a rejection of traditional women's gender roles, as being a possible reason for their higher levels of adjustment to cultural differences when abroad, in comparison to male students. It was proposed that high levels of independence, determination and self-confidence allow these female students to not only pursue international study farther from home, but also contribute to their ability to adapt and integrate into new cultures (Lee et al., 2009). Although the women interviewed in this research displayed confidence and determination, it is unclear as to whether or not this facilitated their transition to international study. This is an aspect which will require further research, and which has largely been excluded from discussions regarding women's motivations for international study.

'*Influenced/Inspired*'

Despite not wanting to admit that they were guided in thought while making the decision to study abroad, many women alluded to the significance of friends and family in setting them on the path of international study or giving them the encouragement needed to pursue their goals. Literature on this aspect is largely focused on economic opportunities, which families perceive as benefitting the family as a whole, which may be gained through migration. This is not something prevalent in this study, as most participants are supported financially by their families.

The role of social networks in foreign countries, as facilitating movement is also often put forward, however this was not revealed as an important aspect during this study, as many participants had no prior connections to the Netherlands of any sort. The role of friends and families as inspiring and encouraging international study has been widely overlooked, and from this study was revealed to be significant enough to require further investigation. However, the role of siblings has been discussed within wider migration discourse and was found to be significant also within the study, although requiring further research.

Mulder et al. (2020) found support for the 'paving the way' hypothesis which indicates that an individual is more likely to move to a location if a sibling is already residing there. Within this research it was also suggested that parents were more open to the idea of migration if a sibling had already left home to study and live abroad. However, this did not impact upon location as strongly, but rather became a way for women to demonstrate that international study was accessible and safe, and often comfort parents with the notion that a sibling would be closer in times of emergency.

8. Conclusion

This research had the objective of exploring the motivators which draw young women towards international study, with the focus being on women studying at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands. Although there was limited literature addressing these specific parameters within international study research, there was certain research and concepts which proved insightful. For example, Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study regarding the push and pull factors which drive young people to pursue international study, were adapted for this research. Instead of push and pull however the terms internal and external motivators were used, as rather than being drawn to a particular destination or forced from their countries of origin, the women of this study were more affected by their own intrinsic views on life, freedom and travel, as well as external perceptions of restriction or prejudice toward their gender within their home countries and the views of their families and peers. When it came to what motivated these women to pursue international study the four identified factors were; the desire to gain new experiences, an independent personality, desire to escape perceived

prejudice within the country of origin, and the encouragement or support of role models and immediate family.

In order for the women interviewed to have arrived in the Netherlands for higher education, several of the motivators mentioned needed to have aligned. These women did not make the decision based on one factor alone but rather the culmination and alignment of several decisions. First, the women decided that they wanted to pursue higher education. Following this, motivators arise which direct the women towards international study, namely their desire to escape gender restrictions in their home countries, their desire to experience something new and different, their independent personalities and the influence and inspiration of friends, family, and peers.

Once the decision to study abroad had been made, the choice of study country is a secondary consideration, which is the result of factors of accessibility aligning, to allow for the easiest transition. Many of the women interviewed had prior belief that the process of migration would be complex and confusing, and therefore it often occurred that the location that would be the simplest to move to, was selected. This research has highlighted a number of significant motivators identified by young women, some of which have some theoretical support from existing literature but all of which require further exploration. In order to explore the significance of gender for example, mixed gender studies should be completed to identify if any of these motivating factors extend to all international students. However, the perception of cultural gender norms and stereotypes of some countries shown by the women of this study were considered significant and this topic alone also deserves further investigation.

This research is by no means conclusive; however, it does highlight areas which have become significant within this field, and which have been overlooked which was ultimately its purpose. Notably, the perspectives of women have received little attention within this research topic despite the consistently high number of women pursuing international study each year. An important factor to consider is that these women are pursuing long-term study abroad. Much of the existing literature surrounding international study refers to brief semester exchanges, or one-year programmes designed simply to give students a taste of international travel rather than comprising a significant aspect of their studies and lives.

