Internationalization of brazilian management students: recommendations from their voices

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Resumo
Brazil is in the tenth position in the ranking of countries with the highest number of international students; is the twelfth largest economy in the world; has the sixth largest population on the planet, and the fifth largest territory. However, few studies address the internationalization of Brazilian students, especially on a theoretical basis. Hence, we used a qualitative methodological approach, based on multiple sources of evidence, in order to analyze the experiences of Brazilian international students, in the light of the theory of planned behavior; we sought to understand their choices and the challenges they face, through their own voices. Our results indicate the main characteristics that mark the international experience of Brazilian students: overvaluation of internationalization and of foreign universities; fear of prejudice; dependence on intermediaries for internationalization; the family as a source of inspiration and concern; the heterogeneity in language use and cultural adaptation; the prevailing local findings; and the ease of establishing networks in the medium term. These results are important to develop mutual understanding between Brazilian international students, local students, and other members of the academic community, so that the internationalization of education can better fulfill its transformative social role.
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Abstract
Brazil is in the tenth position in the ranking of countries with the highest number of international students; is the twelfth largest economy in the world; has the sixth largest population on the planet, and the fifth largest territory. However, few studies address the internationalization of Brazilian students, especially on a theoretical basis. Hence, we used a qualitative methodological approach, based on multiple sources of evidence, in order to analyze the experiences of Brazilian international students, in the light of the theory of planned behavior; we sought to understand their choices and the challenges they face, through their own voices. Our results indicate the main characteristics that mark the international experience of Brazilian students: overvaluation of internationalization and of foreign universities; fear of prejudice; dependence on intermediaries for internationalization; the family as a source of inspiration and concern; the heterogeneity in language use and cultural adaptation; the prevailing local findings; and the ease of establishing networks in the medium term. These results are important to develop mutual understanding between Brazilian international students, local students, and other members of the academic community, so that the internationalization of education can better fulfill its transformative social role.

Keywords: international students; internationalization of higher education; international education; theory of planned behavior; Brazilian students

Introduction
The expansion in the number of international students around the globe is expressive. In 2019, there were over 6 million international students in higher education, a number well above the approximately 4 million in 2013 and, in particular, the modest 800 thousand in 1975 (OECD 2021; UNESCO 2015). This number represents a more than sevenfold growth in less than fifty years, which is why the academic community continues to show a growing interest in this topic. The mark of 8 million international students will be surpassed, by 2025 (OECD 2021).

As surprising as these numbers are, we had difficulty in identifying studies that address specifically the internationalization of Brazilian students. Brazil, in a list of more than 200 countries, is among the ten that most send university students abroad, with 81,882, according to the latest data (UNESCO 2021). It is among the twelve largest economies in the world, the sixth most populous country, and the fifth largest (IMF 2021). An OECD report (2021) mentions that the biggest flow of international students comes from developing countries; more specifically, 67% of all international students within the OECD area come from these countries, including Brazil. Therefore, it is essential to better understand the choices made by international students from this important global player.

Given the above, this article analyzed the experiences of Brazilian international students, in the light of the theory of planned behavior (TPB), to understand better their choices and the challenges they face. With this goal, we contribute by bringing the voice of these students, who, despite their economic and cultural relevance, have hardly been the focus of studies in the literature. We also contribute by including different student profiles in our research, who had very different internationalization experiences, in distinct countries and host institutions. Our academic contribution refers to the use of an established theory (TPB) to understand not only the selection criteria used by students for internationalization, but especially how this experience took place, by analyzing the evaluations they made, the social influence they suffered, and their own perception of self-efficacy before the challenging process of their internationalization path.
International students and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Literature on international students highlights the need for more studies that 'hear the voices' of different student profiles, focusing on the multiple challenges they face in their internationalization towards different countries and institutions (Ahmad and Hussain 2017; Heng 2016, 2017; Pawar, Dasgupta and Vispute 2020; Zhou et al. 2008). Based on these investigations, we deepened our understanding of their choices. Simões and Soares (2010) emphasize the need for studies that address the choices made by students, for example, regarding the educational institution where they want to study, due to the increasing competition among HEIs, and the resulting decrease of their profitability. For Ma (2021), studies that address the international choices made by students should bring a detailed look, with the analysis of the reputation and image of the university, city, or country of destination, as this is one of the main criteria considered by international students. In addition to these views, Nicholls (2018) mentions the lack of studies that address not only students’ criteria for choosing internationalization, but also how they do it.

