

Influence of country and city images on students' perception of host universities and their satisfaction with the assigned destination for their exchange programmes

ABSTRACT:

This research focuses on the effect that country image, city image and university image has on students' *a priori* satisfaction with the assigned destination for their international exchange programme (Bachelor and Master). In particular, this study establishes six hypotheses related to the causal relationships among the different typologies of image and their effects on students' satisfaction with the assigned destination to study at least one semester in a host university. In order to contrast these hypotheses, a quantitative research was carried out in the Spanish city of Santander (Spain), by obtaining a sample of 245 international students who participated in an exchange programme at the University of Cantabria. The research findings are: 1) students' satisfaction with the assigned destination is positively influenced by the university image; 2) the university image is positively influenced by the city image; and 3) the city image is positively influenced by the country image.

Keywords: international exchange programmes; place branding; country image; city image; university image; SEM.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has affected the tertiary education sector, resulting in an increasing flow of both students and academics across borders. In this context, developed countries are increasingly competing in the international education market (Altbach, 1989; Knight, 2011; Sheng-Ju, 2012; Wilkins *et al*, 2012) and many national initiatives have aimed to build up the academic dimension of the country brand under such slogans as ‘study in (...)’ (e.g. <http://www.studyinspain.info>, <http://www.studying-in-france.org> and <http://www.studyinnewzealand.com>, among others). Many of these initiatives are managed by public authorities, and in many cases they are part of the country global branding strategy. For example, the initiative <http://www.studyinspain.info> is managed by Seggitur (the Spanish National Society for the Management of Innovation and Technology in Tourism) as part of the national strategy of international tourism promotion (<http://www.spain.info>), which integrates the private sector with public leadership and management.

At the same time, following the example of the world's leading higher education institutions –e.g. Harvard, Yale or Stanford in the United States (US), University of Cambridge and University of Oxford in the United Kingdom (UK)– universities are also making a conscious effort to develop initiatives to attract international students (Mehtap-Smadi and Hashemipour, 2011). This has led to a notable increase in the number of studies that examine the internationalisation process in Higher Education (Huisman, 2013). Specifically, a research field is to understand the motivations and expectations that determine the choice of educational programmes by students in a global context (Wilkins *et al*, 2012).

In this sense, the decision-making process of international students when selecting a study destination appears to involve three distinct stages (Mazzarol and

Soutar, 2002). Firstly, students must decide to study internationally rather than at home. Secondly, students choose a host country (which depends on the perception about the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the country). Thirdly, students choose a higher education institution in the host country, based on criteria such as prestige, quality of education, reputation of degrees and affordable tuition fees. Additionally, Cubillo *et al* (2009) and Darchen and Tremblay (2010) highlight that the election of the specific host university is significantly influenced, together with academic factors, by the image of the city where the formative product is located. Therefore, it seems to be a sequence in the student decision-making process, in which their perceptions about countries and cities have a relevant role in the previous stages when choosing a university.

Taking into account these issues, “place branding” acquires special importance for the internationalisation of higher education. In particular, despite the discrepancies regarding its conceptualisation (Anholt, 2010; Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013), there is consensus that place branding enhances the capability of the country or city to attract valuable inputs and resources (Zhang and Zhao, 2009; Pasquinelli and Teräs, 2013), and specifically talent (Darchen and Tremblay, 2010; Zenker *et al*, 2013). In this sense, Zenker (2009) emphasises the need to develop specific place branding actions targeted at talented people (called the “creative class” by Florida, 2002, 2005), such as students, high-qualification professionals or human resources in general. In fact, cities which focus on this branding strategy would strengthen knowledge-intensive sectors, and become “creative cities” (Landry, 2000, 2006) or “knowledge cities” (Yigitcanlar *et al*, 2008), with specific competitive advantages in the era of knowledge-based economy. According to this approach, attracting international university students reinforces the higher education system, thus promoting the “creative city” (Darchen and Tremblay,

2010). Therefore, place branding theory is an appropriate framework within which to study the factors that influence the attraction of international students.

This research focuses on international exchange programmes, which have been especially relevant to foster the international flow of students within the European Union (Erasmus Programme) and between the EU and other geographical areas (e.g. Erasmus Mundus Programme, Tempus Programme, bilateral exchange agreements). International exchange programmes are multilateral or bilateral agreements aimed at facilitating and fostering (and sometimes funding) the development of academic periods or stays that students take in a host university within their ordinary university studies (Bachelor and Master). Normally, these stays have a duration of one semester or one year, and imply the exchange of students from the collaborating institutions.

