

Erasmus-driven destination experience and students' ambassadorship behaviour: A multi-stakeholder perspective

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Abstract

This work aims to a) analyze the tourist experience of Erasmus students in terms of place attachment and b) explore their potential to act as destination brand ambassadors of a hosting destination. It builds on previous literature of international students as tourists, with a wider scope as more publics are involved and both current and future behaviours are explored. Through a qualitative approach run in Valencia (Spain) with three techniques (focus groups, open-ended questions, and personal in-depth interview) we gather information from four stakeholders (current and former Erasmus students, academic coordinators, and students' tourism managers). By using verbal content analysis, this varied information was coded to answer five research questions. The results revealed accordance among stakeholders around four interconnected dimensions: academic, social, cultural, and personal or psychological. Insights on cognitive and affective place attachment are found, and on both behavioural (returning) and attitudinal (recommending) loyalty. Results from a multi-stakeholder perspective offers insights on the potential of Erasmus students for spreading substantial positive word-of-mouth to more publics than just other students. Building up on the theory of university alumni as a repeat visitor, this paper brings subjective impressions that can help tourist managers to consider Erasmus students as brand ambassadors as they show attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

Keywords: place attachment; Erasmus program; word-of-mouth; brand ambassador; students experience.

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1. Introduction

One of the positive aspects of globalization is undoubtedly the emergence and consolidation of international movements of students across the globe, which present positive outcomes academically, socially and economically (Gallarza, Fayos, Currás, Servera & Arteaga, 2019; Altbach & Knight 2007; Brooks, 2018). After the shutdown caused by Covid-19 crisis affecting drastically the tourism industry (Butler, 2022), and reducing academic exchanges among different countries (Moreno-Muñoz, & Luque-Revuelto, 2023), the international academic sector seems to have been one of the quicker to recover, because of the return of these international students' exchanges (Covid-19 resource centre, 2022; European Commission, 2021). Indeed, several authors stated that this terrible context can be the opportunity to reposition destinations in terms of their markets (Butler, 2022; Gössling and Schweiggart, 2022), which also works for international academic exchanges and host destinations for academic purposes. Spain is an interesting case study as it is a preferred destination for both Latin-Americans and European students (Olivella, 2017). International students are the public chosen in this work, and more precisely Erasmus students visiting the city of Valencia, a destination with more than 3,000 international students each year.

Tourism literature acknowledges international students as tourists (Amaro *et al.* 2019). Explicitly Erasmus students (staying less than a year) are considered tourists, and therefore they account for the total incoming tourists of a given hosting country; but also, implicitly, these students behave as experiential and transformative consumers (Salami, 2010) and therefore can show both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards their incoming destination. Indeed, they can act as brand ambassadors on their social networks.

The Erasmus Program (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European Union (EU) student exchange program established in 1987. Across the decades, the Erasmus programs have been worldwide acknowledged as one of the most well-established international initiative in Higher Education for its economic effects in terms of labor market mobility (Bracht, Engel, Janson, Over, Schomburg & Teichler, 2006; Parey & Waldinger, 2011; Erasmus, Annual report 2021; European Commission, 2021). ESN (Erasmus Social Network) is the largest student association in Europe, present in 1000 Higher Education Institutions across 42 countries (ESN Annual Report 2021-2022 by Erasmus Student Network AISBL). The relevance of the Erasmus exchange program is also economic: Erasmus + supported the EU education, training, youth, and sport sectors (European Commission, 2021). Today Erasmus+ is more than a European mobility program; it is a global phenomenon that has the 34 Erasmus+ Program Countries which are the EU Member States, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, North Macedonia, and Turkey. Partner institutions are all the other countries in the world. The whole Erasmus+ programme has been severely affected by the Covid-19 crisis, but the opportunity is also there (Butler, 2022), as "In these challenging times, the Erasmus+ programme has proven its agility and resilience, adapting its actions, supporting stakeholders, and reshaping priorities" (European Commission, 2021, p.9).

Spain is one of the most salient Erasmus destination with 13.616 staff Erasmus participants and 77. 406 students travelling in 2021 to Spain (Erasmus+ in Spain, 2021) well ahead of other receiving countries such as Germany, United Kingdom, France or Italy. The University of Valencia, where our fieldwork took place, is always among the top three to five universities incoming students in recent years (Erasmus, Annual report 2021; European Commission, 2021).

On the top of this social and economic relevance, scholars all over Europe have also proven interest in Erasmus students as a specific and idiosyncratic public regarding their behaviour as consumers: they act as tourists and residents at the same time. Previous research has addressed their motivations (e.g. Fombona, Rodríguez & Sevillano, 2013), expectations (e.g. Gallarza *et al.*, 2019), sense of advocacy (e.g.

Amaro *et al.* 2019) or their sense of belonging (e.g. Golubeva *et al.* 2018). Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, the specific profile of Erasmus students as potential destination brand ambassadors (in Spain) has not yet been studied.

Accordingly, with this background in mind, this study has a twofold objective: first, to analyse the visit experience of Erasmus students as a multidimensional and rich tourist experience; second, and derived from this first objective, we aim at exploring students' likelihood and willingness to act as destination brand ambassadors of the hosting destination, by identifying the underpinnings of their sense of place attachment and both an affective (recommendation) and behavioural (repetition) loyalty behaviour.

In sum, scholarly, the study seeks to explore the idea that place attachment is associated with the desire to recommend a city (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013; Chen *et al.*, 2014; Chen, Dwyer & Frith, 2018; Chow & Healey, 2008), here for the specific case of Erasmus students in Valencia. Consequently, in a managerial level, we also want to examine in which way the Erasmus exchange program helps the tourist development of a city through positive word-of-mouth (WOM).

The paper adds on one side to existing literature on international students' behaviour by exploring tourism-related topics (place attachment, destination experience and destination loyalty and recommendation), and on the other side on human-place relationship factors for an unexplored public (Erasmus students). More specifically, our paper follows the call from Gallarza, Šeric & Cuadrado (2017, p. 467): "foreign students can be co-creators of value for other foreign students, for teachers, and administrative staff, as well as brand ambassadors for the University and the country". As this behaviour of ambassadorship of international students has already been proven towards their host university (e.g. Phang, 2013; Bislev, 2017; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Akli, 2012) we concentrate here on this advocacy at an uppermost level, that is towards the hosting city (i.e. Valencia in Spain).

Methodologically, in light with previous literature (Gallarza *et al.*, 2019; Golubeva, Parra & Mohedano, 2018; Engel, 2010; Chow & Healey, 2008; Li *et al.*, 2016) five explorative research questions were developed to guide a qualitative research with a multi-method approach with four different publics (undergraduate and postgraduate Erasmus students, former Erasmus students, staff of International Relations, and Manager of a specialized travel agency).