In order to fully understand students' choices, we need an approach based on theoretical and explanatory studies, which are fairly limited in the literature on international students as a whole, and even rarer for Brazilian international students, where the few articles that address the topic are descriptive and non-theoretical (Ashong and Commander 2017; Sandes-Guimaraes et al. 2020). Therefore, we have adopted TPB's precepts, due to the degree of contribution it can bring to this phenomenon and to the literature, and we carried out analyses based on multiple sources of evidence.

TCP has been adopted, especially in the past 30 years, for better interpreting and, to some extent, predicting human behavior (Ajzen 2015; Conner and Armitage 1998; Ifinedo 2012). It states that our behavior depends on our intentions, and these, in turn, are influenced by three major factors, seen as their indirect determinants (Morris et al. 2005; Verma and Chandra 2018). These are the attitude, or assessment of the action; the subjective norm, or the influences present in the individual's social environment; and the perceived behavioral control, characterized by individuals’ perception of the self-efficacy of their actions (Ajzen 1985).

TPB is even more relevant when dealing with complex human behaviors, which show great heterogeneity among its agents, in addition to great challenges and expectations (Gebhard 2012), as is the case of students’ choices for internationalizing their studies (Smith and Khawaja 2011). An example of this complexity lies in the series of motivations of international students, such as language improvement (Kuo 2011), the richness of intercultural experiences (Cubillo et al. 2006; Hazen and Alberts 2006), and the expectation that an international insertion will make a difference in their lives (Mesidor and Sly 2016). Other challenges faced by students are the fear of cultural differences between the home country and the host country (Hellstén et al. 2002; Nieto and Zoller Booth 2010); technical differences in classes’ format and teachers’ assessment (Huang 2006; Kuo 2011; Lin and Yi 1997; Zhou et al. 2011); and the need to give oral presentations and participate in discussions (Gebhard 2012). In addition to these examples, international students’ behavior complexity is also shown through the need of social support from host educational institutions, to provide foreigners with a higher sense of inclusion (Sherry et al. 2010; Sümer et al. 2008).

Research method
To meet the article’s goal, we carried out a qualitative research using interviews, documents, and audiovisual material as the main sources of evidence (Creswell and Poth 2016). Based on this research design, we did 23 in-depth interviews and analyzed more than 500 posts and 18 videos published on social media, covering more than 20 different destinations of Brazilian
international students, focused on management courses. Figure 1 shows the sources of evidence used in our study, in line with the research objective:

Participants
For the three sources of evidence, we established the same cumulative criteria for selecting reports from international students, namely: to be native Brazilians; students who had international experience abroad during a full PhD, a PhD Internship, or Post-Doctorate; students who had completed their international degree in recent years, that is, between 2017 and 2021. We chose PhD and Postdoctoral students because of their academic trajectory, which provides them with cumulative learning about the higher education process, since they have also gone through experiences such as a Bachelor degree and, in many cases, a Master's degree. These students’ experience allowed us achieving rich insights for our analysis.

Data collection
The first stage of data collection involved in-depth interviews, based on a semi-structured script, with questions organized according to three main dimensions: assessments about the international career and places of destination; influences suffered during this process by different social groups; and students’ perceptions about their self-efficacy in internationalization. Interviews were conducted during 2021, with the participation of 11 men and 12 women (totaling 23 students), and had an average duration of 52 minutes. We recorded and fully transcribed all reports for analysis. Table 1 shows the research script, and its relationship with the literature:
### Table 1 – Research script

