Returning to a new normal

Social and mental adaptation of study abroad returnees during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

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This article presents a comparative case study analysis of two mobility students who, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, had to terminate their stay abroad early and return home after seven and eleven weeks, respectively. The study aims to shed light on the impact of the outbreak of the pandemic on students' social contacts and their re-adaptation back home, drawing on interview and questionnaire data. The interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and suggest that, while the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was a stressful experience for both students, which impacted the social contacts they entertained and their re-adaptation at home, the two students' experiences also differed in many ways. We argue that these differences may be attributable to the social contacts the students maintained prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the goals associated with the stay abroad, and the students' coping strategies.

Keywords: social integration, language use, re-adaptation, COVID-19, interview study, higher education

1. Introduction

The two case studies presented here have emerged from a longitudinal, mixed-method research project on study abroad (SA) students' language attitudes, practices, and competences. SA is essentially a social experience and students' socialization abroad is considered a key aspect affecting students' outcomes regarding foreign language development and intercultural learning (Feyen &

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Krzaklewska, 2013; Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022). While the interview study of this research project was underway, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted mobility programs worldwide and severely affected international students' possibilities of social contact and interaction. The students suddenly found themselves in a rapidly changing situation in which social life, an essential part of studying abroad, was reduced to a minimum. The research team thus decided to adapt the original interview study to document the unique experiences of students who were studying abroad in spring 2020 and who, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, returned home prematurely ($n = 6$). The present paper focuses on two of these interview participants, Lea and Anna, who were selected because they were comparable in many respects (similar age, same home institution, same study program, both staying abroad in a non-English-speaking context) but differed greatly with respect to the composition of their social networks while abroad, their reaction to the outbreak of the pandemic, and their experience of abruptly returning home. The main contribution of the present study is that it allows unique insights into different ways in which SA students reacted to the stress and loss of control surrounding the outbreak of the pandemic, and how social contacts established and maintained during the SA period gained or lost importance in this extraordinary situation. Moreover, a methodologically innovative mixed-methods design was adopted by interweaving the quantitative data about social contacts and language use from a questionnaire, visualized in a specifically developed infographic or *contact profile*, with qualitative information from the interviews, which have been analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social networks during SA

Whereas in its early stages, research into SA focused almost exclusively on measuring learning outcomes in terms of language (Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Llanes, 2011) or intercultural development (Roy et al., 2019), there has been increased interest in individual differences in recent years (see Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Kinginger, 2013; Magnan & Back, 2007). The increased focus on the individual has led to a reorientation in SA research away from an outcome-oriented, mainly quantitative perspective to a process-oriented, mainly qualitative perspective. These more process- and socially-oriented studies have revealed great variability with regard to the extent to which SA participants become engaged in local communities (Coleman, 2015; Kinginger, 2013, 2015, 2019; Mas-Alcolea & Torres-

Purroy, 2021), resulting in a range of different patterns or profiles of their social networks. Following Bochner et al. (1977) and Hendrickson et al. (2011), we understand social networks as the totality and the structured pattern of individual students' interpersonal relationships, including their membership in different social groups (e.g., international students, groups of friends at home and at their SA destination). Previous research has shown that students often move in a "bubble" or "parallel society" (Gomes, 2020, p. 142) while abroad, as they tend to connect and interact with other international or co-national students. This tendency can be attributed to the fact that other international or co-national students find themselves in comparable circumstances facing similar concerns (Gomes, 2020). Moreover, several studies revealed that actively engaging with local communities can be a difficult matter and that, overall, international students exhibit moderate degrees of integration into local communities (Allen, 2010; Ehrenreich et al., 2008; Magnan & Back, 2007; Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022; Moglen, 2017; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Schartner, 2015; Trentman, 2013). In De Federico de la Rua's study (2008) among 241 Erasmus students, for example, the majority developed a cosmopolitan network made up of local friends, compatriot friends, and international friends from other Erasmus countries. There were also a sizable number of students, however, who only had compatriot friends. On average, only 17% of all friends of the 241 participating Erasmus students were from the host society. Similarly, an interview study by Ehrenreich (2008) among 22 former German language assistants who taught German in English-speaking countries revealed that, for more than half of the assistants, interactions with the local population were rare. These findings can be partially accounted for by contextual constraints, such as students' accommodation or type of university program (Bracke & Aguerre, 2015; Mitchell, 2015), the sociolinguistic context (e.g., the presence of many other students from one's own country or with similar linguistic backgrounds; Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022), or the availability of opportunities to invest in a hobby, such as in a local sports club (Sauer & Ellis, 2019). Individual factors can also contribute to this phenomenon. In a study on Spanish students abroad in different countries, Mas-Alcolea and Torres-Purroy (2022) reported how a perceived lack of competences in a local language or in English can prevent students from engaging with locals or even other international students in favor of contacts with whom they can interact in Spanish.

While socially-oriented SA research has uncovered the pivotal role of social networks for individual differences among SA students regarding their linguistic, personal, or intercultural development, it is exactly these networks that were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because many classic opportunities for social networking of SA students, such as the physical classroom,

university societies and clubs, extracurricular activities, and so forth, fell away unexpectedly.

