

## Article

# Erasmus Students' Experiences as Cultural Visitors: Lessons in Destination Management

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**Abstract:** Destination management is an important instrument in promoting tourism as a factor of economic development. Its usefulness in planning and developing infrastructures and services especially dedicated to tourism, such as holidays, sports, or balneal resorts, is well established. In the context of increasing the mobility of people at a national and international level, the flows of visitors whose trips are related to jobs, business, studies, conferences have constantly increased, and—as a result—the importance of large cities among tourist destinations is increasing. The management of destinations must also contribute in such cases to the creation of a greater attractiveness for potential visitors, the facilitation of their activities, and the production of culturally enriched and pleasant experiences. There is still a need to better understand how big cities are perceived as a destination by visitors, especially when it comes to longer stays. As a result, this paper proposes an approach to explore the visitors' perception of their own experiences with the destination city. The subjects of the study are Erasmus students, while the destinations considered are university cities where the mobility programs were carried out. The aim of the research carried out by the focus-group method was to identify the elements that contributed to the coagulation of the experience associated with a certain destination city, in the sense of a more favorable or less favorable image of the destination in question. The results highlight that where visitors interact for a longer period of time and at deeper levels with the host community, they share the conditions of local life. The more pleasant these conditions are for the residents, the more open and welcoming they are to foreigners, and the more appreciated one's personal experience of that city is.

**Keywords:** destination management; cultural tourism; Erasmus students; local community; authenticity; adaptation



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## 1. Introduction

The rich literature on destination management highlights the orientation towards the visitor as a client [1,2]. In the first place, destination management aims to increase the attractiveness of the targeted area for potential tourists and then to provide the actual tourists with a satisfactory experience [3–5]. In order to qualitatively design this cultural experience in such a way that cultural tourists are satisfied and report positively about their experiences during or after their stay, it is useful to analyze their preferences for the elements of the cultural offer of cities [6–8]. Cities have become multicultural and this affects their image in the minds of tourists. The brand of the destination must go beyond the presentation of an image, it must transmit values, traditions, ancient customs, aromas, all shared with the genuine hospitality of the locals [9,10]. Making a city brand requires tourism marketing and tourism management [2,11].

Culture tourists are travelers seeking to explore and experience a different culture, motivated by cultural experiences and activities [12–14]. Currently, it accounts for 40% of

all tourism both globally and at a European level and is one of the fastest-growing segments of tourism [15–18]. In addition, in the profile of the cultural tourist, there is the fact that the average length of stay is higher than that of the leisure tourist [19]. It has been empirically proven that most people hardly find the time and leisure in everyday life to take advantage of cultural offers, visit cultural sights on excursions and on vacation, take part in cultural events or familiarize themselves with local history and tradition [20,21]. In order to absorb and stimulate this demand, impulses are regularly given by the supplying side [4,22,23].

Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth, and sport in Europe [24,25]. The Erasmus+ flagship EU programme represents one of Europe's most tangible achievements: uniting people and creating a European sense of belonging and solidarity, through life-changing learning experiences [26,27]. Considering the work of specialists, we can state that Erasmus students' benefits were improving their foreign language skills, enhancing their intercultural understanding, making international friends, becoming more independent, mobile, self-confident, and feeling more European [28–31].

Thanks to the Erasmus program of the European Union, many students and faculty members move to the universities of the European Union depending on the bilateral agreements they make among themselves [32]. The profile of Erasmus tourists has been studied by various researchers who have compiled the following features: Erasmus tourists are educated, always eager to learn new things; they look for authenticity, thus, the more authentic the places, the greater the interest; wish friends and interaction with locals and allocate some time for trips and traveling in the host country; they are curious, bold, clever, adventurous and involved in deciphering the mysteries of life [33–37].

Erasmus students are tourists with cultural intentions who want to know more about the country they are in [32]. They manage to adapt more easily and integrate faster. They represent a respectable academic community, with characteristics that involve social development, friendship creation, development of communication skills with people with different backgrounds, educational trips, thematic vacations, intense cultural tourism, and sharing experiences on social media via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram [38,39].

Taking into consideration the diverse nature of destinations, the main objective of this research was to identify the elements that contributed to the coagulation of the experience of Erasmus students associated with a certain destination city, in the sense of a more favorable or less favorable image of the destination in question. Therefore, with focus groups, the work aimed to explore a specific set of issues and aspects of the experiences of Erasmus students as visitors in a foreign country: what interested them or what aroused their interest on the spot; what intrigued them, what they liked and what they did not like; what they managed to know and what they failed to get to know even though they would have wanted to; how they interacted with the locals and/or other people they met there; how they synthetically appreciate the whole experience they had. Choosing ERASMUS students as subjects of the study provides good grounds for exploratory research due to several reasons: (i) ERASMUS students are prototypical cultural visitors; (ii) the universities where they execute their exchange program are normally located in cities of a diffused cultural interest; (iii) their perceived experience will potentially make a significant impact on the image of the destination because of their age and their intensive and extensive social networking.

Consistent with the results of this study, Erasmus students often identify with the host communities by their characteristics because the time spent with them exceeds half a year. Erasmus tourists are educated with respect for the environment, nature, society, tourist attractions, values, customs, and traditions. The fact that they do not disturb the habitat and daily life of the locals is the greatest good that Erasmus tourists manage to achieve. Always concerned with cultural enrichment, interacting with locals, making new friends, discovering new sites and tourist attractions, Erasmus tourists help to develop sustainable tourism. Erasmus tourists are cultural tourists through their actions and concerns throughout their studies: along with lessons and exams, they visit the most beautiful tourist attractions of the university cities together with family, friends, and locals.

They also travel in the vicinity of the city of study for cultural purposes or for personal development.

This article is organized as follows: Section 2 highlights significant findings of previous studies, the research methodology is exposed in Section 3—then follows a presentation and discussion of the results, while the main conclusions are summarized in the final section of the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Cultural Tourism and Sustainability Approach

Cultural tourism is defined as: “A type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions” [40]. In addition to the term *cultural tourism*, there are other terms that are similar and even synonymous in the literature, sometimes with a distinction from one another, such as: city tourism, art tourism, theme tourism, pilgrimage tourism, event tourism, festival tourism, which in this context are essentially understood as sub-markets, sub-segments, and cultural tourism [6].

Cultural tourists spend more and stay longer. When it comes to cultural tourism, we encounter a diversity of interests (from visiting museums and historical attractions, to shopping, festivals and concerts, experimenting with local cuisine, etc.) [41,42]. The management of tourist destinations is based on cultural tourism that boosts the entire community. Bujdoso et al. [42] showed that all cultural factors contribute to the economic performance of tourist destinations, along with their development and increasing the level of regional competitiveness. Cultural tourism is especially important for urban areas, characterized by “a broad and heterogeneous range of cultural, architectural, technological, social and natural experiences and products for leisure and business” [43].

Each region has its own picturesque, cultural, urban, or architectural uniqueness [2,7,8]. This sounds obvious, but from a subjective point of view, it is an illusion especially if we talk about clear positioning for cities and regions because it is part of the basic work of any marketing strategy [44]. Nevertheless, there is still a big gap between perfectly developed advertising messages curated in the marketing laboratory and the subjective perception of the recipient. In addition, there are regions that objectively hardly differ and address an overlapping target group [6,11]. Therefore, it always takes a good deal of courage to set yourself apart from the competition with clear messages.

