

Article

The Challenge to Foster Foreign Students' Experiences for Sustainable Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract: While most companies are developing strategies that focus on responsibility and sustainability, recent discussions in higher educational institutions query the contribution of university social responsibility. Based on the theory of stakeholders and the new strategic paradigm of universities becoming sustainable corporations, the purpose of this paper is to determine Erasmus students' opinions on their experiences abroad, as they relate to the importance they attribute to their emotions, and their relationship with and loyalty to their host university's country as a tourism destination. The method inquired into Erasmus students' impressions when studying in Spain through an ad hoc questionnaire based on academic literature and the Delphi technique. Survey data was analyzed through an exploratory factor analysis and partial least squares structural equation modeling. The study is a first attempt at analyzing experiential marketing in Erasmus students, who we considered tourists. The results support experiential marketing as a key approach for achieving sustainability in universities. The paper draws attention to the need for institutions to be more aware of the needs of foreign students as important stakeholders when designing mobility programs, as well as suggestions on how this awareness can be cultivated, in order to contribute to the consolidation of the selected country as a tourism destination.

Keywords: Erasmus students; experiential marketing; higher education; loyalty; tourism; sustainability; universities

1. Introduction

In recent years, academic literature has deeply studied and analyzed the practice of social responsible actions and sustainability practices in businesses mainly according to the classic triple bottom line (economic, social, and environmental goals) from Elkington [1], determining the implications of corporations' management strategies in regard to competing in global markets.

The university social responsibility (USR) concept considers various dimensions that are necessary for an academic institution to be sustainable. These include good governance practices [2], the improvement of the teaching/research link [3], and the inclusion and coverage of the topics of ethics, social responsibility, and sustainable development, mainly in courses devoted to economics and business management, especially Master's courses [4,5].

In addition, USR is supposed to increase students' motivation, satisfaction, and retention. Globalization and the rapid expansion of universities, combined with demographic shifts in the population, have forced higher educational institutions (HEIs) to think differently about the role of student satisfaction. USR could be an important competitive driver of modern universities that satisfies the most important stakeholders: their students. In this context, HEIs are also affected by agency problems, as any other corporation. According to Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes [6], the changing

nature of the HEIs' marketplace encourages university administrators to apply the customer-oriented principles that are used by profit-making institutions [7].

Tourism is an important economic activity in most of the countries around the world. Spain is the world's third most popular country for tourists, after France and the United States. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in Spain, tourism and travel is the most flourishing part of the country's domestic economy. It is also labor-intensive, with a 16% contribution to the Spanish global domestic product (GDP) in 2015 [8].

This work is focused on a segment that is not deeply studied at the moment: mobility students, who are commonly called Erasmus students, as a generalization of the very famous European Erasmus Mobility Program. This tourism segment is growing year by year because of the globalization of higher education, and the high level of employability offer by these kinds of programs.

Traditionally, Spain is one preferred destination for Erasmus students, according to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) website [9]. Some authors, such as Rutherford [10], Boden, and Nedeva [11], or recently Pedro and Franco [12], have analyzed how the EHEA has become a powerful international network oriented toward students, who are in fact considered customers investing in their own education and their own professional future.

Nowadays, some Spanish universities have taken up the challenge, and are increasing their intake of foreign students. This context is the reason for our interest in the importance of experiential marketing as an element of higher education competitiveness. The purpose of this paper is to determine the Erasmus students' opinions on their experience abroad related to the importance they attribute to their emotions and their relationship with their loyalty to the country as a tourism destination. Bearing this in mind, the methodological approach starts by inquiring into the Erasmus students' impressions when studying in Spain throughout an ad hoc questionnaire based on academic literature and the Delphi technique. Later, the survey data was analyzed through an exploratory factor analysis, and finally partial least squares structural equation modeling was used for hypotheses testing.

The reminder of this paper is organized as follows. The second section provides an overview of stakeholder theory, a conceptual clarification of experiential marketing, and the recent consideration of Erasmus students as a new target market for tourism. Section three examines the theoretical background in order to develop a conceptual model linking students' experiences to destination loyalty. The model is then tested in the fourth section, and findings are indicated and discussed in the fifth section. Concluding remarks, including limitations and future lines of research, are presented in the sixth and final section.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Model Development

2.1. The Stakeholder Theory

In 1984, Freeman published the book *Strategic Management: a Stakeholder Approach*, setting the agenda for what we now call stakeholder theory. This theory hinges on requests to management to do the right thing in the interests of long-term profitability [13–16]. According to this theory, an organization must meet its responsibilities toward shareholders. That means that it is expected that organizations behave ethically, and also engage in satisfying their stakeholders as a form of business response to new demands in society. Nowadays, the academic world has embraced the stakeholders' logic, because sustainability and CSR have become important topics in relation to HEIs' planning and development.

