

## EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS OF ERASMUS+ STUDENTS IN RIJEKA, CROATIA

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### **Abstract**

*Purpose* – The Croatian city of Rijeka has been a popular enclave for students participating in the Erasmus+ study exchange program, which has led to a shift in the relations between the local community (as hosts) and the student visitors (as guests). By applying the concept of the host-guest-relationship in this context, this study explores the student perceptions of Rijeka as a study-abroad destination, the degree of cultural exchange between locals and student visitors, and the overall footprint of Erasmus+ students on local communities in Rijeka.

*Methodology* – An online questionnaire was distributed to Rijeka’s residents (n=93) and Erasmus students (n=114). Two surveys were designed to explore their attitudes and the factors influencing the host-guest relationship from both perspectives.

*Findings* – The findings were analysed from both the perspectives of the students and the residents. The motivating factors influencing students participating in the Erasmus+ program included the landscape, rich natural attractions, affordability, proximity to other travel destinations, culture, and safety. From the local host perspective, the findings indicate that locals have a very positive perception of international students in Rijeka, with attributes assigned to them such as “well-behaved” and “friendly”. Hence, contrary to some studies that showed that students might elicit residents’ negative perceptions, Rijeka’s residents were happy to accept them as a part of the community.

*Contribution* – This study applies past research in host/guest relationships to a student exchange scenario. The practical implications for local stakeholders in Rijeka are to extend their offerings of cultural experiences to international students. In addition, identifying the quality of interaction between locals and visitors has implications for hospitality and tourism businesses.

**Keywords:** resident attitudes, tourism impacts, students, motivations, culture, Rijeka.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourist arrivals can bring many positive impacts to a destination, but often due to lack in policymaking, increased numbers of visitors can bring negative impacts. Past studies have investigated a greater understanding tourists’ nature and have found that tourism can have significant impacts in three main areas: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts. Although the results of these past studies implicate that tourism has mainly positive effects on economic-related matters and negative ecological concerns, the socio-cultural impacts are still dubious and are dependent by destination case. Since there can be variety of causes, studies have started to investigate the idiosyncratic factors that tourism can present in explicit destinations and, furthermore, examine how these relations may impact the daily lives of local communities (Aref and Redzuan 2010;

Budeanu 2007; Christian 2016; Hughes 2018). Some of the positive impacts can include tourists indirectly supporting local businesses, volunteering in local organisations, and adding value by bringing globalisation and multiculturalism to a destination. Hence, studies have proved that tourists can have an affinitive impact on destinations, but of course the outcome may still vary depending on the behaviors and the level of interaction of the hosts and guests (Aref and Redzuan 2010).

The Erasmus+ project aims to attract international students who can study a term or a year abroad with a partner university. Furthermore, the nature of the program allows students to travel and gain professional and personal experiences while providing financial support with the Erasmus+ grant. The grant's purpose is to enable students to explore the receiving country with more financial independence by providing equal opportunities for all students spending their time abroad while creating accessibility and promoting a memorable experience. The scheme became more popular among students throughout the years, which led the European Commission to raise funding for the program (European Commission, 2021). Therefore, the arrivals of international students to destinations participating in the Erasmus+ program has steadily increased and implicated further research to be carried out about Erasmus+ students' travel motives, behavioral patterns while living a short period outside of their "home" environment and their subsequent impact on local citizens.

The literature has already provided vital information on tourists' motivations and their behavioral patterns depending on the purpose and length of the travel (Edgell 2016; Fletcher et al. 2018; Page and Connell 2014). However, the literature on understanding the behaviors of Erasmus+ students, their motives, and their impact on local communities is limited. This is applicable to the city of Rijeka, Croatia, where international student numbers have increased, although there is still limited research on the motives of Erasmus+ students visiting Rijeka and their impacts on the local citizens.

Furthermore, since Erasmus+ creates equal opportunities for students to participate in cultural exchange, it is important to understand the correlation between the students and locals in more depth. In a wider context, Erasmus+ is important as it provides a broad understanding of cultural differences while increasing cultural acceptance. Therefore, this research aims to examine the socio-cultural impacts, both from the positive and negative perspectives, that Erasmus+ students may have on the citizens in the city of Rijeka.

