

Post Education Abroad Perspectives of a Young Black Woman

by
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Abstract

The purpose of this creative project is to encourage and educate more black students to seek opportunities overseas. With my discipline in Visual Communication, I used my photography skills to document interesting moments and created a written account of my experience abroad. After my journey, I decided to share my travel experiences on Instagram to engage with other black students, and perhaps to entice them to travel. After my reflection on the travel experience involved reviewing all my images and journal entries, I investigated national statistics and the plethora of reasons preventing black students from ample opportunity. I then conducted an Instagram survey to receive a better response from the black community.

One of the major findings from the survey is that lack of finances is preventing black students from seeking experiences internationally. In light of the Black Travel Movement, I plan to continue my work on social media and build upon my Instagram page with future updates. This creative project making has made a huge impact in life and will continue to have meaning as I encourage other young black Americana to step out of their comfort zone and embrace overseas travel.

Preface

I ask that as you read my thesis to consider what is represented in mainstream media and what can be done to bring socioeconomic change for young black Americans.

Opportunities are readily available to people of color who have much to offer; however, several factors have prevented the amount of exposure and encouragement needed to seek opportunities. Despite apprehension, lack of finances, work schedules, or all of the above, all students should be encouraged to seek opportunities during their college years. Also, I urge others to recognize a more accurate depiction and identity within the spectrum of the black community, thus providing a voice to black students who have been rewarded the opportunity to travel.

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Introduction

How does it feel to travel the unknown and experience a self-fulfilling prophecy? Speaking from experience, I can say it is rewarding, life changing and even more accessible than before. Being able to form my own judgments of international destinations has been gratifying while also allowing me the means to share intercultural experiences.

I studied French on a four-week study abroad program that began in June of 2017 at the Université of Caen Normandy. Before my departure, my self-perception and identity weighed heavy on my conscious due to the uncertainty of challenges ahead. Moreover, being the only black woman in my program, I felt a sense of disappointment while attending study abroad meetings with thousands of students and only a handful resembled my background. However, I didn't allow the lack of diversity within the program to veer me away from ample opportunities. Academic obligations kept me occupied during the program by continuously thinking of thesis concepts and actively seeking inspiration. In the process, I've gained a higher conscious and noticed an increase of social awareness and emotional intelligence. I understood by placing my energy towards creative work and utilizing the moments captured through photography would carry high merit.

Combining the concepts of travel and photography served to provide a platform to share the benefits of traveling overseas. As the program continued, I captured hundreds of images and completed edits during my free time for high quality photographs that could capture my story. During my travels, I documented my experiences in a miniature notebook with daily thoughts, meal notes and interactions. In addition to images, my

daily journals served as placements in time that allowed me to share my experiences on an intimate level.

After speaking with my advisor, I chose to tell my story through the social media app Instagram because I wanted to use a device that is most effective in reaching my desired audience of young African Americans. I launched a specific travel account (@aliyah.ly) to share my journey with others, and the platform has expanded my leadership skills by creating conversations in communities for black travelers. (see appendix A). I received an overwhelming response from individuals who found inspiration through my entries. Documenting my travel journey on social media has offered a voice for African American students with interests in travel abroad. In return, the user connects with someone like them, someone who broke the stereotype. My experience in completing my creative project through experience abroad has changed the black traveler perspective and provided courage to those considering traveling overseas.

Secondary Research

During my research, I became familiar with the 2015 Black Travel Movement. I discovered *Travel Noire*, which is a publishing brand promoting travel resources, tips, and discounts for people of color. Zim Ugochukwu, 27, is the founder of the website launched in 2013 and she has created a success through the brand. The Instagram account has over 300,000 followers and displays posts from black millennials who are traveling, mainly women. Breathtaking scenery and garment details are presented in each post to inspire other millennials of color. Zim Ugochukwu's successful platform has shown that black Americans are interested in traveling abroad and sharing their experiences.

Contacting the founder of *Travel Noire* was an essential piece for my creative project and personal knowledge.