2.2 Re-entry experiences – Positive and negative perspectives

Apart from social integration in the host community, previous research has also been interested in social re-integration of SA students upon return. In general, re-locating to the home environment after an SA experience can evoke both negative and positive feelings. To date, much of the literature has focused on the former part, by exploring the challenges students encounter upon return (Kartoshkina, 2015). Reported challenges have been connected to both psychological and social aspects of readjusting to the home environment. Psychological challenges included feelings of loneliness, isolation, alienation, frustration, and even depression (Allison et al., 2012; Butcher, 2002; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Walling et al., 2006). As far as social aspects are concerned, students reported encountering communication problems with family and friends, partly due to a reported lack of interest in hearing about SA students' experiences or the students' sense of being unable to share the importance of their SA experience (Allison et al., 2012; Kartoshkina, 2015). One possible explanation why re-entering might prove challenging is a sense of loss induced by leaving behind new friends and the newly adopted lifestyle (Butcher, 2002). As Coleman (2015) highlighted, a stay abroad equips students with more than improved language proficiency, including more confidence and more openness towards new experiences. Hence, re-adaptation to old routines may prove difficult, especially in light of the fact that studying abroad has been viewed as a key transformative experience, as an opportunity for personal change, and for assuming a new, more independent identity (Brown & Graham, 2009; Landon et al., 2017; Pritchard, 2011).

Apart from the challenging aspects that might be experienced upon return, students also experience positive elements. One major positive aspect of returning home is the excitement to reunite with people and experiences such as speaking one's own first language or eating familiar food (Gill, 2010; Kartoshkina, 2015). Some students also experience it as comforting to return home where they feel a sense of belonging (Kartoshkina, 2015; Pritchard, 2011). Kartoshkina further highlighted students' increased appreciation of certain elements of their own culture that they missed while abroad. Students also reported that they appreciated sharing and reflecting upon their experiences with people who had similar intercultural experiences.

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, returning to the home environment might have been experienced differently with both bitter and sweet sides potentially being more pronounced. Given the lack of time for proper leave-

taking, the insecurity about what to expect at home, and the involuntariness associated with the premature return, it seems likely that re-entry might have been more challenging.

2.3 The effects of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic on SA

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Over the course of the ensuing weeks and months, the virus caused major disruption in various areas of public and private life. As a response, public health experts and government officials across the globe started to implement measures intended to prevent the further spread of the virus. During the first wave of the pandemic, about nine months before vaccines first became available, these measures included rules on hygiene and social distancing, appeals or orders to stay at home, as well as self-isolation or quarantine. On top of that, many countries imposed restrictions on public life such as closing non-essential businesses, sports, and entertainment facilities, but also schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions. Higher education institutions decided to suspend on-campus activities including courses and completely or partially close institutions (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 16). Where possible, many universities rapidly transitioned to online courses.

The abovementioned efforts also had a tremendous impact on international student mobility. An International Association of Universities (IAU) survey (Marinoni et al., 2020) showed that, in Europe, almost all participating higher education institutions (95%) reported an impact on international student mobility. International students were grounded at their own or foreign institutions; some decided to interrupt their study programs while others were forced to do so because student exchange programs had been cancelled (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 27).

On top of that, many countries restricted entry rules at their national borders. This also had a massive impact on global air traffic with airlines reacting by canceling a large number of flights. Consequently, many SA students had to face the decision of whether to stay in their exchange destination, risking being unable to return home, or to end their stay early. The findings of an Erasmus Student Network (ESN) survey conducted in March 2020 showed that 41.8% of the respondents decided to stay in their exchange destination and 40% returned home (Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020, p. 8f.). At the time of completing the survey, 5.2% of the respondents were undecided how to proceed, 3.6% reported being stuck and unable to return home, and the remaining 7.8% indicated being unable to start their exchange (Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020, p. 8f.). Those returning home had to organize their trip home within a short time frame.

Previous work focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on SA students is still rare. Many of the earliest published studies with a focus on COVID-19 have investigated the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health and well-being. The measures imposed, especially the ban on public and private events, and the closing of shops, restaurants, bars, and entertainment and leisure facilities, could prove to be stressors for students in general, including SA students, potentially resulting in elevated levels of feelings of loneliness, social isolation, anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms (Elmer et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2021).

Social networks provide psycho-social support and a sense of belonging (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). As the study by Hendrickson et al. (2011) on social friendship networks of 84 international students at the University of Hawaii demonstrates, having more relations with host students is positively correlated with feelings of satisfaction and connectivity among SA students. Similarly, the longitudinal study of 162 Belgian high school exchange students by Geeraert et al. (2014) indicated that, over time, students who failed to make friendships with host students experienced higher levels of stress. The studies by Moglen (2017) and Gomes et al. (2021) indicate that this psycho-social support is not dependent on a sizeable network of local friends but can also be provided by a network based on shared experiences with international and co-national friends. Gomes et al. (2021) also suggested that social networks helped to cope with the stress and challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a similar vein, Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett (2021) emphasized the importance for international students to maintain close social connections in order to optimize their mental health.

Both the pandemic as such and the mandated measures are likely to have severely curtailed the sense of *control*, that is, the belief that events are dependent on one's actions rather than outside one's personal influence (Zimbardo, 1985, p. 275), and *agency*, "the power to originate action" (Bandura, 2001, p. 3), of SA students. It seems likely that students may differ in the way they react to and cope with this loss of control and agency on the basis of the causality orientations theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002). This theory posits that people's motivated behavior is influenced by their causality orientation and distinguishes between a *control orientation* and an *autonomy orientation*. Individuals with a control orientation are more oriented toward an environment characterized by controls and instructions, whereas individuals with an autonomy orientation are comfortable in a context that includes opportunities for self-determination and choice, thus offering a high degree of autonomy. It can be assumed that SA students' reactions to restrictions imposed because of the mandated COVID-19 measures differ considerably based on their personal causality orientation: students with a high autonomy orientation, who value the freedoms that SA would offer them under normal circumstances, are likely to suffer from pandemic-related constraints much more than

those who, because of their control orientation, prefer a context with directional guidelines.