The following questions lead the research:

*RQ1: What are the motives of Erasmus+ students for choosing Rijeka as their study destination?*

*RQ2: What can Rijeka offer to a wide Erasmus+ students experience to have their best time while they study in the city?*

*RQ3: How may Erasmus+ students affect the local community of Rijeka?*

*RQ4: How can Erasmus+ students act responsibly to minimise the possible adverse effects on the local community of Rijeka?*

## 1. ERASMUS+ PROGRAM, AN INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus program was funded in 1987 and has expanded to what is now today's Erasmus+ scheme. The program aims to support education, training, and sport throughout Europe (European Commission 2021). The program allows students to explore outside of their usual environment and choose from a variety of academic concentrations to study in a partner University (Cracium et al. 2020). It usually allows students to study abroad for a term or a full academic year. Furthermore, according to the European Commission (2022), it enables participants to:

- explore outside of their comfort zone
- learn new languages or improve language skills
- network with locals and other international students
- gain cultural awareness
- improve employability
- strengthen resilience
- develop professional and personal skills.

Furthermore, students participating in the program receive financial support during their exchange. The amount depends on the sending or host country's economic status and the students' household income (European Commission 2017). By providing this financial support, students are enabled to enjoy the benefits of the program to its fullest, and by creating equal opportunities, Erasmus+ creates fair access to the scheme for those who want to experience student life outside of class with practicality in another country (Lesjak et al. 2020).

The program promises opportunities for students to grow professionally and personally during their exchange (Cracium et al. 2020). The European Commission (2017) supports the statement, showing evidence that 97% of students who participates in the program get along better with people from different cultures. It has shown that 93% of students appreciate the value of other cultures more, and 80% improve their intercultural awareness. However, the program's academic advantages are also highly valued as students participating in the program have a greater chance of employment (Cracium et al. 2020). Furthermore, according to Curaj et al. (2020), participating in the program shows students' adaptability, transversal skills, diversity / intercultural understanding, and self-confidence. Furthermore, European Commission (2022) implies that modernisation challenges students. Throughout the program, they are encouraged to respond to current global issues including "employment, economic stability and growth, but also the need to promote social, civic and intercultural competences, intercultural dialogue, democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion, non-discrimination and active citizenship, critical thinking and media literacy."

### 1.1. Erasmus+ students' travel motivations

Tourists are individuals or a group of people travelling outside their usual environment for more than 24 hours but less than a year (UNWTO 2008). The "*away from home or usual environment*" is described by Shaw and William (1994) as a place away from the traveler's place of employment or residence. Therefore, educational travel with the

Erasmus+ program is also considered a form of tourism as students are away from their usual environment during their exchange program, usually no longer than for a term or one academic year (European Commission 2017).

To understand tourists' motives, researchers began to investigate the topic of tourists' motivation for travel outside of their usual environment. For example, McIntosh and Goeldner (1990, 131) classify the primary travel motivations into four categories:

1. Physical motivators
2. Cultural motivators
3. Interpersonal motivators
4. Status and prestige motivators.

According to Mountinho (1987, 16), motivation for travel is a “*state of need, a condition that exerts a push on the individual towards certain types of action that are seen as likely to bring satisfaction.*” Sharpley (1994, 99) identifies motivation to “satisfy needs, combined with personal preferences, pushes the tourist into considering alternative products; the final choice depends on the pull of alternative holidays or destinations.” Students' motivations for participating in the Erasmus+ program have been found to be similar to earlier mentioned findings (Gheorghe et al. 2017). Gonzalez et al. (2011) describe students' motivation with the push-and-pull framework, which hugely impacts students' destination choice. Abubakar et al. (2014) suggest that students' primary motivators for traveling abroad for educational purposes with the Erasmus+ program are strongly connected with their aim for personal and professional growth. The program allows students to learn through personal life experiences outside the classroom and gain new skills while studying abroad. Abubakar et al. (2014) add to the discussion by underlining that students' choices may depend on current tourism trends. However, factors such as learning how to adapt to a new environment, learning new cultures and languages, and developing networking skills in an international environment are all values that offer personal and professional growth and add purpose for students to study abroad (European Commission 2017; Gheorghe et al. 2017).