Specifically, we examine the factors determining the students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for their international exchange programmes before the academic experience. The interest and relevance of this approach are justified by the nature and regulation of these programmes. On the one hand, places and universities compete on the basis of their attributes and reputation (Simpson and Tan, 2008; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010) to attract students within the exchange programmes. On the other hand, students have to compete among themselves for a limited number of places/grants for international exchange within a specific university. As a consequence, the university assigned to students for their academic stay is not always their first choice, but the best available alternative in competition with other students. This fact may affect their satisfaction with the final destination assigned for their exchange studies abroad. The assigned destination for the academic stay determines not only the university in which to study, but also the country and city in which the student will live for at least a semester. Therefore, the students' *a priori* satisfaction with the destination

assigned for their international stay will be affected by academic issues (e.g. perceptions of the university image or reputation), as well as the perceptions they have of the country and city in which they are going to live (Cubillo *et al*, 2009). Recently, Zenker and Rutter (2014) highlighted the relevance of citizen satisfaction with a place (e.g. city) to their attitudes towards the place brand and their behaviour. The same would be valid for other targets, such as international university students.

Accordingly, our research has a two fold objective: 1) to examine the influence that country image, city image and university image exert on the students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for their international exchange programme (Erasmus Programme, Erasmus Mundus Programme, or specific bilateral cooperation programmes) before the academic experience; and 2) to analyse the conceptual interconnections that are produced among these specific geographical and institutional dimensions of image.

Given that we examine the interrelations between the image of territories (e.g. country and city) and institutions (e.g. university) as perceived by individuals (e.g. university students), the theoretical framework used in this research is the literature on place branding and corporate image. In this sense, this research fits in what Lucarelli and Berg (2011, p. 18) call "critical studies of place branding", and examines the effects of place image, in order to provide empirical evidence that contributes to fill the existing gap between theory and practice (Hanna and Rowley, 2011; Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013). Therefore, the main contribution of this research is the development and empirical test of an integrative model that aims to explain students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before their academic experience abroad. The model includes their perceived image of different types of territories (countries and cities) and of the higher education institutions that are located

there. This approach will allow for the understanding of the hierarchy of the effects of image that, from a practical standpoint, will facilitate the development of strategies to attract students (and other inputs and resources, such as human capital, tourism, or investments) to the territory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hill (1995), students form their expectations about the university where they will study before familiarising themselves with the educational institution through different sources of personal (e.g. word-of-mouth) and commercial (e.g. Web pages) information. In particular, before his/her academic experience in the host university, the student will make an evaluation (*a priori*) of the educational programme. This evaluation, which can be defined as the student's attitude towards the programme (Peng *et al*, 2000), will be influenced not only by its academic elements (central aspects), but also by the peripheral aspects that are closely related to: a) the quality of the services of the host university and the different dimensions of the city (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010), and b) the country where that institution is located (Cubillo *et al*, 2009). With regard to these dimensions, it is accepted that the success of a country as provider of educational services able to attract human capital is based on a clear national policy for the internationalisation of education, and heavy investments in international branding (Mehtap-Smadi and Hashemipour, 2011; Mok, 2012). This approach is consistent with Florida's (2005) and Landry's (2006) assumptions, which raise the need to develop specific strategies to attract talent in order to fuel the "creative" city. More specifically, different authors (Zenker, 2009; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010; Zenker *et al*, 2013) have highlighted that country and city branding can be a key tool to capture talent or, in the context of this research, international

university students.

Taking into account these arguments, the ideas of university, city and country images are key concepts that will be analysed below.

University Image

The image of an institution is defined by some authors as the sum of opinions, ideas and impressions that people have about the organisation (Barich and Kotler, 1991; Kolter and Fox, 1995). This is the result of an aggregated process from which individuals evaluate the different attributes of the institution (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001).

Accordingly, Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2002) define university image based specifically on its perceived quality, which includes variables related to the global reputation of the institution, physical facilities, academic programmes and courses and academic staff, among others (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Simpson and Tan, 2008).