This paper is built on the following way: after a theoretical framework on the concepts of place attachment and the consequences of it on the consumer's behaviour, the empirical study is presented, and the choice of methods and publics is explained. Then, results from the thematic content analysis are discussed, and finally we present conclusions, limitations, and future lines of research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Place attachment, place identity

Place attachment can be explained as an affective bond people have for specific places. Rollero and Piccoli (2010, p. 234) define it as "a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that incorporates different aspects of people-place bonding and involves the interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviours and actions in reference to a place". It should be understood as the affective link that people establish with specific places, where they have a propensity to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). Two main reasons have been posted for place attachment (Chen *et al.*, 2014): first, the fact of being attached to a place thanks to the knowledge (cognitive) previously held before any visit and second, to have affection (affective) for a place because of the experiences lived in. Indeed, the personal experiences lived in a place provoke a feeling of belonging to this place.

Together with place attachment, other psychological outcomes have been developed such as place identity and sense of community. Place identity is the result of the process of identification between the person and the place. This is what leads to place attachment (Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong & Pace, 2014). This identification emanates due to a complex process (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013). Surely, a place can act as a referent of one's past and/or his/her personal experiences (Gu & Ryan, 2008). Individuals look for places in which they recognize themselves (image congruence) and when it is the case the feeling of belonging to the place increases. This feeling has a positive impact on the identity of the person. Moreover, residents who feel a similarity between who they are and the identity of a place will be more inclined to recommend the place to others (Braun *et al.*, 2013). It has been proven that actual and ideal self-congruities affect place satisfaction and engagement with the destination for residents (Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022).

Place identity and sense of community both lead to place attachment. The place fulfils an important function in inhabitants' lives (Stokols & Shumaker, 1982). An individual can develop real affective bonds towards his/her place of residence. Place attachment is based on the feeling of security of the individual (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992; Rivlin, 1982). Secondly, the satisfaction with a place is an essential element to lead to the attachment. It is only when this condition is realized that place attachment will emerge, followed by loyalty. These last two aspects lead to positive WOM (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022).

One can have affection for a place even though only staying in this place for a short period of time (Holton, 2015; Chow & Healey, 2008; Rioux, Scrima & Werner, 2017), for holidays or eventually during the Erasmus exchange, which is normally of a few months. Other related concepts are relevant here: place memory and place expectation. Place memory implies the memory that one has of a place. Consumers remember the place the way it was during their stay. Place expectation stands for the expectations that one has when returning to that place. Place memory stands for the strength of the memories of the experiences and stories associated with a place, it is a dimension based on an interaction on a short term; place expectation corresponds to the future experiences that can occur in a place and is based on a long term interaction since the person projects living future experiences there (Sterchele, 2020).

One gets attached to a place in which significative and memorable personal experiences took place (Jorgenson & Nickerson, 2016; Chen, Dwyer & Firth, 2018; Kastenholz, Marques & Carneiro, 2020; Loureiro, 2014; Xu & Zhang, 2016; Vada, Prentice & Hsiao, 2019). A person feels bounded to a place, because of the experiences lived in it, intensified by a sense of self-congruity (Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022) and perceived authenticity (Yang, Zhou, Fan, Yin, & Qu, 2022).

Place memory develops itself independently from the time of the stay, because it is related to the importance and intensity of the experience and not to the length of it (Jorgenson & Nickerson 2016); place memory can also be due to small and insignificant interactions which take place in daily life, and the accumulation of these can lead to a feeling of "sense" which also leads to place attachment (Yang, Zhou, Fan, Yin, & Qu 2022). Physical space becomes a meaningful aspect for consumers thanks to intimate experiences such as personal development and fulfilment. As Manzo (2005) underlines, it is not the places themselves that are significant but the "experience-in-place" that creates the meaning of it.

2.2. Destination brand ambassadorship

What seems clear is that the relationship between humans and places provokes strong emotions (Hosany, Prayag, Van Der Veen, Huang & Deesilatham, 2017). These have an influence on consumer's behaviour such as WOM recommendation (Del Chiappa, Gallarza & Dall'Aglio, 2018) that leads to

speaking about a place as a touristic destination (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Ryan & Gu, 2009). This attitude towards positive recommendations leads, in some cases, to brand ambassadorship, as a further step consumers may develop in their relationship with a place.

Brand ambassadorship as a concept result from the literature on customer loyalty (Kandampully *et al.* 2015) and branding, and for the case of tourism, on destination branding (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013; Jeuring, & Haartsen, 2017). Residents and tourists are destination brand stakeholders, having the potential to act as destination brand ambassadors (Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019; Wassler *et al.* 2021). Literature on brand ambassadorship focusing on the hospitality industry highlights its emotional aspects affecting variables such as customer engagement and trust and brand citizenship behaviours (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013; Kandampully *et al.* 2015). It does affect both employees and consumers, and tourism destinations can find in both public's potential for encouraging a more organic and genuine promotion of places (Kandampully *et al.* 2015). Indeed, customers' extensive adoption of technology in tourism favors these roles of ambassadors through varied online communication channels, social media and customer communities (Del Chiappa, Gallarza & Dall'Aglio, 2018; Kandampully *et al.* 2015). In this sense, brands can get closer to their audiences by using non-invasive communications channels, instead of social networks over-saturated with advertising (Barquero-Cabrero *et al.* 2023; Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019). More precisely, recent literature shows that the role consumers have in spreading positive WOM about the destination is stronger than tourism official means (Barquero-Cabrero *et al.* 2023): the flow of information is more genuine, and posts made by non-professional in UGCs achieved greater reach and interaction.

2.3. International students' behaviours in their host city: insights for studying Erasmus as brand ambassadors

From a consumer behaviour perspective, most extant works on the experience of being international student highlight the cognitive-affective and social dimensionality of this experience (e.g. Gallarza, Šeric & Cuadrado, 2017), the influence on the students' well-being (e.g. Aydin, 2012), and the positive and negative effects of an international educational experience (e.g. Li, Gallarza & Fayos, 2016; Bedenlier & Zawacki-Richter, 2015; Engel, 2010; Weaver, 2008; McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). Regarding their role as tourists, their consumer behaviours have been analysed in terms of motivations (e.g. Marques, Mohsin, Lengler, 2018), preferences (e.g. Hughes, Wang & Shu 2015), choice behaviours (e.g. Michael, Armstrong & King, 2004) or push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar (2002); their post-experience behaviour has been less developed, which is an opportunity for this research.

Academic tourism is a way of tourism relevant for the industry as it is more sustainable than conventional tourism. Because the stay is longer (usually from 6 to 12 months for Erasmus students), it helps to reduce the temporality of tourism (Rodriguez, Martinez-Roget, & Pawlowska, 2013). Their way of life is like the locals': they usually stay in shared flats or with local families. Also, this way of tourism benefits to many people as it enables communication between the students and the locals and enhances a better knowledge of other countries and cultures for both residents and students (Akli, 2012) resulting in higher levels of social wellbeing (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). Erasmus students are hybrid consumers between residents and tourists: they are also involved in the tourism phenomenon, as they are temporary residents, and do touristic activities; therefore, they participate in the touristic phenomenon of the city.