## **1.2. Tourism impacts**

Much literature shows that tourism can have significant impacts on destinations where it occurs. However, no evidence exists that tourism would only positively or negatively impact any one destination. Therefore, many studies began to investigate and provide an analytical argument on ways in which tourism can affect tourist destinations (Burns and Holden 1995; Dixon et al. 2001; Holden 2000; Hunter and Green 1995; Jenner and Smith 1992; Mathieson and Wall 1982; Page and Connell 2014). Most studies found that attractive destinations that experience a higher number of visitors have a greater probability of being impacted by at least one of the four major tourism impacts. These factors are economic, environmental, social, and cultural impacts (Fletcher et al. 2018; Pearce 2019; Sharpley 2018). However, since social and cultural impacts significantly correlate from one to the other, most studies have merged them and talked about them as “socio-cultural impacts.”

### 1.3. The economic and environmental impacts

Most studies agree that tourism has a definite positive economic impact on destinations, and studies bring evidence that tourism positively contributes to the country's economic growth (Fletcher et al. 2018; Page and Connell 2014). According to the OECD (2020, 15):

*“Following six decades of consistent growth, tourism remains one of the world's most important economic sectors. It is a key part of a growing services economy, generating income and foreign exchange, creating jobs, stimulating regional development, and supporting local communities.”*

Therefore, considering the economic impacts of tourism, it adds value to a destination, creates jobs in the hospitality sector, encourages development in the affected area, and contributes to the economic wellbeing of locals.

On the other hand, environmental impacts have an especially significant position in the tourism and hospitality fields. Food and water waste, littering and environmental damage are just some examples that have been identified. According to Shaw and Williams (1994), the more visitors there are to a said destination, the higher likelihood of environmental damage. Therefore, more popular (and frequently visited destinations) experience increased negative environmental impacts. However, the extent will largely depend on the nature and characteristics of the tourists in that particular destination (Edgell 2016; Jucan and Jucan 2010; Spenceley 2010).

### 1.4. Tourism's socio-cultural impacts

The socio-cultural impacts are not as easily defined as economic or environmental impacts. Therefore, the unique impacts which are considered socio-cultural have attracted researchers' attention, with the aim of understanding the associated factors concerning local communities spawned by touristic visitors.

*“When buying a service, there is often no need for the consumer to visit the place of production in order to consume the product, such as when buying insurance or financial services. But tourists must visit a location for tourism consumption to take place and this means that cultural impacts are inevitable.”* (Fletcher et al. 2018, 195)

According to Mathieson and Wall (1982, 149), “by its very nature, tourism means that people are away from the puritanical bonds of normal living, anonymity is assured away from home, and money is available to spend.” Many studies have concluded that tourists tend to have more of a negative behavior pattern during their time away from home than they do in their daily lives, which may have severe consequences for the local communities receiving these visitors (Budeanu 2007; Fletcher et al. 2018; Hughes 2018; Pearce 2019). Furthermore, it is suggested that further studies are necessary where it concerns tourists' behavioral patterns and subsequent impacts on host communities (Aref and Redzuan 2010; Budeanu 2007; Hall and Lew 2009).

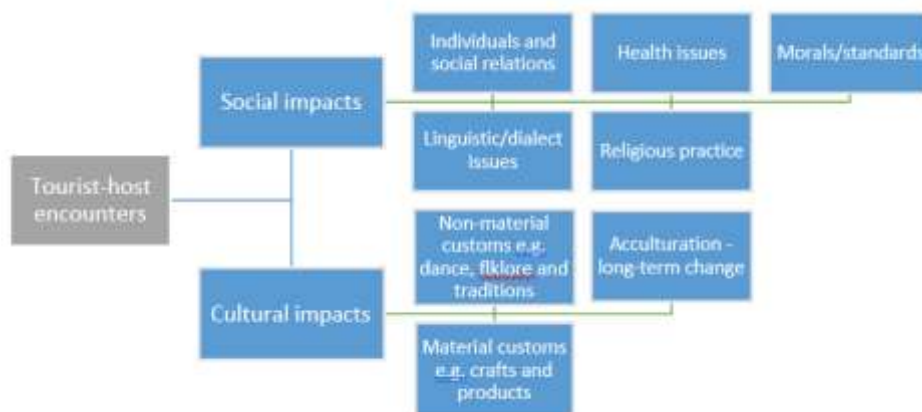
### 1.5. Guest-Host relationship

Inskeep (1991) suggests that the differences between locals and tourists can define the influence, and these differences are most likely to include:

- basic value and logic system
- religious beliefs
- traditions
- customs
- lifestyles
- behavioral patterns
- dress codes
- sense of time budgeting
- attitudes towards strangers.