The image of the educational institution plays a key role in attracting and maintaining the loyalty of the students (Fielder *et al*, 1993; James *et al*, 1999; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010), and as a base for the market positioning that influences their decision-making process (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). In particular, different authors have found a positive relationship between the perceptions (image) that students have about a university and their preference for a particular institution (Krampf and Heinlein, 1981; Qureshi, 1995; Soutar and Tuner, 2002), the evaluation of the educational service (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003; Simpson and Tan, 2009) or the general success of the institution (Mazzarol, 1998; Ivy, 2001; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Therefore, the better the student's perception about the university, the higher will be her/his satisfaction with the assigned destination for an international exchange programme. Thus, the first research hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The image of the host university, as perceived by international students, positively influences their satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before the academic experience.

City Image

Along with the image of the institution that provides the educational programme, many authors have shown that the selection and evaluation of the programme can be conditioned by other factors (Moogan *et al*, 1999; Veloutsou *et al*, 2004), such as the image of the city where the formative product is located (Cubillo *et al*, 2009; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010). According to Barrio *et al* (2009), the image of a city can be defined as “a group of spontaneously noted adjectives associated with a given stimulus (physical or social), that generates a series of positive or negative associations in the targets”.

This image, created in the mind of the students based on their perceptions of the location, the installations and the city’s infrastructure (physical stimuli), plays an important role by influencing the evaluation (Knight, 2011) and choice (Keskinen *et al*, 2008; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010) of the educational programme. In a similar way, Cubillo *et al* (2006) argue that the city represents a space in which the educational service is provided and consumed, so the students, temporary citizens in that place, will take it into consideration when evaluating the educational programme (Harvey and Busher, 1996; Patterson *et al*, 1998). Regarding this issue, city image has been associated with factors such as job opportunities, lifestyle, quality of life, cost of living, safety and security and cultural diversity, among others (Cubillo *et al*, 2006; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010; Zenker *et al*, 2013). Therefore, students will be more satisfied with the assigned destination for their international exchange if they have a positive

perception of the city (city image), which leads to the establishment of the second research hypothesis:

H2: The image of the city, as perceived by international students, positively influences their satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before the academic experience.

In addition, the city's image is considered by some authors to be a factor that contributes to the generation of the image of the institutions that are located there (Tai *et al*, 2007). Therefore, as far as it is adequately communicated and it is known by the relevant targets, the city's image will allow the rapid identification and evaluation of any element (e.g. organisations, products or services) located or produced in that place (Zhang and Zhao, 2009; Pasquinelli and Teräs, 2013). In other words, the city brand acts as a signal, as an umbrella that helps to identify and evaluate the specific organisations or services located in that region by a process of transferring values and associations (Kavaratzis, 2004; Boland, 2008; Zenker *et al*, 2013). Under these principles, this paper establishes the third research hypothesis:

H3: The image of the city positively influences the image of the host university.

Country Image

The image of a country is thought of as a generalised construct of perceived images concerning economic, political, historical, cultural, tourism and technological aspects, among others, that characterise a country (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). In this regard, the most accepted definition in the academic literature considers the country image to be the sum of the beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have about a country. It is represented by the simplification of a large number of informational associations and indications connected to a place (Kotler *et al*, 1993; Martin and Eroglu,

1993; Kotler and Gertner, 2002). In particular, country image has been associated with diverse factors such as economic development, quality of life, culture and heritage, tourism, science and technology or socio-political issues (Parameswaran and Pishardi, 1994; Anholt, 2006a).

Generally, the country image acts as an influential element on the decisions about acquiring (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Javalgi *et al*, 2001; Ferguson *et al*, 2008; Thelen *et al*, 2010) and evaluating services (Schooler, 1965; Han, 1989; Wall *et al*, 1991; Li and Wyer, 1994; Peng *et al*, 2000; Mossberg and Kleppe, 2005; Cubillo *et al*, 2009). In the specific context of higher education, several previous works have established that university students tend first to choose the country where they will study (Bourke, 2000; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002; Forsey *et al*, 2012). In this sense, according to different authors (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Knight, 2011; Wilkins *et al*, 2012), the reputation of a country and the economic, political and social attributes associated with it act as “pull factors” that attract students to this destination over others. According to literature about the student’s decision-making process (Jackson, 1982; Maringe and Carter, 2007), these pull factors may influence not only the selection of a country to study abroad, but also the evaluation of the service before the experience. This rationale supports that country image has a key place as a determining element in the selection and evaluation of an international programme with a specific university (Lawley, 1998; Cubillo *et al*, 2006; Simpson and Tan, 2009). Therefore, students’ satisfaction with the assigned destination for their international exchange will be higher the more positive is their perception of the country concerned. These arguments lead to the fourth research hypothesis:

H4: The image of a country, as perceived by international students, positively influences their satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange

programme before the academic experience.