Students seeking higher education look for extended abroad experience, with both functional or extrinsic benefits and emotional or intrinsic aspects (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Gallarza *et al.* 2017). Aslan and Jacobs' (2014) work showed that language learning and living in a different culture are the main reasons for participating in Erasmus mobility. The literature shows there are also negative aspects (visa

issues, language barriers) which are also part of the experience as personal challenges to face (Li, Gallarza & Fayos, 2016).. It is both academic and cultural factors, the desire to get to know a new environment, to have a European experience that are the motivating factors that impel most of the students to travel abroad (Fombona *et al.*, 2013).

International students have been proven to act as brand ambassadors for their host institution (Galarza *et al.* 2016; Rodriguez, Martinez-Roget, & Pawlowska 2013): hence universities can get students to engage with their brands, as students who are satisfied with their educational experience will demonstrate attitudinal loyalty to that institution, involving themselves in positive WOM actions (Alves & Raposo, 2007).

Regarding their behaviour towards the destination as a place, previous works have researched the concept of place attachment and place identity on international University students: in their transition from home cities to their first year at college (e.g. Chow & Healey, 2008) and also, for international students, regarding their willingness to return to their home countries (China) after their (US) stays (e.g. Cheung, Keung & Li, 2015). In this sense, students show attitudinal and behavioural loyalty (Gallarza *et al.* 2017) and may be good advocates for higher education institutions and tourism destinations. Indeed, study by Amaro, Barroco, Martins & Antunes (2019) revealed that the Erasmus students act as tourists in Portugal, promoting the city due to the visitors they receive and the posts from social media. Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) identified the push-pull factors that influence international students' behaviour: the social and economic forces within the home country serve to push students abroad and their prior knowledge and awareness about the host country influence the decision-making. Similarly, Schartner (2016) emphasized how an academic sojourn impacts on student sojourners' intercultural competencies and Hughes, Wang & Shu (2015) explore the travel patterns, preferences, recommendations of Chinese university students in Australia, highlighting behaviours close to emotional bonds with their host city.

In sum, literature supports the idea that the level of attachment of a person to a place depends on many factors. The two aspects which stand out are the level of satisfaction and the provision of memorable experiences. International students have been proven in previous works to experience satisfaction and memorability (Asgari & Borzooei, 2013; Walsworth, Somerville & Robinson, 2021; Alemu & Cordier, 2017; Martin, Saayman & du Plessis, 2019; Albaity & Melhem, 2017; Ruhanen, Robinson & Breakey, 2013), being attached to the exchange city. Moreover, voluntary WOM behaviours are further induced by new technologies such as online chats in social media (Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022), which are common means for students.

To build up on our objectives, we can relate this literature on Erasmus students with the one on brand ambassadorship and find positive points to start considering them as potential non-professional destination brand ambassadors: they are emotionally engaged with their host destination and use both academic and social means to interact with other students and friends. This behaviour can be associated with emotionally satisfied residents in their advocacy towards the place where they lived (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013); in this sense, they can be "like-minded consumers (who) could be a mean to create brand ambassadors and co-creators of value, ultimately enhancing loyalty and profitability" (Kandampully *et al.* 2015, p. 383). There is therefore interest for empirically researching the underpinnings of place attachment for Erasmus students and connect it to the literature on positive WOM towards the host destination, to conclude on their potential for a brand ambassadorship behaviour.

3. Methodology

This paper's main objectives correspond to analysing the Erasmus experience as multidimensional and to exploring, in a single case study, the behaviour of the Erasmus students towards their exchange city and their potential to become brand ambassadors of a destination. The city chosen for the case study is Valencia, in Spain.

Valencia is, after Madrid and Barcelona, the third-largest city in Spain, surpassing 800,000 inhabitants in the municipality, and around 1.6 million with the neighbouring municipalities. Located in the East Coast of Spain, on the banks of the river Turia, diverted because of important flows in the 50s, and accommodated into a 14 kilometres long park, which is one of the main attractions for its residents. Valencia historic centre is one of the largest in Spain, but the city also offers modern buildings such as the City of the Arts and Sciences, containing the Opera House and an Oceanographic parc. Due to its long history, Valencia has numerous celebrations and traditions, among which the Fallas, declared Intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in November 2016. Valencia has five Universities, the oldest is Universitat de València (founded in 1499), which has been in the last years, the third University with the largest number of Erasmus students received in Europe (Erasmus+ in Spain, 2021).

To fulfil our two objectives, and in light with previous literature, five research questions (explorative) were derived to guide our qualitative research:

R.Q.1. What dimensions does the Erasmus experience have?

Based on previous works on positive and negative outcomes of being an International student (e.g. Forsey, Broomhall & Davis, 2012; Gallarza et al., 2017; Li et al., 2016; Schartner, 2016) or more precisely an Erasmus students (e.g. Aydin, 2012), we want to explore this dimensionality for the case of Erasmus students in the city of Valencia (Spain), and grasp different stakeholders 'points of view (students --- current and former--- international academic coordinators and also tourism managers).

R.Q.2. When and through which means do Erasmus students share contents about their exchange city?

Assuming Erasmus students act as consumers and have both academic and touristic motivations in their behaviour (Fombona et al., 2013; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), we aim at exploring the underpinning of Erasmus students attitudes and behaviours towards their incoming city, and how these attitudes and behaviours might be in accordance with literature on the topic of sense of place (Weir-Jones, 2006; Manzo, 2005) and place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992; Williams & Vaske, 2003).

R.Q.3. In which way do the Erasmus students feel linked to their exchange city?

Based on the literature on motivations and dimensionality of place attachment (Hidalgo, 2014; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010) we explored both cognitive and affective bonds (Hummon, 1984; Scannell & Gifford, 2009) existing in Erasmus students towards Valencia as their exchange city.

R.Q.4. Which aspects of the experience favour a positive word-of-mouth recommendation?

Putting forward what makes people being involved in positive social recommendations of products and behaviours (Riivits-Arkonsuo & Leppiman, 2015), we seek to explore the motivations and actual behaviours of Erasmus students which bring them into a positive word-of-mouth among friends and relatives (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008) regarding Valencia as destination. Accordingly, all dimensions of loyalty ---cognitive, affective and conative (Dick & Basu, 1994) are expected to emerge through

qualitative research, as a consequence of students destination attachment (Yuksel, Yuksel & Bilim, 2010).

R.Q.5. In which sense do Erasmus students act as brand ambassadors for others?

Trying to match the insights brought by literature on place satisfaction from residents (Insch & Florek, 2008) we aim at exploring similar attitudes and behaviours in Erasmus students towards Valencia as their exchange city. In this sense, we explored whether Erasmus students can act towards their exchange city in a similar way than citizens do (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013), and how these behaviours may be close to destination brand ambassadorship (Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019).