For sustainable university development to be successful, stakeholders must be involved in the process. It is important to identify relevant stakeholders and explain the degree of attention that must be paid to them by university manager. HEIs are a special type of organization, where thousands of students start and finish their professional careers every year. Consequently, the student stakeholder group is one of the main stakeholders for universities, and the mobility students group is an important part of this large group of students. As a result, student satisfaction is mandatory in the framework

of stakeholder theory. In addition, society and the local community, which is also as university stakeholder, will benefit from the satisfaction of mobility students.

2.2. Experiential Marketing

The global crisis arose after the speculative bubble broke, and the break with the past economic cycle has been sustained in a series of bad business practices [17]. Consequently, more than ever, business stakeholders are demanding Social Responsibility SR [18]. In this situation, any business is concerned about how to implement social practices that create economic and social value at the same time [19].

The concept of experiential marketing can be considered an important trend for the economic prosperity of commercial business in the 21st century. It considers a marketing idea that features both rationality and sensibility. Therefore, according to the concept of experiential marketing, the consumer decision to buy something, or the client decision to acquire a determinate service, will be influenced by sensory factors to a certain degree [20,21], especially in the tourism sector [22–25].

Experiential marketing is fast revolutionizing the face of marketing as we know it [26]. Nowadays, consumers and clients are looking to fulfill their emotions; they want something new that is capable of satisfying their needs and wants and offering a unique and unforgettable experience. In fact, Lee et al. [27] said that experiential marketing means unforgettable memories rooted deeply in people's minds. This meaning comes from the definition of experience. According to the authors, consumers tend to emphasize their own experience during the consumption process. This fact is being channeled to intensify consumer purchase by improving the sentimental and impressive emotion of consumers through experiential marketing techniques. In this respect, Smilansky [26] recommends the development of different products and services based on experiences in order to satisfy people's expectations.

According to Carú and Cova [28], experiences have been deeply studied by sociologists, economists, and marketers, in order to understand the purchase behavior of consumers. These authors have explained how around the 1980s, emotions started to play a determinant role in marketing, considering that human nature likes pleasant sensations. Other authors such as Walls et al. [29] have highlighted that a pleasant experience is always unique and personal, because it depends on the person, the situation, and context in which the experience happens.

A recent study, carried on by Hosany et al. [30], showed that traditional marketing approaches, which are focused on functionalities and product quality, are not enough for offering experiences to consumers. In contrast, experiential marketing creates value for consumers through positive and pleasant experiences during the purchase process and after consumption, thanks to strong brands that are able to create an emotional link between the consumer and the company [28].

As expected, tourism is one of the economic sectors that benefits most from experiential marketing, as has being demonstrated by recent works in different contexts [31–34]. These works confirm the power of experiential marketing in destinations promotion, and the relationship between the emotional and intellectual dimensions of visitor experiences, travel intentions, and destination loyalty.

2.3. Erasmus Students as a New Target Market for Tourism

At the moment, according to the statistical data from the Erasmus Mundus Program [35], more than 1,400 linked universities around the world promote the EHEA. The official website of the EHEA [9] shows the result of the political will of 48 countries that, step by step over the last 18 years, have created a directive using common goals. Spain is one of the countries involved in implementing higher education reforms on the basis of common key values such as the free movement of students and staff, with the main goal of increasing staff and students' mobility in order to facilitate employability.

The year 2017 marks the 30th birthday of the Erasmus Program named (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students). It is a European Union (EU) student exchange program that was established in 1987. Nowadays, Erasmus+, or Erasmus Plus, is the current program,

which combines all of the EU's current schemes for education, training, youth, and sport, and started in January 2014.

Teichler [36] points out that one of the most important aspects in the journey of internationalizing universities is student mobility, and the Erasmus Program is the best driver for that purpose. In fact, the majority of studies about Erasmus students highlight how much the students' international experiences contribute to the development of a strong personal identity, thanks to the cultural interchange between students pertaining to driver contexts and realities [37].

