

## Travel in the european public sphere. The case of the Erasmus Programme

*El viaje en la esfera pública europea.  
El caso del Programa Erasmus*

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### **Abstract**

*The article combines the travel experience, the construction of identity and the European public sphere through the Erasmus Programme. The topic is interesting and original in order to know how the different variables interrelate in this vital experience. The study describes the attitudes and perceptions of Spanish students about the construction of their own European identity and the common public sphere under a comparative approach between those who have participated in the Erasmus Programme and those who have not. The core of the analysis is the data obtained through a closed questionnaire applied to a sample made up of students and university graduates from different Spanish universities. Thus, the article characterizes the results obtained in the whole of the sample and, subsequently, it offers an analysis of the subgroups of participants and non-participants in the Erasmus Programme. The article concludes that the Spanish university students, regardless of their participation in the Erasmus Programme, are global citizens inserted in a transnational public sphere, who frequently show interest in European news. However, the perceptions of the participants are more positive towards European feelings. They show more interest in the European Union, as well as more confidence in the European institutions. In contrast, Erasmus students tend to be more critical in other aspects.*

### **Keywords**

*Public opinion, European Union, travel, identity, political attitude, university student.*

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### **Resumen**

El artículo aúna el viaje, la identidad y la esfera pública europea a través de la experiencia que ofrece el Programa Erasmus para los universitarios de la Unión Europea, lo que resulta de interés y novedoso para conocer de qué manera se interrelacionan los distintos conceptos en esta experiencia vital. Bajo un enfoque comparativo se describen las actitudes y percepciones de estudiantes españoles que han realizado un Erasmus y aquellos que no lo han hecho acerca del programa, de la construcción de la propia identidad europea y de la esfera pública común. El núcleo del análisis lo constituyen los datos obtenidos a través de cuestionario cerrado aplicado a una muestra de estudio formada por estudiantes y egresados universitarios de distintas universidades españolas. Así, se caracterizan los resultados obtenidos en el conjunto de la muestra y, posteriormente, dividiendo la muestra en los subgrupos de participantes y no participantes en el Programa Erasmus. De los datos recolectados se concluye que los jóvenes universitarios españoles que forman la muestra de estudio, independientemente de su participación en el Programa Erasmus, son ciudadanos globales insertos en la esfera pública. Ahora bien, en las percepciones de los estudiantes Erasmus se reconoce una influencia positiva sobre el sentimiento europeo y el interés por la Unión Europea, así como por la confianza en las instituciones europeas. En cambio, los Erasmus tienden a ser más críticos en otros aspectos.

### **Palabras clave**

Opinión pública, Unión Europea, viaje, identidad, actitud política, estudiante universitario.

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## **Introduction and state of the issue**

Travel has been a key element in the development of societies throughout history. From the migrations of the first hominids to the configuration of the globalized world, humanity has used travel as a fundamental piece to configure its worldview and personality. Currently, the different identities are traversed to a greater or lesser extent by the travel experience, whether in the form of migration, tourism or discovery.

The current globalized society - globalization understood as a phenomenon that exceeds the definitions offered by the European Commission (2002) and the World Bank (2002), which see the phenomenon as a trend towards greater integration and interdependence between countries and regions of the planet and as the fact that the economic activities that have grown fastest are those that take place between the countries, respectively- have travel as a capital element. Following the definition of globalization proposed by Held

and McGrew (2000), global integration is outside the economic sphere, since it refers to the set of interrelated processes that operate in the primary domains of social, political and cultural power. If the latter is admitted, globalization goes beyond the exchange of goods, capital and services and promotes a global culture, sponsored by planetary media.

The industrialization of Western societies allowed the development of increasingly efficient means of communication and transport. It became possible the rapid and economic transfer of a large quantity of merchandise, but also of human beings. This supposed the beginning of a new mentality, to which the newspapers first contributed, at the beginning of the 20th century, and the radio from the forties onwards. Later, in the welfare societies, television exerted a great influence on the configuration of lifestyles, in which tourism began to popularize. Thus, we arrived to the era of the internet and the information society and, with them, a kind of global subject. This process influences the configuration of personal and social identities, as well as the existence of a globalized public sphere.