Overall, further exploration is required on the topic of long-term migration for students, as many of the participants of this study alluded to wanting to permanently migrate from their home countries or postpone returning for as long as possible. As a result, this topic evidently collides with larger migration patterns and trends and should be considered as an expansion of that subject. Further research into long-term study abroad could prove insightful, not only on the gender divisions occurring in all forms of migration, but also in predicting future patterns of movements. Additionally, as more students engage in these programmes every year, research into the motivating factors could appeal to institutions who wish to promote their international programmes and gain understanding of how to appeal to students from a variety of origins. For some countries of origin, patterns of female international students could link to wider concerns regarding a 'brain drain' and the facets of gender inequality which influence this. The over-representation of women studying abroad has been firmly established and consistently confirmed and therefore predominant countries of origin, as well as higher education institutes with international standing, should reflect and research this phenomenon as it will ultimately impact their futures.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.   Letter of invitation

22nd May 2021

To Whom It May Concern

You are being invited to participate in a research study on female students' motivations for moving abroad to pursue higher education. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of how women make the decision to migrate abroad to study in the Netherlands. Data will be collected via an interview which will require a maximum of 1 hour of your time. During this time, you will be encouraged to speak openly about your experiences and engage in informal conversation style discussion regarding your motives for international study. The interviews will be conducted wherever you prefer (e.g., in your home) and will be recorded. Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and identity. While the interviews will be recorded, the recording itself will be destroyed once the interview has been transcribed. The typed interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information from the interview will be removed to ensure your anonymity in the project. The transcribed interviews will be kept on an external hard drive which shall be kept in as secure location by the researcher.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you do this, all information obtained from you will be destroyed. The matters discussed within the interview will remain completely confidential and shall not be discussed with persons outside of the discussion. You have the right to know how your data is being handled and for what purposes it will be used. You may therefore receive copies of data once it has been collected, as well as a copy of the completed research. If you are unsatisfied with the way your data has been used, or if you feel it has been interpreted wrongly, you may request for its removal from the study.

The results of this research will be collated into a thesis which will be submitted to the Faculty of Spatial Sciences at the University of Groningen.
 If you wish to receive a copy of the results from this study, you may contact one of the researchers at the telephone number given below. If you require any information about this study or would like to speak to one of the researchers, please contact **Lorna Urwin** at **l.j.u.urwin@student.rug.nl** or **+447731743080**.

Kind Regards

Lorna Urwin

Appendix 2.

Dear [Participant]

The following is a consent form which must be signed in order for the research to take place. If the consent form is not completed and signed by the participant, data cannot be collected and any information currently held will be destroyed, and the participant excluded from the research project. Please tick yes or no to confirm you have read and give consent to the following statements.

	Yes	*No*
⇒ I have read and understood the information about the research project and the purpose of the data processing.	☐	☐
⇒ I have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐	☐
⇒ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.	☐	☐
⇒ I have been informed of my rights.	☐	☐
⇒ I understand that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	☐	☐
⇒ I understand how my data will be processed and protected.	☐	☐

I confirm I have read (or have been read) the above information regarding this research study on the motivations for young women's participation in international study in The Netherlands, and consent to participate in this study.

_____ (Printed Name)
_____ (Signature)
_____ (Date)

Interview guide:

The following is a rough guide of how interviews were conducted. Initially there was a focus on the ethical implications to adhere to the principles of avoiding deception and informed consent (Hadley, 2017) as well as breaking any initial tension or formality through setting the scene of the interview.

Researcher:

> "Hi, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. My name is Lorna and I'll be conducting this interview.
>
> Have you read the outline of this research and understand the purposes of this study?
>
> And are you aware that you are free to exit the study at any time and that you have the right to access and control all data relating to yourself that is collected during this study?
>
> This interview is predicted to last a maximum of 40 minutes, it will be recorded however no one other than myself will have access to the recordings and they will be deleted once the interview has been transcribed.
>
> The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences and motivations which are driving young women, such as yourself, to migrate abroad for Higher Education, but please consider this an informal discussion in which you are encouraged to explore and describe your own experiences.
>
> To begin with, would you mind answering some questions regarding your background?

Initial Open-Ended Questions
- What is your country of origin?
    - What is your view of Higher Education in your country of origin?
    - Why did you not want to study in your country of origin?
- Is English your first language?
    - If not, [how did you know you wanted to study in English?]
- How old are you?

- How did you come to decide that this was the right time in your life to study abroad?

- What do you study, and how did you come to choose this subject?

    - Did your chosen subject affect your decision to study abroad or where to study?

Intermediate Questions

- How long have you/will you be living in the Netherlands to study?