Black students could benefit from study abroad; however, there is a lack of knowledge concerning African American students, and most decide never to leave the country. Because young black Americans rarely see or hear of others like themselves traveling, the problem perpetuates. Research conducted by IES Abroad has indicated the benefits of study abroad such as faster first-job hires and higher starting salaries. In addition, according to an IES Abroad survey, 90% of study abroad alumni found their first jobs within six months.

Only 30% of Americans obtain passports in their lifetime, meaning that 70% of Americans never leave, which is an extremely high number (Avon). More extreme is that only five percent of African Americans study abroad even though there is a higher enrollment for black Americans (Tensely). According to the National Center of Education Statistics, the percentage for black American students traveling abroad has slightly increased by 0.2-0.5% each year since 2007. Overall, more than 300,000 U.S. students have received credit for study abroad during 2014-2015, a three percent increase from the year prior according to the Institute of International Education. Although the numbers have changed moderately over time, the reasons as to why more African Americans do not travel overseas needed more exploration to help remove racial stereotypes.

While researching some possible reasons that prevented black students from traveling, I considered media coverage as a major influence as to why black students choose not to pursue education abroad. Tragic international news creates fear of being

attacked by strangers or physical harm while using public transportation. “Nearly 460 acid attacks were reported in London in 2016, according to London police” (Phillips). Not all attacks were classified as racially motivated, but the idea that such harsh attacks are taking place overseas may hinder interest. Although fears concerning personal safety are valid, fear shouldn’t turn young people of color away from traveling abroad entirely.

From my initial research, I learned that altering common perceptions is likely necessary to encourage more African-American students to travel abroad. My goal became to gain more insight through the use of social media and surveying.

Implementation —My Travels

Nine students including myself enrolled in the MTSU study abroad program to France in the summer of 2017. I attended classes daily, but it was mostly sightseeing around the city of Caen, going to museums, and visiting historical sites. I appreciated the opportunity for experiential learning, which helped capture additional moments for my creative project rather than sitting in a classroom.

My days were extended because host families left work at a later time. My host mother drove me to class most days and I had homework regularly that she would look over for grammatical errors. I attended class from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and would get up around 8 a.m. Sometimes Dr. Nancy Goldberg wanted the group to arrive at a certain location sooner so we would meet in front of cathedrals or at a bus outside. Whenever we would leave the classroom to visit other locations, I attached my revolving camera lens to my case and tried to capture the ambiance of a particular space. I was mesmerized by the

details of the streets and shops. They became mental archives that would be shared and reflected upon. I did take a couple of selfies, but I refrained from taking too many. I avoided having the experience revolve around being concerned about my outer appearance. Instead, I appreciated nature such as flowers, beaches, and the historical cathedrals, and captured details for a unique perspective (Figs. 1 & 2).

I enjoyed the exposure to children in France. I visited a French elementary school where I wasn't allowed to take photos while observing the students, but I was able to write down reflections seeking my observations. I observed the classroom of the daughter from my host family and was pleased to know the children were anxious for my arrival. They had many questions for me with a decent mix between personal and standard questions seeking an American perspective. During the lessons, I noted things such as the number nine looked similar to the letter G and how teachers seemed stricter compared to American teachers. Also, I observed how the desks were bigger and the curriculum was more challenging than American standards. They desired to understand everything concerning my life and tried to gift me with toys such as fidget spinners. Although they were children, they were welcoming and accepting of my presence. It did, however, become overwhelming attempting to give every child equal attention.

On my last day with my host family in Normandy, my host mother drove me to the adolescent home of fashion designer Christian Dior. It was about an hour and a half away from the host family's residence. This visit excited my interest in fashion and the industry. I took many detailed photos around the grounds of flowers and seashells, and asked my host mother to snap some shots by the sea and signs for visual for visual. (Fig. 3).

Once I arrived in Paris, I was able to capture moments more freely knowing the course was finished. I was able to finally relax for seven days. My first day in Paris involved me observing the area around my hotel and gaining familiarity with transportation and shops. I walked with two other members from the program to the Eiffel tower from the hotel. I was able to capture photos of meals (Fig. 4) and the ambience of the streets through images and get an understanding of the Parisians around me. As I viewed the tower, I snapped more images of the Eiffel (Fig. 5) and it appeared smaller than I imagined. It was satisfying being able to see the landmark for myself. I asked one of the students from the program to take a photograph of me looking at the tower as the sun was setting (Fig. 6). I took more detailed images of flowers by the tower and enjoyed the environment and amount of diversity in the area.