For García (2016), the contemporary dalliance of personal identity makes us experience a way of life that oscillates from ascriptive to elective links, which transforms the sense of personal identity. As understood by Castells (1999):

Identity, in sociological terms, is the process by which social actors construct the meaning of their action by attending to a cultural attribute (or articulated set of cultural attributes) that is given priority over other possible sources of meaning of action. There may be several identities in an individual, but such a plurality is always a source of tension. (p.7)

On a world of identities insists Touraine (1998), considering that, in reality, globalization does not exist, but rather it is an ideological construction. The tension of contemporary society between the global and the local questions what kind of identity is being forged. According to Bolívar (2001), the tension between the network society and the identity self-us, between civic values and cultural differences, must be explored.

Starting from the premise of the existence of the globalized citizen, that is, the person who enjoys the status of a citizen of a State that empowers him to exercise his duties and rights, but which is inserted in the global information society, infers the existence of a public sphere that also crosses the boundaries of the nation-state. The concept of public sphere is understood

as the place of social life in which public opinion can be created, with guaranteed access to all citizens (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974). The global village (McLuhan, 1962) and the global public sphere (Habermas, 1962) begin to be part of the daily life of the middle class as technology advances. The western world is increasingly connected and, in particular, European integration forms a common space in which there are more than 500 million people.

### **The specificity of the European Union (EU). Towards the common public sphere**

In Europe, the Treaty of Rome (1957) initiated the European Economic Community. Transformed into the European Union, the project has continued to this day. It is precisely here where Habermas (1962) locates the origin of the public sphere, in the European bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and defines it as a place of debate and discussion that is transformed with the arrival of the mass media in the twentieth century. In recent years, the European Commission has promoted measures to prioritize the specifically European public sphere, such as the *Plan D initiatives for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (CEC, 2005) and *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* (CEC, 2006). It is understood that the existence of a public sphere is important as a precondition for the realization of popular sovereignty, since it allows the opinion of everyone without limitations (Eriksen, 2004).

In fact, following Calhoun (2003), the public sphere facilitates collective choice and allows the production, reproduction and transformation of the social imaginary, as well as being a means of social integration, a form of social solidarity and an arena for debate. The question is whether the public sphere can be established beyond the borders of the nation-state (Bellamy, & Castiglione, 2001, Calhoun, 2003, Eriksen, & Fossum, 2002), since the general consensus is that National spheres cannot be transposed at European level (Castells, 1997). However, for Bee and Bozzini (2010), the European environment in Brussels leads to the real establishment of a transnational public sphere.

There is an open debate about the existence of a European public sphere, about who shapes it and how it develops. Contrary to the European

public sphere deficit hypothesis, Koopmans and Erbe (2004) proved that the German media reflected the Europeanization of policy-making. On the other hand, Koopmans (2007) concluded that governmental and executive actors are, by far, the most important beneficiaries of the Europeanization of public debates compared to legislative and partisan actors, and even more in comparison with the actors of the civil society, which are extremely underrepresented in European public debates. According to Dahlgren (2006), the public sphere does not begin and ends when the media content reaches the audience; that is a link in the long communicative and cultural chains that include how media content is received, understood and used by citizens. Therefore, the public sphere, in a broad way, integrates the entire communicative process and, therefore, cultural.

The problem in the European Union is that it is a unique integration experiment in the world because of the level of shared sovereignty reached, in which it is debated whether there is a collective identity capable of creating a common public sphere. In this regard, Hepp *et al.*, (2016) concluded that far from blaming the fragmentation of European identity, the collective struggle to understand the recent euro crisis helped to cement a common identity, pointing out that there are more things that unite Europeans than those that separate them. The need to reconcile multiculturalism, citizenship and collective identity is signaled by Delgado-Moreira (2017), indicating that there are European policies on multicultural citizenship and that the EU institutions elaborate measures to create European identity and citizenship. However, it warns that there is a lack of substantive connection between European citizenship and the identity of the Union. Eriksen (2005) argues that European cooperation and problem solving create public spaces, but so far, they have not produced a single general European public sphere. Rather, what one finds are segmented, transnational publics that evolve around networks of policies constituted by the common interest in certain policy fields.

