

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ERASMUS EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Research topic: *The present study is the content analysis of 502 Erasmus students' experiences published in the website www.20erasmus.eu. **The aim of the study:** This study aims to identify the most frequently mentioned concepts in response to the Erasmus experience-related questions "Did you grow-up? Was this experience useful for your life and for your career? Did you feel like home away from home? Did Erasmus change your life? Do you miss that time?" published in the website www.20erasmus.eu, the context (positive/negative) and the attitudes towards Erasmus program via content analysis. In addition to this, identifying whether the Erasmus program influences individual or academic development and the extent to which the Erasmus Student Exchange Program has reached its aims on the basis of collected data are among the aims of this program.*

Key words: Erasmus Exchange Program, Erasmus Experience, EU, Academic Experience, Personal Experience.

1. MATERIAL AND METHODS:

The content analysis of 502 Erasmus experiences shared in the website www.20erasmus.eu was conducted via Simple Concordance 4.0.7. program. Thus, the total word number and word frequency could be presented in tables.

"Content analysis is a highly flexible research method that has been widely used in library and information science (LIS) studies with varying research goals and objectives. Based on a basic communications model of sender / message / receiver, initially researchers emphasized making inferences based on quantified analysis of recurring, easily identifiable aspects of text content, sometimes referred to as manifest content. Since then, researchers in many fields, including anthropology, library and information studies (LIS), management, political science, psychology, and sociology, have used content analysis. In the process, they have adapted content analysis to suit the unique needs of their research questions and strategies and have developed a cluster of techniques and approaches for analyzing text grouped under the broad term of textual analysis" (White and Marsh, 2006: 22-23).

Data: The text which underwent content analysis comprises 100443 words. These were written in 8466 different words. The longest sentence contains 2.254 words. The shortest sentence contains 2 words.

2. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ERASMUS EXPERIENCES, TABLES AND COMMENTS

The country distribution of the students sharing Erasmus experiences reveals that the highest rate of contribution belongs to Italy and Spain, France, Poland and Portugal.

Table 1: Distribution of Erasmus experiences by country

Country name	Number of Erasmus Experience	Country name	Number of Erasmus Experience
Italy	109	UK	13
Spain	59	Czech Republic	10
France	35	Slovakia	8
Poland	34	Hungary	8
Portugal	34	Bulgaria	7
Belgium	28	Lithuania	5
Germany	26	Estonia	4
Romania	22	Latvia	3
Sweden	21	Slovenia	3
Netherland	19	Ireland	3
Finland	17	Austria	3
Greece	15	Denmark	1
Turkey	14	Norway	1
Sum			502

a. Content analysis of Erasmus Experience titles

Table 2: The frequency distribution of the words used in Erasmus experience titles

Concept	Frequency	%
Discover	137	31.1
Life	70	15.9
Love	58	13.1
Dream	44	9.9
Touch	38	8.6
Erasmus	29	6.6
World	25	5.7
Europe	17	3.9
Experience	13	2.9
Friend	10	2.3
Sum	441	100

According to Table 2, the total of the words ranking in top 10 is 441. The fact that the symbol (!) was used 232 times in the titles is an indication of the

excitement with which students talk about their experiences. Students used the concept “**discover**” most frequently in the experience title. 23 students used the expression “we discovered”, while 114 used the expression “I discovered”. Thus, one can infer that the Erasmus experience is a relatively individualistic and personal experience.

It was also observed that the students used the word “discover” most frequently in relation to “themselves” and “life”.

The students emphasized the following in their discoveries related to themselves:

I DISCOVERED -----→ Myself, My limits, A new side of me, myself differently, A new me, My identity, My reality, I discovered myself being happy, who I really am, another me

The students emphasized the following in their discoveries related to life:

I DISCOVERED -----→ A new way of life, So much about life, What life is How good life can, Lovely lifestyle, A new life, A new way of life, The meaning of life, Easy life, How much life can, Different ways of life, Erasmus life.

Other subjects and areas discovered by students are as follows:

I DISCOVERED -----→ Multiculturalism, international, Europe, a wonderful place, true emotions, Home away from home, the World, new world, (others), (paradise), similarities, dreams, magic of cultures, sing Language, universe, diversity, rainbow world joy, a great friendship, many new people, so many things, love, hundreds of different worlds, the heaven, diversity, happiness, European essence, pure and unlimited freedom, what is the mix of nations, each other, other world. At this point, it could be argued that students’ range of exploration is highly diverse.