There are studies that support cultural tourism opportunities:

- *Economic benefits*: cultural institutions can stimulate demand through attractive tourist offers and their professional marketing and in this way increase their income [3]. These additionally-generated funds can also be used for necessary conservation activities—a useful argument in the process of understanding regarding monument conservationists, who are often critical of cultural tourism. As a rule, the location and destination also benefit from an increase in tourist demand.
- *Infrastructure maintenance or expansion*: cultural tourism can promote the maintenance of local infrastructure, such as public roads, restaurants and hotels, additional cultural, and leisure facilities [20].
- *Improving the city image and consolidating its identity*: with the development of cultural tourism activities, the level of awareness and image of a destination and of its service providers can be improved [5].
- *Creating a seasonal balance*: the countercyclical travel behavior of many cultural tourists, who are more flexible in their travel planning and more frequent than other target groups outside of typical holiday periods, can help to extend the season and thus

achieve a more uniform distribution of travel, since most visitor flows throughout the year are driven by service providers [41].

- *Promotion and legitimation*: the cultivation of the cultural tourism market can be a decisive criterion for cultural and economic policy with regard to the financial support of certain cultural institutions and other tourist service providers, and at the same time serve as a legitimate criterion for the distribution of these additional resources [41].

In addition to these positive effects, the development of cultural tourism activities can also be associated with risks, so that a comprehensive market analysis and cost–benefit analysis in advance are essential for all service providers [45]. In relation to risks of cultural tourism, Lepp and Gibson [46] found that they can be classified as follows:

- *Overloaded*: the cultural tourism market is dynamic and very competitive. Touristic demand processing may require additional investment in the infrastructure of a cultural institution, and many cultural tourists place a strong emphasis on quality and aspirations, which involve running costs and link resources (regular employee training, quality management).
- *Lack of sustainability*: sustainable cultural tourism “takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” [47]. Tourism sustainability is always at risk if either the use of space and resources does not remain ecologically neutral or, from an economic point of view, no attention is paid to the fact that the subsequent costs of infrastructural projects; for example, those funded by the EU, can be borne independently by a destination, or that their long-term usability (by locals and/or non-residents) is guaranteed [48].
- *Touristic overexploitation*: through uncontrolled streams of visitors that lead to the damage of objects or sites, represents just as much a risk as the museumization of traditions and customs, especially if it is rejected by the local population, or the commercialization of culture through dramatic effects and supposedly user-friendly but ultimately context-less cultural offers [48]. A compatible balance must be found between the need to implement service orientation and customer proximity and the need to ensure the integrity and authenticity of cultural evidence.

It should be emphasized that cultural tourism is naturally associated with urban tourism as well [7]. Urban tourism can make an important contribution to the economic and social progress of cities, and, therefore, must be considered a central element in urban development policies [47]. This requires applying destination management principles and techniques to increase attractiveness, which depends on the quality of tourist experiences. In addition, many urban offerings are used as much by city dwellers as by tourists (including Erasmus students)—for example, means of transport, leisure activities, museums, cultural events, sporting events [20,21]. Therefore, in order to make cultural tourism a determining factor in urban development, a full understanding of these relationships and their evolution over time is obviously needed [47].

Destination image plays an essential role in evaluating tourists’ affective responses, but the effects of overtourism are potentially severe and can lead to the natural and cultural riches of tourist destinations becoming less attractive as a desirable tourist destination [48]. As a result, overcrowding manifests itself on the one hand in a physical overload—too many people in one place at the same time but without control or regulation of the flow of visitors—and on the other hand, in the psychological perception of residents—the feeling of being restricted by tourism or tourists [49,50]. This phenomenon can also lead to a tourist gentrification of neighborhoods or individual places through tourist restaurants, hotels, souvenir shops [48,50]. Thus, overtourism is increasingly becoming a source of conflict in high-traffic travel destinations between locals and visitors [51,52]. More and more locals are starting to perceive tourists as a disruptive factor and a burden for everyday life on the spot. Instead, tourists themselves consider the large number of present fellow tourists as negative or annoying.

In connection with problems of overtourism, Weaver [53] defined the following key points for the desirable scope of cultural tourism:

- *Ecological capacity*: only as much tourism as it does not pollute the environment;
- *Physical conditions*: tourist projects and recreational activities must not impair the natural physical environment;
- *Socio-receptive capacity*: encouraging no tourism that leads to feelings of rejection in residents due to cultural or ecological impairments;
- *Economic sustainability*: tourist activities must not marginalize, excessively compete or destroy other economic activities;
- *Psychological capacity*: any overcrowding that the locals can no longer handle should be avoided.

At each of these points, a number of arguments and counterarguments could be made, but the only indisputable thing is that cultural tourism generates a significant contribution to the gross domestic product of the destination countries [2]. In addition to economic benefits, such as added value, job creation, and prosperity in destination countries, cultural tourism contributes to international understanding, exploring other cultures, promotes social development and helps build infrastructure in target areas, analyzes possible criteria segmentation of target groups as a result of taking into account the customers' journey as a tool for deriving marketing measures [53]. All of this basically means that tourism has many positive as well as negative aspects, which is why a balanced tourism policy should promote the positive aspects and minimize the negative ones as far as possible.

Based on the above arguments, three things can be said with certainty about the future development of tourism: firstly, the number of customers for travel and tourist offers will continue to increase in the medium and long term—at the latest when the new middle classes enter the tourism market in the densely populated countries; second, it will not be possible to increase the number of tourist destinations and their capacity for tourists indefinitely—in individual places they have already reached or even exceeded their capacity; thirdly, this means that in the medium and long term, either tourism contingents must be set up in the countries of entry for tourism or at the destinations, or that travel will become much more expensive, provided that the volume is controlled via the price. It is also possible that both will happen [6,52].

On the other hand, through its emissions, tourism is also one of the causes of climate change [49]. Conversely, tourism companies are also affected by climate change [50]. Possible effects of climate change can be seen in the form of business interruptions, seasonal and regional shifts in demand, and climate-related requirements for tourist infrastructures [51]. It can thus be said that tourism is heavily dependent on the climate and weather on the one hand, but also has a major impact on climate change itself on the other. Basically—as with any other branch of the economy—the climate and weather are a basic requirement, i.e., an indispensable condition [49,52]. In addition to direct and indirect physical effects, climate change also has social consequences in terms of travel behavior, since CO<sub>2</sub> reduction has to take place everywhere and can even involve the guests, who in the end not only have a pleasant time, but also do something for their personal CO<sub>2</sub> balance. Moreover, environmental damage from tourism not only reduces the quality of the natural environment, but also damages tourism [53].

At the same time, a forecast for the future development of cultural tourism has become much more difficult than before the COVID-19 pandemic [54]. However, tourism will continue to grow—albeit with temporary failures and weaknesses, in any case as long as people have the necessary financial resources. People's desire to travel will remain and even increase. New forms of travel and destinations—perhaps even beyond the borders of our planet—will be found. It will be up to tourism actors and politicians to develop appropriate offers, introduce control mechanisms and lead the tourism industry to become more sustainable and to minimize environmental damage and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [53].