2.4 Research questions

In light of these early empirical findings on the effects of COVID-19 on the social networks and psychological well-being of students, as well as general research on the social adaptation of students abroad and their readjustment in the home country, the current study aims to generate knowledge on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on a specific group of students, namely, SA students, for whom the establishment of social contacts abroad can be challenging under the best of circumstances. The focus of the study lies on the impact of the outbreak of the pandemic on students' social contacts and re-adaptation back home, as well as their coping strategies for social and mental challenges, which, based on causality orientations theory, can be argued to reflect individual styles in reacting to the restricted degrees of freedom during the pandemic situation. The following research questions (RQ) directed the study:

RQ 1: Which social contacts did the SA students entertain in the short time span between the outbreak of the pandemic and the abrupt return home and what languages did the students use to communicate with them?
RQ 2: How did SA students experience their return home and how did they readapt to the "new normal"?
RQ 3: What connections can be made between social contacts entertained while abroad and the experience of returning home?

3. Method

The study presented here is a comparative case study analysis of two mobility students who went abroad in spring 2020. Both terminated their stay after seven and eleven weeks, respectively, and returned home in March due to the outbreak of COVID-19. These two cases were selected from the sample as they differed markedly in the way they perceived and reacted to the unexpected turn that their stay abroad took. They were both enrolled at a Swiss university and were studying abroad in order to meet the requirements of their institution regarding a stay abroad and English proficiency levels.

For the presentation of these cases, we primarily draw on post-stay interview data but complement these with questionnaire data collected three weeks into the stay within the quantitative part of the larger project to provide possible explana-

tions for the differing experiences. In the following, we will first briefly introduce the two cases before outlining the instruments and the data analysis procedure.

3.1 Case 1: Lea

At the time of the post-stay interview conducted in May 2020, Lea was in her early twenties. Her first language was Swiss German. She self-assessed her English skills at level C1 with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). Her pre-departure American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview by computer (OPIc) attested to her Advanced Low oral proficiency level. Lea further reported having intermediate knowledge of French (B1). At the time of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lea was staying in Finland, where she lived in a student dormitory. In the dormitory, she had her own room, but shared the kitchen with her flatmates. Her goals for the stay were to improve her English skills, to get to know a new school system, and to have fun. What was initially planned as a 22-week stay ended abruptly with her early return home after eleven weeks. In the interview, Lea reported struggling with her decision to end her stay early and finding it difficult to deal with the consequences of the premature return home.

3.2 Case 2: Anna

When Anna participated in the interview in April 2020, she was also in her early twenties and a native speaker of Swiss German. She further reported having Standard German (C2), English, French, and Italian in her linguistic repertoire. According to her own assessment, her English skills were at an advanced level (C1) prior to her departure to Spain. Her pre-departure OPIc rating attested to her Advanced Mid level in speaking. She self-assessed her French as intermediate (B1) and her Italian as elementary (A1). She went abroad to advance her English skills, but she also hoped to learn some Spanish, which is why she signed up for a Spanish course. While in Spain, she shared an apartment with a fellow student from the same home institution. On advice of her family and friends and with a heavy heart, Anna decided to end her stay after only seven weeks in Spain.

3.3 Instruments

The overarching research project combines the following instruments in a longitudinal mixed methods design to shed light on the relationship between international students' language attitudes, their social relations, and language practices:

(1) the ACTFL OPIc, assessing English oral competences before and after the sojourn; (2) online-questionnaires pre, while (three times), and post sojourn to investigate attitudes, social contacts, and language use while abroad; and (3) two interviews, one during the stay and another after the stay. Due to the premature termination of their stay, the two selected participants could not complete all parts of the longitudinal study. They did not fill in the second and third questionnaires during their stay. Additionally, Anna did not complete the post-sojourn questionnaire and post-OPIc since her stay was shorter than the minimum duration of stay required by the project (eight weeks). The analyses in this paper are based on data from the first questionnaire administered during the stay (while 1) and the post-stay interview, which are available for both participants. These two instruments and the methods for data analysis are characterized in more detail below.

3.3.1 *Post-stay interview*

For the semi-structured interviews, guidelines in German were prepared. The interviews were conducted in Swiss German using the online platform whereby .com. The structure of the interview followed a temporal logic: it started with questions on the last few weeks abroad before returning home, including questions on who the interviewees perceived to be important people in their social networks during this time and how the pandemic measures in the host country influenced the maintaining of social contacts, language use, and the decision to return home. The second part of the interview dealt with the arrival home and reintegration, differences between the pandemic situation at home and in the host country, the maintenance of newly established social contacts while abroad, and insights gained from the SA experience. The interview ended with some evaluative and retrospective questions on the stay abroad.

Two of the authors conducted the interviews in spring 2020. Lea was interviewed eight weeks and Anna was interviewed four weeks after returning home. Both interviews lasted roughly an hour. The interviews were audio and/or video recorded for transcription and subsequently broadly transcribed in Standard German. As an incentive, each participant received 50 Swiss Francs after the interview.

For the analysis of the interviews, qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2015; Schreier, 2012) was chosen as a methodological framework. In a first step, deductive main categories were derived from the research questions and interview guidelines. These were supplemented with inductive subcodes as new topics emerged. To ensure intercoder reliability of the codings, the interview with Anna was coded by three researchers. Differing codings were discussed and the code system was refined and adapted where necessary and supplemented with coding rules. Subsequently, the interview with Lea was coded by two researchers.