The second most frequently used concept in the experience title is “**life**”. The word “life” is mostly used together with “discovery”, which was also mentioned above. Apart from this, an analysis of the meaning and context in which life was used shows that;

I had the time of my life, I had the best time/year of my life, I had change my life, I had Experience a new life, I started a new life, I did the best decision of my life, I smelled/ my life, I touched real life, I widen my life, We saw the heaven of life.

As can be seen, students used the concept life in both concrete and positive sense.

*An analysis of the concept **love** shows that;* Every single minute, this time, Erasmus, sharing cultures, Eastern Europe, Europe, to be Erasmus person, my Erasmus time, every single day, host country,

*An analysis of the concept **dream** shows that;* It was also observed that the students use the concept of dream in two senses;

1. That they realized their dreams through the Erasmus experience;
2. That their Erasmus experience was like a dream and they saw a dream during this process.

Both senses encompass a positive meaning and a feeling of excitement.

*The concept of **touched** is as follows:* Sky, Europea, my dreams, time, endless, happiness, my life, my soul, a dream, and the paradise

*In relation to the use of the **Erasmus** concept:* The students mentioned that they felt, discovered and loved Erasmus.

*As for the concept “**world**”:* Students used the concept “world” in two senses;

1. The concrete and physical sense: to see new places in the world and discover the variety and colours in the world.
2. The abstract sense: to see different worlds, to explore their own world

*The use of the concept “**Europe**” is as follows:* The students stated that they explored, felt, loved and lived the spirit of Europe and the meaning of EU. It is interesting that the students stated having discovered Europe and living the European spirit although the majority was of European origin. It can be seen that the Erasmus programme helped develop an awareness of Europe and Europeans.

The students used the experience concept with highly positive adjectives: They described the experience concept with the adjectives “great, wonderful, beautiful, exciting, changing”. Also, they expressed that they experienced a new and different lifestyle and future.

*The concept of **friend**:* The students told that they met friends from different parts of the world and built friendships that would last forever.

b. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ERASMUS EXPERIENCES

Table 3: The frequency distribution of the words used in Erasmus experiences

Range	Concept	Frequency	%
1	Erasmus	1007	18.6
2	People	631	11.6
3	Life	599	11.1
4	Friend	462	8.5
5	Experience	450	8.3
6	Time	438	8.1
7	Student	391	7.2
8	New	364	6.7
9	Different	284	5.3
10	Other	253	4.7
11	World	218	4
12	University	165	3
13	Language	157	2.9
	Sum	5419	100

According to the table, the sum of the words in the 14 most frequently used words is 5419. While 156 students used the expression “My Erasmus”, 17 students used “our Erasmus” and 5 students used “your Erasmus”.

The “**Erasmus**” concept was most frequently used in the Erasmus experiences. It is evident that the students have created an “**Erasmus**

terminology”. This terminology is composed of naturally emerging concepts formed as a result of the students’ experiences. They can express many things that they feel and they understand each other by means of these concepts.

The concepts in this terminology could be listed as follows (from the most frequently used to the least frequent):

Table 4: Erasmus Terminology

Erasmus students	Erasmus spirit	Erasmus babies	Erasmus girl	Erasmus community
Erasmus experience	Erasmus family	Erasmus trip	Erasmus night	Erasmus bar
Erasmus programme	Erasmus period	Erasmus word	Erasmus association	Erasmus victims
Erasmus year	Erasmus language	Erasmus parties	Erasmus nationality	Erasmus name
Erasmus friend	Erasmus group	Erasmus studies	Erasmus gift	Erasmus section
Erasmus life	Erasmus semester	Erasmus network	Erasmus generation	Erasmus destination
Erasmus people	Erasmus scholarship	Erasmus money	Erasmus journey	Erasmus nick
Erasmus Exchange	Erasmus days	Erasmus society	Erasmus atmosphere	Erasmus courses
Erasmus time	Erasmus months	Erasmus dream	Erasmus planet/world	Erasmus Story

The most striking concept is **Erasmus Spirit**. Erasmus spirit does not have a concise definition; however, what Erasmus spirit encompasses can be listed on the basis of data collected via content analysis. The Erasmus spirit includes discovering primarily oneself, new places, new tastes; making new friends, having fun in Erasmus parties, entertainment and travelling. The Erasmus spirit does not contain prejudices, isolation, national, ethnic and religious identities.

As expressed by a student;

It had no meaning if you were from Poland, Turkey or Greece

It had no meaning if you were a Catholic, Muslim or Orthodox

It had no meaning if you liked heavy metal or techno

It had no meaning if you were straight or gay

It had no meaning if you liked cats or dogs

The majority of the students stated that Erasmus changed them and their lives to a great extent.