It should be noted, following the contributions of Scammell and Semetko (2018), that currently the hegemony of public life structured by the State and territorially linked by radio, television, newspapers and books has been lost and the multiplicity of spaces of network communication distance the idea of a unified public sphere. Instead, what is given is public spheres of different sizes, superimposed and interconnected.

## **Mediated travel by the Erasmus Program**

The Erasmus Program was born in 1987 with the aim of promoting academic and cultural exchange among university students from different training centers in the European economic area, plus Switzerland and Turkey. At the core of the experience is travel to another country of the European Union and the possibility of living and studying in an environment different from that of the country of origin between three and twelve months, with the guarantee that the studied courses will be recognized in the university of origin. In 2014, the Erasmus Program became Erasmus + within the European 2020 Strategy (Jones, 2017, Hubble, Bellis, & Bolton, 2018).

Erasmus + collects previous projects and has become the program of the European Union that supports education, training, youth and sport in the continent. It extends until 2020 and has a budget of 14.7 billion. Its main objective is to offer study opportunities, experience acquisition and volunteering to four million European citizens. Thus, it is not only aimed at students, but teachers, practitioners or organizations, among others, who can also benefit.

In this article the Erasmus Program and the Erasmus + variant have been considered only regarding university students and graduates. It is based on the foundation that, beyond the academic content, the pan-European journey mediated by the Erasmus Program (which entails academic and economic advantages) influences the participants' worldview about the construction of the European identity and the configuration of the European public sphere, since it broadens the cognitive horizons of the participants, already inserted in the global world. In addition, the program is related to the internationalization of higher education beyond European mobility (Haug, 2016, Villalón de la Isla, 2017).

The research aims to explore the role of the Erasmus Program in relation to travel as a performative element of the European public sphere. Therefore, in addition to the literature review, a survey has been conducted to university students and graduates of different Spanish universities.

The main objective of the analysis is to observe and describe to what extent the trip mediated by the Erasmus Program contributes to modify the perceptions of citizens in the European public sphere in the people who have had an opportunity to participate in it compared to those who have not

participated in it. In the same way, it is also intended to characterize how participation in the program alters perceptions about European identity.

The study starts from the hypothesis that travel as the main experience of the Erasmus Program, beyond its academic content, favors the creation of the European public sphere and positively influences the public perception of the European Union in Spain. In the same way, it is considered that the youngest layers of Spanish society with university studies are inserted in an incipient European public sphere. In addition, they are global citizens and fully integrated into the digital society.

The research relates descriptively and compares the perceptions about the phenomenon among the subgroups that make up the sample of analysis.

## **Materials and method**

The study has been carried out under two research techniques: the literature review and the questionnaire. The review of the literature has served to refine the objectives of the research and for the subsequent elaboration of the questions that form the survey. Thus, the questionnaire contains twenty questions aimed at collecting relevant information to know the concepts that are related in the investigation. They are closed questions.

The sample has been limited to university students and graduates because they are the only ones who, until recently, have had the possibility of participating in the Erasmus Program. Therefore, it is a non-probabilistic sample, since its choice is given by the characteristics of the research (Hernández, Fernández-Collado, & Baptista, 2006). The total sample consists of 124 valid answers.

100% of the sample consists of students or former students of Spanish universities, of which 66.1% are women and 33.9% are men. 96% of respondents are between 18 and 30 years old, and 4% are over thirty years old, which indicates that all have been able to participate in the program created in 1987. Of these, 95.2% said know the Erasmus Program. However, only 24.2% have participated in the pan-European experience.

The comparative method is effective to be able to describe the object and check the hypothesis, since it allows to relate the attitudes gathered in the different data for the two subgroups.

## **Analysis and results**

From the data obtained, it is observed that Spanish university students live in a globalized world, with ease to travel or carry out international transactions, especially with the European Union. The global citizen is reflected in the study sample, since 36.3% assures to travel abroad two or three times a year; 32.3% say they do it once a year; 14.5%, more than three times a year; 12.9% said that they travel outside of Spain once every two or three years; and, only 4% say never to do it. Therefore, 68.6% of the sample travels abroad between one and three times a year. The experience of travel and its ease in today's world is revealed. This is reinforced by living integrated in the European Union, the only territory in the world in which 28 States have large doses of common policies and in which a public sphere is shared.