Excerpts from both interviews were translated into English for the purposes of this article.

3.3.2 *While I questionnaire*

The questionnaire from which the data for the present article were drawn was completed by the students three weeks into the stay. The main foci of this questionnaire were the students' social contacts and language use during the stay. The conceptualization of the questionnaire was inspired by the Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire (Dewey et al., 2013; Dewey et al., 2012) and the Language Contact Profile (Freed et al., 2004) and adapted for our study purposes. In contrast to most previous questionnaires, our questionnaire not only looks at contacts with the local population and other international students, but also with friends and family back home and it assesses the use of languages other than the target language and students' first language, just as Mitchell et al.'s (2017) social network questionnaire.

Participants were asked to list up to 20 persons with whom they regularly interacted, taking into account both people in the host and home countries. For each person listed, the following information was collected: whether it was a previously known person or newly established contact, their regular place of residence, first language(s), English skills (compared to oneself), length of contact in hours per week, language(s) used, communication channel(s), and relationship to this person (family/relatives, partner, close friend, friend, acquaintance, host family).

Based on this data, infographics, which we labeled *social contact profiles* (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), were created for the cases studied illustrating social contacts and language use. The idea for these infographics was inspired by Lexander and Androutsopoulos's (2021) work with mediagrams. Because we could not find a traditional software solution to illustrate our data, we created a concept for the visualization of a person's social contacts in collaboration with Bettina Baumann, our in-house expert for data visualization. The purpose of this approach was to ensure that the following characteristics of our data were presented in the most descriptive and easy-to-understand manner: (1) the contact duration in each language per contact; (2) the distinction of pre-existing and newly established contacts and the distribution of contact time between pre-existing and new contacts; (3) the relationship status; and (4) the first language(s) of each contact. Our visualization expert implemented this concept and created a template in PowerPoint for the creation of the infographics.

4. Results

4.1 Social contacts and language use during SA (RQ 1)

Our first research question investigated which social contacts the two SA students entertained in the short period between the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and their abrupt return home and what languages the students used to communicate with them. When asked about their personal aims for their SA experience in an open question of the pre-sojourn questionnaire, neither Lea nor Anna mentioned making new friends explicitly. Lea's main aims were academic – getting to know the Finnish educational system and improving her English – as well as having fun. Anna mentioned improving disciplinary and English competences, as well as learning some Spanish, as aims for her stay in Spain. Both students attended courses in the local language, but since neither had any pre-departure competences in those languages, it is likely that their expectation and intention was to mainly use English as a lingua franca with both local and international contacts.

Both Lea's and Anna's stay abroad was significantly curtailed, which deprived them of time and opportunities to establish new contacts and cultivate the already established ones. The data from the first questionnaire during the stay show that Lea and Anna differed markedly in terms of the social networks that they developed while abroad.

Figure 1 is a representation of Lea's social network three weeks into her stay, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. In the middle we find Lea, who indicated Swiss German as her first language. In the blue circle we see the percentage of all the contact minutes she indicated, divided between pre-existing contacts (left) and new contacts (right). The circles around Lea represent all the people she indicated interacting with, including information on their relationship to Lea and their first language(s). The color of the circles indicates the language(s) Lea used with these respective contacts, and the size of the circle visualizes the indicated duration of contact. As becomes clear from Lea's social contact profile, Lea managed to make many friends within only three weeks and establish a new social network in Finland. Nearly two-thirds of the people with whom she reported having regular contact were people she did not know before coming to Finland. Many of these were also international students, except for three contacts who were Finnish. For her, these new contacts were mostly acquaintances and friends, one of whom she described as a close friend. Not surprisingly, Lea exclusively used English with her newly established contacts.

Even though she did not mention making new friends as one of her goals in the pre-departure questionnaire, the interview revealed that it was important for

Lea and she also voiced some regret over not having been able to establish even more new ties:

> To be honest, I had hoped for more…And yes, I wasn't there for so long that I could get to know more people, somehow. And then, they didn't hold any more events and I was really looking forward to these, also in terms of meeting new people and so on. Yes, that's why, so I had a very nice time, but I would have expected a bit more. (Lea, par. 32)

The gradual worsening of the pandemic situation also affected the social contact profile of Lea in that there was a slight intensification of online contact with people back home. Contact with her parents and some friends intensified as they were worried about her. The driving force in her decision to return home were primarily other international students, in particular one co-national from the same home university.