    - In the long term, do you have plans to migrate to the Netherlands, or another country outside of your country of origin?

    - In what ways has studying abroad changed your view of travelling or migrating to live in another country?

    - [Probe]: What was your view before, and how has it changed?

- Why did you want to obtain your degree?

    - [Probe]: what circumstances or experiences led you to make the decision to pursue Higher Education?

    - [Probe]: When did you make the decision?

    - [Probe]: How did you feel after making the decision?

- Do you have any siblings?

    - If yes: What did your sibling(s) think of your decision to study abroad?

- How or why did you decide to study and live in the Netherlands specifically?

    - [Probe]: had you been to the Netherlands before deciding to move/study?

    - [Probe]: What was your view of the Netherlands prior to deciding to study here?

- Who, if anyone, was influential or important to you when making decision to study abroad?

Ending Questions

- Did you aspire to travel before deciding to study abroad?

- Have you grown as a person since you decided to study abroad?

    - [Probe]: In what way?

- Did you apply to any other universities in different countries?

    o If so, which countries and why?

    o [Probe]: What led you to choose Groningen specifically?

- Did you have any fears or concerns about moving and studying abroad?

- What would you say are the major differences in your experiences and lifestyle here compared to your home country?

- How has studying abroad affected your relationships with people at home?

    o Did you consider this before you decided to study abroad?

- Do you think your gender impacted your decision at all?

    o [Probe]: Were there any female role models in your life that impacted your decision to study abroad?

⇒ After reflecting on your experiences, is there something else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this study, please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the research or the way in which your data is being used. "

Appendix 4. Additional Findings

The following are additional findings which, although not relevant to answering the research question, were recurring themes presented during the study and therefore deemed important enough for inclusion in the final work.

Language

The importance of finding an English-speaking country was highlighted frequently as a key motivating factor in the decision to study abroad. For many, if a suitable course cannot be found in English, they cannot have the opportunity to study abroad. Most participants have a degree of comfort with English, often times having been taught it from a very early age but finding any international course that is in English proves difficult. Many identified that the location of the Netherlands was less important than accessibility to English subjects. Often it can be seen that participants view English as a beneficial or international language which is more likely to provide them in good stead for their futures.

> *ID#9: Well, it's an international language. Everyone pretty much knows a bit of English. And there are a lot of hospitals around the globe that even if your degree is not in their native language, they're are going to accept you even, you know, good English, because you know the terminology which is more or less common in every language. And also you'll be able to communicate with every patient because everybody knows a bit of English*

> *ID#5: So that was a big thing of why, like, I'm in the Netherlands because they have so many bachelor's programs that are in English, because a lot of European universities will have like several masters programs that are in English, but all their bachelors programs are in whatever their native languages. But the Netherlands were, what a standard, they decided to incorporate some English.*

Although English opened up access to different universities, it was less of a motivator than a skill, which allowed these women to study abroad. Despite the fact that several women expressed feeling stressed or concerned that their English language skills would be lacking, the majority were

confident in pursing degrees in English and therefore it was their language skills combined with their motivations for studying abroad that actually permitted their move. In a similar way, access to funding through scholarships or the support of parents also acts as a facilitator to migration. A number of participants discussed the financial aspects of studying abroad, and in a couple of cases the granting of scholarships is what led them to the Netherlands and to RUG.

Timing

For many participants, the decision to study abroad happened during high school. However, for some there was a significant gap between their previous and current education. Of the bachelor's students interviewed, two were starting their degree at the age of 21, after having spent the time in between high school and higher education both travelling and working. It was during their time travelling that they become acquainted with the idea of international study and made the decision to move to the Netherlands. Additionally, a number of the master's students did not pursue their post-graduate degree immediately after graduating. Most spent time working in the interim, which is where they made the discovery that in order to progress in their chosen careers, they would need to pursue further education. When asked how they felt that this was the correct time in their lives to study abroad, answers varied—some still did not feel this was the correct time, others simply seized the opportunity when it occurred and when circumstances aligned to allow it, whereas for others HE was the inevitable next step in their lives so no other options were even considered.

> *ID#8: "Um, I finished high school in the country where I lived overseas after I was born, and I decided that I've had enough of that system of education. So I just wanted a new life, basically."*

This quote highlights a recurring theme, that once one stage of their lives was over there was a realisation that a new stage was beginning, and the time was right for more significant change to occur.