Some authors, such as Vieira and Martins [38], have considered the Erasmus Program a complement that encourages students to open their minds, and gives them the opportunity to get competencies that are sometimes determinant for finding a job. They described the program as a human and professional experience. Aktan et al. [39] have empirically demonstrated the positive impact of Erasmus experiences in participants' employability and professional futures.

Considering the growing impact of students' mobility, and the importance of experiences for Erasmus students, the tourism sector is considering mobility students as a new target. Some authors, such as Moisă [40] for instance, have considered general aspects of youth mobility. In the context of Erasmus students' mobility, Cvikl and Artic [41] have proposed improvements to the current organization of student mobility, with the aim of fostering tourism development in Slovenia. In Poland, Drozdowska and Duda-Seifert [42] have considered Erasmus students a target for special kinds of tourism, such as culinary tourism.

3. Theoretical Model Development

The determinants of international student mobility flows have been traditionally studied. For instance, Rodríguez González et al. [43] focused on country size, the cost of living, distance, the educational background, university quality, the host country language, and climate. These factors are found to be significant for mobility decisions. This is the classic method for studying the Erasmus students' mobility, as it puts the focus on pull or host-countries' characteristics, i.e., why students choose one particular host country instead a second choice, once they have decided to move. The reasons and motivations to study abroad for one year are usually half personal (experience-oriented) and half professional (career-oriented), including traveling, learning languages, and getting life and cultural experience abroad [44].

However, among the factors identified in the existing academic literature influencing the decision-making process of international students and their experiences, some of them seem to be especially relevant, such as destination image. The role of a beneficial image in tourist destination selection is generally accepted [45]. In the higher education context, the university image has been directly linked to students' behavior [46]. In the context of student mobility, Cubillo et al. emphasized both the country's image as a student destination and the university image [47].

Some authors also refer to sources of information, such as packages from tourist agencies, as a factor conditioning the final destination of a student [48], and in general terms, the destination loyalty of a tourist [49]. The company that organizes the traveling can also affect the Erasmus experience. In fact, students that tend to avoid risks prefer joining other students in a similar situation [50]. The typology or kind of tourism preferred by students (history and heritage, or sun and beach, for instance), will also condition the destination and the experience at the destination, as has been deeply studied in general tourism [51–53].

Based on the above, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Hypotheses 1 (H1). *There is a direct and positive relationship between the motivation to become an Erasmus Student and the experiences lived.*

Hypotheses 2 (H2). *There is a direct and positive relationship between the destination image and the experiences lived.*

Hypotheses 3 (H3). *There is a direct and positive relationship between the sources of information managed and the experience lived.*

Hypotheses 4 (H4). *There is a direct and positive relationship between the student company and the experience lived.*

Hypotheses 5 (H5). *There is a direct and positive relationship between the preferred type of tourism and the experience lived.*

Once the factors related to the experience have been considered, loyalty to the destination should be the expected consequence of very good experiences as Erasmus student. In fact, a link exists between the experience lived by tourists, and their loyalty to the place visited. For instance, Chi and Qu [54] have offered an empirical approach to understanding destination loyalty by examining the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among destination image, tourist attributes, overall satisfaction, and destination loyalty.

Understanding the determinants of customer loyalty will allow management to concentrate on the major influencing factors that lead to customer retention. A number of studies have examined the antecedents or causes of repeat purchase intentions [55–58]. The results of this body of research have shown that satisfaction, quality/performance, and other variables are good predictors of customer intended loyalty. The more satisfied the students are with their experience abroad, the more likely they are to come back to the destination country, and to encourage others (friends, family, and other Erasmus students) to select the country. In order to attract new Erasmus students and increase the country's reputation as a good destination, higher education institutions must seek to improve their experiences in the country. However, a further objective must be the establishment of their loyalty. Based on the above, the last hypothesis (H6) is formulated, and the conceptual model to be tested is shown in Figure 1.

