

## **The Effect of Sociocultural Identities on Study Destination Choice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There are very few studies that consider the relationship between sociocultural identities and tourists' destination choices, in which almost none focusing on the education tourism context. The objective of this research was to examine the effect of national identity, consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer ethnocentrism on international study destination choice. One hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed to final year high school students, with a usable response rate of 75.83%. The data were analysed using partial least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The study found a significant positive effect of consumer cosmopolitanism on students' intention to study in Australia based on their perceived image of the destination and institutions. Contrary to the proposed hypothesis, national identity had a significant positive effect on the destination image of Australia.

*Keywords:* Consumer cosmopolitanism, consumer ethnocentrism, destination image, institution image, national identity

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The advantages of studying abroad encourage many students to leave their home country to study overseas. This tendency has resulted in a growing number of international students worldwide, which reached a figure of 5.3 million in 2017 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD],

2019). Marketing scholars and practitioners have been urged to conduct more research in order to understand the factors influencing international students' decisions to study abroad. It is important to consider the factors shaping the image of destinations and institutions because most international students tend to consider these aspects in their decision-making.

Some tourism marketing research have reported that tourists from different countries may hold different images of a destination (Kastenholz, 2010; Ng et al., 2007). This finding implies that one's attachment to a socio-cultural group may lead an individual to have a collective perception of foreign countries. Other work, however, tends to neglect the potential effect of sociocultural identity on destination image formation (Chen et al., 2012a; Tasci, 2009).

Globalisation has various impacts on culture, including how individuals identify themselves (King, 2016). Nowadays it is common for an individual to hold multiple sociocultural identities. This study is one of the few that evaluates the joint predictive power of multiple socio-cultural identities as determinants of international students' choice of study destination. The research aims to examine the effect of national identity, consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer ethnocentrism on international students' choice of study destination based on their perceived image of the destination and institutions.

## Literature Review

**Destination and Institution Images as Collective Constructs.** Previous studies tended to consider the formation of destination and institution images as an individual process (Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Martínez & Alvarez, 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014). Nevertheless, these images may be collectively constructed (Chen et al., 2012a, 2012b). Referring to the self-congruity theory, individuals are likely to maintain their self-concept when purchasing a product (Hosany & Martin, 2012; Sirgy, 2018), including when evaluating a tourism destination (Ahn et al., 2013; Kumar, 2016). One of these self-concepts is shaped by individuals' attachment to sociocultural groups.

Individuals' sociocultural group identity in the international context can be seen from the extent of their national identity, consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer ethnocentrism. Even though individuals may hold multiple group identities, the effect of each identity on consumer behaviour depends on the strength of their affiliation with the group. Social identity theory explains that when individuals recognize their membership of a group, they are likely to adopt in-group values, which in turn influence their perceptions, attitudes, preferences, intentions and behaviours toward an object (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

**National Identity as an Antecedent of Education Tourism Choice.** National identity is individuals' identification with their home country, which is reflected by

their sense of belonging, recognition of the country's uniqueness and emotional attachment to the home country (Keillor & Hult, 1999; Carvalho et al., 2019). One's national identity stimulates individuals to hold an in-group bias, which leads to consumer ethnocentrism. Their emotional attachment to their home country encourages them to act in the best interests of the country, including protecting the domestic economy (Carvalho et al., 2019; Fischer & Zeugner-Roth, 2016).

Studies by Conner et al. (2017), Nguyen-Hau et al. (2013), and Sobol et al. (2018) found a positive effect of national identity on consumer ethnocentrism. Based on this argument, the first proposed hypothesis of this study is:

*H1: There is a positive relationship between national identity and consumer ethnocentrism.*

High national identification may lead individuals to perceive local products as superior to foreign ones (Conner et al., 2017; Fischer & Zeugner-Roth, 2016), which affects their behaviour toward foreign products. However, other scholars believe that national identity does not always lead to rejection of foreign products (He & Wang, 2015; Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015), unless the foreign country may harm the home country's well-being (Brewer, 1999).

This may explain the inconsistency in the relationship between national identity and foreign purchase behaviour. For instance, Chen et al. (2012a, 2012b) found a significant negative relationship

between national identity and foreign product purchase behaviour when the home and host countries were in conflict, although He and Wang (2015) and Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015) reported that the relationship was positive.

In the context of education tourism, as governments of emerging economies continue to improve the quality of local higher education institutions, students may change their perception of these institutions. Hence, they may have negative perceived images of foreign study destinations and institutions. The proposed hypothesis on the relationship between national identity and education tourism choice is:

*H2: Students with strong national identity will hold negative images of (a) foreign study destinations and (b) foreign institutions.*

### **Consumer Cosmopolitanism as an Antecedent of Education Tourism Choice.**

Consumer cosmopolitanism describes one's identification as a world citizen, which is characterised by the degree of open-mindedness, appreciation of cultural diversity, and the interest to consume products from other cultures (Riefler et al., 2012; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Due to their open-mindedness, individuals with high cosmopolitanism traits are less likely to be ethnocentric (Shankarmahesh, 2006), more receptive to cultural diversity, and more objective in evaluating foreign products (Parts & Vida, 2011; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Many studies have reported a negative relationship between consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer ethnocentrism (Cleveland et al., 2009; Parts & Vida, 2011; Riefler et al., 2012). However, some studies in developing economies have found the relationship to be insignificant (Vida et al., 2008; Strizhakova et al., 2008). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H3: There is a negative relationship between consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer ethnocentrism.*