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical dimensions and main references</th>
<th>Second-order categories and main references</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong></td>
<td><em>International students’ assessment</em></td>
<td>Starting off, can you give me an overview of your academic trajectory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajzen (1985)</td>
<td>Cubillo et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Tell me, what motivated your decision to internationalize the studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajzen (2015)</td>
<td>Hazen and Alberts (2006)</td>
<td>When you did decide to internationalize your studies, what results you did expect or imagine obtaining with internationalization?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conner Armitage (1998)</td>
<td>Hellstén (2002)</td>
<td>What was your destination country and how did you choose that country?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mesidor and Sly (2016)</td>
<td><strong>Subjective Norm</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romani-Dias and Carneiro (2019)</td>
<td>In this internationalization process, especially when choosing the destination country, explain whether the home institution and its advisor had influences on your decision, and in what way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sherry et al. (2010)</td>
<td>How the host institution and its advisor in this country, did influence your decision?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yoon and Portman (2004)</td>
<td>Can you report aspects of the job market or career (opportunities), which motivated the choice of the destination place?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Influences on the international student</strong></td>
<td>Intimates, or closest people, such as a spouse, or friends, did participate in this decision?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brown (2008)</td>
<td>Did other family members, parents, grandparents, uncles or others have any kind of influence in your decision?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Butcher and Mcgrath (2004)</td>
<td><strong>Perceived behavioral control</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hellstén (2002)</td>
<td>How do you consider was your knowledge or mastery of the language of the destination place? Did this influence your decision?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sawir et al. (2008)</td>
<td>How comfortable were you with the culture of the destination place?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sümer et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Please, tell me if the domain of any specific theme or content, helped in the choose for the destination place.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ward and Masgoret (2004)</td>
<td>How did the knowledge and especially the network of your advisor impact the process of choosing the destination place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Self-efficacy perceived by international students</strong></td>
<td>Are there other factors that made you comfortable with the choice of destination place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brown (2008)</td>
<td><strong>Morris et al. (2005)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khawaja and Stallman (2011)</td>
<td><strong>Conner and Armitage (1998)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kuo (2011)</td>
<td><strong>Morris et al. (2005)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lowinger et al. (2014)</td>
<td><strong>Sawir et al. (2008)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sherry et al. (2010)</td>
<td><strong>Wong (2004)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Subjective Norm**

- Ajzen (1985)
- Ajzen (2015)
- Morris et al. (2005)
- Verma and Chandra (2018)

**Perceived behavioral control**

- Ajzen (1985)
- Ajzen (2015)
- Conner and Armitage (1998)
- Morris et al. (2005)
The second stage of collection regarded analyzing documents, in the form of posts available on social media. We collected accessible data in 40 public and private Facebook groups that addressed matters related to Doctorate and Post Doctorate abroad. These groups comprise around 800 thousand Brazilian students. In all, we analyzed more than 500 posts, which received about 25,000 interactions, such as ‘likes’ and comments. The final collection phase consisted of audiovisual materials. We collected videos available on two Youtube channels, identified from comments made in Facebook groups. These channels have around 700 subscribers and produce content on the international experience of Brazilians during their PhD and Post Doctorate programs. After the survey, we identified 18 videos, published between 2019 and 2020, which were viewed more than 8,300 times, and received 668 ‘likes’ and comments.

Our set of sources of evidence was important to increase the study’s validity (Creswell and Poth 2016), by better understanding the behavior of Brazilian students during their international studies. Despite the big opportunity for analysis that interviews provide, literature highlights that a limitation for their use is the potential influence of the interviewer’s presence on participants’ answers. Therefore, posts on social media can increase research reliability, because their content is autonomous and spontaneous, without any interference from the researcher. Social media brings opportunities for participants to share their experiences directly, which reflected in our study through the increase in the number of countries and internationalization experiences, thus allowing to explore both their spoken and written language (Amigud 2020; Hudson and Hudson 2013; Mewburn and Thomson 2013; Schneider and Trottier 2012, 2013; Towers and Towers 2020).

Data analysis
We processed the collected data through thematic content analysis. At this stage, we started from the theoretical dimensions of TPB: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen 1985, 2015). In a second moment, we carried out an open encoding, through line-by-line reading of the interviews with students, which generated new codes for the analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the final stage of codification, of the selective and axial type (Glaser and Strauss 1967), we carried out, through several rounds, a refinement of the created codes. To confirm our encoding scheme (Table 2), we then collected and analyzed posts and videos from social media, according to the codes already identified.