As stated before, the country image influences the evaluation of products, brands and companies from that country (Kotler and Getner, 2002; Ferguson *et al*, 2008). Following the same logic, in the international education sector, the image of the destination country may directly influence the attitudes of students towards the academic institutions that are located in that territory (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002; Knight, 2011; Forsey *et al*, 2012). Therefore, a poor or negative image of a country could lead to negative beliefs or perceptions about its institutions (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002). Consequently, there is a direct relationship between country image and institutional image, giving way to the fifth research hypothesis:

H5: The image of a country positively influences the image of the host university.

Finally, a hierarchy exists among the regional brands/images (country and city), which is derived from the physical dimensions and the notoriety of the different geographical aspects (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2007). More specifically, the subjects normally have more concrete and more relevant perceptions about countries, while their beliefs about smaller regions are usually less clear. It is necessary to state that there are some cases in which specific cities (for example, New York, London, Paris or Tokyo) have a stronger notoriety, thereby producing the opposite effect (Anholt, 2006b). However, this is the exception to the rule. This fits into the Information Processing Theory, which explains the behaviour of consumers in terms of cognitive operations (Bettman and Kakkar, 1977; Tybout *et al*, 1981). The theory states that processing information is conditioned by, among other aspects, the solidness with which the different informational signals are structured (Peterman, 1997). Therefore, it can be postulated that the subjects have more concrete beliefs about countries, which affect the

perceptions or images of the cities located in those countries (Cubillo *et al*, 2006).

Therefore, the last research hypothesis proposed is:

H6: The image of a country positively influences the image of a city.

Our research hypotheses give shape to a theoretical model that is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research model

METHODOLOGY

In order to test empirically these research hypotheses, a quantitative study was performed in which data were collected through a structured questionnaire personally administered to international students (studying a Bachelor's or a Master's degree) before their academic experience at the host university. Specifically, this research focuses on the University of Cantabria, a higher education institution located in Santander, a medium-sized city in the north of Spain.

Measurements

Referring to the content of the questionnaire, all of the variables in the model are measured on a Likert scale taking values from 0 (extremely unfavourable) to 10 (extremely favourable). The scale used for the measurement of the final dependant variable of our model (i.e. student's satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before the academic experience), is developed by considering several previous studies from the existing academic literature about educational services (Vaughn *et al*, 1978; Veloutsou *et al*, 2004; Cubillo *et al*, 2006). In particular, several aspects linked to the cognitive and affective dimensions of satisfaction are included in this scale.

The measurement of the model's independent variables was developed in the following way. The country image was captured by taking as a reference the image measurement scales created in the studies of Parameswaran and Pisharodi (1994), the Anholt's "national brand hexagon" (2006a) and the dimensions used by Futurebrand when creating the annual "Country Brand Index". The measurement scale for city image is theoretically supported by the Anholt's hexagonal theory (2006b), referring specifically to cities, and by the works of Barrio *et al* (2009), Zhang and Zhao (2009) and Zenker *et al* (2013). Lastly, the host university image is measured by adapting the scale proposed in the work of Cubillo *et al* (2006, 2009), in which six specific dimensions are used as a reference: the prestige of the institution, the positioning, the scientific standards, the quality of the professors, the international recognition and, finally, the campus installations. In accordance with the research scope established before, the measurement scales refer to Spain (country image), Santander (city image) and the University of Cantabria.

Field work

The population of the quantitative research is made up of international university students who have been taking part in international exchange programmes at the University of Cantabria. A convenience sampling procedure was used by distributing the questionnaire to international students brought together in two reception meetings by the International Relations Office of the University of Cantabria. During the meetings, a total of 245 valid interviews were obtained. The main characteristics of the sample were profiled in terms of geographic origin and area of knowledge. The students interviewed were mainly from Europe (69.0%) and the Americas (26.9%), which is mainly due to the specific agreements signed by the University of Cantabria (Erasmus

Programme in the case of Europe, and Erasmus Mundus Programme and specific bilateral programmes in the case of the Americas). Considering the country of origin, the majority were Italians (20.8%), Germans (16.7%) and French (13.1%). Among the interviewees from the Americas, the most common origin of the students was Mexico (12.7%) and Brazil (6.9%). Last of all, the main areas of knowledge were Social Science (35.5%), Engineering (27.3%) and Science (18.0%).