Similarly, Douglas and Douglas (1996) share the view and state that the main contributors to the relationship between hosts and guests will derive from either social, economic, and cultural differences – or a combination of all (see figure 2.1). Fletcher (2018, 195) suggests, “the contact between visitors and residents can be beneficial or detrimental to the host population depending upon the difference in cultures and the nature of the contact.” Therefore, relationships between locals and guests can largely depend on both locals’ nature and visitors’ attributed characteristics (Crandall 1994; Deery et al. 2012; Inskeep 1991; Jucan and Jucan 2010; Kim et al. 2013; Markovic and Klaric 2015; Smith 2001; Su et al. 2018). This is consistent with many studies which suggest that socio-cultural impacts can depend on the rapidity of the tourist flow and a destination’s development (Kim et al. 2013; Markovic and Klaric 2015; Mountinho 1987). According to Fletcher (2018, 202), “the speed for development and change will have an important role in determining the magnitude of socio-cultural changes because time allows for the process of adaption.”

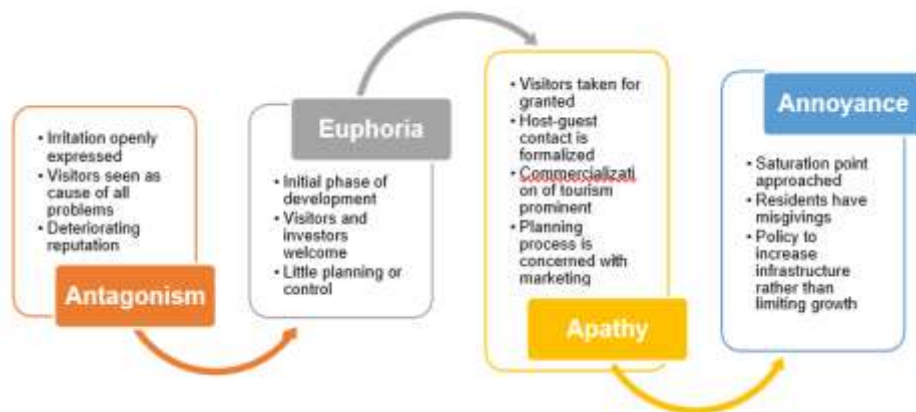
Figure 1: The dimensions of tourist-host encounters



Source: Page and Connell (2014, 294)

For example, tourism in Barcelona was severely [negatively] effected when tourist numbers rapidly grew between 2014 and 2016 (Hughes 2018). The situation in Barcelona reached its climax when locals started reporting that they did not even have access to enough parking slots in their own hometown, which has been overtaken by tourists. The tensions towards tourists became so immense that locals had graffitied “tourist go home” on street walls (Hughes 2018). The unmonitored and rapid tourist flow in Barcelona resulted in a negative experience for the local community. Furthermore, it likely influenced tourists’ perceptions of the destination as they experienced an unwelcome atmosphere during their stay.

Figure 2: Doxy’s Irridex (Levels of host irritation)



Source: Page and Connell (2014, 300)

Alternatively, aside from the negative experiences, many studies prove that tourists can indeed have a positive socio-cultural impact to some destinations. For example, if the purpose of travel is benevolent and both locals and tourists are open and interested in cultural exchange, the outcome is more likely to bring positive results (Aref and Rdzuan 2010; Christian 2016; Ogorelc et al. 2013; Peric 2018; Teo 1994; Zamani-Farahani and Musa 2012). Furthermore, according to Fletcher et al. (2018), tourism usually cherishes local pride in destination heritages, as locals seeing their homes through the tourist lens and may be more likely to consider their hometown’s beauty. According to Hall and Lew (2009, 162), “*Tourism must be practiced in a sustainable manner that includes public participation and support. An involved citizenship will have a greater sense of ownership and more positive attitudes toward tourism.*” Tourism organisations have started to think about more sustainable and responsible tourism trends, encouraging local and international businesses towards greener behavior which can thus encourage tourists to be act more responsibly while traveling and will eventually lead to a more sustained relationship between locals and guests (Sharpley 2018).

