

Comparing Visual Learning Approaches: Photographic Documentation and Photovoice as Pedagogical Tools for Sustainability Education Abroad

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Introduction and Literature Review

Short-term study abroad (STSA) programs are a widely used form of experiential learning in higher education, offering intercultural and sustainability-focused experiences that help students connect theory to practice and engage with diverse perspectives (Bultseva & Lebedeva, 2021; Coker & Porter, 2016; Holmes et al., 2015; Pigg et al., 2021; Ruth et al., 2019; Wereszczyńska, 2018). However, global awareness does not automatically result from studying abroad alone (Deardorff, 2015). To support meaningful learning, STSA programs should incorporate intentional, structured reflection that promotes critical thinking, perspective-taking, and guided meaning-making (Acker & Bocarro, 2021; Garbers et al., 2024; Toran III et al., 2025). When aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these reflective practices help students connect personal experiences to global sustainability challenges and social responsibility frameworks (United Nations, n.d.).

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the Cultural Information Processing (CIP) model (Toran III & Anderson II, 2025), which integrates value-judgment processing through intentional instructional strategies. Within this framework, photovoice serves as a reflective learning tool designed to prompt metacognitive engagement with novel cultural concepts. Rather than measuring behavioral adaptation, the model emphasizes understanding how structured instructional methods facilitate metacognitive reflection on cultural and global concepts.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to compare two STSA assignments, a 2024 photographic documentation assignment, and a 2025 photovoice assignment, to examine how the inclusion of reflective narratives influences participants' interpretation of the SDGs. Specifically, the study sought to (1) compare how students represented and interpreted the SDGs across two assignments to identify any differences in interpretive depth, thematic richness, and scope of sustainability concepts, and (2) determine what these potential differences suggest about the pedagogical value of structured reflection in visual learning activities within STSA programs.

Methodology

This comparative qualitative study used secondary analysis of two STSA programs to examine how differences in assignment structure influenced participants' representations and interpretations of the SDGs. Participants were undergraduate students from the University of Georgia who attended European STSA programs in May 2024 (N = 30) and June 2025 (N = 35). The 2024 cohort visited five cities (Amsterdam, Bruges, Delft, Leuven, and Paris) and captured at least 25 photographs per participant, each identifying one or more SDGs. The 2025 cohort visited five cities (Barcelona, Nîmes, Nice, Aix-en-Provence, and Turin) and submitted three photographs per city, each accompanied by a 2–3 sentence reflection. The study was reviewed

and deemed exempt by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board. Data from both programs were analyzed using inductive thematic coding to identify how participants represented the SDGs and what themes emerged across datasets. The 2024 data were coded for visual themes such as agriculture, transportation, and infrastructure, while the 2025 data underwent similar analysis with an added layer capturing narrative meanings related to sustainability, equity, and community engagement. The course instructor who accompanied both cohorts was referenced to triangulate the data and verify whether deeper reflection and interpretation were evident between 2024 and 2025. A comparative thematic analysis was then conducted across the two datasets to examine differences in the frequency and framing of SDGs, interpretive depth, and the emergence of new social and environmental themes associated with reflection. While the STSA locations differed between cohorts, analysis emphasized how reflective depth, rather than destination context, shaped participants' interpretations of SDGs.

Results

Analysis of the 2024 dataset revealed a strong focus on environmental and urban sustainability, particularly Life on Land (SDG 15), Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11), and Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG 9). Participants frequently captured agricultural systems, landscapes, and infrastructure; however, without accompanying narratives, many images lacked interpretive depth and required researcher inference, a key limitation of the 2024 dataset. In contrast, the 2025 dataset demonstrated greater depth and clarity in meaning-making while centering on many of the same SDGs. Dominant SDGs in 2024 continued to appear frequently in 2025, but students framed these goals through richer social and ethical lenses, linking SDG 11 to equity and accessibility, SDG 9 to sustainability innovations, and SDG 15 to biodiversity and environmental stewardship. SDGs that received less attention in 2024, such as No Poverty (SDG 1), Gender Equality (SDG 5), and Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), emerged more prominently in 2025. Instructor triangulation confirmed deeper, more contextually grounded reflection in 2025, attributing to stronger integration of reflective-based learning, illustrating a shift from descriptive representation to interpretive engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Structured reflection enhanced participants' meaning-making and critical interpretation of sustainability, equity, and community engagement within STSA programs. Guided by the CIP model (Toran III & Anderson II, 2025), results suggest that photovoice fosters metacognitive engagement, enabling students to connect observations to broader SDG frameworks. Compared to photo-only submissions, reflections prompted students to question assumptions, recognize cultural differences, and relate experiences abroad to sustainability and social equity, aligning with established STSA learning outcomes (Coker & Porter, 2016; Holmes et al., 2015; Ruth et al., 2019). Although findings are not generalizable, they underscore the importance of embedding structured reflective practices, such as digital storytelling, guided journals, or other creative approaches, into STSA curricula to deepen student reflection and strengthen analytical engagement with global sustainability issues (Pigg et al., 2021; United Nations, n.d.).

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