Thus, 31.5% of people say that they sometimes do activities with another EU country, while 27.4% say they do not do it very often. On the other hand, 21.8% say that they do it frequently and 7.3%, very often, compared to 12.1% who never do it. Of the total sample, however, almost half, 49.2% say that they frequently inform themselves of what is happening in the European Union and 7.3% say that they do it very frequently. On the contrary, 29% say they do not inform themselves frequently about European issues; 13.7% say that they do it sometimes and 0.8% never.

From the above data it is clear that 87.9% have relations with other EU countries, although they may be sporadic and of a different nature, such as personal, commercial or business. 23.4% of respondents have worked or lived in another EU country other than Spain for three months or more. However, 49.2% have a relative who has lived or worked in another member state. It follows that the European Union is present in the collective imagination of at least half of the sample. At the same time, it is clear that the respondents are interested in the news, since the entire sample consults media daily (71%), weekly (21%) or sometime a month (8.1%). In addition, 63.7% think that the EU is presented in the media with positive and negative aspects; 31% believe that it only appears as something good and 4.8% as something bad.

60.5% of the sample maintains a favorable opinion on Spain belonging to the European Union, which coincides with the traditional Spanish Europeanism shown in different surveys; compared to 34.7% that is indifferent and 4.8%, which is unfavorable. 37.9% of respondents felt

that they were as European as their Autonomous Community and 30.6%, as European as they were Spanish, compared to 24.2% who did not feel European and 7.3% who only feel European. Asked about their environment, respondents say that among their family and friends' feelings towards the EU are neither favorable nor unfavorable (58.1%), compared to 27.4% who consider them favorable and 4.8%, very favorable. On the other hand, 8.9% see them unfavorable. It follows that the relational context about the EU is rather indifferent in the study sample.

Likewise, of the total sample, 42% of the respondents consider themselves indifferent about whether belonging to the EU has benefited them, compared to 38% who believe that they have. In contrast, 53% agree that Spain has benefited from being part of the EU, while 16% is indifferent, like the 16% who strongly agree. On the contrary, 12% of those questioned disagree and consider that Spain has not benefited from European integration.

On whether the European Union interferes in Spanish political affairs, 29% of the sample is indifferent, 25% agree and 22% disagree. Indifference also wins among the respondents when asked if, in general, what is good for the EU is good for Spain, with 37% that is neither in agreement nor in disagreement, compared to 29% who disagree and 19%, which agrees. In fact, almost half of the sample, 49%, feel neither confidence nor distrust towards the European institutions, while 21% feel quite confident and 16% manifest feeling distrust.

The feelings of distrust differ when it comes to state institutions, according to the collected data. Thus, 49% of the sample feels great distrust towards the Spanish Government, 27% feel distrust and 16% are indifferent. As far as the autonomic government is concerned, the extreme levels of distrust are not so high, since 19% of the sample is very distrustful. 31% of the sample feels distrust for the autonomous government, 29% is indifferent and, again, 19% say they feel quite confident. On the other hand, the majority of the study sample, 81% feel very distrustful of the monarchy. It can be seen that the state institutions generate more radical opinions than the European ones.

The comparison of the subgroups allows observing how the travel experience influences those who have done an Erasmus. On the existence of a European public sphere, it is seen that those who stay very frequently informed about the EU are 17% among those who have done an Erasmus and 4% are among those who have not. Likewise, among the participants of the program, 3% say they keep informed at some time, compared to 17% who

say they ever do it among those who have not participated in the European program. This shows that those people who have participated in the European experience are more frequently interested in the information issues that concern the EU, which has an impact on strengthening the European public sphere. Among those who have participated in the program, there are more critical positions on how the European Union is presented in the media, since 37% of the participants consider that the Union is presented as something good, compared to the 30% that considers it among non-participants; 53% of the participants think that it is shown as something with positive and negative aspects, while 67% of the non-participants consider it to be so; but, 10% of the participants observe that it is presented as a bad thing, compared to the 3% who perceive it among the non-participants in the Erasmus.