## 1.6. Erasmus+ students and socio-cultural impacts

There are a minimal number of studies on Erasmus+ students and their impact on destinations and local communities. Lesjak et al. (2020, 36) state that “*investigating student travel behavior is not new; however, understanding leisure travel behavior of Erasmus+ students is still relatively unexplored.*” Studies show that international student numbers have grown in the last few decades, and therefore exchange students may become a good investment for destination management that tend to invest in the youth travel segment (Asoodar et al. 2017; Amaro et al. 2019; Lesjak et al. 2015; Lesjak et al. 2020). According to Lesjak et al. (2020, 35) “*Erasmus+ students represent a large sub-segment of educational tourists, making this segment an attractive market for universities as well as destination marketing organisations.*” Therefore, the literature on Erasmus+ students, their motives and spending habits is growing. Also, since tourists can add to a destination’s value and characteristics, it is important to understand that with the growing number of Erasmus+ students, a destination’s image can be shaped by the quality and intensity of the incoming international students (Baron and Smith 1987; Coleman and Chafer 2011; Nemeth 2015). The latter may bring variety and multiculturalism to the city. Therefore, it is important to understand both positive and negative socio-cultural impacts on a local community, and it is important to study it further. Therefore, since there are no studies on the subject matter in Rijeka, this study aims to understand better the interrelation between the community of Rijeka and the Erasmus+ students visiting the destination in Croatia.

The literature has many studies discussing host and guest relationships in many destinations (Su et al. 2018; Vevere et al. 2017; Ward and Kennedy 1993; Yildirim and Ilin 2013). Furthermore, there is already a significant amount of literature on Erasmus+ students and their travel motivations (Coleman and Chafer 2011; Vevere et al. 2017; Yildirim and Ilin 2013). However, there is a gap in the studies of understanding the relationship between Erasmus+ students’ motivations and their impacts on the citizens in Rijeka. Hence, this study is guided by the following research questions:

*RQ1: What are the motives of Erasmus+ students for choosing Rijeka as their study destination?*

*RQ2: What can Rijeka offer to a wide Erasmus+ students experience to have their best time while they study in the city?*

*RQ3: How may Erasmus+ students affect the local community of Rijeka?*

*RQ4: How can Erasmus+ students act responsibly to minimise the possible adverse effects on the local community of Rijeka?*

## 2. METHOD

The research was carried out to understand better Erasmus+ students’ impact on the city of Rijeka, led by an interpretative paradigm. One of the authors had a first-hand experience of participating in the program and living in Rijeka for an academic year in 2019/2020. After completing the scheme, that author kept open communication with other international and local people from Rijeka, having a first-hand experience of understanding the socio-cultural impact on a destination. Another author is Croatian with



tourism host experience for over twenty years, having a first-hand perception of living with socio-cultural tourism impact on a destination.

This study has been designed to establish the relationship between Erasmus+ students in Rijeka and local citizens of Rijeka. Therefore, the questionnaire was designed to have the best use to answer the research's questions. Thus, the online survey has included both close-ended questions where responders could only choose between the answers provided by the questionnaire, which suggests that the study was carried out with the quantitative method. However, open-ended questions were also taken for better understanding, indicating that the study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve the best possible outcome. Furthermore, various options were provided for the responders to understand the correlation between local residents and international students. Therefore, according to Finn et al. (2000), this research is a mixed methods approach employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The research included data collection by creating an online survey for: a) the local community in Rijeka and b) the international students who visited Rijeka and studied there for a maximum of a year. Using both approaches enabled the research to reflect on the socio-cultural impacts of tourism studies and objectively analyse the subject.

According to Durbarry (2018), it is necessary to ensure that the sample validity is based on the accuracy of the responders and that it has been collected only from the groups whose participation added value by accuracy to the study. Therefore, to ensure the questionnaire would be answered only by participants whose answers would add significant value to the study, the questionnaire has been designed only for those who either studied or lived in the city of Rijeka in Croatia. Using the Erasmus+ network as the primary source, the snowball technique testified to this study's acceptable data collection method. In this way, the survey could be reached as many participants as possible.

The survey was distributed online in the spring of 2022, and received 217 total responses, with a breakdown of 93 responses from those who formerly lived or are currently residing in Rijeka and 114 responses from students who used to study or currently studying in Rijeka. The survey was kept open for a period of several weeks between February and March.