Hypotheses 6 (H6). *There is a direct and positive relationship between Erasmus students' experiences and their destination loyalty.*

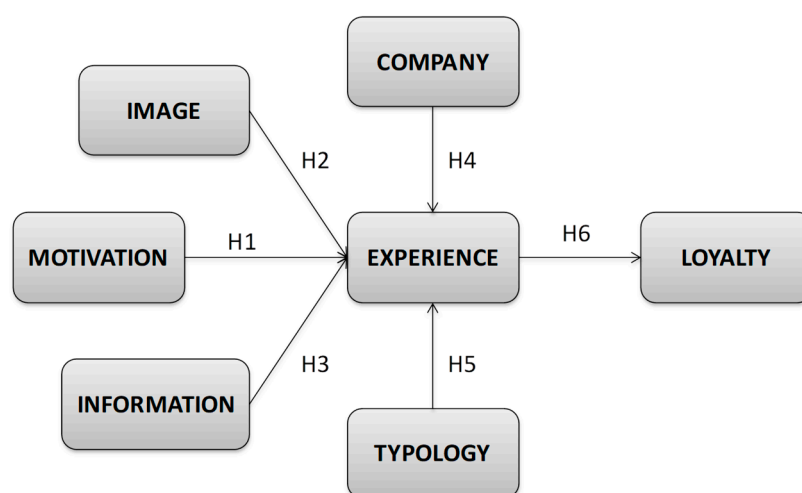


Figure 1. The conceptual model.

4. Method

The new complex research questions that are emerging in social sciences are increasingly demanding the use of sophisticated multiple complementary methods. In this section, we present and justify the composite research design that is adopted represented in Figure 2, including three selected techniques interconnecting qualitative and quantitative research methods. Later, we present the sample selection and procedure.

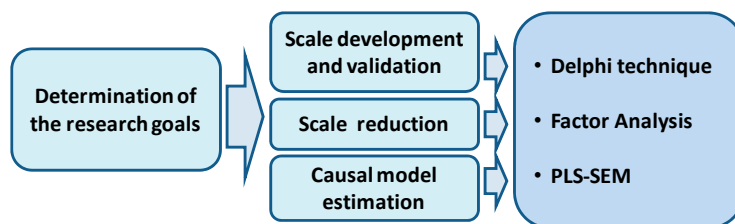


Figure 2. Research design.

4.1. Techniques

- *Delphi technique to adapt the scales of measure*

Bearing in mind the necessary adaptation of available scales to the Erasmus students' context, we carried on the Delphi technique—a very well-known and useful research tool in the social sciences [59]—through the selected scales that have been retrieved from our tourism literature review. The Delphi technique is considered an excellent tool for obtaining consensus from a group of experts in a wide range of fields, such as applied psychology and psychotherapy [60], the impact assessment of public policies [61], or strategy implementation for sustainable development [62], among others.

We also acknowledge the criticisms and limitations of this qualitative technique. For example, it should not to be viewed as a total solution, because the information obtained is only as good as the selected experts [63]. Despite such limitations, the Delphi technique has been considered a powerful tool for scale development and validation in tourism [64].

The starting point was preparing the questionnaire for measuring the variables considered in the model. The reasons and motivations scale for one year of abroad study was based on Park and Njite [65]. The scale to measure image in tourist destination selection in the context of students' mobility was based on Beerli, Palacio, Martín [66], and Phillips et al. [67]. The scale to measure the sources of information was based on Morais and Lin [49]. The company for traveling was measured based on Polo et al. [68]. The typology of tourism preferred by students was adapted from Prayag [69] and Hosany et al. [30]. In order to measure the experiences, we parted from the scale developed by Kim et al. [33]. Finally, to measure loyalty, we followed the work of Gallarza, Saura [48], and Forgas-Coll et al. [70].

Later, the Delphi application was followed by selecting experts to participate, testing the questionnaire in a first round, preparing a new questionnaire for the second round in order to analyze the feedback, and concluding by defining the final scales for the study.

- *Factorial analysis to reduce the destination experience scale*

Taking into account the high number of items in the scale for destination experience, and the potential relationships between them, a factor analysis was performed in order to reduce the scale and obtain the best understanding of the factors that determine the Erasmus experience in the country. Thus, we grouped the proposed items related to the experience according to a similar correlation pattern in order to discover the main factors for this construct. In general, factor analysis is a collection of methods for explaining the correlations among variables in terms of more fundamental elements called factors. Specifically, and according to Jolliffe [71], the central idea of a principal component analysis is to reduce the dimensionality of a data set in which there are a large number of interrelated variables, while retaining as much of the variation present in the data set as possible. This reduction is achieved by transforming to a new set of variables—the factors or principal components—that are uncorrelated, and which are ordered so that the first few retain most of the variation present in all of the original variables. The data analysis was carried out by using SPSS 13.0 software.

