Indian students’ psychological and behavioral aspects on studying abroad decisions amidst fear of uncertainty and social unrest

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Abstract
Purpose – The study is an attempt to expand the knowledge about the psychological and behavioral aspects of Indian students studying abroad amidst fear of uncertainty and social unrest.
Design/methodology/approach – The exploratory study is employed to seek a better and deeper understanding of the possible impact of the potential war on the student abroad study process. In the study, the participants were selected from Delhi NCR of India. The thoughts and opinions of students on studying abroad under the fear of uncertainty were covered in a semi-structured interview.
Findings – Five broad themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews that influence students’ choices and attitudes toward their decisions on studying abroad. The themes are “safety”, “fear of incomplete degree”, “financial stress”, “parents’ apprehension” and “emotional breakdown”.
Practical implications – The study leveraged an understanding of the mindset of Indian students. Considering the student’s doubts and fear over such uncertainty and war-like situations, the higher education policymaker can adopt some measures (hybrid education, short-term programs, student exchange programs, shift in destination, distance learning and new forms of educational technology) to cope with such upcoming challenges, ensuring their safety and pursuing their dreams by taking higher education abroad.
Originality/value – This qualitative study develops a comprehensive understanding of how students perceive such extreme crises and how their thoughts, attitudes and behavior toward studying abroad change. The study contributes to comprehending the student’s description of perceptions, emotions, opinions and behaviors under the fear of uncertainty and social unrest.
Keywords Qualitative study, Uncertainty, Social unrest, War, Abroad study
Paper type Research paper

Introduction
It is not a new trend for Indian students to study overseas. With the growth of the global economy, enrolling in overseas studies has become a popular and well-accepted route for many Indian students, who are increasingly eager to study, live and work abroad. Studying abroad benefits career advancement and language proficiency, making it a valuable experience (Wu, 2014; Dwyer, 2004; Kim and Lawrence, 2021). Internationalization and international student mobility, in particular, have undeniably changed the landscape of higher education during the previous decade (Knight, 2012; Kim and Lawrence, 2021). Students study, establish relationships and understand different cultures (Knight, 2012). Internationalization of students embraces a multitude of positive results, it is an effort for 360-degree career advancement of students (Gan and Kang, 2022; Kim and Lawrence, 2021). “Education abroad has become an increasingly significant educational program (experience) in global development and learning, intercultural competence, global maturity, and intercultural awareness amongst students,” according to Braskamp et al. (2009).

Employers and organizations are increasingly anticipating students to have strong global capabilities; consequently, students may be encouraged on studying abroad (Hunter et al., 2006). It has been recognized as a necessary component of a good liberal education (Bolen,
It is evident that education abroad significantly affects students’ mindsets, intercultural competencies, academic learning and attitudes toward studying abroad (Paige et al., 2004; Dwyer, 2004). Foreign education is a value-added experience that enhances global learning and development (Li and Bray, 2007; Henthorne et al., 2001; Bolen, 2007). Educating abroad may act as a gateway for students to acquire personal characteristics such as a feeling of self-direction, i.e. assisting students on their path toward self-authorship, which is a crucial and primary objective of a successful life journey (Li and Bray, 2007; Gan and Kang, 2022; Kim and Lawrence, 2021). However, there are concerns and unintended results. It has not been without its share of struggles and tribulations.

There are numerous factors that influence a student’s decision-making process (Srivastava and Dhamija, 2022) on borderless education. There are both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects that might impact a student’s decision on studying abroad. External events outside a student’s control like uncertainty, war and social unrest can have a significant impact on a student’s career decision. Such situations make the future uncertain and bristling with risk.