To better assure reliability of our qualitative results (Carù, Cova & Pace, 2014; Ruhl & Buches, 2004), three different techniques were chosen to gather information from four publics. Being a single case study (Valencia), the sampling technique for selecting participants was a purposing sampling process (Teddlie & Yu, 2007), according to the researchers' convenience, and the pertinence of the subjects involved (all of them actors or stakeholders of the Erasmus experience). In sum, 26 individuals were approached, 23 students and three managers or coordinators, approached in four steps in spring 2019, generating 11 transcripts for analysis. See Table 1 for the distribution of these respondents and the techniques employed.

Table 1. Respondents and techniques

		STUDENTS (N=23)			OTHER STAKEHOLDERS: MANAGERS (N=3).		
Method		Current (N=18)		Former (N=5)	Academic		Tourism
Step	Technique and transcripts for analysis (n)	Postgraduate (N=6)	Undergraduate (N=12)	Undergraduate (N=5)	Private University (N=1)	Public University (N=1)	Travel Agency (N=1)
1	Focus Groups (3)	FG1 (a to f)	FG2 (a to f) FG3 (a to f)				
2	Open Ended Questions (2)				OEQ1	OEQ2	
3	Personal Interview (1)						Pl1
4	Open Ended Questions (5)			OEQ3 (a to e)			

For our first and main public, students, three focus groups were conducted: one with postgraduate Erasmus students (FG1) and two with undergraduates (FG2 and FG3). First one took place in the University of Valencia (UV), in the Faculty of Psychology with students from the Erasmus Mundus Master on Work, Organizational and Personnel Psychology WOP-P (postgraduate). The focus group was conducted as an in-class exercise, to understand student's consumer behaviour in an introspective way (the subject being Marketing, an elective course for psychologists). The inconvenient of a sample coming from a compulsory in-class exercise is balanced by the fact that these students, being psychologists, are familiar with qualitative techniques and with underpinnings of consumer behaviour, which made the discussion run smoothly. Second and third focus groups correspond to undergraduate Erasmus students, coming from different groups from different undergraduate programs taught in 2019 at University of Valencia (UV). Students were invited to freely and voluntarily participate, in a similar way than in other works with international students asked to comment on their own behaviour as consumers (e.g. Gallarza, Šeric & Cuadrado, 2017; Hughes, Wang & Shu, 2015). Here, authors contacted the International Officer at UV, who proposed herself to make the announcement to Erasmus students

visiting the office about an ongoing research project on Erasmus students' behaviour as tourists. Just students having spent more than three months in Valencia were invited to freely join and participate in the project (convenience sampling). The resulting list of 12 undergraduate students was diverse enough in terms of nationalities and backgrounds (see Table 1). They were organized in two focus groups (FG2 and FG3) which took place in the office of the travel agency Happy Erasmus, where the conductor had a more active participation than in first focus group (postgraduate); a longer warm-up was needed, because some students did not know each other, and were unfamiliar with consumer behaviour as a subject (see Table 1 for participants' profiles). FG1 was held in English; the other two were held in Spanish with multicultural groups (foreign students with enough proficiency to express feelings and emotions in Spanish). Lately, transcripts from FG2 and FG3 were translated into English, to have a homogeneous corpus in terms of language.

Second public approached were academic coordinators who work in the International Office at the University of Valencia (public) and Catholic University of Valencia (private). A set of open-ended questions, based on our five RQs was elaborated and send by e- mail, with a personal invitation to participate as experts. Both were selected by convenience but had longer years of expertise of dealing with large (public) and small (private) cohorts of Erasmus and other international students, either being in- and out-going ones.

Thirdly, an in-depth personal interview took place with the manager of the students' association Happy Erasmus, who has been offering tourism services for Erasmus students for fifteen years. The agency offers customized cultural packages, rather unexpensive, and with a high level of social interaction. In this case, the protocol for the interview contained questions for free discussion related to all RQs.

To enrich results, a fourth additional public was considered: former undergraduate Erasmus students, repeating destination for postgraduate programs. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was sent to five students whose names and e-mails were provided by the international officer of University of Valencia (purposive sampling method); all five came back to Valencia after their Erasmus exchange to follow up their master program in the city. Addressing this fourth public enabled to answer our last research question, having a point of view and opinion of actual behaviour of revisit, and therefore a loyalty behaviour towards the city of Valencia.

Regarding the methodological procedure to extract knowledge from the outcomes of the three qualitative techniques, a content analysis method was adopted. The aim was to extract information on personal opinions or views of different stakeholders to explore the idea of Erasmus students as destination brand ambassadors. Compared to current ways of studying brand ambassadorship in tourism through UGC or social media (e.g. Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019; Morant *et al.* 2021) we use here primary data, instead of secondary sources. Adopting the "students as customers" approach (Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014) we let students relate their experience as consumers of the higher education service and their relationships and bonds with the city; we followed the similar approach than previous works on students' evaluations of consumption situations (e.g. Ledden *et al.* 2007; Li, Gallarza & Fayos, 2016).

In this case, a mixed deductive-inductive approach was applied in terms of analysis: for answering RQ.1 (dimensions of the Erasmus experience), a pre-schema was used extracted from the literature review of experiential values in general (Holbrook, 1999; Mathwick *et al.* 2001) and in higher education in particular (Li *et al.* 2016; Ledden *et al.* 2007; Gallarza *et al.* 2017; 2019).

The approach for answering RQ.2 and RQ.3 (on brand ambassadorship and place attachment), and RQ.4 and RQ.5 (on affective and behavioural loyalties) was inductive, as a free-coding procedure, with no pre-schema of abstraction, except the overarching tridimensional paradigm of cognitive, affective, and conative antecedents of loyalty behaviour (Dick & Basu, 1994). As works on content analysis has evidenced (Vespestad and Clancy, 2021) any text may have multiple readings, and the so called "content" is difficult to capture; we therefore placed emphasis on the words the interviewees used to express impressions, ideas, or feelings.

To assure external validity and reliability of the human coding of the semantic content analysis, we followed a team approach to analyze the data obtained from the three techniques and the four publics (Carù, Cova & Pace, 2014). By doing this in a replicable and valid manner, we coded the information extracted in three waves (with three judges), among the three members of the research team. This round procedure was made till an agreement was reached on more than 90% of the manual coding of each outcome from each of the 11 transcripts (three focus groups, one in depth interview and seven open ended questionnaires).

According to our objectives and research questions, we looked for a) dimensionality of the Erasmus experience as cognitive (extrinsic) and affective (intrinsic) dimensions (Holbrook, 1999; Gallarza *et al.*, 2017; Gallarza *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2016), b) the underpinnings of positive word-of-mouth being on and offline behaviours as having cognitive, affective and conative dimensions (Dick & Basu, 1994; Riivits-Arkonsuo & Leppiman, 2015), and c) the underpinnings of place attachment, both cognitive and affective (Scannell & Gifford, 2009; Yuksel, Yuksel & Bilim, 2010), leading to potential brand ambassadorship behaviours.