Table 2 – Encoding Scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical dimensions and main references</th>
<th>Second-order categories and main references</th>
<th>First-order themes</th>
<th>Some quotations (selected examples)*b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td><em>International students’ assessment</em></td>
<td>• On career internationalization and the host country</td>
<td>‘You get to know a different world, find opportunities, practice a foreign language, and have an experience of culture, of life, and of self-knowledge. Through this, we are helping Brazilian Science’ (Michael, on a social media video).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajzen (2015)</td>
<td>Hellstén (2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘One option was the United States, largely because of its institutions. I wanted to go to a large American university. The country also helps, by itself, especially the Boston region. It was the perfect set’ (Peter, on interview).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective Norm</td>
<td>Perceived behavioral control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romani-Dias and Carneiro (2019)</td>
<td>Self-efficacy perceived by international students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kuo (2011)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ward and Masgoret (2004)</td>
<td>• On the host HEI and advisor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• From the advisor, home HEI, and professional community</td>
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<tr>
<td>• From family and close friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>• With the language or culture</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• With the established network and the research topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘At the host university, in US, the advisor warned me that there was no tax exemption for international students. Unfortunately, the only professor who works with my topic is there’ (Elizabeth, a post on a social media).</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I gained the international experience through my advisor in Brazil. I did not sent e-mails, I achieved it through his connections’ (Logan, on interview).</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘We should honor the community, the Brazilian agencies for research support, and our network, which includes the scientific community, the researchers, and the family. Without them, I would have gone crazy’ (Clayton, on a social media video).</td>
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<td>‘My father is a truck mechanic. I remember telling him that I was going to Israel, and he said, not really knowing about my process: but haven’t you finished? (Jane, on interview).</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Two great friends who had gone abroad helped me a lot with the paperwork, the contacts, it was a big support’ (Margaret, on a social media video).</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘During my international experience, I did several activities in Ireland. At first, I had difficulty with the language, but I knew different cultures and learned English well’ (Megan, on a social media post).</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Within that protection bubble called Cambridge (USA), within its universities, I felt perfectly at ease with the culture’ (Frank, on interview).</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘They even called me for collegiate meetings, and it was really cool, because they treated me like a peer and not as a PhD student (Chloe, on interview).</td>
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<td>‘We have the same ability as them. In the beginning, I doubted my capacity, but after a while I noticed that we can be as good as them’ (Leonard, on a social media video).</td>
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</table>

**Results and discussion**

In this section, we present the reports of Brazilian international students collected in interviews and in posts and videos on social media, always organized according to the theoretical dimensions of TPB (attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control), and to the first-order topics that emerged in this research.
Attitude  
Assessment of career internationalization and the host country  

Our first category deals with Brazilian students’ perceptions on the internationalization of their career, during their study period. These evaluations can be positive or negative, and following TPB precepts (Ajzen 1985, 2015), they influence students’ decisions on internationalizing their studies or keeping them local. As an example, interviewee Jane has a positive view on what internationalization meant to her career: 'What motivated me to get the PhD Internship was that I’ve always wanted to be where I am today. I did the PhD because I wanted to be a PhD professor'. Despite Jane's positive speech, there are challenging tradeoffs in this process, especially in careers already solid, as in the case of Beth, who went to England:

When you have a job in your home country market, with a salary, helping your family, and with and upward career, living abroad again, with a scholarship, means waiving a security already achieved (Beth, on interview).

According to Mesidor and Sly (2016), adapting to the academic environment is one of the first learning experiences of the international student. Thus, positive or negative assessments on internationalization may result from the student's appreciation of the life changes that this experience may bring. In other words, international experience can make a difference in a student’s life, and in those around him/her; since education promotes change and adaptation, it has a transforming role. The student can interpret this transformation as something with more rewards or more costs.

As important for students' choice as the appreciation of the internationalization itself was the evaluation they made about the host country. Posts made by Brazilian students on social media show that a substantial part of the country's assessment, whether positive or negative, is carried out on the spot, that is, after starting their studies abroad, as reported by students with experiences in Spain and Portugal:

I do a PhD in a Spanish university. It is a reality shock. We Brazilians have a rich, friendly, but mismanaged country, and we lack basic things, both in infrastructure and in social relationships. I’m not here to say that Europe or the United States are better than Brazil, but we have a lot to learn (Julia, a post on a social media).

I lived in the city of Porto for a year. It really bothered me the harassment I suffered when they knew I was Brazilian. Brazilian women have a reputation for being easy and "hot". I lived alone in Portugal (Marie, on a social media post).