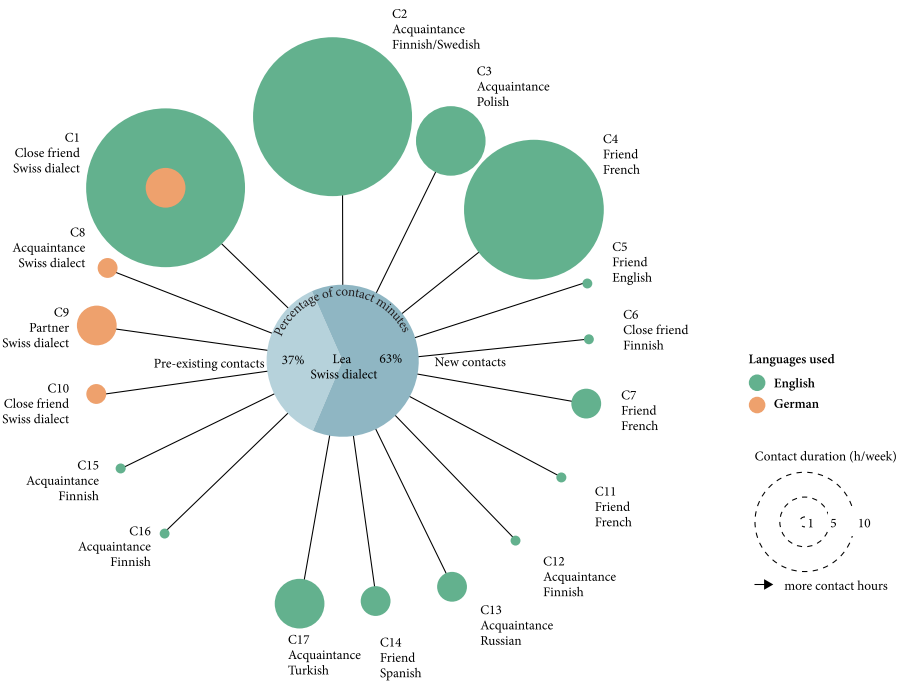

Figure 1. Social contact profile for Lea

In contrast, Anna's social contact profile (see Figure 2) three weeks into her stay looks strikingly different from Lea's. Anna put less emphasis on making new friends. She explicitly described how she did not proactively seek out many new friendships and was quite content with this decision:

> At some point you, maybe it's also because of your age or something, but at some point you…have your friends and you know what you want and you don't necessarily have to have a long list of friends, because, also, I know anyway when I meet people from Belgium or I don't know where from, I'm not going to visit them in the next six months. Because I have my friends and I know what I want from them, I have, I can make friends well to be there. But I don't need them for my whole life now. But I'm actually really quite satisfied. (Anna, par. 26)

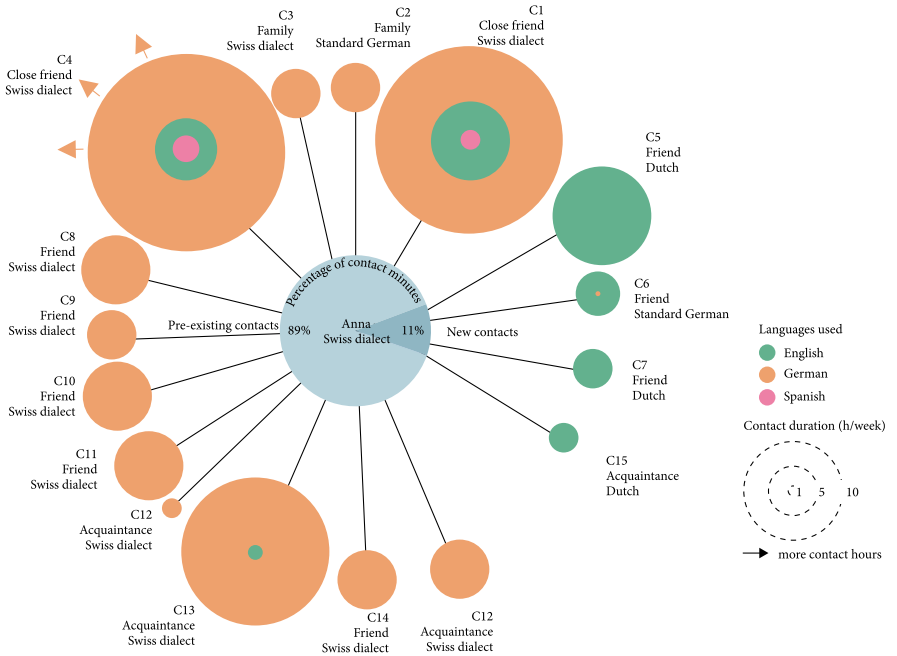

Figure 2. Social contact profile for Anna

In this excerpt, Anna highlighted her satisfaction with her current social network, rejecting the idea that to acquire many new friends from different countries was desirable for her. She also implied that, as a young adult, she was beyond the age where a special investment in establishing new friendships was crucial.

As can be gleaned from the percentage of contact minutes, Anna mainly had contact with people from home that she knew prior to studying abroad. While in Spain, she shared an apartment with a fellow student from the same home institution, who was by far the most intensive contact for her. She established few new contacts while abroad, but mostly considered these friends rather than acquaintances. All were international students as well. As a consequence, contact with the local population was virtually non-existent in Anna's case.

Not only did Anna establish few new contacts, but the time that she indicated spending interacting with these new contacts was also markedly more limited (in terms of contact hours) than her contact with her pre-existing social network. As a result, Anna used much more German than English, unlike Lea. As none of the new contacts she listed were locals, she also did not use Spanish with them. However, she used some Spanish with two previously known friends from home.

Under the rapidly changing circumstances, Anna's social contact profile became sparser as she reported losing touch with a number of international students who hastily left. Due to the stress associated with the return decision, she hardly had any time and energy left for maintaining peripheral social contacts. The cultivation of contacts was concentrated on close reference persons, primarily close family members and previously known friends. Right before her return, even her contact with family and friends from home, which she had cultivated intensively before, was drastically reduced. As Anna stated, "But now, towards the end, I realized that I didn't have the time or the nerve to write with anyone from home, even if I wanted to" (Anna, par. 44).