4. Results

The following tables (Tables 2, 3 and 4) reflect the profile of respondents approached with each technique. Students' profiles (Table 1) are varied in terms of levels of education (both postgraduate and undergraduate), age ranging from 20 to 30 years old), nationalities (10 different, European, and non-European) and backgrounds (mainly psychology, but also physiotherapy, engineering, translation). This combination is varied enough to produce discussion because discrepancies, but not too heterogeneous (except for first one, belonging all to a postgraduate program for psychologists) to affect validity of the results (Brotherton, 2014; Krippendorff, 1989).

Table 2. *Profiles of respondents of Focus Groups*

Focus group	Gender, age, nationality, level of education
FG1 (6 postgraduate Erasmus students)	
FG1a	F,21, Portugal, Psychology.
FG1b	F,30, Brazil, Psychology.
FG1c	F,28, Ghana, Psychology.
FG1d	F,22, Italy, Psychology.
FG1e	M, 22, Italy, Psychology
FG1f	F, 29, Brazil, Psychology
FG2 (6 undergraduate Erasmus students)	
FG2a	F, 20, Italy, Pedagogy.
FG2b	F, 23, Finland, Physiotherapy.
FG2c	M,23, Italy/Austria, Engineering.
FG2d	F, 23, Sweden, Economics.
FG2e	F,21, France, Languages.
FG2f	M,22, France, Economics

FG₃ (6 undergraduate Erasmus students)FG_{3a} M, 22, Thailand, Engineering.FG_{3b} F, 26, Germany, International Law.FG_{3c} F, 21, France, Languages.FG_{3d} F, 21, Italy, Translation.FG_{3e} M, 20, France, Sports.FG_{3f} M, 23, Mexico Engineering.**Table 3.** *Profiles of respondents of in-depth interview*

Personal Interview	Gender, age, nationality, position
PI.1 (Travel Agency Manager)	
M, 41, Spain, Male, Manager of the association and travel agency “Happy Erasmus”	

Table 4. *Profiles of respondents of open-ended questionnaire*

Open ended questionnaires	Gender, age, nationality, position
OEQ.1 (2 International Academic Coordinators)	
OEQ.1a F, Spain, Female. Former coordinator of International Relations in the Catholic University of Valencia.	
OEQ.1b F, Spain, Female. Academic coordinator of mobility programs in the University of Valencia	
OEQ.2 (5 former Erasmus students who came back to study in Valencia)	
OEQ.2a F, 22, Bulgaria, Master’s degree in tourism management and planning.	
OEQ.2b M, 23, Italy, Master’s degree in Marketing.	
OEQ.2c F, France, 23, Master’s degree in Marketing.	
OEQ.2d F, 24, Germany, Master’s degree in tourism management and planning.	
OEQ.2e F, 25, China, Master’s degree in tourism management and planning.	

After coding the varied information (four publics and three techniques), results were organized into the five research questions, outlining categories in accordance with the literature inspiring each research questions (see above).

Next table (Table 5) helps to answer our first objective regarding the description of the Erasmus experience as multidimensional, with information obtained from the different techniques and publics. As recommended (Krippendorff, 1989; Vespestad & Clancy, 2021), different levels of abstraction were identified in the coding phase: the transcript of the outputs (oral and written) were broken down into indicators (e.g. “new people”), followed by concepts (e.g. prestige, social esteem) and finally categories (e.g. social values). For this ladder method, regarding first objective, we followed as a precoding structure the dimensionality of consumer value from Holbrook (1999) as extrinsic vs. intrinsic values. The former corresponds to functional (in this case named as academic), and social (other-related, where “other” correspond to friends, family, residents). The latter correspond to more experiential aspects such as a cultural and personal or psychological. Results are organized in Table 5 around four dimensions (academic, social, cultural, and personal or psychological) with selected verbatims extracted from our analysis. This final structure of four dimensions of the Erasmus experience was also coherent with the revised literature on the international students’ experience (Ledden et al. 2007; Gallarza et al. 2017; 2019).

Table 5. Verbatims extracted answering Research Question 1. The four dimensions of the Erasmus experience

RQ1 Dimensions of the Erasmus experience: What dimensions does the Erasmus experience have?	
Academic	"There is an academic dimension in which the Erasmus students have to immerse themselves" OEQ1 (translated) "I would emphasize the academic dimension, (...) the prestige of adding a stay abroad to the academic record" OEQ2 (translated) "For me the academic aspect because we are doing our research here so something more about my professional future. Valencia too of course, but the academic side is very important" FG1.d
Social	"For me it is also the social aspect, to know new people (...) from the whole world." FG2e (translated) "I didn't need to go to many countries to get to know many people, I met them here." FG2f (translated) "There is a ludic dimension (...) a new life with new friends". OEQ.1^a (translated) "Many parties, many trips.", OEQ.1b (translated)
Cultural	"The cultural dimension, they want to learn another language (...) know the culture of the country and the culture of the other Erasmus students with whom they are sharing their experience" OEQ.1b (translated) "They learn a new culture". OEQ.1^a (translated)
Personal or psychological	"The personal aspect because I changed a lot in a year. I also got to know my limits, my capacities." FG2a (translated) "You really realize that you will not evolve in six months if you keep on doing the same as in your country, if you keep on studying, studying, studying, and you don't go out to know people, you will stay the same." FG3f (translated) "All these are personal benefits and it's something that will mark them forever" PI1 (translated) "But the most important is the personal aspect" OEQ.3a (translated) "The dimension of personal growth, (...) to face problems and challenges without the family's and friend's support, to become "adults" in a way" OEQ.3b (translated)

Table 6. Verbatims extracted answering Research Question 2. The students receiving and sharing information about the city

RQ 2 Sharing contents about the Erasmus host city. When and through which means do Erasmus students share contents about their exchange city?	
Received word-of-mouth	"I knew Valencia because my brother and sister in law came here" FG1.c "I was really influenced by my sister who did her Erasmus here" FG2e (translated) "I already knew Valencia because one of my friends was here last year for Erasmus too" FG1d "Every person who had already been to Valencia told me it was a really nice city." FG1f "Many students chose Valencia thanks to the word-of-mouth they heard from former students that came to Valencia with Erasmus." OEQ.1b (translated) "I was actually very influenced by my brother who has done his Erasmus here (...) I have chosen Valencia because my sister has sold it in a way like "it's amazing." FG2.e "I already knew Valencia because one of my friends was here last year for Erasmus too" FG1.d
Spread word-of-mouth (Social media)	"Yes a lot on Instagram, it's a very "instagramable" city!" FG1f "On social networks, they don't stop putting pictures. They do a lot of publicity for the city." PI.1 (translated) "I like documenting everything to see it again and live emotions again" FG3f (translated) "Yes, it is constant. Every time they visit something, every time they go to a place, they are putting it on Facebook or Instagram and of course their friends back home are going to see it." PI1 (translated) "I do a little more, because I'm in another continent so for me it's the first time living outside, I like to document everything because I see it again and relive emotions, and I'm sharing it just as much in excess already." FG3.f "I do it to share what I feel at the moment. It's really so that I can see it again later and for those who want to can see it, those who are drawn to Valencia" FG3.a (translated) "They are things that are not so much to share it with others but to have a memory." FG3d (translated)

Regarding our second objective, the verbal content analysis was done with no specific pre-structure: an inductive approach allowed us to give answer to RQ.2 to RQ5. Verbatims corresponding to each research questions are displayed in the following tables: Tables 6, 7, 8 and 9 respectively give answer to RQ.2, RQ.3, RQ.4 and RQ.5. Finally, Table 10 encompasses compiled results from the four stakeholders for each question.