### **3. FINDINGS**

This section presents the research findings and gives a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between Erasmus+ students and the local citizens in Rijeka, Croatia. The first section will explain the subject matter from the students' perspective, while the second section will focus on the local's experience with the Erasmus+ students living in Rijeka.

#### **3.1. Destination choice motives**

Students were asked if they had any existing connections previously residing in Rijeka to understand the if there was a relationship to their choice of Rijeka as a destination for

study. A majority of the respondents indicated they didn't have any family or friends living in Rijeka, which indicates that students' choice of study in the city comes from their respective interests, research, or gathered recommendations. Furthermore, this implies that students are likely to have less expectations prior to their arrival, which may help to pursue a positive experience at the end of their trip.

According to Lesjak et al. (2015), international students' main motivation for choosing their Erasmus+ study destination is primarily influenced by rich natural attractions, safety, and culture. Based on Lesjak's et al. (2015)'s identified motivations, this research adopted a motives framework for Erasmus students studying in Rijeka and this research similarly found that students who studied in Rijeka had emphasised their interest in natural attractions, safety, and the desire to discover different cultures and languages as their main motives for participating in the program. In Lesjak et al.'s (2015) study, respondents stated that their reasons are to have new experiences, grow personally and learn about different cultures.

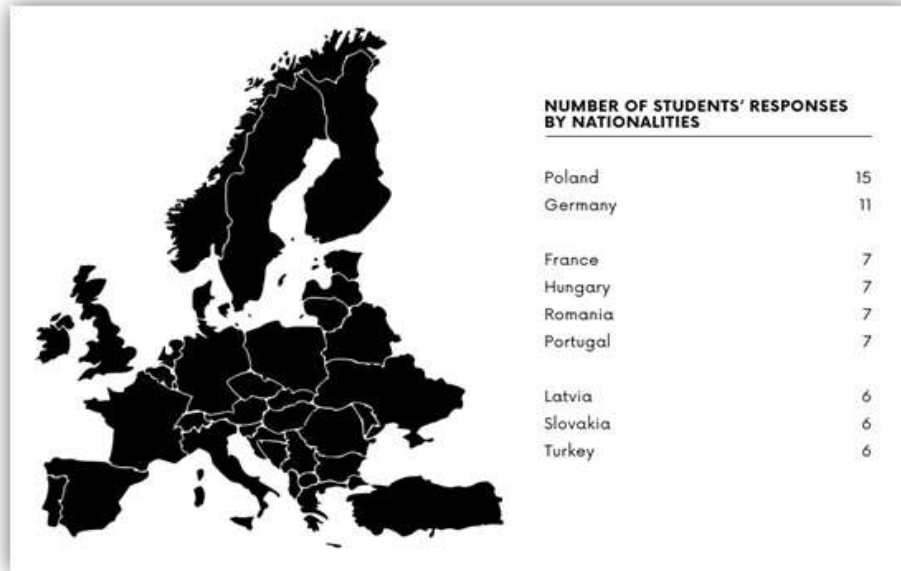
Furthermore, the results of this study are aligned with McIntosh and Goeldner's (1990) four main travel motives. The physical motivators of students choosing to study in Rijeka related to the beautiful landscape and beaches, which can also be associated with physical relaxation. The cultural motivations are also reflected in students' answers. Learning about languages and culture was rated as fourth (out of thirteen) in the students' motives to study in Rijeka. The desire to travel to other countries as the third-ranked motive shows further evidence of Erasmus+ students being open to exploring a new environment and looking to experience varying lifestyles to their own. This follows the interpersonal motivators proven in this study as the catalyst to meet new people, make new friends, and create human interactions with varying cultures.

Furthermore, the status and prestige motivators can be identified as carrying social capital from family and friends. As Erasmus+ students are returning home with more experiences than their classmates shows that they desire a unique experience that will likely give satisfaction at the end of their program by sharing it with their connections. This finding is consistent with Moutinho's (1987, 16) motivation theory, as travel is a "*state of need, a condition that exerts a push on the individual towards certain types of action that are seen as likely to bring satisfaction.*"

### **3.2. Erasmus+ student experience in Rijeka**

According to Inskip's theory (1991) on tourists' and hosts' acceptance, this study supports the hypothesis that similarities between nationalities facilitate more acceptance between the host community and guests. Most responders are from countries with similar traditions, customs, and lifestyles (see Figure 3). Therefore, a positive experience is more likely to be guaranteed, and it also reflects on students' and guests' positive perceptions of each other, which reflects in the survey's responses.