- *Structural equation modeling for the empirical model validation*

The empirical analysis to test the model has been performed by using structural equation modeling (SEM), which is also called causal models. According to Chin [72], one of the prime

advantages of SEM is the ability to include latent (unobserved) variables in causal models, as is the case in this study. Thus, the researcher may model abstract constructs comprised of many indicators (observed variables). Another key advantage of SEM is that it enables the researcher to estimate causal networks simultaneously.

We have used the partial least squares technique (PLS), which is a form of SEM that has provided much value for causal inquiry social research fields. According to Lowry and Gaskin [73], we have to distinguish between first-generation techniques and second-generation techniques. First-generation techniques, such as correlations, regressions, or difference of means tests for instance, offer limited modeling capabilities, particularly in terms of causal modeling. In contrast, second-generation techniques offer extensive, scalable, and flexible causal modeling capabilities. It is true that some authors who specialized in statistics have criticized SEM. For instance, Neuberg [74] commented that Pearl [70] regards SEM as a specialization of his theory of inferred causation, but claims that the algebraic language of SEM makes it hard to express causal assumptions. Pearl [75] wondered whether SEM practitioners keep causal assumptions implicit, since pure statisticians detest assumptions that are not directly testable. However, SEM has become a quasi-standard in marketing and management research when it comes to analyzing the cause–effect relations between latent constructs. According to Hair et al. [76], PLS–SEM path modeling is a good option for estimating causal models in many theoretical models and empirical data situations.

4.2. Sample and Procedure

The study was carried out with the incoming students of the University of Extremadura, in Spain, for the academic year 2015–2016. The University of Extremadura is a public university that was established in 1973. It has around 22,500 undergraduate students, 2,000 postgraduate students, and around 500 Erasmus students every year. We drew on a primary source to build the data set for the study through a questionnaire addressed to incoming students. We randomly sampled 496 students who had enrolled in the 2015–2016 academic year. After sending an invitation by electronic mail to answer the questionnaire and two reminders, we obtained 202 complete responses (response rate = 40.72%). This response rate compares favorably with similar studies. The technical data sheet is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Technical specifications of the empirical study.

Technical Data Sheet	
Universe	Incoming Students
Geographical scope	Region of Extremadura (Spain)
Population census	496 (course 2015–2016)
Period under study	March, April, and May 2015
Method of gathering information	Electronic questionnaire reinforced by phone calls
Sample	202
Participation index	40.72%
Maximum error sample	5.3%
Confidence Level	95%

5. Results and Discussion

The Delphi method that was implemented entailed a group of experts who anonymously replied to questionnaires and subsequently received feedback in the form of a statistical representation of the group response, after which the process repeated itself. The goal was to reduce the range of responses and arrive at the best scales, according to expert consensus.

According to Hasson and Keeney [77], we followed a classical Delphi design, because the objective was to elicit opinion and obtain consensus. In addition, the panelists were experts who had been selected with the aim of the investigation, and a traditional postal mechanism was employed with

two rounds, in which the first one was an open qualitative round in order to allow panelists to record responses.

Acknowledging the limitations of the classical Delphi method, Table 2 compiles the process to modify our original scales to the purpose of our study. The final scales are shown in Appendix A.

Table 2. Technical specifications of the conducted Delphi method.

Delphi Method Specifications	
Design type	Classical
Participants/panelists	10 experts (five experts from the tourist sector, five experts from Erasmus institutions)
Geographical scope	Region of Extremadura (Spain)
Rounds	Two rounds
Items to validate	Forty in the first round, and 44 in the second round, considering that four items were added by participants
Variables	Motivation, Image, Information, Company, Typology, Experience, Loyalty
Scale for validation	0 Strongly disagree; 1 Disagree; 2 Somewhat disagree; 3 Neutral; 4 Somewhat agree; 5 Agree; 6 Strongly agree

Later, an exploratory principal components factor analysis (Table 3), allowed us to check the factorial composition and validity of scale for measuring the Erasmus experiences. Thus, the initial 22-item instrument is performed to determine the structure of the construct under study. In our analysis, the value of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy ($KMO = 0.927$) and the Bartlett sphericity test showed the existence of good correlations between the items, so that we could continue with the factorial analysis.

We can observe how the eigenvalues and explained variance decline following the extraction of the first factor. The four factors extracted explained around 66% of the total variance. To validate the exploratory factor analysis, we took two random sub-samples. Since the communalities of the sub-samples were found to be similar in value to those of the initial sample, the total explained variance was also similar, and the factor loadings after Varimax rotation were also close to the initial sample, it was accepted as the validity of the factor analysis.