## 2.2. Erasmus Students' Travel Motivations

Some Erasmus researchers [55,56] perceive Erasmus tourism as a waste of time and resources, because students make their choice to study abroad based only on what they can see and visit and not on what they can learn. The Erasmus program is not just about studies, it also helps them to develop intercultural relations and to enrich themselves culturally: they communicate better with other cultures, they are confident in their own strengths, and develop both academically and humanely [32]. We believe that although students choose to study abroad through the Erasmus program only to see other countries and have different experiences, this enriches them (through visits to various museums, castles, palaces, exhibitions, participation in fairs, exhibitions, shows, concerts, making friends with locals, adapting to local culture, etc.). This research strengthens what Richards and Wilson [57] also discovered, namely: cultural tourists are travelers seeking to explore and experience a different culture, motivated by cultural experiences and activities.

Monteiro and Pereira [58] researched motivations for incoming and outgoing Erasmus student travel. The findings show that there are three distinct groups: the socio-cultural student traveler, whose main goal is interaction and making friends with the locals; the entrepreneur student traveler, who wants to forward his career and rapidly adapts to the authenticity of the host community, and the synergistic student traveler, whose main goal is developing cultural tourism activities. Furthermore, the same authors [58] found out in their research that the overall group, which combines the incoming and the outgoing students, confirms the Erasmus student is "Open to new experiences" (96.4%); shows "Spirit of adventure" (91.1%) and travels for "Cultural reasons" (91.3%). These results reinforce literature [56–59], asserting that international mobility is motivated by social reasons, rather than educational ones.

The Erasmus programme is a means used by young people to experience new realities that will contribute to their personal growth, as referred to previously [60–63]. Richards and Wilson [57], in their study, reached the conclusion that the most frequently expressed motivations for students' travel were to explore other cultures (83%), followed by excitement (74%) and increasing knowledge (69%)—demonstrating the desire to encounter "different" people and places.

## 2.3. Erasmus Students' Travel Experience

Researchers have found that the quality of cultural tourism experiences is improved by authenticity on the one hand, and on the other, that authenticity has a significant effect on tourist loyalty [64,65]. Park, Choi, and Lee [65] researched the role and dimension of authenticity in cultural tourism and concluded that tourist satisfaction from experiencing authenticity is a strong indicator of their intention to revisit. In this context, it is important to note the work of Wang et al. [66] identifying three kinds of authenticity: objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, and existential authenticity. This highlights the active role of tourists in the buildup of their experience as visitors in interaction with the local community. Frias-Jamilena et al. [67] discuss the term *cultural intelligence* (CQ) as part of the interaction between visitors and locals. This intense interaction between people from different cultures and with such different backgrounds takes place mostly in tourism. CQ considers the ability of people to function effectively in completely different intercultural environments from their own, and then to be able to cope in a totally new environment and make fair assessments about the new cultural context visited [53].

For the cities hosting the university where they execute the exchange program, Erasmus students are cultural tourists [63]. Erasmus tourism has its place and role in the Erasmus programme as it offers students a better opportunity to develop their cultural, social, and linguistic capital. This is indeed in line with the reasons why the Erasmus program was established [61]. They consider themselves cultural tourists even if their interest in the diversification of experiences is generally higher than their interest in a specific culture [62]. There is an abundance of studies in the literature on the added value provided by Erasmus in terms of labor market benefits and career advancements [26–28].

Erasmus students' motivations and preferences were also extensively investigated [68–70]. However, the way students perceive and narrate their experiences was less investigated.

Dolga et al. [71] underline that the Erasmus program has an overwhelming influence on students' careers. Erasmus students are of two categories: the first category is career-oriented, with low-income families, who want a better standard of living, and in order to achieve it, they strive to acquire new academic knowledge and learn a foreign language, and the second category—experience-oriented students who want to have new experiences, learn about new people, new cultures, and who have the need to be independent and/or live in a foreign country. Likewise, Jamaludin et al. [59] support the idea that international education and the experience of local host culture play an important role in determining destination-loyalty intention. Students' travel decisions may be pushed by intangible factors (e.g., exploration) and pulled by tangible factors such as natural attractions, entertainment, events, and nightlife [72–74]. In addition, safe and secure environments, standard (high or low cost) of living, and geographical proximity to the home country, are found to influence Asian students' destination choices [54].

All students who embark on an educational journey in a country other than that of their origin are expected to adjust to the new environment [74–77]. This may be challenging, as they will have to cope with a dual adaptation challenge: (1) the need to cope with study requirements in a foreign language held in a university abroad and (2) to live in a new and different cultural space [78–80]. Erasmus students prove cultural intelligence during their studies when interacting with the local community in another culture, with different traditions, customs, religions [63]. The way in which the Erasmus student, as a cultural visitor, represents his experience in relation to the host locality is not studied enough. This facet that has been insufficiently explored so far can provide important information for destination management. This is the idea that first sparked the authors' interest when they initiated the research.

Erasmus students also develop a higher cultural intelligence after participating in the Erasmus program. They are in search of authentic experiences and want to learn new things during their travels [39]. This leads to the general conclusion that the attractiveness of cities to visitors relies on a kind of host–guest relationship, more than on a provider–customer one. However, the international tourism in which Erasmus students also participate catalyzes the transition from traditional ways of life to modern society. It sets in motion the processes of change in a relatively short period of time, as very different cultures meet. While many locals' communities view such changes positively—for example, in terms of faster modernization—on the other hand, cultural identity is declining and the traditional value system is disintegrating [50].

### 3. Research Methodology

To examine the Erasmus students' experiences as cultural visitors, this study used the focus group technique which is based on the idea that group interaction encourages respondents to explore and clarify individual and common perspectives. The main objective of the focus groups method in this study is the group dynamics, respectively, the extraction of insights that are difficult to obtain in the absence of group interaction [81]. Thus, the use of this method can create and exploit the dynamics of the Erasmus student group and thus facilitate the collection of specific collective perspectives, while also maintaining their individual preferences.

It is important to note that this method differs both from the answer to a questionnaire (structured interview) and from an in-depth interview, in that the information is mainly extracted from the interaction between the group members. In this sense, we asked the participating students, in addition to their own narration, to comment on the narratives of their colleagues, highlighting common perceptions, but also differences, contrasts, or particularities. Thus, differences may come from differences between participants (different interests, different ways of relating to certain things), but also from differences between countries or areas where students have traveled. In fact, semi-structured discussions with

groups of 4–12 people in focus groups aim to explore a specific set of issues. Although participants answer the facilitator’s questions individually, they are encouraged to talk and interact with each other.

At the same time, within the study, the COREQ checklist was developed to promote explicit and comprehensive reporting of qualitative studies (interviews and focus groups). The checklist consists of items specific to reporting qualitative studies and precludes generic criteria that are applicable to all types of research reports [82].

COREQ is a comprehensive checklist that covers necessary components of the design study, which should be reported. The criteria included in the checklist can help researchers to report important aspects of the research team, study methods, context of the study, findings, analysis, and interpretations [81–83]. The COREQ checklist is available in Appendix A.

There were three focus groups, namely FG1 foreign students who came to Erasmus studies in Bucharest (in Table 1), FG2 Romanian students who went to Erasmus studies in different cities abroad (in Table 2), and FG3 Romanian students who went to Erasmus studies in different cities abroad (in Table 3). The three focus groups were held in 2019 and 2020, respectively, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the experiences that were discussed happened well before.