For Hazen and Alberts (2006), it is common that students' motivation focuses on the best educational opportunities in the host country, as in Julia's speech on infrastructure. In addition, cultural factors, present in Julias and Marie's speeches, despite showing very different scenarios, shed light on the importance of environmental factors for international students’ adaptation. These factors appear in situations of prejudice or discrimination, through superficial relationships, and in other phenomena that can cause stressful situations for students (Yoon and Portman 2004). For Sherry et al. (2010), the local community usually does not understand the culture of foreign students, which is also a great cause of frustration and discomfort for them. On this point, Tom reports, in a post on social media, that ‘a Brazilian friend went to Portugal for a PhD, and local people always called him a monkey’. Therefore, prejudice is one of the main challenges faced by Brazilian international students, which can also be associated with their ethnicity and cultural aspects in general.
Assessment of the host HEI and the advisor

Looking at students’ more specific assessments, some address the organizational level, represented by the host HEI, and some the individual level, referring to the advisor in the host country. As examples, reports from Brazilians show quite well their views on the American institutions that received them:

Professors are very open, highly available, and that impressed me a lot, because we think that by being great professors, they would be very distant; but actually, they are super-available. They are very good (Sarah, on a social media video).

Universities here are very good. All of them. Even the worst are better or are at the same level as those in Brazil. It pays a lot to come, even if you go to the worst of them. There are many opportunities for funding that you do not have in Brazil, and, in addition, the advisor here is great, he is well known in the area, which also makes it easier to get financial support for research (Paul, on a social media video).

The reports of Brazilian students show very contrasting experiences on their studies in Brazil and the United States. Through these testimonies, we assume that the substantial assessments made by them took place in the host country, which we interpreted as a low level of information on the host country and HEI, before the trip. Cubillo et al. (2006) argue that students cannot notice most attributes of higher education services before being there, which makes the assessment difficult, especially for international students.

Another critical issue raised in Paul's report concerns the financial aspects that students interested in internationalization evaluate. He highlights the easier funding for research done in the host country, as compared to Brazil. According to Hellstén et al. (2002), and Mesidor and Sly (2016), financial difficulties are among the greatest barriers to students’ internationalization, although they are sometimes willing to give up money and greater comfort for their international goals. On this point, Romani-Dias and Carneiro (2019) emphasize that this difficulty can be worse for Brazilians, especially when the intended destination is Western European countries or the United States, due to the unfavorable exchange rate of the Brazilian currency.

Subjective Norm

Influence of the advisor, of the home HEI, and of the professional community

Following TCP's precepts, the subjective norm concerns approval, disapproval, and influence in general, concerning a certain behavior intended by the individual, by different social groups that interact with him/her (Ajzen 1985, 2015). In our study, these groups comprised the advisor in the home country, the home HEI, and the academic and professional community to which the student belongs, according to these reports:

My Brazilian advisor has international contacts and cooperates with a group on telephone-based diagnosis. That’s why I came here to do research on this method (James, on a social media video).

My university in Brazil was very important in the process of arousing my interest in internationalization. My trajectory in this HEI helped me see that I could wish more, and internationalization was this something else (Chloe, on interview).

I did a freelancer work for a Foundation manager, and he really liked it. He knew a professor in one of the main American universities, and referred me to that professor. Hence, it was someone from my professional community that made me achieve it (George, on a social media video).

The reports make clear the essential role of different social groups in students' international experience. The stories of Brazilians vary a lot, and there are cases where the effort was practically individual on the part of the student, in his relationship with the intended host institution, as reported by Bill, who went to Germany: 'I dug all my funding, I used all my
strength to get, to make possible my going abroad. It didn't fall in my lap. Then, there was just the formalization between the Brazilian and German universities’.

On these aspects, literature highlights the relevance of information prior to the trip (Brown 2008), a role that the advisor in Brazil can sometimes play. Butcher and Mcgrath (2004) argue on the role of the home institution - if the university has an exchange program for its students, it will expand cross-cultural experiences, enabling a better understanding of the transition demands of international students. Chloe's statement goes in this direction, mentioning a home institution that has a strong internationalization program, through its international office, which facilitated her trip to the United States. As for the importance of the professional community for students’ internationalization, we see it from the perspective of networks, created by individuals due to their need of belonging, that is, for achieving certain levels of quality and quantity in social relationships (Sawir et al. 2008). This participation in networks, as in George’s case, enabled his insertion in an international community, increasing the Brazilian student’s sense of belonging.

Influence of family and close friends
Family and close friends exert a great influence on the professional trajectory of most international students. We can consider these actions as involuntary, that is, they result from the context, and not from the actions of family and friends intended directly at the student’s internationalization. Among those that are voluntary, we mention a friend’s direct action that contributes to the student’s internationalization. We start with reports that put the family as an inspirational factor for the internationalization of Brazilian students:

My mother did a Doctoral Internship in Switzerland, and I went with her as a child. I just have good memories. I remember that my mother's advisor abroad was very dear. Now I have the opportunity to do my Doctoral Internship in France, without children, but with the joy of someone who left as a child (Cristine, on a social media post).