While spending time in Paris by the Eiffel Tower, I took notice of the many diverse individuals representing a variety of backgrounds and skin complexions. I was surprised to see Africans wearing their traditional head wraps and creating revenue from pop-up businesses. Witnessing Africans speak French was also an inspiring and unique experience. I feel that many black Americans don't expect to see people like themselves in Europe. This is an important message to share with those hesitant to travel.

Versailles was extremely picturesque and such a wonderful site to relax and enjoy the historic statues (Fig. 7), paintings and well-kept gardens (Fig. 8). Rooms in Versailles are excessively decorative, not what you usually find in the United States (Fig.9). I found myself being inspired by the ceiling artwork (Fig. 10), patterns on the walls and vibrant colors incorporated in the bed sheets, chairs and furniture. I also remember taking a short nap in the shade in Versailles and captured a rare moment of isolation. (Fig. 11). The

temperature was about 85 degrees in Paris and I woke up with flowers in my hair, which looked like visitors carefully placed them there in my slumber. I wish I had a photo to commemorate that special moment (Fig.12).

When I arrived in London, I walked from my Airbnb flat to Oxford Circus and from there to Big Ben (Fig.13). I didn't have a problem touring London alone. I enjoyed an Indian restaurant every day for dinner, and the owners kindly gave me advice for navigating the city. While touring the area around Big Ben, I purchased and enjoyed an espresso (Fig.14).

Unlike Paris, I was unable to recognize who was a foreigner in London, England. More people were dressed more like Americans as opposed to ethnically. However, I immediately took notice of the diversity within the food selections in London. My Airbnb had a Indian restaurant nearby called Cochin where I enjoyed dinner every night. The British were also incredibly friendly and helpful when I needed assistance with directions and the best way to get transportation.

The program total cost was about \$5,000, but I earned over \$2,000 in scholarships from the Honors College, the Hope scholarship and a written essay. I received \$1,000 from the Hope scholarship, \$950 from a written essay, and \$300 from the Honors College. I was encouraged to get these scholarships from Dr. Goldberg, the professor in charge of the French study program.

The rest of the funds came from my savings and my work at the University cafeteria and Amazon. The program was a successful step in my journeys to travel abroad. It has already opened many doors for me to expand on future travel endeavors

and have the experience as a Global Ambassador for the study abroad program during my final semester.

Implementation — Reflection

After returning from the summer program, I began a reflection process to examine my emotional responses at various times throughout my travels. Music has been a wonderful reminder of my European journey, like a mental archive. Listening to certain tracks, such as “Feel It Still” by Portugal. the Man and “Just Dance” by Honne, enhanced my reflection process and my growth to better process my past experiences. A big part of my reflection involved reviewing photos and deciding which ones would be evocative of my experience. I compared my images with notes from my journal, thinking about the best ways to tell my story.

Journal Entries

As I examine my inner thoughts from the travel journal, I’m aware of my personal growth. It has been nine months since the program ended, and I don’t recognize my former self while reading the journals. As noted from my journal on June 11, 2017; “The first day in Normandy was a success. I attended an 80th birthday party. I woke up slightly tired, but I pushed through. I didn’t know what the day would be like speaking French and being tired.” At this moment, I was unsure how successfully I would be able to communicate with a foreign family. I assumed that the language barrier was going to be a huge challenge, but I ended up knowing more of the language than I expected. That helped me to gain confidence in my ability to navigate this foreign country.

Another moment of learning about my new environment happened on July 3, 2017 while strolling through Paris and browsing through pop-up shops. In my journal, I wrote; “No wonder the French dress well. Fly clothes for good deals. 15, 30 euros and the choices are endless.” Even though the euro is more powerful than the American dollar, I still felt that clothing in Europe provided better deals. People there seem able to be fashionable and not spend hundreds of dollars. Learning from the fashions I observed, I now try to be more aware of my own sense of style.