RESULTS

Firstly, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was carried out (EQS 6.1 for Windows) in order to evaluate the convergent validity, the discriminant validity and the reliability of the measurement scales. Initially, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis suggests that it is necessary to eliminate two items, “Cost of Living” and “Hospitality of the People”, from the scale of city image because of convergent validity problems (standardised coefficients far below 0.5). The reasons for the lack of validity of these items might be that the students were incapable of evaluating these specific aspects of the city before their stay in the place. After excluding both items (tables 1 and 2), the re-specified factorial model shows a correct fit to the data, all of the measurement scales are reliable and there is convergent validity as well as discriminated validity in the factorial structure (Steenkamp and Van Trijp, 1991; Anderson and Gerbing, 1998). Therefore, the scales are valid and reliable for measuring the constructs of the research model.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Table 2. Discriminant Validity of the Factorial Structure

Finally, a Structural Equations Model (SEM) was estimated with the objective of testing the research hypotheses (Figure 2). It should be pointed out that, following a Robust Maximum Likelihood estimation procedure, goodness of fit indexes are within the recommended intervals. This confirms that the model is correctly adjusted to the data. With respect to the estimation results, in the first place it is observed that the image of the host university positively affects the students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before the academic experience, which confirms H1. In the second place, it is demonstrated that the city image directly and positively influences the image of the host university, but not the satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme (supporting H3, but not H2). Thirdly, the evidence obtained shows that the country image does not influence the image of the university or the student's satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme. However, country image positively influences city image. Hence, this supports H6, but not H4 and H5. Therefore, the country image and city image do not directly influence the students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme. Furthermore, it is shown that there is a hierarchy among the images of the places and their institutions, wherein the country image positively affects the city image which, in turn, favourably influences the university image. Lastly, considering the R^2 coefficient values, it is worth pointing out the strength of the significant relationships between image constructs.

Figure 2. Estimation of the causal model

DISCUSSION

From the perspective of higher education internationalisation, the empirical evidence obtained in this study shows that country and city image have a crucial relevance in students' choice process, and particularly in the selection of the country and university in which to study. Thus, our results support the influence of country and city image on students' perceptions about host universities and their satisfaction with the assigned destination for international exchange programmes before the academic experience.

Within the scope of place branding theory, our results confirm the existence of a hierarchy among the images of the places (Cubillo *et al*, 2006) and their institutions, wherein the country image positively affects the city image which, in turn, favourably influences the university image. In line with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) approach, country image is fundamental in students' selection of the host destination for their international exchange programme. In particular, the perception about the country and its socio-economic and cultural characterises influences the perception of the cities located in it. In turn, city image is also a relevant factor in students' decision process, as it influences the perception of its university or universities. Finally, the university image is a direct determinant of students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before the academic experience. Therefore, place brands (country and city brands) act as umbrella brands for the institution located in those places, allowing international targets (e.g. students) to identify and evaluate less popular or less recognisable brands (e.g. university brands). As a consequence, place branding is a key tool for taking advantage of country and city image in order to increase the internationalisation of universities and specifically to attract international students (Zenker, 2009).

This conclusion can be extended to marketing strategies aimed at attracting other relevant resources, like investment, tourism or talent, among others; and it shows the need for creating brands that act as an umbrella of the institutions and businesses that are located within the region's borders. Along the lines of Ashworth and Kavaratzis' study (2007), this type of umbrella brand strategy (country brand) acquires more and more relevance for a greater regional competitiveness when matched with the corresponding creation of sub-brands (city brand and institution brand). This fact is especially relevant in today's globalised environment, characterised by an abundance of available market information and the growing mobility of people and businesses. Thus, place branding can be improved through properly communicating the interconnections between different levels of place brand and, specifically, the fact that a city belongs to a specific country. This should allow the transference of positive associations from the country brand to the cities' brands, and improve the perceptions of relevant publics with regard to smaller or less known geographical areas in a country.