The individual factors contributing to the Erasmus experience and their theoretical explanation are the following:

Factor one—Experience from internal motivation (half of explained variance): This factor can be described and interpreted as representing the most personal experiences lived by the student when he or she is in the country. The experience is internal. It is the result of the satisfaction to have done something important in his/her life, and to have learned about him or herself.

Factor two—Experience motivated by the external factors (6.5% of variance): This factor is related to good memories of local people, and friendship or local culture experiences.

Factor three—Touristic experience (5.1% of variance): This third factor is related to the place and the activities the student did in this place.

Factor four—Cultural experience (4.6% of variance): This last factor is related to the knowledge acquired from the cultural experience as an Erasmus student.

Finally, we tested the conceptual model proposed by analyzing the measurement model (scales, validity, and reliability) and the structural model (hypotheses testing). The results from the measurement model were satisfactory. The variable destination experience was considered a second order construct according to the previous exploratory factor analysis. Only the third factor, which was related to the tourist experience, was dropped out, as it was not significant. For each construct in the model, and following Nunally [78], a coefficient alpha exceeding 0.70 was maintained. Composite reliability—a more accurate measure because it does not assume equal item weighting—was in all of the cases higher than alpha values. To assess discriminant validity, according to Fornell and

Larcker [79], we calculated the average variance extracted (AVE) for all of the constructs that obtained values higher than the limit of 0.50.

Table 3. Factor analysis for the variable destination experiences.

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
EXP16	0.803	0.205	0.155	−0.159
EXP15	0.786	0.262	0.302	−0.096
EXP13	0.727	0.326	0.281	0.025
EXP12	0.717	0.33	0.226	0.13
EXP14	0.697	0.359	0.266	−0.063
EXP11	0.664	0.331	0.192	0.004
EXP05	0.506	0.269	0.361	0.023
EXP21	0.477	0.415	0.334	0.066
EXP20	0.475	0.194	0.352	0.007
EXP10	0.288	0.812	0.044	−0.035
EXP08	0.333	0.808	0.087	−0.033
EXP09	0.362	0.718	0.157	−0.054
EXP02	0.11	0.622	0.54	0.01
EXP01	0.357	0.566	0.333	0.029
EXP07	0.423	0.523	0.427	−0.025
EXP04	0.468	0.502	0.357	0.152
EXP06	0.41	0.43	0.413	0.24
EXP19	0.233	0.293	0.733	−0.04
EXP18	0.42	0.052	0.73	−0.08
EXP17	0.464	0.031	0.688	−0.095
EXP03	0.145	0.569	0.621	0.043
EXP22	−0.063	−0.026	−0.075	0.954
% of standard deviation	49.937	6.552	5.188	4.675
Accumulated %	49.937	56.488	61.677	66.351

To test the hypotheses, we used the nonparametric bootstrap resampling technique [80], which provides values for both the standard error and Student's *t*-test. In particular, in order to calculate the path coefficient's significance, we applied this technique to 500 sub-samples using a two-tailed Student's *t* distribution with *n*-1 degrees of freedom, where *n* is the number of sub-samples. The results were highly satisfactory (see Table 4), given that the most important structural paths posited in the model are significant. The hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H6 are supported by the data. In addition, the positive signs of the β coefficients for the verified relationships are coherent with theoretical expectations.

Table 4. Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses Structural Path A → B	Original Path Coefficient (β)	Expected Sign	Mean Sub-Sample Path Coefficient	<i>t</i> -Value (Standard Error)	Result
H1: Motivation → Experience	0.298	+	0.298	4.08 *** (0.07)	Confirmed ✓
H2: Image → Experience	0.331	+	0.334	4.92 *** (0.06)	Confirmed ✓
H3: Information → Experience	0.172	+	0.173	2.79 *** (0.06)	Confirmed ✓
H4: Company → Experience	0.059	+	0.066	0.91 (0.06)	X
H5: Typology → Experience	0.122	+	0.123	1.74 (0.07)	X
H6: Experience → Loyalty	0.508	+	0.505	8.66 *** (0.05)	Confirmed ✓

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$, (Distribution $t_{(499)}$ —Student two tails), $t_{(0.05;499)} = 1.964726835$; $t_{(0.01;499)} = 2.585711627$; $t_{(0.001;499)} = 3.310124157$.