**Table 1.** FG 1 foreign students incoming to Bucharest.

Code	Given Name (Family Name Confidential)	Country of Origin	Age	Year of Study	Reason to Choose Erasmus Studies in Romania
1.1	MARIA	Greece	20	Bachelor, year 3	Recommendation of friends and for experience; wants to start a business in Romania
1.2	BURAK	Turkey	21	Bachelor, year 3	For proximity; does not want to be too far away from home
1.3	ASRARBEK	Uzbekistan	23	Bachelor, year 3	Recommendation of friends who have stories/memories and pleasant experiences here
1.4	MARCEL	Germany	25	Bachelor, year 3	Friends and experience; visited Romania before as a tourist; already had friends here when he chose the Erasmus program; wants a business in Romania
1.5	GIOVANI	Italy	24	Bachelor, year 3	Experience; discovery; did not expect it to be so beautiful; second Erasmus internship in Romania and still had to visit cultural attractions that he did not check last year
1.6	SABRINA	Russia	20	Bachelor, year 2	Thanks to parents’ advice together with the desire to see the Black Sea and the city of Constanța
1.7	NICOLAS	France	20	Bachelor, year 3	Second Erasmus experience in Romania; comes here for cultural tourism; has already visited Constanța, Brașov, Bran, Timișoara last year; wants to visit Sinaia, Sighișoara this year “I chose to be an Erasmus student here because I wanted to find out more about new cultures, that’s why I chose the Eastern European part and more precisely Romania because before I got here I didn’t know anything about Romania.”

**Table 2.** FG 2 Romanian students outgoing to destinations abroad.

Code	Given Name (Family Name Confidential)	Cities Where They Went for Erasmus Studies	Age	Year of Study	Reason to Choose Erasmus Studies Abroad
2.1	OANA	Vilnius, Lodz, and Istanbul	23	Master, year 2	Both for studies and for the practice of cultural tourism, being attracted by religion and the study of cultural differences; out of the desire to find as many local attractions as possible through the locals
2.2	ANA	Vilnius	22	Master, year 1	Passionate about culture; chose Erasmus studies for personal and professional development, as well as for travel and tourism purposes
2.3	EDI	Istanbul and Sankt Peters-burg	23	Master, year 2	From passion for religion, culture, traditions, cultural differences; to study the attractiveness of different tourist areas and befriend the locals
2.4	LUCIAN	Vilnius and Istanbul	23	Master, year 2	To study and visit unique tourist attractions on his own
2.5	TEO	Katowice	21	Master, year 1	For studies and tourist purposes to visit the old cultural settlements
2.6	ADINA IOANA	Nicosia and Porto	22	Master, year 2	Education; life experience; tourism; passionate about art; wants to start a business
2.7	DANIELA TEODORA	Istanbul	23	Master, year 1	Mainly for tourist purposes, discovering a new culture and on the recommendation of friends

From the way they presented their reasons for belonging to the Erasmus program and their choice of destination, and also from the expressions used and the observation of their attitude during the discussions within each focus group, it was possible to deduce a typology of the participants corresponding to the classification proposed by Monteiro and Pereira [58]:

- Synergistic student traveler = 6 students (1.3, 1.5, 1.7, 2.2, 2.6, 2.7);
- Entrepreneur student traveler = 5 students (1.1, 1.2, 1.6, 2.4, 2.5);
- Socio-cultural student traveler = 3 students (1.4, 2.1, 2.3)

The three focus groups took place several months apart and focused on completing Erasmus internships. Although the COVID-19 pandemic had already set in at the time of the discussions, the pandemic had no bearing on the experiences discussed. Therefore, the atypical conditions imposed by the pandemic are not considered in the study.

All participants were presented with the purpose of the discussions, more precisely the desire of the researchers to know how they perceive the experiences they had with different cities where they carried out their Erasmus internships. It was clarified that the emphasis should not be on their activities at the host university, but rather on the experience as visitors of the destination city. Participants were encouraged to describe the experience lived in the way they considered most appropriate, without following a certain model; they were also encouraged to refer to the words of the other participants and to engage in direct discussions with each other. Only after the first part of the discussions was consumed, the moderator proposed a return to some aspects resulting from the discussions. The aim was to extract the elements perceived as favorable and those perceived as unfavorable, from a more general perspective, not strictly related to the destinations visited. For example, "Would you generally say that what you appreciate about a city as a visitor is . . . ?" or "Do you think that such an aspect can damage the image of a city, in the visitor's perception?"

**Table 3.** FG 3 Romanian students outgoing to destinations abroad.

Code	Given Name (Family Name Confidential)	Cities Where They Went for Erasmus Studies	Age	Year of Study	Reason to Choose Erasmus Studies Abroad
3.1	LAVINIA	Barcelona	22	Master, year 1	Student in the master's degree in Business Administration in Tourism; chose Erasmus studies to develop relationships with people, to be more communicative, to have a fun nightlife, to have a pleasant climate, to make new friends
3.2	ALICE	Rome	23	Master, year 2	Student at the Master of Business Administration in Tourism; chose Erasmus studies to get in touch with a new culture; passionate about history and art; to travel on isolated, unmarked, unique routes; to discover new tourist sites
3.3	MATEI	Paris and Istanbul	22	Master, year 1	Student in the master's degree in Business Administration in Tourism; for gastronomy, culture, nightlife, interaction with other young people of various nationalities
3.4	VICTOR	Istanbul	21	Master, year 1	Student of Business Administration in Tourism; for career development and personal business in the host country
3.5	JESSICA	Amsterdam	21	Master, year 1	Studies Business Administration in Tourism; chose Erasmus studies for new friends, local gastronomy, discos, bars, and pubs created especially for young people
3.6	VERA	Porto	21	Master, year 1	Master's degree in Business Administration in Tourism, she chose Erasmus studies to create her own business, to gain inspiration and practical lessons to be a good manager
3.7	AMELIA	Katowice	22	Master, year 2	Student at the Master of Business Administration in Tourism; to interact with the host community, to learn their language, traditions, old customs; to make new friends

A first step in processing the information collected in the focus groups was to see to what extent the participants referred to objects and activities of cultural tourism. To create the coding tree, we used the definition of cultural tourism developed by the World Tourism Organization, a definition adopted during the 22nd Session of the General Assembly held in Chengdu, China, from 11–16 September 2017 [23].

Areas to be included within the category of cultural tourism, according to experts' responses:

- Tangible heritage: (011) national and world heritage sites, (012) monuments, (013) historic places and buildings, (014) underwater archaeology.
- Intangible heritage: (021) handicrafts, (022) gastronomy, (023) traditional festivals, (024) traditional music, (025) oral traditions, (026) religion.
- Other contemporary cultures and creative industries: (031) film, (032) performing arts, (033) design, (034) fashion, (035) new media.
- Other: (041) sports, (042) education, (043) health, (044) shopping.

Table 4 shows the types of objects and activities of cultural tourism mentioned by the participants in the focus groups, regardless of whether the mention was in a positive or negative sense.

**Table 4.** FG participants and the coding tree with a binary analysis.

	011	012	013	014	021	022	023	024	025	026	031	032	033	034	035	041	042	043	044
1.1	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x			x		x		x		x
1.2	x	x	x		x	x	x			x					x		x		x
1.3	x		x		x	x	x	x		x					x		x		x
1.4	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x				x	x	x		x
1.5	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x				x		x		x
1.6	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x			x		x		x		x
1.7	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x					x	x	x		x
2.1	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x					x		x		x
2.2	x	x	x		x			x	x	x		x			x		x		x
2.3	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		
2.4	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		x
2.5	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x					x		x		x
2.6	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x			x		x
2.7	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x					x		x		x
3.1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x		x		x
3.2	x	x	x		x			x	x	x	x	x			x		x		x
3.3	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		
3.4	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		
3.5	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x					x		x		x
3.6	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x			x		x
3.7	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x					x		x		x

The distribution of interests between the three groups supports the idea that, in general, there are no significant differences between incoming and outgoing students. Interests expressed by only a few students are probably related to the personal background, or to some peculiarity of a certain destination. One intriguing fact is that oral traditions (025) appear to be of interest for the experience abroad of Romanian students (almost not related to the destinations), while incoming students to Bucharest universities do not mention such an interest. One reason for such an outcome may be that Bucharest is the capital city of Romania and a more cosmopolitan city. Another interesting fact is that health (043) was not mentioned by any of the participants.