4.2 Returning home (RQ 2)

Our second research question revolves around the issue of how SA students experience their return home and readapt to the "new normal" during the first wave of the pandemic. The time shortly before the return home when the pandemic crisis came to a head was a highly stressful situation for both Lea and Anna for several reasons. Suddenly, they were forced to decide within a very short time whether they wanted to return home or stay in the host country. They both found it very difficult to make an informed decision given the novelty and unexpectedness of the situation, as well as the differing and rapidly changing epidemiological situations in the host and home countries. Both students then had to immediately organize their return trip, which was associated with a lot of organization, enquiries, and worries about travel restrictions and flight cancellations. Here is how Lea described the time shortly before her return:

> And then one day later, the Canadians and Americans all had to go home, because somehow the borders had closed there. And then it was like now a lot of people are leaving. So, somehow a third of them left and then there were quite a few graduation parties and the rooms were empty afterwards. And then, yes, more and more left. Then quite a lot of French people left, Turkish people, a few from Poland and so on. Yes, you could tell. Somehow, everyone was very insecure. Nobody knew exactly what was going on. Most of them didn't really get any clear instructions from the home university. And yes, more and more flights were cancelled and somehow everyone was just afraid, and no one really knew what to do.

> And somehow it was a bit strange because everyone is quite young and…yes, they have never experienced anything like this before and yes. Then there were also, yes, quite a lot of discussions and the mood was very depressed, yes.
>
> (Lea, par. 42)

In the excerpt, the insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety experienced by Lea appear not just in the content, but also in the style of her narrative, rapidly shifting between sub-topics. In the process of deciding whether to go home, Lea mostly consulted with a friend who was also staying in Finland and whose parents strongly encouraged her to come home. Lea's parents, in contrast, left the decision up to Lea and did not interfere in the decision process. It seems that this made it more difficult for her to decide and, more importantly, to be confident about the appropriateness of the decision once taken. Her doubts persisted after her return and gave way to regrets, which made readaptation to home difficult for Lea. She spent her last night in Finland surrounded by friends who threw a surprise birthday party for her so that she could properly say goodbye. This convivial leave-taking ties in with Lea's diversified social network in Finland that was focused on new contacts rather than pre-existing ones.

In contrast to Lea, Anna does not seem to have had as much freedom to decide whether to return home. Initially, returning home was not an option for Anna. It was only when the situation in Spain drastically worsened that she decided to return to Switzerland. Her mother's ex-boyfriend, with whom she maintained a very close relationship, called her while she was on a weekend trip to England to urge her to return home. Apart from him, her mother and her best friend were also heavily involved in Anna's decision to come home early. Anna described the support of these three key people as very valuable in this extraordinary situation: "I always want to make sure that I have enough contact with them because I know I can rely on them and I know they can tell me what I should do" (par. 44). The moral support Anna received proved invaluable. Since they almost begged her to come home, the decision was practically made for her. This also left little room to doubt whether the decision to return home prematurely was the right one.

Anna described the short time between her decision to return home and her actual departure as awful. She found herself at home alone trying to pack her suitcase. The stress accumulated over the previous days combined with the acute problem of not managing to shut her suitcase culminated in what she called her first real "crisis." The seemingly trivial situation caused her to be so overwhelmed that she ended up calling her mother in tears and said: "Mum, I can't do this. I can't take it anymore and I don't know how to get home" (par. 106). Even though

the actual departure felt strange, Anna reported feeling relieved once she landed in Switzerland where she was warmly welcomed by her family.

While returning home is a "bitter-sweet" experience for many SA students (Kartoshkina, 2015) and associated with a series of potential challenges for readaptation, the situation for the participants in this study was unique in the sense that they involuntarily returned home to a "new normal," that is, a home and a daily life that had changed due to the pandemic measures. The term acquires an extra significance with respect to returnees because they experienced multiple transitions from their pre-departure life: immersion in their novel surrounding abroad, a brief glimpse of a "new normal" in their host country, and a return to their altered "normal" life at home. The extent to which the label "normal" is still meaningful is called into question in Lea's description of a normal day below.

> Yes, well (laughs) there aren't any really normal days somehow. So, now I live with my parents at home again. And they renovated my room while I was still away. So, I didn't really have a room anymore when I came home. (laughs)
>
> (Lea, par. 9–10)

Lea reported being shocked when coming home to Switzerland, where the epidemiological situation at the time was worse than in Finland with much higher infection rates and, accordingly, more drastic measures in place. Given the contact restrictions, she was unable to meet in person with many people and she was even unsure if she could see her boyfriend at all, as his superior at work was an at-risk patient. Hence, reuniting with friends, one of the main aspects that SA students are typically excited about when returning home (Gill, 2010; Kartoshkina, 2015), was only possible under difficult conditions. Lea generally reported having trouble adapting back home. She was unhappy about living with her parents again without her siblings, who had moved out. She felt like an only child who was getting too much attention from her parents. This is in stark contrast to the feelings of independence she experienced while abroad. Lea missed the life she had in Finland, the freedom, living on her own, the city, discovering new things, and being somewhere else. This finding corroborates previous results that SA returnees feel a sense of sorrow over the loss of new friendships and a more carefree lifestyle (Butcher, 2002). In addition, Lea felt thrown back in terms of her personal growth and repeatedly regretted not having stayed in Finland:

> I also found that it did me a lot of good. I mean personally and that I was changing and then it just came to an abrupt end and now I'm back here in the same stuff as before, yes. It may sound strange but that threw me back a bit.
>
> (Lea, par. 139–142)

Lea described how further goals that she had set herself before leaving, including getting to know the Finnish educational system and learning the Finnish language, had become irrelevant. These regrets and the sense of lost opportunities ultimately led to a loss of perspective for Lea:

> Well, it's just that this summer, this is kind of my last summer before I finish university, and I had a lot of things planned, also for later. They're all pretty much on the brink now…So, yes, I'll be at home for four or five months and somehow I'm lacking a goal a bit at the moment. (Lea, par. 154)