Implications for decision makers

This study presents important implications for the management and branding of countries and cities, as well as for the managers of universities. First, the analysis of the factors determining students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme is very relevant, not only to attract more international students in the future, but also for a cohesive and global development of countries and cities. Thus, during their stay, international students generate a significant income for the city or country. They act as tourists who visit the city in which they are studying and, in many cases, travel through the rest of the country to see other geographical, social and cultural realities. In particular, this economic impact is in many

cases increased by the grants that students receive when participating in multilateral programmes, such as Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus or Tempus. Additionally, as long as students' expectations about the country, city and university are fulfilled by their experience during the exchange programme, their attraction to a territory may have even greater externalities for the country and city. In this sense, international university students may one day use the image they have about the country or city where they studied to make professional decisions (for example, to work or invest in a country), as CEOs, scientists, researchers and leaders of organisations. Consequently, students' satisfaction with their international exchange programme may have a significant influence on the territory in the future, fostering or hindering the attraction of tourists, talent, investments or other scarce resources.

According to our results, decision makers should design strategies in order to manage correctly the images of places and university, so that students have better perception of the territory and the institution prior to international exchange programme, which reinforces their decision to study in a specific destination. First, a city's decision makers need to be aware that the image of the country has a direct and positive effect on the image of the city. Accordingly, when planning strategies focused on promoting the city they should first consider the perceived image of the country, given that a negative perception will generally contribute to generating negative associations with the city. On the other hand, where a favourable image of the country exists, those who make decisions about the city brand should take advantage of the strengths of the country brand (which can act as an umbrella brand), in order to sustain the image of the city while benefiting from the positively perceived associations with the country. This same effect takes place, on a lower level, between the image of the city and the institutions that are located there.

Therefore, strategies aimed at the internationalisation of universities should be defined based on a situational analysis of the country and city where the institution is located and, fundamentally, on a study of the image that they project to their different targets. Accordingly, universities should identify which strengths of the country and city are more relevant from the perspective of international students' needs and preferences, and include them as part of the value offer of the institution (Simpson and Tan, 2009; Wilkins *et al.*, 2012). In particular, universities must include in their branding and recruitment campaigns not only information about academic and scientific issues, but also a clear and appealing description of the country and city where the university is located. Thus, it is very important to provide students with the relevant information when they are looking for the university in which to study, and, therefore, a place to live for at least a semester. In this respect, quality of life or cultural aspects could be strengths for some universities (e.g., historical universities in Europe, such as University of Bologna, University of Louvain or University of Salamanca), while others could take advantage of the image of socio-economical development or the technological and scientific competitiveness of the country/city (e.g. universities in northern Europe or the United States).

At the same time, this study shows that there must be coherence between the image of the institution, the city and the country in the actions aimed at projecting universities and/or businesses to the outside world. When a city brand is projected to international markets, the definition of the image to be projected must be coherent with the country image. Otherwise, there would be a confusing positioning and, therefore, a gap between the projected image and the perceived image of the city. In addition, the image of universities and/or businesses will benefit from a favourable country and/or city image when these entities come from sectors/areas where the country brand is

favourably perceived. For example, the image of a country that is clearly related to education and science would reinforce the image of the country's educational institutions that are trying to position themselves in the international market. This link between country image and city image can be strengthened through conjoint branding strategies, with a deeper integration and stronger presence of cities in national campaigns (e.g. www.studyinspain.info, www.studying-in-france.org and www.studyinnewzealand.com, among others).

Future lines of research

The findings of this research show different lines for future research within the field of higher education internationalisation. First, it would be interesting to repeat this analysis once the students have finished their academic period abroad. In particular, it would be especially relevant to examine whether there is a change in students' perceptions about the country, the city and the university after a long stay in the host institution. This would lead to greater insight into the formation of students' perceptions in their international exchange experience. Besides, it would also be very interesting to examine whether there are differences in students' perceptions depending on their country of origin, on the type of studies they are following, or their previous experience abroad.

Finally, this research focused on the influence that country image and city image has on the university image. However, place brands are also built on the basis of the actions and reputation of the institutions (e.g. universities) and other stakeholders in a territory (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Pasquinelli and Teräs, 2013). This fact is evident in some cities with universities in the top positions of international rankings (e.g. <http://www.shanghairanking.com/>), such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, or Massachusetts in the USA, with Harvard University or the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology (MIT). Therefore, it would also be very interesting to examine how the reputation or image of the universities (or other institutions) in a territory influences the image of a country, state or city.

CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to analyse the role that the country image and city image plays in the formation of the image of educational institutions, as well as the influence of these psychological constructs on international students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for their international exchange programme. The results show that the satisfaction with the destination is determined by the perceived image of the host university, which is influenced by the image of the city where it is located. At the same time, the image of the city is affected by the image of the country it belongs to.

However, there is no direct effect of the country or the city image on the students' satisfaction with the assigned destination for their international exchange programme; although they do have an indirect effect on satisfaction through the image of the host university. As was stated in the literature section, these results are coherent with the Information Processing Theory (Peterman, 1997), according to which informational signals more directly related to an object (e.g. university image) have a stronger influence on perceptions about that object (e.g. students' satisfaction with the assigned destination).

Finally, it should be mentioned that the measurement of the dependant variable (i.e. student's satisfaction with the assigned destination for the international exchange programme before the academic experience) is made using a scale of only four items. This can be considered a limitation, as it would be interesting to use a more complete scale by including other items like, for example, the cost of the international exchange

(university fees, accommodation and other expenditures).

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Appendix 1. Measurement scales

Appendix Measurement scales

Country Image (0 = Very unfavourable; 10 = Very favourable)

- COUIM1. Economic development
- COUIM2. Science and technology
- COUIM3. Infrastructures and communications
- COUIM4. Socio-politic stability
- COUIM5. Business and professional network
- COUIM6. Level of education
- COUIM7. Environmental sensitivity and responsibility
- COUIM8. Quality of life
- COUIM9. Culture (ways of life and customs)
- COUIM10. Tourism and cultural heritage

City Image (0 = Very unfavourable; 10 = Very favourable)

- CITIM1. Professional opportunities
- CITIM2. International cooperation (educational, social and cultural programmes)
- CITIM3. Public services (transportation, health)
- CITIM4. Atmospheric pollution
- CITIM5. Landscape
- CITIM6. Climate
- CITIM7. Public safety
- CITIM8. Cost of living
- CITIM9. People's hospitality
- CITIM10. Leisure activities (museums, festivals, sports, shopping...)

University Image (0 = Very unfavourable; 10 = Very favourable)

- UNIIM1. International recognition
- UNIIM2. Interest of educational programmes
- UNIIM3. Quality of professors
- UNIIM4. Campus facilities (sports, cultural, lodging...)

Satisfaction with the assigned destination for international exchange programme (0 = strongly disagree; 10 = strongly agree)

- SAT1. The interchange programme with the UC meets my expectations
- SAT2. It was a wise decision to choose this exchange programme with the UC
- SAT3. I'm happy with the choice of this exchange programme with UC
- SAT4. I would encourage other students to choose this exchange programme with UC

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Factor	Variable	Standard Coefficient	R ²	Cronbach's α	Composed Reliability	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Indexes
Country Image	COUIM1	0,642	0,413	0,885	0,887	
	COUIM2	0,697	0,486			
	COUIM3	0,720	0,519			
	COUIM4	0,638	0,407			
	COUIM5	0,775	0,600			
	COUIM6	0,756	0,571			
	COUIM7	0,733	0,538			
	COUIM8	0,630	0,397			
	COUIM9	0,487	0,238			
	COUIM10	0,526	0,277			
City Image	CITIM1	0,591	0,349	0,805	0,816	Normed $\chi^2 = 1,65$ BBNNFI = 0,90 IFI = 0,91 CFI = 0,91 RMSEA = 0,08
	CITIM2	0,764	0,583			
	CITIM3	0,705	0,497			
	CITIM4	0,493	0,243			
	CITIM5	0,674	0,455			
	CITIM6	0,468	0,219			
	CITIM7	0,572	0,327			
	CITIM10	0,484	0,234			
University Image	UNIIM1	0,556	0,310	0,822	0,833	
	UNIIM2	0,831	0,690			
	UNIIM3	0,861	0,742			
	UNIIM4	0,710	0,504			
Satisfaction with the assigned destination	SAT1	0,881	0,776	0,912	0,919	
	SAT2	0,851	0,723			
	SAT3	0,873	0,763			
	SAT4	0,833	0,694			