On June 28, 2017, I wrote the following; “Not much phases me anymore and that’s such a good thing. I don’t dwell and get upset like I used to. I just want good skin and to live a meaningful life, a life I’m passionate about.” I didn’t expect to experience a complete mind shift, or to have such a strong internal transformation within just one month overseas.

My journal entry from June 28, 2017; “Realistically, I’m hoping I know what I want to do soon, but it’s not that simple. I’m not simple. There is a difference between what I can do and what I want to do.” At this moment, my senior year of college was fast approaching. I began to feel pressure about making a decision on what to do after I graduated. I didn’t have any idea of what I wanted to do. I knew that I was able to do many things, but it was a matter of deciding what I most wanted to accomplish. It took time, but I finally made some decisions and I’m content with my future plans so far. My goals are to travel, build my portfolio, and delve into the creative design industry whether its corporate or freelance.

Travel Photography

From my recent academic studies, I learned about the emergence of photographers associated with the Black Press during the 19th century and the fight to obtain a better image and identity within the black community. During the civil rights movement, black reporters and photographers worked diligently to cover events and risked their lives to educate the public. Former reporter Dorothy Gilliam stated that, “Many young people like me learned that education would be the key to help overcome racial discrimination” (Gilliam). The idea to create social change has propelled my interest in expanding my photography skills for a lasting imprint in history. About a year before I left for Europe, I developed an interest in photography in a Digital Media course and I was able to expand my skills in photography. I received positive feedback from multi-media professors acknowledging my eye as a photographer. For the trip, I made the decision to purchase the Ztylus 4 in 1 iPhone 8 plus Revolver lens which came with a macro, fisheye, CPL and protective case. I knew I wouldn’t be able to afford an expensive DSLR, but the \$70 option provided better quality images for my iPhone 8 Plus and room for variety. There wasn’t a specific technique I used during the process of taking photos. I trusted my judgment and experimented with angles and details with minimal editing and no filters.

The Instagram social experiment allowed me to observe other travel photography as an amateur photographer. I have discovered established accounts and now understand what users gravitate towards. I wanted to make sure I was providing a high quality and sharp image that stood out from the typical posts.

Social Media Outreach

The digital world is a different space compared to interacting and connecting with people in person. It's also not my nature to post frequently on social media and share my life with others. Part of it has been fear of judgment or fear that not many people would recognize my existence with likes. Professor Leslie Haines asked me during our initial meetings how I could best reach out to my audience to promote travel abroad to black students. It was agreed that social media would be most effective in supporting \my message and goal and in reaching the desired audience.

I began to make sense of the Instagram user by becoming the user with more frequent posts on social media. I quickly learned that I had to become more strategic in the times I posted and found that posting around 2 a.m. proved to be most effective. I knew I needed to understand the dissonance between digital and face-to-face communication and accept that communicating digitally is something that the public might be more comfortable with. Instagram has allowed me to observe, educate, learn from, and share with my broader audience. Comments left by others provided more insight into current perceptions about traveling abroad.

Instagram is commonly used among those in my family and social circles. 38% of black Americans use Instagram while 21% of whites use the platform. 34% of Hispanics use Instagram, and it's found to be the most popular platform for ages 18-29 (Krogstad). I discovered accounts such as Black and Abroad with 84,000 followers most of whom are black millennials. This allowed me to gain perspective on the expansion of the Black Travel Movement and how quickly it's expanding. I followed accounts that have shown interest in the movement which then allowed my following to grow more quickly. I

became determined to promote study abroad experiences for black Americans and allow their thoughts and opinions to be heard and acknowledged.

I launched my travel Instagram account in February 2018 to gain more of a focus for my thesis. I have shared 24 posts and the number is still ongoing. This format allowed for both image posting and comments, so it seemed a perfect way to tell my story and gain knowledge. I incorporated journal entries that corresponded with some of my images to encourage more commentary. The account showed images from my travels in Caen, Paris, and London. People are fascinated with travel photography and commented on images such as “wow,” “brave,” and “you are an inspiration.” Using Instagram as a business account has allowed me to better understand my target audience and monitor the change and expansion of demographics. I know the age groups I’m dealing with, where they live, I’m aware of the increased engagement in some posts rather than others.