Regarding the construction of their own identity, among those who have been part of the Erasmus Program, the feeling of being only European is more widespread, since 17% of them say they feel that way, while 4% of those they have not participated in the program claim to feel only European. The experience of travel mediated by the Erasmus Program influences the configuration of the own identity, especially if it is opposed to the opinion about the belonging of Spain to the EU that offers similar data both in the participants and among the non-participants in the program, in which more than half are favorable to integration.

The different perceptions about the European Union are more tangible between those who have done some Erasmus and those who do not regarding whether belonging to the Union has benefited them personally, since 27% of those who have participated are very great in agreement that has benefited them, compared to 9% of those who have not participated. Likewise, among the participants, 43% agree, compared to 36% of non-participants. Indifference falls among those who have lived the experience of the Erasmus travel, since 27% are not in agreement or disagreement in, while 47% of non-participants are indifferent to this issue.

Regarding the opinion on whether Spain has benefited from its membership in the European Union, it is clear that those who have done an Erasmus are very great in agreement (30%) compared to those who have not done so. (12%) To the contrary, those who disagree are 3% among Erasmus and 14% among those who have not done Erasmus. It is observed that participants see more advantages than non-participants in belonging to the European Union. This is reinforced by the perception of 34% of the

participants who are indifferent about whether the EU meddles in Spanish political affairs and 23% who strongly disagree, compared to 28% who are indifferent and 14% which strongly disagrees among non-participants. According to the statement is 20% of the participants and 26% of the non-participants.

The divergences between the subgroups are evident when considering whether what is good for the European Union is also good for Spain, since 10% of the Erasmus Program participants agree, compared to 21% of those who do not have participated. Disagree is 40% of those who have done an Erasmus, while 26% of those who have not done so disagree.

The discrepancy between the participants and the non-participants is also evident in the perceptions of citizen distrust towards different institutions of representative democracy of different levels of governance, as shown by the collected data.

The perception of trust is different between both subgroups with respect to the community institutions, as expected. However, there are also differences in the perception of trust towards the state and regional governments among the subgroups. On the other hand, this does not occur with the perception of trust towards the Spanish monarchy, in which distrust prevails in the two subgroups. Thus, it is inferred that other aspects and not only participation in the Erasmus Program can influence the trust towards the different institutions.

It is noteworthy that 40% of those who have done an Erasmus do not feel neither confidence nor distrust towards the European Parliament, the Commission and the European Council. Even so, this indifference is greater among those who have not participated in an Erasmus, with 52%. On the other hand, there are more (33%) those who, having done an Erasmus, feel quite confident in the European institutions, compared to 17% who, not having done so, feel quite confident. In a similar way but in the opposite direction, it is observed that those who have not done an Erasmus (19%) distrust more than the 7% who have done it and who say they distrust. Paradoxically, those who have participated in the Erasmus Program show a more extreme position of distrust towards the European institutions, compared to those who have not participated in the program. In this way, 17% of participants say they feel very distrustful, while only 7% in non-participants.

Precisely, it is in the case of distrust and the degree of great distrust towards the Government of Spain where it also shows more difference between the

two subgroups. Among those who have done Erasmus, the majority option (40%) is that of great distrust towards the Spanish Government, 12 points lower than that option (52%) among those who have not done an Erasmus. However, the mistrust option is higher (33%) among those who have participated in an Erasmus than among those who have not participated, since 26% of them are in distrust of the state government. In what has to do with the regional government, the data appear more dispersed. In the two subgroups similar values are given among those who favor great distrust (20% and 19% between participants and non-participants). In contrast, there are 8 points of difference between those who feel quite confident towards the regional government, between 13% of participants and 21% of non-participants who are in that option. Regarding the position of not feeling neither confidence nor distrust, there is a difference of 6 points between the opinions of the subgroups, from 34% of the participants to 28% of the non-participants in the Erasmus Program.

The data shows that, except in the case of the degree of great distrust in the Spanish Government, people who have done an Erasmus either show greater indifference or have more opinions tending to distrust the state and regional governments.

Among those people in the sample who have participated in the Erasmus Program it is observed that in most cases this participation has generated greater interest in the European Union, has allowed to establish a group of international friends and consider that it has benefited them academically and professionally. In contrast, fewer people believe that doing an Erasmus has served to internalize European values.