Figure 3: Erasmus+ students by country studied in Rijeka



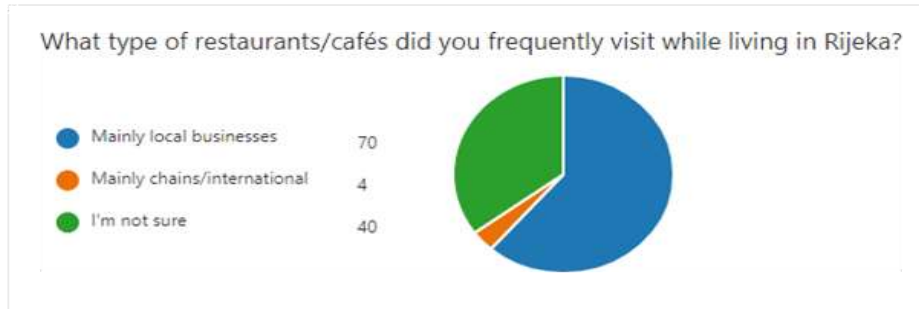
Source: Authors' own.

Furthermore, it was indicated in many of the responses that students enjoyed meeting new people and liked the atmosphere while studying in Rijeka. 85% of the surveyed students responded they enjoyed meeting new people, and 79% stated that the atmosphere was the most significant aspect in which they benefited from while studying abroad. In connection to the experience of students' perception, they were asked, "How much did you enjoy living in Rijeka?" for which question more than half of the students answered positively. At the end of the questionnaire, the students were asked how likely they were to revisit Rijeka. Most students have responded positively, which also proves their positive experience during their time in Rijeka.

### 3.3. Students' contribution to the guest-host relationship

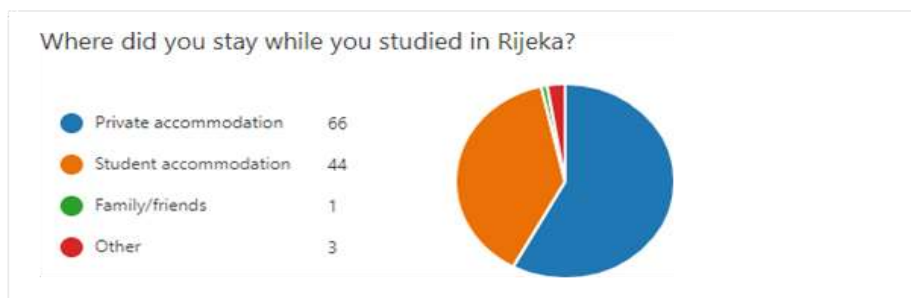
To understand students' purchase habits, and thus how they impacted the local economy of Rijeka, the students were asked where they frequently shopped in Rijeka (international or local restaurants/cafes) and where they stayed during their visit (private or student accommodation) (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). The outcome indicates that students, indirectly or intentionally, support local businesses during their stay. For example, a student responded, "Instead of well-known international, I chose local and small places every time," which shows positive intention and respect for local citizens, contributing towards to a positive guest-host relationship.

Figure 4: **Students' restaurants/cafes preferences whilst studying in Rijeka**



Source: Authors' own.

Figure 5: **Students' accommodation preferences whilst studying in Rijeka**



Source: Authors' own.

Additionally, students were asked if they studied the Croatian language to see their desire to learn about the local culture/language. According to the responses, this study supports previous motivational studies (Lesjak et al. 2015; McIntosh and Goeldner 1990) as most of the respondents indicated that they learned the language or had learned at least a few local words outside of class, which shows students' desire to learn about different cultures. Although their motivation might be self-driven to learn about new cultures and languages, eventually with their actions, they are contributing to a positive relationship with and outcome for the local community.

As the findings of this section demonstrated, students had a positive experience living in Rijeka and had a positive relationship with local citizens. However, when students were asked more about their friendships in Rijeka, only a few responded that they made only local friends. Although many students stated that they made international and local friends equally, it can be argued that the reason for making predominately international friends is because of a possible language barrier or the host community's attitude towards international students.

### 3.4. The Host Perspective

This section will highlight the local residents' perspective on Erasmus+ students in Rijeka. Furthermore, it will give a more detailed understanding of their views regarding further international student arrivals in the future.