I became more strategic in my posts and began to create better engagement in my captions by asking direct questions such as, “Where would you like to travel abroad?” I’ve received direct messages with questions and sincere comments to congratulate me on my thesis and my travel experiences. I was pleased to inform individuals who were curious about whom I am, my studies and my interests.

I’m grateful for the feedback I have received and I learned how fickle the Instagram user can be. I knew with wanting to gain a more organic following I had to follow many users in hopes they would recognize my work. When I didn’t post for a couple of days, I would get unfollowed and wasn’t quite understanding of it at first. I realized the age group I’m dealing with and how impatient society is. It was also

frustrating how others weren't as interested in nature aspects and took more notice of my physical appearance.

Primary Research

I used Instagram to test my thesis by creating an Instagram poll (see appendix B) for my followers and students from the University. I found it more effective to create a poll through social media to give participants the freedom to click on the poll rather than direct message or e-mail. I was advised to contact the director from the Office of Study Abroad, Katherine Kovar, and ask permission for my Instagram page to be distributed to MTSU students willing to participate. For the poll, I also reached out to some faculty members from a study abroad fair for a broader sample of responses. I also developed yes or no questions for more quantifiable responses. Some questions offered more insight if discussion about travel abroad was circulated among friends and if students were first-generation college students.

From my survey questions given to MTSU students and Instagram followers, I gained insight into the reasons why young black Americans aren't able to study abroad. The most common deterrent to travel abroad for this audience was lack of finances. I'm not surprised by this confirmation of my theory. Other barriers to travel voiced were the fear of traveling alone, lack of encouragement from relatives, work, and classes. There isn't just one primary reason black Americans aren't traveling abroad, though financial limitations were voiced most often. I also discovered that fear of personal safety and the unknown isn't a major factor.

From my research I learned that altering common perceptions is necessary to encourage more African-American students to travel abroad. Success stories of black

Americans who undertook the journey may lead to greater understanding and acceptance of the concept and make it known that travel is affordable and accessible. It may lead to more family support if concerned relatives can see, and converse with, someone like themselves who has made the journey. I concluded that with my creative project I have challenged perceptions and provided a helpful millennial perspective as a young black woman.


Conclusion




The thesis turned out to be a phenomenal project for me, even though I was unsure of my challenges ahead. I had trouble finding a professor willing to work with me after my initial professor left the University for another position. I'm thankful for Leslie's advice throughout the process after she agreed to become my advisor. From start to finish, she helped me understand what I'm passionate about which created purpose. Discovering that I have the ability to reach many people and inspire others through my connection with traveling was valuable. I gained meaning from the process of the thesis and I found it powerful to promote positive experiences and insights.


From social media, I discovered a way not to worry about the need for likes. I knew I wanted to be as authentic as possible, but I discovered that it could be difficult keeping up. I became proud of my work no matter if one person liked the post or 100 people did. In conclusion, I have addressed perceptions about barriers to travel for young black Americans and gained insights into how to reach out to them. I feel proud that I have played a small role in encouraging young black students to study abroad.

Appendix A: Instagram Posts

Instagram Account and Mission Statement

 | Instagram






alayah.ly


Following


24 posts 297 followers 404 following

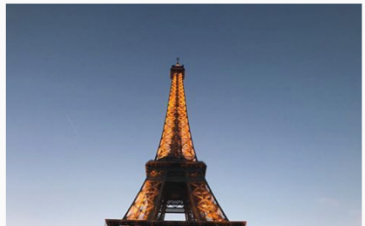
Aliyah Lyons MTSU Global Ambassador🌱🌍 I aspire to encourage young black students to travel abroad by sharing my experiences from France and London 2017


Followed by [_benyonce_](#), [dirtyspritelee](#), [maleklowkey](#) + 5 more














Appendix A: Instagram Posts



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

aliyah.ly I enjoyed my day by the sea in Granville, France. It was a calming place to enjoy nature and reflect. Do you have a next destination in mind outside of the U.S? If so, comment below 🍷 I want to hear your thoughts 🗨️

curiocupcake I want to go to Japan and Scotland so bad!!