- They evaluated the process as joyous, enjoyable and productive.
- The number of people expressing gratitude for the Erasmus is unignorable. In addition, they expressed wishes like “God save Erasmus” and “Long live Erasmus”.
- Most of the students expressed that they explored and found about themselves through Erasmus.
- They stated that talking about and describing Erasmus is not easy and that people lacking this experience would have difficulty understanding this.
- Erasmus is highly recommended for everyone. They even describe the process as indescribable and a must for everyone. Some even have recommendations like “Do not attend Erasmus, live Erasmus!”.

- The number of students who state that they will never forget those days is also high.
- Most of the students want to return back to the Erasmus period.
- They think that Erasmus is not “a waste of time”.
- They long for the Erasmus period and friends.
- Some evaluate Erasmus as a chance.
- Students state that Erasmus never ends. It could be argued that its effect continues despite having ended as an action.
- Five students stated they found their husbands and five stated they found their wives in this experience.
- Many students think that Erasmus has created a new culture.
- They evaluated Erasmus as an important period in their lives.
- A student pointed to similarities between Plato’s metaphor of cave and Erasmus.
- There are even some who say “I wish I could stay as an Erasmus student forever”.
- The number of students saying “Erasmus was the best decision in my life” is quite high.
- The students stated that they became more positive thanks to Erasmus.
- Again, the number of people wishing to participate in the Erasmus program is quite high.
- There are a few students who separate their lives into two periods: Pre-Erasmus and Post-Erasmus.
- There are many students who think that Erasmus put an end to their routine life and made them more European.
- There are only a few students who think that the Erasmus funding was insufficient.
- There are even people who identify themselves with Erasmus and go so far as to say “We were Erasmus.”

The second most frequently used word is People.

Table 5: The use of the concept of people

young people	right people	lovely people	special people	lot of kind people
wonderful people	interesting people	drunk people	Smiling people	ESN people
Erasmus people	local people	Foreign people	the best people	all people
some people	other people	a few people	The nicest people	good people
new people	fantastic people	awesome people	hundreds people	bad people
real people	great people	Strange people	multicultural people	dozen people
international people	more people	Friendly people	enjoy people	shallow people
blonde people	very special people	happy people	Turkish people	VIP people
European people	many nice people	Seasick people	the greatest people	all types of people
different people	a lot of people	my people	amazing people	genuine people
native people	unite people	different culture	unforgettable people	warm hearted people

It can be observed that expressions related to meeting people from new and different cultures, and the expressions “there aren't people categories”, “unite people in diversity”, “Erasmus people were/are unique” are frequently used. The students also pointed to the fact that people are very similar to each other and could be close to each other despite coming from distant places and mentioned the shared beauties. It can also be seen that the adjectives used in relation to the concept of people have highly positive connotations: wonderful, special, fantastic, important, good, great, enjoy, the best, the nicest, the greatest, happy, friendly people.

The description of a new person type is evident: **Erasmus people**.

There are also positive opinions of the local people.

Here, there is no discrimination and otherisation in the use of “other people”.

On the contrary, students emphasized forming a unity despite the differences. It was observed that the concept of people was used negatively in only three places.

1. Bad people: A student mentioned her worries about being stalked by a male stranger she met in the tram while searching for accommodation and stated that it was difficult for her to save herself from the man.
2. Shallow people: A student mentioned the presence of some shallow people who became drunk in parties.
3. A French student (going to Italy) conceived of Erasmus as a waste of great amounts of money and thought that young people used this money for alcohol and drugs. He had witnessed that the students used most of their time consuming alcohol and drugs in Erasmus bars.

The third most frequently used concept is Life

Table 6: The use of the concept of life

my life	live life	my future life	a bland life	real life
new life	student life	erasmus life	everyday life	perfect life
their life	multinational wild life	great life	my whole life	university life
different life	traditional life	European life	amazing life	magic life
your life	admiring life	post-erasmus life	our /life lifetime	my professional life
night life	daily life	my old life	our perfect life	social life
small lifes	expensive life	another life	fake life	second life

The fact that the concept “my life” was used 274 times indicates that the students told this experience from the perspective of their own lives.

The most frequent use of the “life” concept is “the best day/time/ year/ period /part/decision of my life”. Another frequently mentioned thing was that the Erasmus experience changed their lives. A negative use of the life concept was not observed.

Two new uses of the life concept was noted:

Erasmus life= The time period spent as an Erasmus student in the host country.

European Life = Making friends from different European societies, travelling and discovering European life.