The next step was the inventory for each of the destinations evoked in the three focus groups of the favorable and unfavorable aspects highlighted by the participants. These are summarized in Table 5.

All participants regard their Erasmus mobility programs as nice, pleasant, enjoyable experiences. Regardless of the features of their specific destinations, students took the benefits of satisfying their curiosity, enlarging their cultural horizons, establishing links and new friendships with people from other countries. After each new Erasmus internship, their curiosity becomes more intense, and they are better motivated to go to other places as well. It can be appreciated that, with a few exceptions, the inclination towards further diversification of experiences is dominant in relation to the desire to return to a city they have already visited. However, they claim to have shared pleasant memories with relatives and friends who, as a result, manifest interest in visiting the same cities and countries themselves.

**Table 5.** Destination cities pluses and minuses perceived by focus groups participants.

Destination City	Pluses (As Perceived by Focus Group Participants)	Minuses (As Perceived by Focus Group Participants)
Bucharest	Friendly people Numerous outdoor festivals Local gastronomy The youth of the city, its effervescence and the active and fun nightlife Safeness of the city	Foreigners are potential victims of deception for some waiters or taxi drivers Student 1.7: "some people tend to consider that if you are a foreigner, you are rich"
Katowice	Attractive local architecture Landscapes similar to Romania Student 2.5: "The vast forests and cultural settlements send my thoughts home to Romania "	Conservative city Student 2.5: "It seemed like a conservative city" English communication problems with senior residents
Istanbul	Interculturality Friendly, kind, helpful and open-minded people Impressive mosques with spectacular rituals The effervescence of the city full of young people The multitude of concerts Traditional food as a real feast Student 2.7: "I discovered Turkish and Arabic cuisine and I was fascinated by their tastes and flavors".	Overcrowded city Nervousness Noise from traffic Agitation Student 2.1: "It's the city that never sleeps. Always agitated and restless".
Lodz	Accessibility for traveling in the city Modernity and cleanliness of the city Helpful locals Very old architecture and its preservation The city atmosphere and the streets' animation	The public transport lines had all the applications in Polish Concerts held only with Polish music Student 2.5 "Their Polish-style music without other international songs was not to our taste."
Nicosia	Impressive architecture Student 2.6: "The preservation of monuments is very precious".	Flavorless city Student 2.6: "A city where everybody else just goes to work". Difficult local transport: the applications were not in line with the bus schedule Student 2.6: "I ended up waiting for the bus for two hours in the cold to get to the faculty."
Porto	Blossoming tourism Student 2.6: "Tourism is flourishing and constantly evolving". The residents shared their traditions and customs with the tourists The many gardens in the center of the city, laying down quite a distance	Public transportation problems Unsociable resident population Prevalence with an aging population Student 2.6: "The Porto population was aging"
Sankt Petersburg	Tourism is booming Excellent accessibility at the city level with the public transport Unique and valued tourist objectives Interculturalism A city with a strong emotional charge Student 2.3: "I had the feeling that I had walked on those streets before".	English communication problems with senior residents Pollution Student 2.3: "I felt a polluted air due to traffic"
Vilnius	Interculturalism The old architecture preservation Student 2.4: "The buildings are impressive in size and very well preserved".	Monotonous, inanimate and dull city Student 2.2: "I can't say that there are so many things to see in Vilnius, because it's a pretty monotonous city".

Table 5. Cont.

Destination City	Pluses (As Perceived by Focus Group Participants)	Minuses (As Perceived by Focus Group Participants)
Barcelona	<p>Nightlife in an effervescent, elegant, cosmopolitan and cheerful city</p> <p>Vibrant atmosphere</p> <p>Tourist attractions, unique tourist sites in the world</p> <p>Festivals, parties, free shows on the streets and in bars</p> <p>Youth independence</p> <p>The multiculturalism of the city</p> <p>Pleasant weather, sunny weather and the perfect heat for Barceloneta beach</p> <p>Multiple accommodation possibilities depending on the budget of each student</p> <p>Open people</p> <p>Local cuisine</p> <p>Culture, art, architecture and history of the city.</p> <p><i>Student 3.1 "I would have stayed there forever, it's a magical, dream place." "I integrated perfectly, I also know Spanish and I was often confused with a local woman, I integrated so well."</i></p>	<p>Crowded</p> <p>Dirty public space</p> <p>Overwhelming prices in the city center on the famous La Rambla</p> <p>Taxi drivers don't speak English, they speak Catalan and Spanish, so it's hard to get along with them</p> <p>Big queues at the ticket offices for sightseeing: Sagrada Familia and Park Güell</p> <p>Restaurant schedule, which does not open before 13:00</p> <p>High consume of alcohol, young people consume alcohol at parties that last all night and it is difficult to study quietly on the university campus</p>
Rome	<p>The history and tourist attractions of the city</p> <p>Well-preserved architecture, unique museums and art galleries</p> <p>Events and festivals, on the street, in galleries</p> <p>Extra shopping, fashion houses, perfumes</p> <p>The Rome Metro, which is fast, clean, and running on time</p> <p>Very polite waiters, and they behaved very nicely</p> <p>The climate is very pleasant, Mediterranean</p>	<p>A city where the cost of living is expensive</p> <p>Streets and sidewalks that are full of garbage</p> <p>Buildings full of dirt and graffiti</p> <p>Buses that have long delays and some do not come at all</p> <p>Near the tourist attractions there are many street vendors, insistent and annoying</p>
Paris	<p>Fast access by all means of transport in the neighborhoods of Paris</p> <p>Superb tourist attractions, places with a magical load</p> <p>Impressive churches, old castles and palaces, huge boulevards</p> <p>Sociable, talkative people who help guide you through the streets of Paris</p> <p>Festivals and concerts with special acoustics</p> <p>Many young people from all cultures, from all religions with all dialects in university</p> <p>Respect for work and respect for studies on the part of the locals and the students who come to study</p> <p>Elite business program with very well trained teachers</p>	<p>Huge city, metropolis, impossible to visit completely</p> <p>The city is full of garbage</p> <p><i>Student 3.3: "The city is in a deplorable state, it is not maintained at all, it is dirty everywhere".</i></p> <p>Dangerous periphery</p> <p>An expensive city for everyday life</p> <p>Very high degree of violence</p> <p>Possibility of terrorist attacks</p> <p>Illegal immigrants gather in tents near the main tourist attractions in the city</p>
Amsterdam	<p>A city full of life and young people who work and study</p> <p>The city that does not sleep, with a calm atmosphere of the historic center and magical fairytale fairways</p> <p>Wonderful museums (Rijks, Van Gogh and Stedelijk) and special art galleries</p> <p><i>Student 3.5: "The food was to my taste, I liked Foodhallen."</i></p>	<p>Many noisy tourists looking for alcohol and drugs with little respect for the locals</p> <p><i>Student 3.5: "Young people drink a lot of alcohol in these clubs, and you can't get along with them anymore. They are too libertine. "</i></p> <p>The city has excessive noise and drunk young people sometimes urinate in public</p> <p>Many tourists are disrespectful to the locals</p>

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The study explores which elements contribute to the buildup of a visitor's experience which is satisfying and may be further translated into a favorable image for such a destination. Significantly, each story began with references to locals, local society, and lifestyle in the destination city. Then there were references to how the adaptation went. Most of each story had to do with special (specific for the destination) things or places, that they discovered during their stay in the city of destination. Moreover, when several of the participants in the focus group knew the same point of interest, each insisted to nuance it in a certain way, according to its personal meaning for them. It can be said that the interest in authenticity is confirmed in all three forms: of the object, constructive and existential. Based on the way the discussions took place, the way in which the presence of youth, foreigners, vibrant character of city life, and public artistic manifestations were mentioned as strengths, it can be appreciated that existential authenticity prevails in building the perception of experience, relative to the other two forms.