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Uncertainty and social unrest are eroding the importance of education (Singh et al., 2021). Students are encountering considerable difficulties in fulfilling their ambition to study abroad previously due to pandemics and now the social unrest in the form of the impending invasion of powerful countries over others. Students are suffering from the double whammy of pandemics and war (Singh et al., 2021). Recent occurrences of war like the earlier Taliban took over the political regime of Afghanistan and now an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine gave birth to fear and doubts about their desire to study abroad. Prospective students are rethinking places such as Poland and Georgia or the nations adjacent to the Russia and Ukraine conflict zones. Cross-border education has been dilapidated by such incidents and it puts such desires of students in limbo. Colleges and universities are experiencing rippling impacts across higher education, notably in studying abroad programs, as uncertainty abounds. Colleges are recalling students who have already been to Russia or Ukraine and putting a hold on planned study-abroad programs in both countries. As a result, such occurrences raise the issue of “what does the immediate future hold for students?”, “What if” such potential invasions of hegemony power become a trend and it will lead to the World War III. This critical form of imagination and anticipation in the realm of unforeseeable future results in losing all enthusiasm of students to pursue their dream of studying abroad. In such situation, studying abroad becomes questionable as the environment metamorphoses from favorable to hostile. Students are feeling the heat as well (Kantenbacher et al., 2022). The decisions that students make on such arduous occasions may have long-term consequences for their professional path (Dumont and Provost, 1999). Students who are enrolled in or planning to enroll in universities outside of countries are left in the lurch. With approximately 11.3 lakh students studying abroad as per the Ministry of External Affairs as of 22 July 2021 (Ministry of External Affairs, India), India is the world’s second-largest supplier of foreign students. Study abroad programs are being canceled, exchange programs are postponed and students are stranded over studying abroad due to the recent Russia–Ukraine crisis. It is putting a stall on dreams of studying abroad. As uncertainty reigns, there can be a change in the dynamics of internationalization for higher education (Knight, 2012).

The main research objectives of this study are: How does the fear of uncertainty (war-like situation) affect the Indian student’s decision-making process to study abroad? How their perceptions of studying abroad have changed? What challenges they may face if stuck in that situation and what coping strategies do they use to pursue their dream of studying overseas? The intent of this qualitative study is also to explore how students perceive such extreme crises and how their thoughts, attitudes and behavior toward abroad study have changed. The study contributes to understanding of the student’s description of perception, emotions, opinions and behavior. The study also highlights some worrisome unintended consequences of fear of uncertainty and social unrest on studying abroad.
Since, to our knowledge, no other research in the context of Indian students has managed to find the views on student’s apprehension on uncertainty, specifically as a war-like scenario, which currently plays a key part in their decision-making process to enroll in foreign countries for higher education. We believe that qualitative research like ours was necessary to acquaint with the understanding of the possible impact of the war on their abroad study process. The study may encourage more research and reflection on such a topic.

**Methodology**

The utilization of a grounded theory research design stemmed from several pivotal reasons. It facilitates the theory development directly from real-world participants using methods like in-depth interviews and observation, focusing on understanding human behavior and their perception of reality (Suddaby, 2006). Additionally, this method emphasizes the theory formation over testing and aids in recording and analyzing subjective experiences (Fendt and Sachs, 2008). Goulding (2009) advocated for the process where data are collected and analyzed first, leading to the development of theories grounded in the data. The study employed inductive analysis for exploration (Janesick, 1994) and theoretical sampling to identify information-rich key respondents.

Conducted between March 13th and April 10th, 2022, the study focused on respondents from Delhi NCR, India, ensuring diversity in gender, age, location, courses and universities. Around 15 students (seven females and eight males) were part of the study, selected through purposive sampling to represent heterogeneity (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample size was justified using the concept of saturation, signifying the point where additional data collection fails to uncover new insights (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The sample size for saturation can be defined and typically falls within the range of 5–24 interviews (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). According to Mason (2010), the prevailing range for sample sizes in qualitative research often falls within the bracket of 15–50 individuals. The students, aged between 18 and 24 years, comprised unmarried individuals pursuing undergraduate, intermediate and post-graduation programs, as detailed in Table 1. The primary data were collected via online semi-structured interviews, each lasting an average of 40 min, exploring their perceptions and evolving decisions concerning studying abroad amid ongoing conflicts. Follow-up

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**Note(s):** R 8 is a female medical student evacuated from Ukraine  
**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

*Table 1. Student’s demographic profile*
questions were employed until theoretical saturation, with clarification sought during or after
interviews (Charmaz, 2006).