The first hypothesis (H1) corresponding to the structural path between motivation and experience was confirmed, with only 1% probability of the hypothesis that the standardized parameter β is equal to zero being rejected when this is true. Similarly, the other hypotheses (H2, H3, and H6) were also robustly supported, with only a 0.1% probability of error. They represented theoretically expected causal relationships, so these results partially constituted the verification of the original model proposed. Two hypotheses, H4 and H5, were not confirmed with our empirical analysis. Consequently, and taking into account the multifaceted nature of experiences, and the validated factors, the final verified model is shown in Figure 3, summarizing the main results.

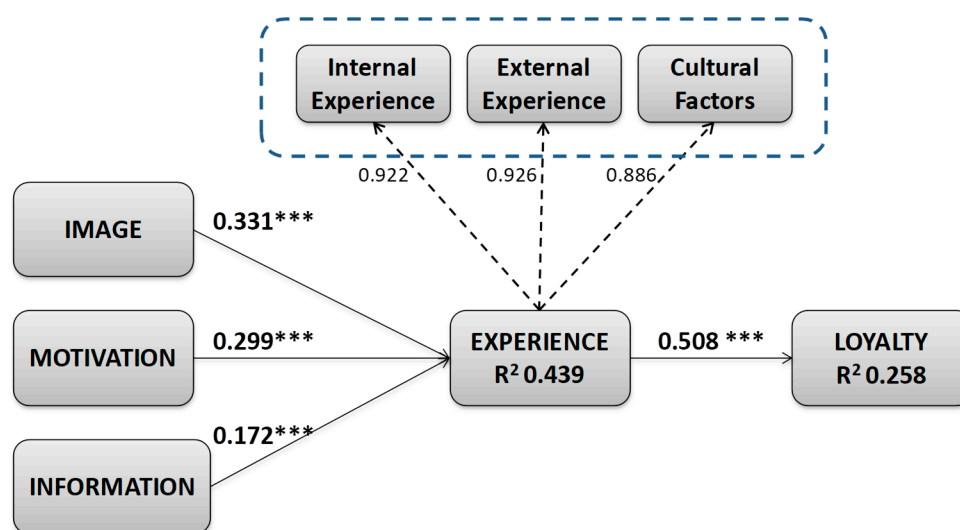


Figure 3. Validated structural model (Note: *** means high level of significance).

The results confirm the importance of destination image in influencing the decision-making processes related to foreign student mobility, which is in line with the academic literature in the field of tourism [45,46,54,56,65,66,69]. According to the results, destination image is directly and positively linked to student experiences as an important antecedent. The positive significant parameters obtained suggests that a high-richness destination image ($\beta = 0.331$) is very important in improving experience, as well as motivation ($\beta = 0.299$) and information ($\beta = 0.172$). In addition, and according to previous works in the field [21,25,26,29,30,32,33,38,50], the experience is dominated by internal emotions, although external conditions are also important for gaining a positive global experience abroad. In the Erasmus student case, our results revealed that cultural factors also significantly contribute to creating a great experience. Finally, consistent with prior research but adding new insights, the results of this study identify Erasmus students as tourists, showing the potential of their experiences to impact destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.508$).

6. Concluding Remarks

In recent years, Spanish universities, in their efforts to be responsible and become sustainable, have put great effort into adapting their management models, human capital, and technology, as well as their offer of courses, to the requirements of mobility students. In fact, at the university under study, there have been several calls for proposals to promote this adaptation. The purpose of this paper has been to determine the Erasmus students' opinion on their experience abroad and its determinants, and also to define its influence on their further loyalty to the country as a tourism destination.

This paper contributes to the academic literature on sustainability and USR through recognizing and empirically demonstrating how satisfying mobility students as important stakeholders for the HEIs is a new deal in modern times. The work also contributes to the literature on experiential marketing through the clarification of the link between experiences and loyalty in a trendy target for

international tourism, such as the Erasmus students. The main contribution of this study was probably the adaptation of available scales from general tourist marketing, thanks to the Delphi method, to the specific context of a new target in tourism and a relevant stakeholder for HEIs: the Erasmus students' group. From now on, constructs such as image destination, experiences, or loyalty will count on this contribution to academic literature in the field of higher education mobility programs.

In addition, the exploratory factor analysis has shown an important result, positioning internal experiences as the most determinant of Erasmus students' experiences. This result has practical implications for the potential consideration of experiential marketing in higher educational institutions in order to attract new students.