In the following section, the authors expose some aspects of detail with reference to each of the three layers of the Erasmus students' experience as cultural tourists: the connection with the local community, adaptation, authenticity.

Regarding the connection with the local community, participants in focus group 1 and 2 claimed that they were advised and guided both by locals and by the international students to find which are the most beautiful and special cultural attractions they can see. Instead, one of the students from focus group 3 said that after exhausting all the recommended cultural attractions, he wanted to discover other cultural attractions on his own. After visiting them, he also told the locals about them, and the latter said that they had not even heard of them, because they did not give due importance to these cultural attractions. From here on we deduce an assiduous interest in knowledge, a desire to experience new things, a way to seek easy access to various cultural attractions.

*Student 1.7: "Generally speaking, as a student it is easy to talk to people and make Romanian friends. Most Romanian students are very nice and helpful. From this point of view, nothing is to say: they speak perfect English. And when you talk to a stranger on the street, he tries to help you if you need it."*

Erasmus students consider it very important to interact and make friends with locals because no matter how much they would like to look for their own tourist attractions and to know the area, they will not be able to gather as much information as a local, established there for many years and who can provide insights that cannot be accessed online. Therefore, Erasmus students consider friendship with the locals a strong point for practicing cultural tourism.

*Student 1.6: When I talk to my Romanian friends, they tell me, "Oh, come on, don't exaggerate," and I tell them, "But I'm not exaggerating at all," because the people here are very kind.*

We see that for touristic reasons they are open to talking to the locals, to be preoccupied with making friends that open their horizons to cultural destinations. The students in the focus groups stated that they wanted to see everything that could be seen in the host country from a cultural point of view. There is an increased concern for knowledge and personal development. They want to experience new cultures, new territories, new religions, along with unique cultural attractions.

*Student 2.1: "It is very important to make friends with the locals because no matter how hard you try to look for tourist attractions on your own, to know the area, you will certainly not be able to gather as much information as a local who is already so old in that city and can offer you many more insights that are not so handy online or in other sources of information."*

The results of our focus groups strengthen and are consistent with the research conducted by Frias-Jamilena et al. [67] In this way, strong interactions from different cultures

are created between Erasmus students and locals, developed during the tourist activities practiced by Erasmus students.

Adaptation was generally perceived as an easy, but still necessary thing. The results of the focus groups highlighted the fact that the students clarified aspects related to understanding a new culture within which they must live, discovered new things of the culture of the host country, and were even delighted by some of them (solidarity, respect, indulgence, permissiveness, friendship) while being less pleased with others (coldness, non-involvement, disinterest).

*Student 2.6 “I thought, first of all, Porto was a wonderful city, the population was quite old from my point of view, the youth was completely lacking, although it is a city populated from a tourist point of view. I mean tourism is in bloom and it is developing, and it is in continuous development, but it seemed to me the majority of the population was 50+, which was quite disadvantageous, but quite welcoming, communicative, even if I did not speak Portuguese, they did their best to understand me and communicate. It was really ok from this point of view of the culture, quite welcoming. “*

During the focus group discussions, the students demonstrated that they learned various things related to good orientation in a new geographical area, how to have access to the most unique cultural tourist objectives, since they were concerned with the means of transport that can be useful to reach quickly and at a minimal cost to the cultural destinations they wanted to visit. Erasmus students were forced to adapt to new cultures—the more different the cultures, the greater the cultural shock they felt. Impressed and intrigued by the cultural differences, they managed to make lasting friends with both international Erasmus students and students from the host country. We could say that these countries have a great geographical coverage when it comes to friendship: Spain, Italy, France, Georgia, Russia, Poland, China, Canada, Turkey, Portugal, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Cyprus, Germany, Romania.

The existence of means of access played an important role in choosing the cultural attractions visited. For example, the existence of special means of transport for students, such as an access card to the means of transport and an access card to cultural objectives, attracted Erasmus students very much. More accessible, possibly more comfortable, or cheaper means of transport have played an important role in choosing to visit certain cultural tourist destinations to the detriment of others. Road signs and other computer applications that could be used to find out the schedule of public transport (train, minibus, bus, tram, subway) were accessed at high rates by Erasmus students. Moreover, the rail-route type tourist arrangements (a combination of train and bus/car) and cruise and drive (ferry and car) were used and appreciated by Erasmus students. The unique card for all means of transport has facilitated access to as many cultural tourist attractions scattered throughout the territory.

The existence of access tourist cards for several tourist destinations in the country, not only for the tourist attractions of the capital valid for 1 year, invited Erasmus students to return to their dear places full of memories. Public transport problems highlighted by the student who went to Portugal and Cyprus always made her stressed with accessing the area and it made her give up on certain tourist visits. Even the driving style on the right or on the left side of the road counts for access and movement in the area and was brought to the fore by students. The obligation of adaptation also debated by researchers Jamaludin et al. [59] and the desire of Erasmus students to return to the tourist destination was also validated by our focus groups, thus, determining that destination-loyalty intentions are based on adaptability, recommendations of relatives and friends, and their own behavior/interaction with locals.

A lot of interest for authenticity in its different forms resulted from focus groups. Erasmus students stated their desire to live unique/authentic experiences and their desire to learn something new during their cultural travels.

They visited a lot, claiming that their motivation to participate in the Erasmus study program was focused on tourism, which confirms the results of Bótas and Huisman's

research [68]. They sought to visit open-air places of national interest specific to the culture of the host country, such as museums, palaces, and castles, all related to history. They discovered plenty from visiting mosques and churches in connection with the religion of the host country, and they were impressed by the social generosity and fairness in the approach of foreigners encountered in Turkey, along with the fact that the Turks value their local community and regard their family in a broader sense that refers to the whole community in which they live. It stuck to them that the Turks have a special respect for the people with whom they live and thus try not to inconvenience anyone. On the other hand, Poland was perceived as a conservative country, similar in mentality to Romania—instead, young people seemed much more open and happier to see foreign students there than seniors. In Lithuania, the people were cold, reserved, and unwilling to socialize.