Table 7. Verbatims extracted answering Research Question 3. Place attachment with the exchange city

<i>RQ 3 In which way do the Erasmus students feel linked to their exchange city?</i>	
<i>Cognitive and affective dimensions of place attachment</i>	
Feel at home	"it's like our city, our home." FG2.e (translated) "I feel more linked here than I do to most of the other countries I've been to." FG1.c "I actually feel like I could claim this as my city," FG1.c "Almost more than in Italy for me" FG2.a (translated)
"Special" city	"There are many experiences that we can relate with the city. For this rea-son, it is something special" FG2.c (translated) "For me it is very special (...) this experience really changed me, I will always feel linked to Valencia." FG3.d (translated) "Some aspects of the city are unexpected for them (the buildings on the river bed, the river itself and the sporting facilities...) OEQ.1a (translated) "I live in Washington D.C so I'm a city girl but who loves the country lifestyle and I feel that for me Valencia is actually like the perfect balance. It has the advantages of the big city but without all of the extreme things which make you feel like you're in a city you know, like you hate being in the city. I love that, and it's not that far from nature." FG1.c
Experience-in-place	"I don't know to what extend it is the city itself or the experience, which links me to Valencia." FG3.f (translated) "During my bachelor degree I did an Erasmus in Germany and I still feel pretty linked to the city but here I feel like at home, like in Brazil" FG1.6 "I consider that they developed affective bonds towards the city and the locals with whom they interact." OEQ.1b (translated) "the experience lived in Valencia is usually really positive (...) they live it with so much intensity." OEQ.1a (translated) "It is a place where they have lived for a few months, where they had fun, made new friends, so they will always feel linked to Valencia" PL.1 (translated)

Table 8. Verbatims extracted answering Research Question 4: The reasons for positive word-of-mouth

<i>RQ4 Reasons for positive recommendation. Which aspects of the experience favor a positive word-of-mouth recommendation?</i>	
Make the city known	"Because Valencia is a city that not everybody knows in France (...) so I do it for them to know." FG2.e (translated) "To catch their attention on Valencia" FG3.f (translated) "Because Valencia is great, I've been to lots of places in Europe and Valencia is so far one of the best cities." FG1.6
Share their feelings	"I do it to share what I feel in the moment" FG3.f (translated) "I do it for myself (...) to have a memory." FG3.e (translated)
Promote the Erasmus program	"Because it is a chance to be here (...) I feel lucky to be here (...) I am in Valencia, 20 years old, I already speak another language, it's a chance." FG2.a (translated)

Table 9. Verbatims extracted answering Research Question 5. Place attachment and Brand ambassadorship

RQ5. Returning and promoting the Exchange city. <i>In which sense do Erasmus students act as brand ambassadors?</i>	
To study	"I am maybe looking for a PhD and I will come back if I find one here." FG1.e "I already came back to do an internship." FG3.d (translated) "Yes, there is a big percentage that come back, for internships, for master's degrees, or for another course for the stay to be longer." Pl1 (translated) "If I were to get an internship here I would definitely come back." FG1.b
To meet with Erasmus friends	"I would come back, but more to meet my Erasmus friends than for the city itself" FG3.e (translated) "Some come for holidays, mostly for Fallas, they meet with friends." Pl1 (translated) "They developed friendly and sentimental ties; I think it increases the possibility of them to return." OEQ.1b (translated)
Holidays	"This is the second time I am here on holiday after my Erasmus." FG2.b (translated) "I will come back in July" FG3.c (translated) "Obviously some have come back to visit." OEQ.1^a (translated) "They like the climate, the culture, the fiestas of Valencia and still want to improve the language and maybe with the possibility of finding a job in Valencia." OEQ.1b (translated)

Table 10. Sum up of results by research questions for the four publics

Research questions	STUDENTS		OTHER STAKEHOLDERS:	
	Current (under and postgraduate) Erasmus students	Former Erasmus students returning to Valencia	International Relations Coordinators (Private and public universities)	Travel Agency Manager (Happy Erasmus)
R.Q.1: What dimensions does the Erasmus experience have?	• Social • Personal • Academic • Personal / Psychological	• Personal • Academic • Social (Mentioned in order of importance by each public)	• Academic • Personal • Ludic • Cultural	• Cultural • Personal • Social
R.Q.2. When do Erasmus students have place attachment and speak well about their exchange city?	• Positive word-of-mouth • Social network • Proud of Valencia	• Positive word-of-mouth • Always recommend Valencia as a tourist destination (even an Erasmus destination)	• Positive word-of-mouth • Recommendation from the former students	• They receive and promote online word-of-mouth • Share pictures on social media
R.Q.3. In which way do the Erasmus students feel linked to their exchange city?	• "Special" city • Feel at home • Experiences • Personal evolution	• City that has everything • Many associations for Erasmus students • Feeling of being at home	• Loyalty towards the city • Affective bond • Experiences • Unexpected aspects that lead to higher satisfaction	• Place of living for months • Many experiences in the city • Answers describe place memory and place expectation
R.Q.4. Which aspects of the experience favor a positive word-of-mouth recommendation?	• Make Valencia known • Share emotions	• Outstanding experience. • Want to share contents • What Valencia deserves	• Experience lived with a lot of intensity	• Share what they are living • Share their experiences and travels
R.Q.5. "In which sense do Erasmus students act as brand ambassadors?"	• They want to carry on their studies, holidays, to visit friends	• They come back for the city because it is where they feel at home	• They come back to visit and make others visit as well	• Many come back for internships, Master's degree or other courses • To meet with the Erasmus friends

5. Discussion

Our results, from a multi-stakeholder perspective, can be discussed considering both our objectives and previous research. First, four dimensions came out from content analysis: academic, social, personal, and cultural (RQ.1). Academic because the Erasmus exchange enables to learn a new language, to add a study abroad experience to the academic record and improve the employability of the students. This seems to be the more intuitive answer, also found in previous works (Li et al. 2016; Gallarza et al. 2017) as it corresponds to the main motivation, but very easily, other aspects arouse, especially among students (Focus groups) and the agency manager (in-depth interview). The social and personal dimensions are also underlined as the experience enables to meet people from around the world, to go on many trips, to discover the Erasmus destination and to get out of their comfort zone which leads to personal growth. This fourfold dimensionality coheres with results in other works with international students (e.g. Bamber, 2014; Gallarza et al., 2017; Gu et al., 2010), but it is noticeable that this richness is a) perceived in the long term (as also former students recall it) and b) other-oriented (Holbrook, 1999), because visible also for other stakeholders such as University staff and the tourism manager from “Happy Erasmus”. There is therefore self-oriented as well as other-oriented aspects derived from an Erasmus experience.