Finally, the validated PLS-SEM has confirmed the causal relationship between image, motivation, information, and experiences. It has also robustly confirmed the direct and positive causal relationship between experiences and destination loyalty. In this regard, the results showed that experiential marketing exercises a positive influence by stimulating and creating new experiences in students to open new horizons. The presented results support the conclusion that experiential marketing can be a profitable strategy for HEIs to be responsible and sustainable, as a way to invest resources with the confidence that a positive result will be obtained in mobility programs.

These results support experiential marketing as a key approach for achieving sustainable marketing objectives in HEIs. As a practical recommendation, the experiential approach could be focused on a two-way interaction in real time, a live brand experience, and thereby a significantly deeper consumer bonding process. The recommended live brand experiences could be enhanced in the form of live events that allow the Erasmus student to live, breathe, and feel the university brand through interactive sensory connections and activities. For instance, international students could participate in real time and/or online, in any conference, event, decision-making process, or any activity organized by the hosted university, before, during, and after the academic year as an international student.

The findings highlight how international students' mobility is bringing real opportunities for the development of tourism based on experiential marketing. Furthermore, the development of students emotions and experiences during their mobility programs have to be an innovative priority in higher education management in order to build a more meaningful relationship and loyalty to the country.

From a managerial point of view, the present findings could assist practitioners devoted to university policy in facilitating harmonious social relationships among other institutions in the same territory. Sustainable HEIs have to seriously consider building and developing a good relationship with other institutions in order to create the best image destination (i.e., municipality, Chamber of Commerce, cultural heritage institutions, etc.). Particularly, the results suggest that improving Erasmus experiences today could increase tourism attraction in the future. Specific attention should be paid to new potential incoming students who are making the decision to choose their destination for studying abroad for one year.

The study is a first attempt to analyze experiential marketing in Erasmus students, who are considered tourists and relevant stakeholders when studying at HEIs. However, the results are not completely generalizable. There are two fundamental limitations of the present study, which are related to the area in which we have worked, and the centre in which the survey questionnaire was applied. First, the study was carried out through a survey without previously considering deep qualitative research. Second, it has quantitatively examined the views of students only. The results may thus be biased towards this group. It is our intention to conduct further work inquiring also into the views of teachers and university managers, which would enrich the conclusions drawn.

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Appendix A. Scales of Measure

Motivation

Budget available (MOT1)
Events and festivals (MOT2)
Visiting as much as I can to take profit from my grant (MOT3)
Visiting with family and friends (MOT4)

Destination Image

Proximity (IM01)
Monuments and history (IM02)
Good reputation (IM03)
Avoiding routine without spending so much money (IM04)
Countryside (IM05)
Beaches (IM06)
Visiting friends (IM07)
Cultural activities (IM08)
Regional festivities and traditions (IM09)

Company for travelling

With other Erasmus students (CQ1)
With the friends I met at the destination (CQ2)
I used to travel alone (CQ3)

Tourism typology

Adventure (TP1)
History and heritage (TP2)
Sun and beach (TP3)
Leisure and entertainment (TP4)

Sources of Information

Packages from tourist agencies (INFO1)
Other Erasmus students' recommendations (INFO2)
Packages from Erasmus agencies (INFO3)
Own plans and timetable (INFO4)
Packages from tourist agencies for Erasmus students (INFO5)

Destination Experience

Happy to have had a new experience (EXP01)
To have enjoyed the activities offered by the destination (EXP02)
To have enjoyed the tourist experience (EXP03)
Emotions (EXP04)
Once in a lifetime (EXP05)
Unique place (EXP06)
To experience something new (EXP07)
Good memories from local people (EXP08)

Local culture experiences (EXP09)
 Friendship with local people (EXP10)
 Freedom experiences (EXP11)
 Refreshing experiences (EXP12)
 Revival experiences (EXP13)
 I did something significant (EXP14)
 I did something important in my life (EXP15)
 I learned about myself (EXP16)
 I visited one place where I have always wanted to go (EXP17)
 I did activities that I have always wanted to do (EXP18)
 I was very interested in all of the activities offered at the destination (EXP19)
 I explored the destination on my own (EXP20)
 I acquired new knowledge (EXP21)
 I knew a new culture (EXP22)

Loyalty

I will try to come back to this country next year (LOY1)
 I will encourage family and friends to visit the country (LOY2)
 I have enjoyed my time in this country (LOY3)
 I will share my experience with colleagues and social networks (LOY4)

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