Student 2.7: *“We visited interesting cultural attractions at the suggestion of international students.”*

*“I looked for the objectives more from a historical point of view, being in Istanbul I found it more interesting to see how this coexistence was formed between Byzantine architecture, which came from the Roman Empire and what the Ottomans brought in addition, after they have conquered so far. I have seen this best in Hagia Sophia, where you can see very well this coexistence in the architectural style, but also in the religious part, where both the mosaic and the icons are still present, our part of religion, as well as elements of Islam, with those wooden boards, with the name of Allah and so on, with everything they have there.”*

It should be noted that they also choose to visit areas/countries during the Erasmus internship around the neighboring country. Beneficial for the tourism of a region, students have 2 or 3 Erasmus mobilities, claiming that they got the taste of practicing tourism in this way, of enrichment and personal development with good career prospects. Moreover, participation in traditional cultural events was by chance, somehow the event took place at that time when Erasmus students were in the area so they could participate. They did nothing about it. The chance gave them this opportunity and so they became acquainted with the traditions, customs, folk costumes, they caught the essence of the culture visited. Erasmus students are concerned with art, architecture, history, religion. They were impressed by the souvenirs. They also noticed the emotional load that the Grand Bazaar has on individuals. They noticed that the merchants have the following character traits: patience, goodwill, kindness, and helpfulness.

As this study has demonstrated, a distinction must be made between the five types of tourist experience and thus also for the motivation for tourist travel: (1) relaxation or recreation, (2) variety or distraction, (3) experience, (4) experiment and (5) experience of being. In fact, these motivations flow into each other. A central element in cultural tourism are the feelings associated with a trip or a vacation—these include anticipation, excitement, curiosity, joy, and a thirst for adventure, but also fears. Other authors [84,85] also emphasized, in particular, the importance of the attributes of the physical and psychological target and the importance of distance from everyday life as elements for the tourists' moments of happiness.

From the analysis of the three focus groups, the preferences of Erasmus tourists for the elements from the cultural offer of the localities/tourist destinations emerged in the following order:

As regards (01) Tangible heritage:mm

- Rank I. 011 national and world heritage sites; 013 historic places and buildings
- Rank II. 012 monuments
- Rank III. 014 underwater archaeology

As regards (02) Intangible heritage:mm

- Rank I. 021 handicrafts; and 026 religion
- Rank II. 022 gastronomy
- Rank III. 023 traditional festivals; 024 traditional music

Rank IV. 025 oral traditions

Regarding (03) Other contemporary cultures and creative industries:mm

Rank I. 035 new media

Rank II. 031 film

Rank III. 032 performing arts

Rank IV. 033 design

Rank V. 034 fashion

And regarding (04) Other elements of cultural tourism: mm

Rank I. 042 education

Rank II. 044 shopping

Rank III. 041 sports

Rank IV. 043 health.

The preferences of Erasmus students belonging to the three focus groups clarify and support the results of previous studies [44,46], their rankings being close to the authors. The order of options for the elements in the cultural offer for the tangible components puts national and world heritage sites next to the historic places and buildings, at a very short distance being monuments. They also put handicrafts and religion on the intangible elements, gastronomy in the 2nd place, traditional festivals and traditional music in the 3rd place. Other elements of cultural tourism are preferred in this order: education, shopping, sports, and health.

The study showed that most respondents have rightly pointed out the increasing diversity of lifestyles, worldviews, and living conditions of people. This is not only reflected in the growing heterogeneity of travel motivations—it also makes it increasingly difficult to develop standardized travel offers for everyone. Accordingly, cultural tourism is increasingly reaching its limits not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality. These results are in line with the conclusions of previous studies [3,6,10,21,85] which show that more and more travelers are looking for holistic models of relaxation, i.e., offers that attract body, soul, and spirit. At the same time, Erasmus tourists are increasingly focusing on digital offerings and services [60]. Today there are almost endless possibilities for combining, integrating, and synthesizing tourism marketing for cities and towns, technology, and digital media [86].

In this way, the history and culture of the sights should be conveyed in an exciting, instructive, and environmentally sustainable way. Thus, with holographic technology in particular, it will be possible to reproduce any number of three-dimensional images of the locations, objectives, and impressions of nature and present them in any location. This could prevent or reduce long, environmentally damaging and energy-consuming journeys. Virtual spaces, virtual journeys, and imaginary worlds can thus be realistically experienced. Not only nature, but also art and imagination could generate completely new experiences for Erasmus students. Therefore, this study is conducted in the context of the results obtained from several studies [86–88] on how digital marketing will influence the choice of tourist destinations. At the same time, our research also found that cultural tourism is diverse in the attractions it offers, and this is an asset for the management of tourist destinations. The detailed knowledge of the preferences of Erasmus tourists for the elements of the cultural supply of the localities offers those responsible for the management of the destinations' information a better composition of the cultural supply.

Finally, according to the results of the study, it is important to note that local governments are directly involved in the management and marketing of tourist destinations along with the entire network of connections. This is due to the fact that tourism marketing for cities involves the development of the city's infrastructure, identifying priorities for preserving and promoting the city's tourist attractions, integrating the local community in this process, and creating well-targeted marketing campaigns to achieve strategic objectives [48,50]. This process has the following points in the foreground: presenting the honest tourist destination in leaflets, brochures, and on the internet via videos; creating safety

products for tourists; distribution through sales techniques and correct prices; vigilance regarding the hidden relations between tour operators and retailers.

## 5. Conclusions

The main lesson for tourism destination management that emerges from the results of our exploratory research is that visitors should be seen primarily as guests and not as clients. The main force of attractiveness is represented in the tourist destination by the local community. People come because the locals make them feel welcome. Otherwise, the main factor of attractiveness for cultural tourism is the local community itself.

According to the appreciations of Erasmus students, cultural tourism was an important element in intercultural dialogues, both in the educational institution where they carried out their educational activity, but also in their own relationship with local communities. This type of tourism has occupied an essential place in the more complex process such as: mutual knowledge—adaptation/integration in local communities—favorable reception by local communities.

In addition to the general conclusion set out above, the exploratory study carried out allows the following assertions to be made.

1. There are no significant differences between the three groups (incoming and outgoing Erasmus students) in the manner that they describe their experience (local people, local society, immersion, authenticity, adaptation)
2. The experience is better when local people are kind
3. The experience is better when the local society is vibrant, providing guests with the opportunity to participate, to join local people in their activities
4. The experience is better when the main destination provides opportunities to visit other destinations in the host country or abroad.
5. The experience is better when the main destination provides an opportunity to meet and interact with other visitors from a variety of other cultures.

Erasmus students would like advantageous means of transport such as route and student pass cards, and mixed transport arrangements plus special cards for visiting sights and tourist attractions throughout the country, access cards for cultural attractions with the validity of a 1-year visit. This will also generate the desire to revisit the country. Creation of festivals, shows, exhibitions, traditional fairs in large urban centers, and other outdoor activities, which attract unexpected and unscheduled tourists who walk through the area and who have not expressly proposed to take part in such events. It has been noticed that Erasmus students have always participated with great pleasure in such unplanned events.

Creating a clean and tidy city that will make visitors happy to live in it—if the local community has a pleasant time living there, then tourists by default will also be happy to have entered a clean, prosperous, well-maintained, landscaped, beautiful place. Creating gardens and parks in the middle of the city might also benefit both tourists and locals.

Another suggestion could be maintaining traditions and customs for future generations as well as for Erasmus students who come to study, along with the further creation of souvenirs and small handicrafts driven by the desire of Erasmus students to take with them a traditional object as a souvenir. It was also demonstrated that friendly infrastructure with access maps in the area and mobile applications in languages of international circulation are aiding Erasmus students' accessibility to information related to the cultural attractions of the area.