I come from a family with high cultural capital. They were not rich, but had been in the habit of sending their children to study abroad since the beginning of the 20th century. I guess that’s why they had the courage to send me at 16 years old alone to England (Emy, on interview).

Sumer et al. (2008) argue that, for international students, it is very difficult to replace their social relationships with family and friends of the home country. The greater social support makes the individual experience a better adjustment, and less depression and cultural stress, corresponding to a buffer for the challenges they face during their international experience. In addition, their families' previous experience with internationalization appears as a major factor for them to see this type of experience as something natural in their lives, as for Cristine and Emy.

Another issue that stands out in Brazilian students’ reports regards their responsibilities towards their families, as in Fred's worried speech, on a social media post: 'I am married and have difficulty getting my wife's visa to Belgium. In order to get her visa, I must prove an income that is higher than my international scholarship'. Therefore, the family can be both a driver and a challenge for Brazilian students’ internationalization, a frequent element in the literature on international students (Hellstén et al. 2002). Regarding friends, Brazilian testimonies show that they are an important support in their internationalization processes, as reported by Jones, whose destination was England: 'I talked to a friend who had studied there, and he told me how a Doctoral Internship in England worked, and that was important, despite all financial challenges for supporting myself abroad'.

Perceived behavioral control
Self-efficacy with the host language and culture
TPB states that we intend to achieve a certain behavior when we feel effective in exercising it, a phenomenon known as self-efficacy (Ajzen 1985, 2015). In this sense, Brazilian students seek internationalization if they perceive themselves capable of dealing with aspects such as the language and local culture of the host country. These aspects can be, at the same time, heroes and villains for Brazilians’ internationalization, according to reports:

I love languages. I already spoke English and had the basics of Spanish. After a year of daily contact with the Italian, I think I have reached a quite advanced level. I arrived in the country only managing to introduce myself and place an order in restaurants, and in the end I was totally immersed in the culture (Robert, on social media post).

No foreigner really speaks English well. I sensed a thick accent among university colleagues. I wasn't comfortable with that, and they told me to stay calm, that I didn't have the obligation to speak perfectly (Peter, on interview).

While Robert is at ease in dealing with different languages, which enabled what he called an immersion in Italian culture, Peter has a difficulty shared by most Brazilians in their international experiences. This is because Brazil has never been an English colony, which limits our familiarity with this language, the world’s most widely spoken. On this issue, Brown (2008) argues that ability with the language of the host country is an important requirement for reducing students’ stress in their cultural adaptation. This happens because the demands of the proposed activities throughout the studies put pressure on students, being sources of tension. Students often feel nervous, scared, embarrassed, insecure, or shy about their lack of language skills. A frequent problem is that international students compare themselves to local students, even in the way teachers conduct group activities, which can harm their academic results, as in Peter's report (Mesidor and Sly 2016). An even wider analysis than that of the language concerns the type of treatment received by the student abroad:

The Dutch are still ruder than the Germans. In the first days, you think: my God, what am I doing here? I left my family for this? However, as time goes by, we start to notice that the culture is different, it’s nothing personal (Jane, on interview).

Jane, who had experiences in both the Netherlands and Israel, mentions a situation where it took some time to adapt to the local culture, similar to Mesidor and Sly’s arguments (2016). Students usually arrive at the host university with an action plan already established, as they believe they have a reasonable understanding of what they will face. In a second moment, they realize that they are quite different from the others, in terms of culture and language, which is why the first days of their university experience are so important; if these are positive, they will achieve more confidence in their activities.

The relevance of this topic is highlighted by Lowinger et al. (2014), for whom the cultural shock, also resulting from discrimination, is a cultural aspect that interferes with the academic performance of students, due to the high level of stress that it generated. Kuo (2011) observes that this context can lead to a great loss in understanding the different contents that they must learn. In summary, the way of cultural assimilation emerges as one of the central elements for the perception of self-efficacy of Brazilian students in their international experience.

Self-efficacy with the established network and with the research topic

If Brazilian international students feel comfortable with the network they have established, and with the research topics they worked abroad, they seek a stronger international insertion, and even advocate for it, as Audrey reported on a social media post: 'I still have contact with my research colleagues, we exchange opportunities and information; it was one of the best results
of my international experience, and I recommend it to everyone I can'. Another Brazilian student’s speech:

You know researchers that are working on a topic similar to yours, who sometimes bring answers to what you search. You can make contact with these people, exchange information to find potential good directions (Jessica, on a social media video).