Second, in comparison to other works (e.g. Gallarza et al., 2017; Aydin, 2012; Bamber, 2014; Fombona et al., 2013; Brooks, 2018), the cultural dimension arouse in this work, as an additional dimension experienced in the Erasmus experience, and closely related to their attachment to the city. Other authors (Aydin, 2012) identified that the Erasmus program has significant benefits to improve language skills and personal and professional development for teachers of English. Similar but not identical results are the ones in Bamber (2014) for Chinese women in the UK: studying abroad allows early and mid-career gains, opportunity to travel, and favourable exchange rates. These aspects were mentioned by former students in the open-ended questions. Our findings are closer to Fombona et al., (2013) who identified similar motivational factors (academic and cultural, the desire to get know a new environment, etc.) that impel most of the students to travel abroad. Moreover, our results emphasized what others (Gallarza et al., 2017; Gallarza et al., 2019) have identified through the lens of consumer value: the academic experiences can be evaluated as a trade-off (benefits vs. costs) as the participants shown agreements and differences on the dimensions of value: the latter being the emotional and social aspects that students expect from their abroad experience, on the top of the academic insights. Although our results show the Erasmus experience is more positive than negative, some sacrifices were also mentioned (time loss, visa problems, etc.). Other works also highlighted constraint to travel, as financial ones for the Chinese students (Gardiner, King & Wilkins, 2013; Bamber, 2014), and cost of language barriers with local languages (Gallarza et al. 2017). Even though the students in our work did not mention explicitly cultural aspects, the International Relations and the Manager of Happy Erasmus add a cultural dimension as this experience is also about learning about the culture of a new city/country. In sum, as quotes in Table 4 put in evidence, although officially the Erasmus exchange program is an academic program, it is the aspect that less stands out of the experience. To live abroad is an experience that goes beyond the academic and educative dimension, as other studies have already proven (e.g. Aydin, 2012). As a contribution, the multi-stakeholder perspective gives extra support in number of stakeholders to a structure of four dimensions (academic, social, cultural, and personal or psychological), where the two former ones are relevant for further explore place attachment.

Therefore, even though the students who are currently living the Erasmus exchange mention the educative or academic aspect, former Erasmus students, staff of International Relations and the Manager of Happy Erasmus, confirm that the elements that remains with time are the personal and psychological aspects, which are fully emotional, and therefore useful drivers to derive customer loyalty to the destination (Kandampully et al. 2015). Results show aspects of place memory (Jorgenson &

Nickerson 2016), with positive memories associated with the experience in former students, and place expectation (Sterchele, 2020), as some students and both academic and tourism manager evoke the students' desire of returning to the city). In fact, overall, the experience enables the students to change, to grow and to know themselves better to be ready to face the professional world.

Pursuing our second objective, we noticed all the interviewed publics speak positively about Valencia (RQ.2) and it is thanks to the positive WOM that Valencia is getting known, both regarding the received and the spread positive WOM. Indeed, most students did not know anything about Valencia before coming. The only people who knew about the city before doing there the Erasmus exchange were Postgraduate students (Focus Group 1) who heard about Valencia through WOM from previous cohorts of Erasmus students, and less often or family and friends. This confirms the existing profile of brand ambassadorship of former Erasmus students, at least in a non-explicit way (RQ.5). What stands out, is that the Erasmus students who have lived in Valencia for a certain amount of time are satisfied with the city (Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022) and inclined to recommend it as an Erasmus destination and even as a tourist destination. These aspects are positive underpinnings of a brand destination ambassadorship behaviour (Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019; Wassler *et al.* 2021). Positive WOM is also done through social media as students usually share many photos and videos of the city on Facebook or Instagram. As known, eWOM is constant and plays an important role on the tourism development of a city (Del Chiappa, Gallarza & Dall'Aglia, 2018). There is here a driver for destination management organizations (DMOs) from activating an online promotional activity of the city, though social media, where Erasmus students (both current and former) could be actively involved.

Next, literature review has shown that satisfied visitors experience a feeling of loyalty and place attachment towards the location (Kandampully *et al.* 2015; Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019; Wassler *et al.* 2021).). As our results show, in the case of the Erasmus students, the affective bond towards the city is even stronger as they live the experience intensively (RQ.3). The most present idea is the aspect of feeling at home. They identify themselves to Valencia developing a strong sense of place. It is not only a city where they lived for a few months, but a place in which they have changed and grown psychologically and in a more personal way achieving a sense of self-congruity (Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022). To feel at home in another place from one's own country is difficult, but Valencia achieves it thanks to its specific and authentic characteristics. These feelings relate to the consideration of Valencia as a "special" city, because of its idiosyncrasy (size, orography, urbanism). Accordingly, we can consider both cognitive (pace identity and sense of place) and affective (sense of community and engagement) aspects of place attachment towards the city.

These aspects do not only concern the Erasmus experience, but the city itself also plays an important role. The term "special" is frequently used to define Valencia. The students feel an affective bond towards Valencia. Even though most of them feel linked to Valencia, some of them do not know to what extend it is the city, or to what extend it is the experience.

Besides, another reason which stands out is the desire to share their feelings and emotions with the others (RQ.4 and RQ.5), and to have a memory after the stay. An interesting idea is that the Erasmus students do not only share their experience in the city (Gallarza *et al.* 2017) but want to share their Erasmus experience to encourage young people to participate in the exchange program, and to open themselves to the world. Indeed, out of our results, place attachment favors in the mind of respondents a level of loyalty which is translated into positive WOM and the desire to return to a place. Therefore, many students want to stay longer or return to their exchange city, as a strong feeling of customer engagement with the city. In fact, many do, but for various reasons: to find a master's degree or internship, for holidays and/or for meeting with Erasmus friends. However, all interviewed students (from the open-ended questionnaires) who decided to stay in Valencia, do it for the city itself. As

exposed above (in RQ.4) there is an important personal and electronic recommendation (Barquero-Cabrero *et al.* 2023; Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019) which encompasses the three relevant antecedents of loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994): cognitive (e.g. reporting about the cultural attractions), affective (e.g. presenting emotional bonds to local people and habits) and conative (e.g. likelihood of returning as students and/or as tourists). The qualitative research was done to understand why there is such phenomenon. The students tend to share their experience to make the city known. This is a driver and accelerator to perform actions (both on and offline), in accordance with DMOs, to promote Valencia as a tourist destination, using former Erasmus students.