Anna experienced settling back in as less challenging than Lea. Unlike Lea, she mentioned positive aspects of being back home, such as the ability to be with her family and knowing they were doing well or the ability to save money, as she no longer had to pay for food and rent. Overall, it did not take Anna long to settle back in. When describing her time readjusting, she primarily mentioned administrative aspects such as doing the laundry, putting away stuff, trying to find a job, and organizing who she could meet, and what she was allowed to do. Nevertheless, the unexpectedly early return also psychologically impacted her:

> [A]ctually, this [first] week I just needed a little time for myself. Above all, I also had to kind of process this a bit. Because I actually left so that I could have a little time for myself…And in the beginning, the first week, I was a little bit upset at times. It was nobody's fault, but it simply annoyed me, the situation and that I now have to be at home again. And attend classes from home and…yes…the first week I needed a bit of time for myself. But now everything is actually good. (Anna, par. 142)

As has been reported previously, Anna felt a sense of frustration upon returning home, connected to the fact that she had to return home prematurely and involuntarily. However, in Anna's case, the feeling of comfort of being back in her familiar surroundings seems more pronounced than in Lea's. Such differences have also been reported in previous research with some SA students experiencing their return to the home environment as comforting (Pritchard, 2011) and others struggling to return to old routines (Kartoshkina, 2015).

4.3 Connections between social contacts and return experience (RQ 3)

In this last section, we try to uncover possible connections between the social contacts entertained by Lea and Anna while abroad and their experience of returning home. At first sight, the two students have a lot in common, including their choice of a non-English-speaking country as their destination and the unfortunate luck of having travelled abroad in spring 2020. Major differences arise, though, with

respect to how they experienced their stay before the outbreak of the pandemic and their return home (see Table 1). While Lea's investment into forming new contacts was substantial, Anna focused to a larger extent on interactions with a fellow student from her home country and with contacts back home. When the pandemic compelled the students to return home, the importance of Lea's local contacts versus Anna's family back home became apparent again. The rapid end of the stay abroad was emotionally challenging for both students. Anna's crisis was rapid but intense, while Lea's sorrow was less acute but more prolonged.

Once home, Lea was more oriented to the past. Mentally, she was still much more in her host country, contemplating activities in Finland that she could no longer engage in, while Anna was more focused on life back home, also in her thoughts, and looking forward to what she would do next. This may be due to the fact that, even while in Spain, Anna was still very much tied to home, as is evident from her social contact profile. It seems that she neither perceived the stay as an opportunity for self-development to the same degree as Lea, nor did she share Lea's feeling of being thrown back in her development. The extent to which Anna almost actively refrained from engaging in much social contact building seems to be at odds with common expectations of SA students' behavior and is likely to be underreported in SA participants' statements.

For Lea, there was a much more pronounced sense of lost opportunities and irretrievability of this unique experience. Anna also voiced her disappointment about the lost opportunities, but less intensively. In a comment at the end of the interview, she announced that she would compensate for her reduced immersion in Spanish by watching more Spanish films, which can again be considered a pragmatic attitude. Moreover, she proudly generalized with respect to her academic development in spring 2020: "I have really learned something, even if I'm at home now" (Anna, par. 64). It is maybe ironic that, despite her return home, she could still pursue one of her main goals for the semester abroad, namely, to take a break from her home university.

Table 1. Case overview

	Lea	**Anna**
Destination	Finland	Spain
Duration of stay	11 weeks	7 weeks
Accommodation	Student dormitory	Apartment with fellow student
OPIc level pre-departure	Advanced-low	Advanced-mid
Social contact profile	11 new contacts (63%) 6 existing contacts (37%)	4 new contacts (11%) 12 existing contacts (89%)

Table 1. *(continued)*

	Lea	Anna
Social contacts (RQ 1)	High importance of making new friends Regret over not having been able to establish even more contacts Slight intensification of contact with people back home at the outbreak of COVID-19	Low importance of making new friends Satisfaction with social network abroad Focus on close reference persons from home at the outbreak of COVID-19
Returning home (RQ 2)	Uncertainty and anxiety about the decision Strongly influenced by friend Parents leave the decision to her Unhappiness and regrets after return Troubles with readaptation Feeling of being thrown back, lost opportunities and perspectives	No room for doubt about the decision Relies on advice from family to return home Relief after return Smooth readaptation (1 week) Happy with situation back home
Connections between social contacts and return experience (RQ 3)	Strong focus on making new friends result in a backward and regretful perspective after return with long period of readaptation	Strong ties with contacts back home during stay result in a short period of readaptation

5. Discussion and conclusions

Across most countries, governments and authorities sought to contain the spread of the coronavirus by imposing sometimes drastic measures to reduce contacts between people. These measures stand in obvious contrast with the key aims of SA programs with their intrinsic focus on connecting people across national and other boundaries. For many people who were lucky not to be affected medically by the coronavirus, such restrictions on where and how to travel and who to meet for professional or private purposes were probably most incisive.