An analysis of the concept “different” shows that Friend:

They made friends from different cultures and countries and built good friendships and relationships. Shared activities like travelling with friends, going to the cinema and theatre, etc. were mentioned frequently. The majority of the students talked about the loneliness and the things they suffered from in the first days; however also mentioned that they overcame many difficulties soon by making new friends and built firm relationships. The number of people visiting their friends after Erasmus is unignorable. It is evident that the discovery of different places and cultures continues with friend visits after Erasmus.

Table 7: The use of the concept of experience

indescribable experience	amazing experience	incredible experience	positive experience	same experience
the best experience	a unique experience	fruitful experience	unusual experience	educational experience
wonderfull experiences	wonderful experience	cool experience	personal experiences	scary experiences
great experience	academic experiences	shared experience	richest experience	bad experience
new experience	rich experience	exciting experience	learning experience	work experience
erasmus experience	beautiful experience	goods experience	their experiences	lasting experience
cultural experience	first experience	singular experience	funny experience	foreign experiences
fantastic experience	social experience	European experience	singular experience	big experience
my experiences	exceptional experience	unforgettable experience	extraordinary experiences	international experience
usefull experience	not professional experience	intercultural experience	unbelievable experiences	boring experience

The fact that the Erasmus experience was highly fruitful and beautiful was emphasized by students. No negative opinions were observed in relation to experience. A student even said: “Have you ever met somebody with a bad experience on Erasmus program? Stop searching, you will not find it!”.

An analysis of the concept “different” shows that Time:

The most frequently used expression in the time concept was “First time”. The students expressed that they lived the advantage of being in a different country and culture for the first time and felt pleased about this. The students evaluated the Erasmus period in a highly positive way. Only two students viewed the period as difficult times.

Table 8: The use of the concept of new

new friends	new world	new life	new home	new eyes
new cultures	new community	new room	new year	new feelings
new me	new style of life	new university	new projects	new foods
new family	new apartment	new-Europeans	new identity	new nationality
new situations	new things	new lessons	new generation	new revelation
new city	new prospectives	new desires	new places	new options
new people	new persons	new challenges	new flat	new way
new experience	new opportunities	new stuff	new plans	new knowledge
new country	new lifestyle	new couples	new sight	new adventure
new language	new business	new impressions	new start	new ideas
new period	new view	new day	new smells	new environment
new social rules	new skills	new self	new moon	new teacher
new beginning	new landscape	new perspective	new EU	new economy

The students experienced a lot of novel things within the Erasmus process. This is evident from the wide range of the concept “new”.

An analysis of the concept “different” shows that:

Students frequently stated that they viewed a different dimension of life, looked at life from different angles, learnt about different cultures, languages, worlds; tasted different meals, cuisines and spices and made friends from different cultures. A student said “Everything was different; I was feeling like I was living in another planet”, “No expressions related to the problems created by differences were observed. A student even said “We were so different and so similar at the same time”.

An analysis of the concept “different” shows that:

It can be seen that the concept “other” was not used in the sense of otherisation, isolation or discrimination.

Table 9: The use of the concept of university

new university	different university system	university life
my home university	host university	guest university
our university	medieval university	your university
good university	extremely modern university	old university

Although the main aim and function of the Erasmus program is concerned with university education, the concept of university was not frequently used in the students’ experiences. The academic environment, educational system, relationships with the faculty were not mentioned frequently. For instance, the concept of library was used only four times. Usually the university names were mentioned.

Table 10: The use of the concept of language

erasmus language	interesting language	nicely melodic language
different languages	same language	very romantic language
foreign language	all languages	beatiful language
a new language	native language	local languages
another language	our own languages	language exams
second language	Universal language	odd language
learn language	body language	nicely melodic language

The process of learning a new language was frequently mentioned. The emphasis was on communication despite speaking different languages by making use of body language where possible and even creating a new Erasmus language.

"*Erasmus language*", is not English, Spanish or French... It is the best way to understand the sense of living without speaking; just acting I discovered sign language and body language! It could be argued that the effect of shared experiences with Erasmus students from different countries may have had a big influence over conversing in not only one but also a few other languages.

IN CONCLUSION

In this study, it is observed that the students talked highly positively about the Erasmus experience. The students described this process as enjoyable and productive. It could be argued that the Erasmus experience contributed to students' individual development rather than academic development.

It could also be maintained that one of the key purposes of the Erasmus exchange program is to remove prejudices by maintaining student mobility and cross-cultural dialogue and to unite societies under the EUROPEAN AWARENESS and EUROPEAN PEOPLE understanding via strengthening interactions between EU member citizens. Data collected in this study present evidence that the Erasmus programme has reached this aim.

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