aliyah.ly @curiocupcake both sound like amazing destinations! I'm definitely eyeing those as well

apron.lady90 Might check out Peru this year and do one domestic trip. Our goal is to do at least 2 trips a year, one domestic and one international

aliyah.ly @apron.lady90 sounds like a good plan 😊

the_lucy_who Thinking of a Canada trip from Vancouver to Montreal 🇨🇦

aliyah.ly @the_lucy_who I've been to Canada for a layover but have yet to explore ✈️

curiocupcake @aliyah.ly Next year, hopefully I'll be able to do a trip to Oregon, Scotland or Ireland (apparently the plane tickets are not that expensive)

wanderlust_experiences Absolutely love how you capture your experiences 🥰🥰🙌

aliyah.ly @wanderlust_experiences thank you 😊

myreallifeproductions Keep shining 🌟🔥
100

Appendix A: Instagram Posts



Figure 4

curlyhairadventuresblog I did after studying abroad in Spain. The times I'd eat were all messed up for a few months when I came back to the states (especially since Spaniards don't usually eat dinner until after 7pm). Since my diet in Spain consisted of tapas, having a plate full of food back in the states was intimidating (I still till' this day can't eat a full meal lol). And overall, my stomach just had the hardest time adjusting back to American food.

demina_macc My mouth just watered! It looks soooo good! I really haven't had a memorable experience with food in my travels. I was actually wanting to be back in the states. But I guess I need to go further than the islands

travel_like_aqueen wait till you have Pasta in Sicily Italy, and have the best gelato in Venice, youll never wanna eat at any restaurants in the U.S again !!

aliyah.ly @travel_like_aqueen 😊 I'll keep that in mind.

1girl1globe 🍕

theurbaneater Yaaasss. I have. I cried. In Europe i kept saying, it doesn't taste like this at home....In the US, i kept saying, for a few weeks, it didn't taste like this in Europe. Now, there are just some foods i will not eat state side...

Appendix A: Instagram Posts



Figure 5



Figure 6

Appendix A: Instagram Posts



Figure 7



Figure 8

Appendix A: Instagram Posts



Figure 9



Figure 10

Appendix A: Instagram Posts



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

ripbamb.i I think it's a lack of all the above and my parents.

raerae_livingoutloud Awesome, congrats 2 u

aliyah.ly [@ripbamb.i](#) i agree completely. They weren't as encouraging to leave abroad.

fetchgreenandco [@aliyah.ly](#) I traveled to U.A.E and Qatar.

ripbamb.i [@aliyah.ly](#) i think it's mostly they'd be a bit too worried about me. They already don't like when my job takes me an hour to commute sometimes. And my mom wants me to travel she tells me, but just not rn(years later i think)

_msdavis Super brave more power to you 🇬🇧

aliyah.ly [@_msdavis](#) thank you 🌸

lucia_lrfrench Wow !!

fetchgreenandco I have traveled abroad but never alone. I would like to do so but have been hesitant b/c of fear. But I'm glad your solo trip was safe and wonderful.

aliyah.ly [@fetchgreenandco](#) Thank you for explaining your experience with traveling abroad. Where did you visit?



Figure 14



1. Have you ever traveled outside of the country? Yes 80% No 20%
2. Are you a first generation college student? Yes 23% No 77%
3. Has money interfered with your interest in traveling abroad? Yes 66% No 34%
4. Have your parents encouraged you to travel overseas? Yes 53% No 47%
5. Do you talk to your friends about traveling abroad? Yes 89% No 11%
6. Have you thought about living overseas? Yes 92% No 8%
7. What has prevented you from travel abroad? Lack of finances? Yes 74% No 26%
8. Is work preventing you? Yes 54% No 46%
9. Are classes preventing you? Yes 25% No 75%
10. Is it fear for personal safety or the unknown? Yes 26% No 74%
11. Do you have interest in traveling abroad? Yes 100%

*Percentages averaged from 36 survey respondents.

Male/ Female ratio :61% Female , 33% Male

Black 99.8%

White .1%

Asian .02%

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