Table 2. Discriminated Validity of the Factorial Structure

	Country Image	City Image	University Image
City Image	0,851 ^a (0,785 ; 0,917) ^b		
University Image	0,674 (0,556 ; 0,792)	0,856 (0,778 ; 0,934)	
Satisfaction with the assigned destination	0,621 (0,527 ; 0,715)	0,729 (0,627 ; 0,831)	0,710 (0,578 ; 0,842)

^a Correlation among variables /

^b Confidence interval for high correlations

Figure 1. Research model

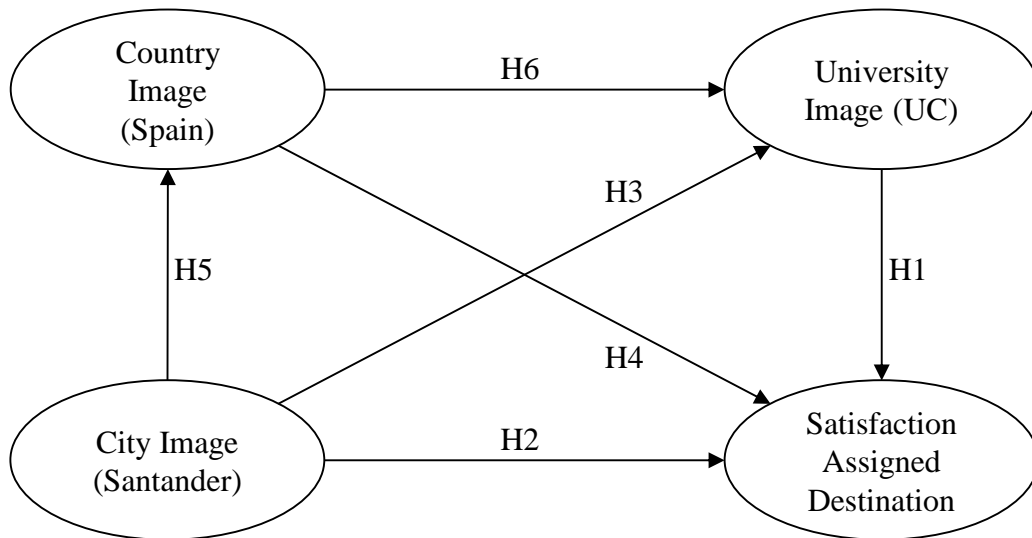
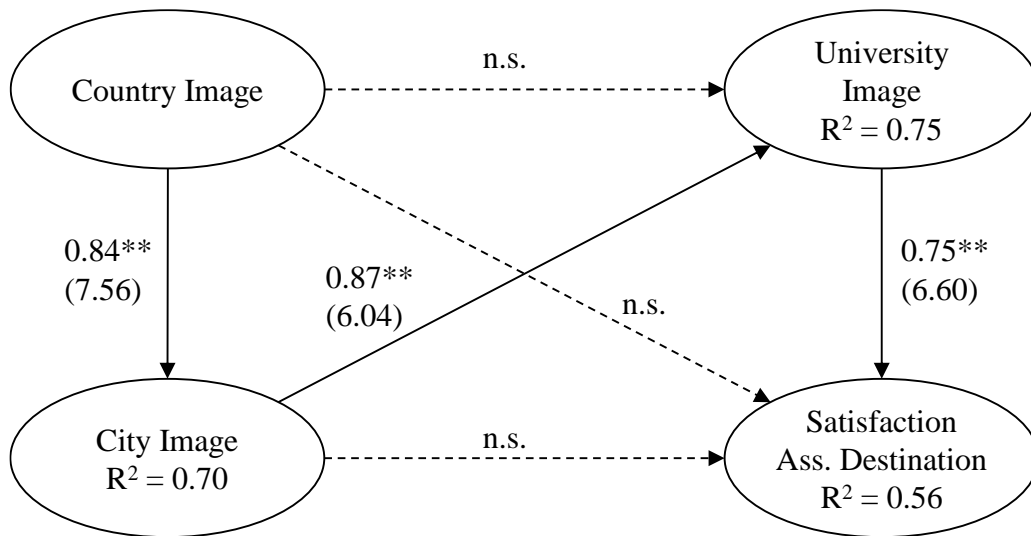


Figure 2. Estimation of the causal model



Normed $\chi^2 = 1.64$

Bentler-Bonett Non-Normed Fit Index = 0.90

Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.91

Bollen (IFI) Fit Index = 0.91

Root Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058