6. Conclusions

This study follows previous trend of research on international students as tourists (e.g. Marques, Mohsin & Lengler, 2018; Chhabra, 2012; Amaro *et al.*, 2019; Gardiner *et al.*, 2013; Hughes, Wang & Shu, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Michael, Armstrong & King, 2004) but focusing on the specific public of Erasmus students and their future conative behaviour towards their host city, that is on their destination experience and ambassadorship behaviour (Wassler, Wang & Hung, 2019). Because Erasmus students have relative freedom of choice among universities cooperating in the Erasmus program, they attend any given participating university for a semester or a year; they are therefore considered prescriptively tourists.

The empirical study is based in the city of Valencia (third city in Spain, the most visited destination for European Erasmus students since 2001), and still a post-Covid famous destination among both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Thanks to a range of three qualitative techniques, our study generated answers from different perspectives (four different stakeholders: current and former students, university managers, and tourism managers). Through this multi-actor perspective, we aimed to enrich our research (Veal, 2006) by following a semantic manual coding for all the three qualitative outcomes (interviews, open ended questionnaires and focus groups).

Theoretically, the study contributes to the tourism literature by outlining the importance of the Erasmus' students experience in a hosting city, in terms of creating place attachment and positive behavioural outcomes. Moreover, it enlarged the consumer behaviour research trend on linkages between (place) satisfaction and loyalty (to a place), leading to a better promotion of a destination. The paper is in line with other studies that analyse relationships between international students and the host country (e.g. Bamber, 2014; Cheung & Xu, 2015; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Wen, Hu & Hao, 2018). Our results add to these ones by confirming the need and opportunity to have a new research perspective on Erasmus students and their behaviour on the host city related to the Erasmus experience as the topic is not explicitly advanced in the previous mentioned literature and relatively scarce developed generally. Hence, our work tries to fill a gap regarding this topic and add new insights about students' experience in Valencia, as tourists, and their perception related to the experience had. Moreover, the paper offers managerial insights as destination managers are encouraged to monitor brand perceptions from Erasmus students' points of view to maximize all their positive brand-related behaviours (Wassler *et al.* 2021), both off and online.

Thusly, the findings revealed a) four dimensions (academic, social, cultural, and personal or psychological) for the Erasmus experience, b) benefits for Valencia of positive WOM, as the students described in their statements making it known on social media, valuable information for its tourism development. The Erasmus students were informed about the city by former students but also by their families and relatives and further they spread positive WOM after their Erasmus experience as to make the city known for its good quality of life, nice tourist spots, and welcomed stays. Overall, the Erasmus experience enrich the students with personal memories which give them the wish to act as brand

ambassadors for the city, recommending it as a good Erasmus destination and expressing the desire to return for continuing their studies, meeting other Erasmus friends or just for the city itself.

The findings of this research are useful to develop marketing strategies as the DMOs and travel agencies might collaborate with the universities from Valencia to promote the city for the Erasmus students by offering trips and other social activities that students may engage with and recommend further. Avenues for informal (through alumni organizations) and formal (through public and private Universities in the city) partnership exist. An active understanding of the potential of Erasmus cohorts of students each academic year as brand ambassadors is urgent for Valencia DMOs and for other Spanish cities in general (Granada and Madrid).

Now that the world is facing important social and political issues affecting the tourism industry (Butler, 2022; Gössling and Schweiggart, 2022), the Erasmus exchange program (both in its students' and teachers' levels) is a powerful leverage to enhance a competitive advantage of some countries over others. Hence, this study has emphasized the Erasmus students experience in Valencia by also outlining the ambassadorship behaviour of the students in promoting the city after their Erasmus study experience.

6.1. Limitations and further research

Several limitations of our work must be acknowledged, guiding eventually future research. First, the aim pursued in this study was merely explorative (Brotherton, 2014) applying a previous well-established knowledge (i.e. brand ambassadors behaviour and place attachment) into a relatively new fieldwork (i.e. Erasmus experience) in order to explore the connection between the Erasmus phenomenon and the concept of place attachment, underlining the fact that Erasmus students can become brand ambassadors of their exchange city. As we aimed at analysing a process, and not a fact, the qualitative research was what fit best, but accordingly, results are merely descriptive, and their analysis is explorative. Second, the number of texts analysed in our multi-stakeholder perspective was unbalanced by publics, as only a single interview was available of one of the informant group (tourism manager), which does not allow to compare and contrast with other similar profiles: The sample size of former Erasmus students and of those from the focus groups could be considered also a limitation of the research as a more consistent number of them might add a broader perspective from the stakeholder's view involved. In this sense, a more systematic qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) would help in search for a better triangulation between the three techniques (De Block and Vis, 2019) based on the similarities and differences in each public. To better analyse the ambassadorship towards a city as a destination, a quantitative approach through SEM (Structural equation modelling) could complement and further validate some of our results, regarding for instance which dimensions (cognitive, affective, social, academic) best predict the students' ambassadorship behaviour. Moreover, differences by nationality could be explored.

Third, considering academic and tourism managers as informants of students' behaviours in our multi-stakeholder perspective should be assume as an outside perception; although being close to the students' activity, it is the view of informants on somebody else's experience. Besides, the implication of new publics in the study might give additional information related to the students' ambassadorship behaviour; teachers have not been approached here nor have been families and relatives. Moreover, the number of cases should be higher to gain saturation and avoid the subjectivity of some the responses given by the four publics.

Fourth, further studies might expand the research by making a comparison between more cities/countries in which regards the perceived experience of the Erasmus students. In this sense, considering the change of attitudes because of the perceived threat of COVID-19 as recent works have

done (Kim et al. 2022; Moreno-Muñoz, & Luque-Revuelto, 2023) might add insights into new generations of Erasmus/International students.

Last, computer-based analysis (with software for qualitative analysis) should be a further step for similar research for researchers to get a full appraisal of what was the content. Accordingly, words depicting certain features from the experience should be commented in a way that its either the nature (functional, social, emotional) or the experience or the antecedents towards a loyalty behaviour (as cognitive, affective, or conative) would be ascertained automatically, with a proper semantic contextualization with the whole linguistic structure of the discourse.

Nonetheless, despite the limitations it has, this study provides valuable insights from theoretical perspective (place attachment linked to the Erasmus students host city experience) and from practical ones: it helps identifying significant information for destination marketers and managers to create marketing strategies that target Erasmus students both as tourists and as prescribers. From managerial implication perspective, tourism managers and DMOs could devise discounted short-stay travel packages for the Erasmus students, use social media to encourage positive word-of-mouth advertising to make the city better known and a travel information kit at the time of student enrolment could also be efficient.

Moreover, from a destination management perspective, mature destinations such as Valencia can better retain their overall appeal after the pandemic (Butler, 2022), and academic exchanges can hopefully be a leverage for this recuperation.

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