With a combination of methods, this study has allowed detailed insights into the trajectories of two SA students. The findings on the social networking patterns of Lea and Anna tie in with previous research stressing important individual differences regarding the extent to which SA students gain access to local communities (De Federico de la Rua, 2008; Ehrenreich et al., 2008; Kinginger, 2013; Moglen, 2017), with local integration ranging from moderate (in the case of Lea) to virtually non-existent (in the case of Anna). With regard to Lea and Anna,

these differences can also be partly attributed to their different personalities. At the same time, our results also resonate with Mitchell's (2015) finding that only a minority of residents abroad develop close relationships with locals and confirm the oft-cited tendency of international students to primarily socialize with co-nationals or other international students – the "Erasmus bubble" as Papatsiba (2006) termed it. Gomes (2020) even went so far as to call it an "international student parallel society," which has the function of creating a sense of belonging abroad and of helping students cope with living in a foreign country without the familiarity of family or loved ones (see also Moglen, 2017). Especially the interview with Lea suggests that the pandemic crisis increased the importance of this bubble, consisting of international students and co-nationals. On the one hand, other international students constituted an important resource and sounding board for both Lea and Anna for navigating the uncertainty surrounding the continuation of one's stay abroad. On the other hand, there was a shift in orientation towards friends and family back home when the crisis came to a head. The pandemic crisis also negatively affected the social networks of Anna and Lea as many international students left abruptly, which ultimately reduced the size of their social network in the short time span before their own abrupt departure.

In many aspects, the two students' reentry experiences are comparable to the experiences of students that studied abroad prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lea is a case in point for psychological suffering: her sense of loss over what could have been, combined with her frustration related to the situation back home, are in line with previous research that reported similar bitter feelings among newly returned SA students (Butcher, 2002; Kartoshkina, 2015). Unlike previously reported experiences of other SA students, Lea's excitement at reuniting with family and friends was short-lived, as opportunities to meet were also restricted at home, resulting in her feeling socially isolated. Anna, too, was frustrated by the fact that she was unable to socialize with her friends back home the way she would have wanted to. It seems that the strict measures during the first wave of the pandemic created a heightened risk for these two SA students to experience feelings of social isolation upon return. Lea also felt that by returning home, she was forced to involuntarily take on the role of her previous self again, a circumstance which has been identified as challenging by other researchers (e.g., Kartoshkina, 2015). She perceived the return home as a sudden and unwelcome stop to her personal growth, an aspect that, to our knowledge, has not received much attention in studies thus far and would be worth exploring in more detail. From an overarching perspective, studentship as a life stage has been characterized as "liminal and developmental" (Klemenčič, 2015, p.12); it is about "being free and becoming" (Barnett, 2007, p.3). This applies to an even greater extent to a stay abroad as it confronts students with the challenge of shaping their student lives and social

networks abroad in the sense of *agency* (Bandura, 2001). The pandemic and the associated termination of the stays of the two case studies described above put an abrupt end to this autonomy and agency.

The differences between Lea and Anna in terms of coping with the stress and lack of control induced by the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted against the background of causality orientations theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002), which distinguishes between a control orientation and an autonomy orientation. Anna did not make an independent decision to return home but made her decision strongly dependent on her key social contacts at home. This search for advice shows a strong control orientation on Anna's part. Anna's worst crisis was also evident in the phase of greatest uncertainty and lack of social support in the period shortly before departure, while she experienced the return to the social care of the family as positive after a short adjustment phase. In contrast, due to her autonomy orientation, Lea enjoyed the freedom abroad, developed a large network of new contacts, and flourished in this situation which allowed more self-determination than at home. Lea's crisis occurred mainly after her return home. For her, the return was associated with a lack of autonomy and interrupted opportunities for development, a stop to "becoming."

Beyond their interest for the discipline of SA research, the insights from this study can inform a redefinition of the aims and organization of SA programs. This redefinition is likely to be characterized by increasingly sophisticated virtual forms of social and extracurricular exchange, and a heightened awareness on the part of prospective and current students of the vulnerability of their experience, since renewed outbreaks of the pandemic could end their stays, as in the cases documented in this paper. SA students might adopt different strategies. Some may follow a "carpe diem" strategy where they rapidly and energetically strive to gain as many contacts and new experiences as possible in a short period of time, to avoid feelings of regret if another change in restrictions compromises their experience. Another strategy, which could be labelled "stay on the safe side," might consist in investing rather less energy into building and upholding new contacts but capitalizing on previous ones from one's home environment instead. The latter strategy, which has been observed in SA research since at least the availability of the internet and social media (Mitchell, 2015), is likely to have become more attractive since the onset of the pandemic, despite its obvious contradiction with typical pedagogic aims of studying abroad. Students who, like Anna, do not strive to invest much energy in new social contacts, might justify this choice by referring to how COVID-19 put a rapid end to SA stays and the opportunity to intensify newly made social relationships on site. The two strategies are also likely to influence the extent to which the students remain in contact with newly forged contacts long-term after the stay (Campbell, 2015). These hypotheses can be tested

against data collected on SA experiences after the first phase of the pandemic, where students' opportunities to invest in local and international networks have again become more substantial.

By combining two methods – detailed content analysis of semi-structured interviews with quantitative data on social contacts and language use visualized in infographics – we have been able to produce a fine-grained and theoretically plausible analysis of how the two students' reactions and emotions under the specific circumstances of the COVID-19 outbreak relate to likely aspects of their personality, which in turn shaped the patterns of social interaction they had established before their unexpected end of the sojourn. Even if the surprise effect associated with the first outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 is unlikely to be repeated, these insights remain useful for the field of SA, for instance, for guidelines and activities that are offered to students for the preparatory and early stage of SA experiences. These could encourage students in various ways to become more aware of their psychological resources, including, but not limited to aspects of mental health and well-being, their expectations, and their agency for the creation of social networks during the SA and after their return. In particular, the willingness to be cognitively flexible as a fundamental prerequisite for exploiting the learning potential of a mobility stay, in general, and social contacts, in particular, seems to be an important asset that SA students could be sensitized to in the preparation for a mobility stay also after the pandemic.

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