The results of this study can be taken into account as it demonstrates that Erasmus students are, indeed, cultural visitors. This research also demonstrates that we speak only about longer-staying tourists, in contrast to short-term tourists (as may be the case with tourists coming for a city break). Thus, the main lesson for sustainable cultural management is that a longer-staying tourist perceives a better experience in cities with good public infrastructure, good, reliable, and accessible public services, plus a vibrant city life for all, residents and visitors alike. We consider that this finding is in contradiction with the current practice in city management, where decision-makers often consider separate

routes for tourists and local citizens. In addition, we found that providing easy, convenient, accessible access to other nearby destinations (other cities, domestic or even abroad) adds value to the experience within the primary destination. We see this as being broadly overlooked by the city destination management, which are mostly concerned with access to their own city as a primary destination.

This research is additionally supportive of the idea that a factor on which attractiveness is based is the experience of the tourists in the destination area, more precisely the way in which people perceive their experience. Simply put, good experiences increase attractiveness, while bad experiences decrease the attractiveness, and therefore the competitiveness of a destination. However, decision-makers in sustainable cultural management activities need to make informed decisions based on what shapes a tourism experience for better or for worse, and this should be relevant information. In addition to this general conclusion, the study also identifies several elements of detail that may also contribute to informing destination managers.

From a theoretical contribution, this research adds up to the tourism literature on the educational benefits of the international mobility of young students, on the one hand, and aims to extract some useful lessons from the perspective of destination management. Given these considerations, the resources of a cultural tourism service provider, but also its specific external framework conditions (cooperation opportunities, support from the provider) will be decisive for the way in which differentiated actions can be taken for Erasmus students. Moreover, the findings of this study may contribute to the design of a unitary strategy for the management of tourist destinations for both Erasmus and foreign tourists because tourism is essentially a social and cultural activity that enriches our minds and souls.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the study focused on a sample of Erasmus students. In one group, there were people from the same culture (Romanians) traveling to several destinations covering different cultures, while in the second and third group the authors worked with people from different cultures traveling to the same destination. In the second row, the authors are aware that the focus group qualitative research method does not produce results representative for all visitors with longer stays in a certain city. The study was exploratory and aimed at identifying the elements that contributed to the coagulation of the experience associated with a particular destination city, in the sense of a more favorable or unfavorable image of the destination in question through the experiences of Erasmus students. Thus, each of the assertions of every Erasmus student could be tested and proven by quantitative methods.

Furthermore, a future direction of research would be to research the cultural experiences of business and professional visitors (i.e., employees of non-resident entities according to the International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008). If Erasmus students are a segment with limited financial resources, the business and professional visitors' segment may seek more sophisticated and expensive products and services. Managers of tourist destinations should also address this kind of demand.

Another potential further research subject would be the analysis of the accessibility offered by the destination when it comes to visiting other nearby cities. As the results of the focus groups show, Erasmus students have shown interest in making tourist trips from their principal destination. They also argued that they chose their Erasmus study destinations considering available opportunities to visit other cities or places of interest. Quantitative studies could be carried out to verify how much a rich, attractive, and diversified travel offer towards other destinations may contribute to improving the experience of long-stay tourists with a certain city.

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### Appendix A. The COREQ Checklist: Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ): 32-Item Checklist

#### Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity Personal characteristics

1. Interviewer/facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	The focus group research was conducted by Lecturer, PhD Andreea Marin-Pantelescu Lecturer, PhD Andreea Marin-Pantelescu is a graduate of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, The Faculty of Commerce, the specialization Tourism-Services (2002) and of the postgraduate program in International Tourism (2003). In February 2007, she became a teacher in Bucharest University of Economic Studies, The Faculty of Commerce, The Department of Tourism-Services. She obtained her PhD in Economics in 2008 with a thesis in services, and in 2010 a Master's Degree in the field of Economics and International Business.
2. Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials?	Lecturer Ph.D. Bucharest University of Economic Studies from 2011 Faculty of Business and Tourism Department Tourism and Geography
3. Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	Lecturer Ph.D. Bucharest University of Economic Studies Faculty of Business and Tourism Department Tourism and Geography Major in business ethics and services economy
4. Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	Female
5. Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	As a Lecturer in the Department of Tourism and Geography, the Faculty of Business and Tourism, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, she teaches subjects like the management of tourism operations, management of hotels operations, development strategies for the tertiary sector, services economy, business ethics, etc. She writes articles published in scientific journals and her research interests are in the field of services, tourism and business ethics. Currently, she is focused on the services economy course and conducts research in the domain of creative services.

## Relationship with participants

6. Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	Yes. The Erasmus students participating in the focus group were selected from the students that the interview leader had in her classes. Prior to participating in the research, a teacher-student relationship was already established between the interview leader and the Erasmus students participating in the focus group.
7. Participants' knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g., personal goals, reasons for doing the research	The participants knew the researcher's dedication and interest in the proposed research topic. The students met the professor-researcher for whom they had a special respect and admired her motivation for research.
8. Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? e.g., Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	Interests in the research topic: the will to contribute to the development of knowledge in the domain of cultural tourism. Reasons and interests in the research topic: the desire of the researcher to come to the aid of the managers of the tourist destinations so that they adapt to the wishes and needs of their cultural tourists, and last but not least the desire of the researcher to find a harmony between the visitors and the local community.
Domain 2: Study design Theoretical framework		
9. Methodological orientation and theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	Grounded theory: The authors relied on the literature and studied what was written in the field of Erasmus students in terms of their typology, how the Erasmus program contributes to the personal and professional development of students, making them more confident in their own strengths and determining them to travel. The Erasmus program is not just about studies, it helps students to develop intercultural relationships and enrich themselves culturally—they communicate better with other cultures, they are confident in their own strengths, they develop both academically and humanely.
Participant selection		
10. Sampling	How were participants selected? e.g., purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	Convenience and purposive
11. Method of approach	How were participants approached? e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	There was a face-to-face focus group 1, in the focus group room with all the facilities. Email contributions were also encouraged, along with a zoom conference meeting focus for groups 2 and 3, under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.
12. Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	Group 1: 7 Foreign Erasmus students come to study in Romania Group 2: 7 Romanian students studying abroad Group 3: 7 Romanian students studying abroad
13. Non-participation	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	None.

Setting		
14. Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? e.g., home, clinic, workplace	Workplace
15. Presence of non-participants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	No.
16. Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g., demographic data, date	The study focused on incoming foreign students to Bucharest University of Economic Studies and Romanian students outgoing to destinations abroad.
Data collection		
17. Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	A pilot research was made for the interview guide.
18. Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No
19. Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	Yes. Audio-video recording was made for focus groups.
20. Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	Yes
21. Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	Focus group 1 = 120 min Focus group 2 = 120 min Focus group 3 = 120 min
22. Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	Yes
23. Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	Yes. The transcript was discussed with focus group participants. It has been analyzed and corrected.
Domain 3: Analysis and findings		
Data analysis		
24. Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	3
25. Description of the coding tree	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	Yes
26. Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	Yes
27. Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	Microsoft Excel Software Zoom: Video Conferencing, Web Conferencing
28. Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	Yes

## Reporting

29. Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g., participant number	Yes. Quotes from focus group participants were used to illustrate the results. Citations were identified using participant number.
30. Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes, a remarkable consistency was noted and achieved between the data presented and the results obtained.
31. Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	All themes were clarified.
32. Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	All themes were clarified in detail.

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