Thus, 64% of people consider that making an Erasmus has made their interest in the European Union grow, 17% of those who have participated in the program are very much in agreement with it and 43% agree. 27% of them do not show either agreement or disagreement, and 13% disagree (3%) and strongly disagree (10%). The interest aroused by the completion of the program is a contributing factor in the strengthening of the European public sphere. In the same way, maintaining a personal environment of relations with other people in the Member States is also a factor that helps the construction of the European public sphere, as 63% of the people who have participated in the program are very much in agreement that it has allowed them to have a group of international friends and 20%, who agrees with it. Therefore, 83% of those who have done an Erasmus appraise positively that

possibility, which together with the interest for the European community can generate more inclination towards the existence of the common public sphere. On a personal level, 87% of those surveyed with Erasmus are in favor of the effects of the program in their curricula. Among those questioned, 47% strongly agree and 40% agree that they have benefited academically and professionally, compared to 13% who are indifferent.

As regards the knowledge of the EU thanks to the Erasmus Program or the strengthening of the European identity itself, the majority option is that of indifference, while in terms of internalizing European values, indifference and disagreement are tied. In this way, 33% of people who have done an Erasmus are indifferent about whether the program has helped to strengthen their European identity, although those who strongly agree (17%) and agree (30%) add up 47%. They are, therefore, more numerous. On the other hand, those who disagree (17%) and strongly disagree (13%) are 30% of the respondents. Similarly, if participating in the Erasmus Program contributes to better understanding the functioning of the EU, 34% are indifferent, but the sum of those who strongly agree (10%) and agree (30%) is greater, with 40%. On the contrary, 23% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed.

In the case of the utility of the program to internalize European values, there is a tie with 27% of those who are indifferent and 27% of those who disagree. Even so, if one joins the degree of disagreement, with the one that strongly disagrees (13%) we obtain a result of 40%; therefore, it is greater than that of those who express an opinion of strongly agree (13%) and agree (20%), whose sum gives 33%. At that point we can see a weakening in terms of the homogenization of the construction of European identity through the Erasmus Program.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The hypothesis that the travel experience mediated by the Erasmus Program favors opinions about the European Union is demonstrated in the light of the obtained data and is in line with other studies that highlight the success of the program (Cairns, 2017; Cunha, 2018). In the same way, the experience also reinforces the existence of the European public sphere in informative terms. This is clear from the comparative perspective between those who have been part of the program during their university stage and

those who have not; as well as when considering their opinions about the Erasmus experience.

The European sentiment in one's own identity is more widespread among people who have done an Erasmus, who also consider that Spain has benefited from belonging to the EU, as well thinking that it has also benefited them at the personal and academic level. In addition, almost half of those who have participated in an Erasmus think that the trip has helped to reinforce their European identity, as 40% consider that thanks to this experience they know better the functioning of the EU. On the other hand, a greater number of participants consider that the experience has not served to internalize European values, something that is shown as a weak point in the construction of the European identity, since the participants are not aware of having developed the cosmopolitan values associated with the EU.

According to the data found, the Erasmus program influences the perception of trust in the European institutions, since 40% of those who have done Erasmus do not feel confidence or distrust in the European Parliament, the Commission and the European Council, but those who have not done Erasmus are more indifferent towards them (52%). However, although the most radical position of distrust is greater among the Erasmus, there are also more those who feel quite confident and less those who distrust.

It is beyond the scope of the study to determine whether there is a homogeneous European public sphere or a multiplicity of them overlapping and interconnected, but what the data show is that young university students are embedded in a transnational public sphere. Regardless of the participation in the program, the EU is in the worldview of the respondents, as shown by the fact that 87% have some relationship with the supranational community. More than 60% of the total number of respondents is favorable to the membership of Spain to the EU, almost half of them are informed of European affairs and have a relative who has lived or worked in another member country. Of course, more than half of those who have done an Erasmus are more interested in the EU and have been able to maintain a network of international friends. In addition, participants stay more frequently informed about community issues than non-participants, which reinforces the existence of a community public sphere.

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