To analyze the data, various techniques such as comparison, pattern noting, clustering and
confirming results with participants were used (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The grounded
theory coding techniques including open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998,
2008) were applied. In the open coding process, the data are divided into several sections and
compared to look for patterns and distinctions. Similar events are classed into “categories”. The
data that were split off during open coding are assembled during axial coding. In this, the
categories are connected to their subcategories to produce explanations that are more specific.
Axial coding is a coding method that addresses the questions based on “when, where, why, who,
how and with which consequence”. A procedure to consolidate and strengthen theories takes
place during selective coding. The entire process adhered to criteria for credibility,
is transferability, dependability and conformability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), culminating in the
identification of themes extracted from respondents’ narratives.

Findings of the study
Five broad themes emanated from the evaluation of the interviews which are relevant to the
students’ understanding, their influence on career choices, change in their attitudes and
decisions on studying in foreign and landing to alternating options for upcoming challenges
and coping strategies (Altbach and Peterson, 2007). The themes are delineated as follows:

Safety
The landscape for foreign education in India had already witnessed a sea change in the post-
pandemic era. Now amid escalating global unrest, tensions and destruction, students find
themselves engulfed in fear in the war-torn situation. Perceptions about a specific country’s
overall safety also seemed to be a deciding factor for students. Throughout the past year, both
the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have petrified the
globe. The current condition of the world is a very scary climate to live in. To think that this
Russia–Ukraine situation could possibly escalate into the World War III and dread the
possibility of nuclear warfare. Therefore, safety is the primary concern of any student and
their parents (Singh et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2019). The choice of the destination for higher
studies depends upon “how safe the nation is?”.

There is so much uncertainty surrounding the world. worldwide pandemic and potentially world
war iii like a situation where a country begins collapsing under the foot of another spiralling my
anxious thoughts and endless worries about my future. I think that attack has put into perspective
how lucky I am to be in India. Thankfully not choosing an abroad destination for my postgraduation
program. R 4

Potential invasion of Ukraine terrifies me; the world will never be the same after this war. Depending
on how the rest of the world responds to this aggression will shape the future of the world. If Russia is
allowed to get away with taking over Ukraine it will just pave the way for countries like China who
have been looking to return their countries to their former borders to do the same. Studying in own
country is safer than facing the horrible scene of sitting in the dark, damp basements of homes,
desperately trying to find a way to escape the event. Such unfortunate and painful experience will
never fade from anyone’s memory of life. R 10

At least I will be safe, life is more precious for me. I will never risk my life so may drop my decision to
abroad education as war may become larger any time. R 1

Fear of losing life and family would be catastrophic for students so their outlook has changed
as stated by Responded 1. It is said that traumatized adolescents frequently struggle
throughout their entire lives (McGrath and Kovacs, 2019). They are building a belief system that claims safety is of utmost importance.

**Fear of an incomplete degree**

Considering the significance of growing earnings premiums of college graduates, it is difficult to dispute the importance of degree attainment (Baum, 2014; Kim and Lawrence, 2021). Students pursuing undergraduate or post-graduation have to face a long road ahead (Carvalho et al., 2023). Especially those who will be graduating may face an even more undefined future. They could not apply for jobs due to an incomplete degree. Hundreds of Indian students who enrolled in various courses at Ukrainian universities and colleges have been left stranded as the Russia–Ukraine conflict continues. Many students who had just started or were about to finish their studies are now concerned about their futures since their aspirations have been thwarted by the ongoing Ukraine–Russia conflict.