#### 3.4.1. Locals' perception of international students

More than half of the locals acknowledged that they met with international (Erasmus+) students in Rijeka, and only a tiny percentage of the responders stated that they had not met any international students at all. However, to understand locals' overall perception, all locals were asked about the first thought that comes to their minds when considering international students. According to their answers, the outcome emphasises an optimistic overview of locals and suggests welcoming behavior towards visitors (see Figure 6). Therefore, the findings indicate that according to Fletcher's (2018) theory, Rijeka has good management in terms of tourism and a fair speed of development to accommodate visitors and positively welcome them.

Figure 6: Locals' first associations with Erasmus+ students



Source: Authors' own.

#### 3.4.2. Locals' experience with Erasmus+ students in Rijeka

Among the locals who stated they met with Erasmus+ students, 28% had created meaningful friendships, indicating a generally positive relationship between hosts and guests in Rijeka. Although most respondents met only briefly with Erasmus+ students, when asked to describe the nature of their experience of meeting with them, most answered positively on a scale where 0 stands for "very negative" and 10 for "very positive". The findings show that locals had a positive experience with international students, as 40% of the responders evaluated their experience as extremely positive. Notably, the lowest received score on this question was a four, where responders stated they had a negative experience. As can be seen in Figure 6, some of the descriptions that local residents used to describe Erasmus+ students in Rijeka included *interesting*, *fun*, *open-minded* and *friendly*.

When locals were asked their opinion about future international student arrivals, the responses were also very positive. 83% of respondents supported the statement that international student arrivals should increase, which has significant implications for the future of the development of the Erasmus+ program in Rijeka.

Figure 8: Locals' level of acceptance for future Erasmus+ students



Source: Authors' own.

When asked to elaborate, one local respondent said:

*"I think it would be better for Rijeka to have more foreign students, so maybe the events would expand that way. But, even for local people, I don't think we have enough of this program."*

Furthermore, the following answer reflects on the isolated nature of the city and that the Erasmus+ program helps to mitigate this:

*"I think Rijeka would profit from additional multiculturalism, even though we pride ourselves already to be one of Croatia's most open and tolerant cities."*

### 3.4.3. Locals' contribution to the guest-host relationship

Locals show effort when learning other languages as most speak English as their second language. The question "When you meet international students, what language do you use to speak to them?" was a multiple-choice question where 76% of local respondents chose the option "English" as their answer. None of the locals selected the Croatian language as a singular answer, indicating that locals are highly likely to speak a second language (not necessarily English, but predominantly) regardless of age or gender. However, from the answer "I made meaningful friendships with Erasmus+ students," 100% of respondents chose English as at least one of their spoken languages. It also indicates that language is not a barrier to making friendships between the citizens and Erasmus+ students.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows evidence that socio-cultural impacts can bring positive results in tourism and hospitality studies and add to the literature demonstrating that appropriate behaviour and sufficient openness for other nationalities can establish positive interrelation between guests and the host community, especially where it relates to Erasmus+ or exchange students in international Universities. The Erasmus+ program shows genuine potential for positive globalisation and promotes equal opportunities in a world where travel has become more accessible for the public.

According to previous studies, students are keen to explore during their exchange program. Therefore, they are frequent customers in local restaurants, stay in private accommodations and travel in the country while on exchange. This study has implications for more rural or obscure destinations to acquire the same type of high-quality visitors in the Erasmus+ students. This can include destination offerings like package tours designed especially for Erasmus+ students, volunteer activities to contribute to the local community and other programs where locals and students can have increased interaction to eventually strengthen the guest-host relationship.

This study contributes to existing literature in both the areas of socio-cultural impacts on local citizens, and also on the behaviors and value-added by Erasmus+ students as visitors. This study also contributes to the perceptions of students from that of local communities in places where Erasmus+ programs exist. This study sets the ground for future research on the subject matter in alternate destinations to compare students' motives and experiences with local citizens as much as hosts' perspectives on the students' arrivals to research socio-cultural impacts in the tourism industry.

Although the study received appropriate responses, data collection might limit the accessibility and adequacy of international students' data collection for older adults who may not be as familiar with online surveys as the younger generations. Furthermore, collecting data by interviewing students and locals may have given a more in-depth understanding of their relationship. It is also important not to generalise the findings beyond the context of Erasmus+ destinations.

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