Sawir et al. (2008) mention the importance of integrating a social network, not only as a way to achieve professional goals, but also to reduce students’ isolation. That is why dense social networks can reduce loneliness, increasing their sense of belonging. Despite the positive examples brought by Audrey and Jessica, many students report the lack of environmental knowledge and of social isolation, failing to develop friendly relationships, thus facing sociocultural, interpersonal, and language barriers (Khawaja and Stallman 2011).

Associated with the establishment of networks is Brazilian students’ perception of self-efficacy with the research topic conducted abroad, as well as familiarity with academic research in general, as in Beth's interview: 'I have always enjoyed studying and the academic field, and since I graduated I have been involved with research'. Chloe's interview goes in the same direction, highlighting her taste for the research topic: 'I was already quite familiar with three US institutions that make serious studies on gender, with almost daily seminars and events. Internationalization brought me even closer to all of this'.

The familiarity reported by Beth and Chloe is important in dealing with a major general challenge faced by international students: critical thinking (Brown 2008). This type of thinking can be suppressed by cultural differences, when people from the host country do not approve criticisms and contradictions from foreign students, and when the students themselves have difficulty in showing their critical thinking, due to the cultural model of their home countries, especially those that provide passive or mechanical educational systems (Wong 2004). In addition, it is common that many topics unknown by international students are present in professors’ speeches. Therefore, Brazilian students’ previous academic experience, in different topics, can be critical for their internationalization process (Nieto and Zoller Booth 2010).

Conclusions and recommendations
In this article, we analyzed the experiences of Brazilian international students under the perspective of the theory of planned behavior, in order to better understand their choices and the challenges they face.

As main results, we identified that Brazilian students show some peculiarities in their assessments of the international experience. They strongly believe in internationalization as a possibility for a major turnaround, and sometimes overvalue foreign institutions, especially those in developed countries, and their advisors abroad. In this sense, they show a certain fascination, while they report a constant fear of suffering several kinds of prejudice during their international experiences, which can make their journeys difficult.

We also identified the factors with the highest social influence on Brazilian international students. There is a strong need, for entering the ‘internationalization club’, to count on a ‘member’ who already has a good international dialogue. In other words, Brazilian students sometimes depend on the good contacts of their advisor or of their home institution, to have reasonable chances of entering the international academic environment, although there are reports from successful Brazilian students that succeeded by fighting stoically and individually for their internationalization.

In any case, Brazilians need to establish networks of trust that can assist them in the international path. In addition, the family appears as an inspiration for them, which means that beyond technical or financial support, the greatest impact of the family on these students is the
example. This example stems from the value that some families give to knowledge in general, and, in fewer cases, from previous international experiences of family members, which influence the student to follow an international path. However, the Brazilian international student is, for the most part, the family pioneer on this trajectory, and shows great concern for it during his academic journey abroad.

Our findings also refer to the perception of self-efficacy of Brazilian international students, who are very heterogeneous, in terms of the quality of language use and cultural adaptation. Furthermore, these students end up discovering their real conditions “in loco”. Even in the face of initial challenges, and even because of them, Brazilian students show a good ability for establishing networks, in the medium term. This ability is much valued among those who already have an experience with the research themes that will be their focus at the host institution, prior to internationalization. This is another challenge that students can see as an opportunity.

Exploring the behavior of Brazilian international students during their studies’ internationalization process, through their own voices and experiences, provided an essential theoretical basis for understanding this phenomenon, which substantially advances compared to previous research, and opens a potential avenue of future studies that mainly benefits Brazilian educational institutions and students. Our results are important for developing mutual understanding between Brazilian international students, local students, and other members of the academic community. In this sense, our study is pioneering, and we suggest additional research to continue it.

As a social implication, internationalization can be seen as a great opportunity for life change, especially for students from developing countries, such as Brazil. However, for this change to reach a larger scale, providing chances to more students (such as those who were part of our study), it is essential that governments, educational institutions, and other social groups that act both in the home and host countries, understand their needs and expectations. This is how we will be able to provide a fairer education to millions of students, who dream of changing their lives and improving society, locally and globally, based on their own international journeys.

Disclosure statement
Authors did not report any potential conflict of interest.

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