When you live in the shadow of bombardment and gunfire, your world shrinks, and you focus solely on survival, on finding moments of peace. Your ambitions as an individual are overshadowed by such a situation. Completion of studies becomes secondary. R 13

Like all other Indian students who have returned from Ukraine, I am worried about my future. Everything is uncertain and unclear. My parents’ hard-earned savings and my entire career is at stake. We don’t know what will happen, Will I be able to study further? R 8

It makes me anxious about my career if I will ever be stuck in such attacks, I would rather prefer to join my family business than study abroad to pursue higher studies. R 2

It was the biggest attack on the European state since the World War II. It gives the visualizations of possible attacks on other European nations. It may jeopardize the career plans of students and may ruin their life. An incomplete degree brings no job (Carvalho et al., 2023). Even if the wartime is over, things will still be uncertain and will take time to return to normalcy. Timely completion of the degree will suffer leading to a delay in earnings.

**Financial stress**

Students from Ukraine or Russia who are studying abroad are also being impacted by the conflict, and money woes now loom over their desire to continue their education. Many students may scuffle to arrange funding for their college fees and living expenses due to the collapse of the Russian rouble, which has lost its value to half so far and unprecedented restrictions on access to foreign exchange and international banking structures. It may lead to a growing burden on academic finances (Larbi et al., 2022; Baum, 2014). Financial anxiety is a stress-triggering factor that threatens student’s decision to continue their studies and impacts their academic success (Salisbury et al., 2009; Larbi et al., 2022).

I am planning my master’s degree in Germany and it is just 2 year-long program. The terror of war and all the uncertainty of what is going on in Russia murder the purpose of studying in another country, especially in European universities. Paying a hefty fee with the support of an education loan will be an undue financial burden on me with no surety of a job in the future. R 14

If I were to head abroad, like a third of other Indian students, I would take on debt, that too by offering some collateral. This debt is only payable on an income in dollars. With dark clouds now looming over job prospects, owing more than a crore rupee at the age of 21 isn’t just foolish. It’s catastrophic. R 15

I’m concerned about such a global crisis. And looking ahead, I’m worried about my financial situation as I am aware that this will tie up bank accounts . . . and I don’t want to burden my parents by forcing them to my dream of studying abroad. R 3
**Parent’s apprehensions**

Parental aspirations are one of the crucial determinants in increasing the educational aspirations of adolescents. Parents are involved in their kid's academic endeavors and related decisions (Rimkute et al., 2012; Kirk et al., 2011; Kaplan et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2019).

Every parent is worried about their child’s safety in this age of terrorism and pandemics will be concerned (Singh et al., 2021). Parents’ decisions are important in India (Srivastava and Dhamija, 2023), and have a significant influence on a student’s decision to study abroad. There might be a slew of reservations about abroad education, ranging from the exorbitant fees to the unfamiliarity with the place and safety (Spera et al., 2009; Larbi et al., 2022).

My father was planning to send me to Poland after my intermediate exam to pursue higher studies, but the Ukraine–Russia war left him in a fix. Even now entire European continent seems unsafe. You never know how this situation will play out. He does not want to take a chance on my future. R 6

Parents are sceptical about the situation and, therefore, unwilling to take any risk with their children. No parent wants to send their child into a warzone. Concerns of parents are legitimate as they can understand such situations better than their kids.

I am graduating this year and applied to 4 European countries but the feeling that war might be in the near future is both scary and unsettling so presently planning to drop the idea. There is uncertainty and social unrest prevailing situation. I’m the only son of my parents, they will never allow me to even think of abroad studies after Ukraine Russia crisis. R 9

**Emotional breakdown**

Studying abroad is a rollercoaster of emotions. It is accompanied by a wide spectrum of emotions. It is undoubtedly ecstatic at the prospect of studying in another nation. However, students’ ambitions of studying abroad have been shattered and wrecked by their fear of war. Students planning for Europe are astonished and indignant, afraid of what the future holds. The threat of the World War III is alarming. There can be significant transformations as there can be chances of nuclear war. It is critical to comprehend how foreign education can be managed in these times of uncertainty and societal unrest. Students are perplexed when it comes to deciding whether to study abroad.

I have never before as a student felt so distracted, disconnected, and inefficient when heard about the likelihood of a World war III like event, I feel even more anxious than before the pandemic. R 7

I can barely fathom what life would be with shattered dreams and hope of not going abroad for studies. It’s an uneasy feeling. Honestly, these past few days ever since this happened I’ve been feeling ill to my stomach. R 11.

Studying abroad is a long process, and it requires huge investments both financially and emotionally, so changing a whole life plan because of the current scenario does not appear to be a good move. Under students’ aspirations, everything is unknown; an extensive and critical thinking is required to make plans for the future.

Paying a hefty fee with the fear of uncertainty in mind does not appear to be a viable alternative for those who truly wish to live abroad. Both parents and students are dejected, and their aspirations of studying abroad have been smashed. Students are unclear about their prospects and how long they will be in this scenario. A significant positive impact on emotional distress, tension and anxiety was shown by a large-scale study on the effects of both social and personal stressful life events (Hammen, 2005; Dumont and Provost, 1999; Harkness et al., 2006).

Concerns about the unpredictability of war and social upheaval as well as their negative consequences on education, are intertwined (Singh et al., 2021). The aspiration of prospective students to study abroad is surrounded by doubts. Such things are demotivating, but an important
aspect of changing one’s entire professional path. Envisioning the future education landscape is required for learning the future under emerging approaches and critical anticipation.

I will not apply for further studies in foreign universities and the option of taking up an internship or any short-term program looks like the better option to somehow fulfill my desire. R 12

My parents are not agreeing to send me abroad due to the threats of war in the future. I am experiencing stress, anxiety, and distress at being separated from a childhood dream of studying abroad. R5

Discussion
The existence of differing ideologies ensures the enduring reality of wars, is a harsh truth. India, with its substantial youth population, acknowledges the pivotal role of education in its development, urging a transformative shift in its educational system to align with contemporary needs. A call for a major revamp in India’s education system is imperative to cater to diverse knowledge approaches (Amsler and Facer, 2017), shaping a forward-thinking higher education landscape. The adaptation must be directed toward constructing sustainable futures, aligning education with students’ demands to prevent a continued exodus of talent abroad. The implementation of more varied professional education options in Indian institutes, in line with the National Education Policy 2020s skill-based focus (Kumar et al., 2021), marks a positive start, though its effectiveness in curbing the trend of Indian students studying overseas remains uncertain. Simultaneously, foreign universities must intensify efforts to foster supportive, egalitarian and multicultural environments for their international students.

This study explores alternative educational paradigms, emphasizing the evolution of pedagogies (Altbach and Peterson, 2007; Amsler and Facer, 2017) and offering suggestions for Indian students to navigate forthcoming challenges while pursuing higher education abroad. The adaptation of a hybrid learning model, a blend of online and face-to-face teaching (Bosch et al., 2019; Phutela and Dwivedi, 2020), emerges as a viable solution amid disrupted global circumstances, enabling international degree acquisition while assuaging uncertainties. This style supplements the “global digital knowledge economy” (Facer, 2011). Additionally, integrating smart materials, augmented reality and artificial intelligence into teaching methods stands as an evolutionary pedagogic approach, fostering innovative learning environments (Leahy et al., 2019). Short-term programs like cultural workshops and tours offer a glimpse into overseas education without the extensive commitment, catering to students’ affordability and time constraints (Anderson et al., 2006). Similarly, internship programs, including virtual opportunities, provide invaluable practical experience and intercultural exposure, contributing to global communication skills. Student exchange programs, facilitating immersion in foreign education for a limited period, enhance independence and global perspectives (Daly, 2011; Anderson et al., 2006), likely gaining prominence amidst uncertainties and social upheavals. In light of current geopolitical situations, selecting a study destination encompasses considerations of safety, economic viability, future job prospects and overall comfort, emphasizing the importance of stability in a host country to sustain an undisturbed educational ecosystem (Kirloskar and Inamdar, 2021). Moreover, embracing distance learning and emerging educational technologies becomes integral to internationalizing education, expanding opportunities for virtual mobility alongside physical experiences, enhancing the global exposure of students (Kantenbacher et al., 2022). The concept of virtual mobility involves transnational learning experiences, crossing borders through communication-intensive processes, further supplementing physical mobility (Boninsegna and Dondi, 1998; Koris et al., 2021; Leahy et al., 2019). It encapsulates varied forms of international engagement, fostering a sociotechnical change and global mindset (Facer, 2011; Kantenbacher et al., 2022).
Conclusion
It is quite difficult to imagine how something so wonderful and a lifetime experience of studying abroad can turn into a nightmare and ruin a career in a potential World War III. Due to the uncertainties and social upheaval, students' study abroad plans and experiences will inevitably be affected. Studying abroad will continue to be an option, but with a few caveats which are understandable. While it is probably too early to predict the long-term impact on studying abroad decisions of students, however, the transformative overhaul of educational paradigms – embracing hybrid learning, short-term programs, student exchanges, safety considerations and integrating distance learning with new technologies, aims to equip Indian students with a comprehensive toolkit to navigate and thrive in the dynamically evolving landscape of global education. The study demonstrates the need for always vigilant attitude toward unforeseen twists and turns on the route to internationalization. As nothing goes exactly as planned, it is difficult to keep track of both intentional and unforeseen consequences in order to ensure the advantages to people, institutions, nations and society outweigh the threats, both now and in the future.

Implications
The important implication of the study is to prepare the students to face any future challenges and also to understand their mindset. Reimagining orderly transitions in philosophy and practice is necessary to prepare for uncertain futures.

Students must build a more nuanced strategy for navigating desirable futures due to the rise in complexity. Firstly, it was discovered that storytelling in troubled times can be used to uncover resources to help youngsters anticipate and create liveable futures of their own. Sharing and listening to stories can play a crucial role in empowering students to discern and put wings to their desires, hopes and dreams for the future (Facer, 2019). Secondly, it has become of utmost importance to prepare students for the future sociology of education and technology to promote a global digital knowledge economy (Facer, 2011). Thirdly, based on the notion that education is transformative and requires critical thinking, “futures literacy” is recognized as a pedagogical approach that adds value to the envisioning perspectives for the future. It becomes necessary to educate students under this approach to enhance their capacity to act in the future (Häggström and Schmidt, 2021) and to make them more adaptive and resilient for future endeavors. Fourthly, the development of the future capability of students is crucial. The Pouru-Mikkola and Wilenius, 2021 model for transformative future learning is the holistic approach to succors in building future capacity in students. It is an augmentation of the conventional idea of future education. The approach is based on active, cognitive and motivational aspects of future learning. Lastly, educators must encourage young youngsters to have faith in the future even though they will certainly foresee the perils that the planet faces (Rubin, 2013).

Another important implication of the study is understanding the mindset of students, considering the psychological and behavioral aspects of Indian students about studying abroad amidst fear of uncertainty and social unrest, the educational policymaker can strategize to reduce student’s offshore mobility for higher studies. The study will be equally beneficial for foreign universities to attract Indian brains by offering programs considering the students’ doubts and fear over such uncertainty and war-like situation.

Limitations and areas for further research
The findings cannot be generalized since they reflect the opinions and experiences of a small, saturated set of respondents. The participants of the present study are confined to Delhi NCR boundaries. Additionally, the respondents have been self-selected by the researchers. The researchers believe that interpretative phenomenological analysis can be done to understand the lived-in experience of Indian students studying abroad during such a crisis.
References


Further reading


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