Highly cosmopolitan individuals perceive the world as a personal in-group (Visconti et al., 2014). Due to their openness to other cultures, these individuals tend to show curiosity toward foreign products. They consider buying foreign products because they feel local products cannot fully satisfy their needs (Riefler et al., 2012; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Dimofte and Zeugner-Roth (2013), Jin et al. (2015), Riefler et al. (2012), and Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015) found that consumer cosmopolitanism had a significant positive effect on foreign product evaluation and the willingness to buy foreign products.

In the education tourism context, cosmopolitan students perceive that studying abroad will enable them to experience something different from their home country. As a result, they tend to have a positive perceived image of the host country and foreign institutions. The proposed related hypothesis is:

*H4: Cosmopolitan students will hold positive images of (a) foreign study destinations and (b) foreign institutions.*

#### **Consumer Ethnocentrism as an Antecedent of Education Tourism Choice.**

Consumer ethnocentrism refers to an individual's normative beliefs in the inappropriateness of purchasing foreign products (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). One's membership of and emotional attachment to one's home country is likely to urge people to have a domestic country bias (Conner et al., 2017; He & Wang, 2015).

While widely applied to explain consumer behaviour toward foreign products, consumer ethnocentrism has been little studied in the tourism context. Marketers of foreign destinations must consider the potential effect of consumer ethnocentrism on tourists' behaviour, as it may affect individuals' attitudes and intention to travel abroad. Due to their ethnocentric beliefs, individuals may favour travelling in their home country as opposed to other countries to meet their social expectations and to support local tourism (Fan, 2016; Kock et al., 2018).

Ethnocentric students may fear the negative consequences of studying abroad in their home country. They tend to assume that foreign education will trigger a brain drain, which may threaten the future of their home country. Due to this belief, highly ethnocentric students are less likely to have a favourable attitude toward foreign study

destinations and foreign institutions. Based on this argument, the proposed hypothesis is:

*H5: Ethnocentric students will hold negative images of (a) foreign study destinations and (b) foreign institutions.*

**The Role of Destination and Institution Images in Education Tourism Choice.**

Studying abroad is a risky decision (Basha et al., 2015) since it entails high commitment and financial resources from the students. Hence, prospective students must be highly involved in all stages of decision-making. Due to the difficulty of assessing the education quality in the host country, students tend to rely on the perceived images of the destination and institutions.

Ahmad and Buchanan (2017), Bamber (2014), and Jon et al. (2014) reported that destination and institution images played a significant role in international students' decision-making. Favourable images of the host country and institutions might lower the perceived risk (Basha et al., 2015),

which in turn elevated students' intention to choose the country as their preferred study destination. Following are the hypotheses on the relationship between the images of the destination and institution and students' choice:

*H6: A favourable destination image will increase students' intention to study in the host country.*

*H7: A favourable institution image will increase students' intention to study in the host country.*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study.

**Research Context.** Despite Indonesia's position as one of the main providers of international students in Southeast Asia (Chan, 2012; OECD, 2013), there is little research on Indonesian students' decision-making. This study looked at the effect of socio-cultural identities on Indonesian students' intention to study in Australia. Out of the 45,206 Indonesian students studying

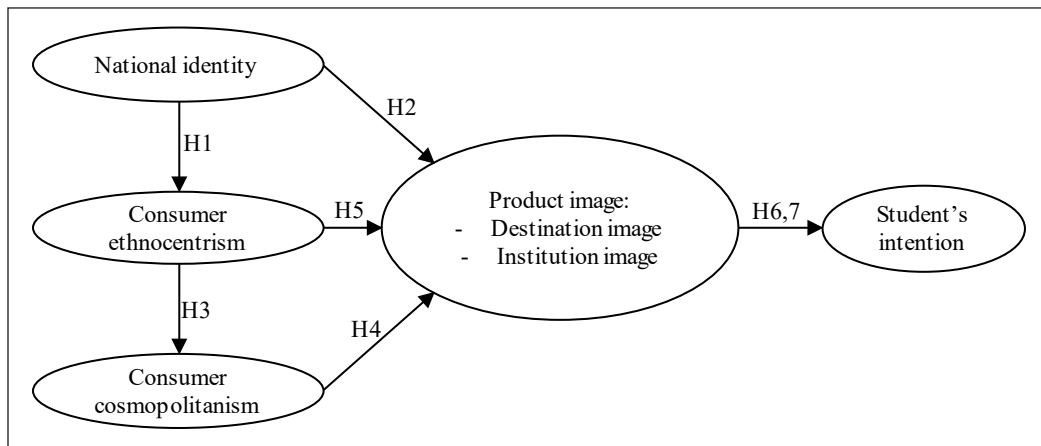


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

abroad in 2017, 24% were studying in this country (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019).

Australia is attractive to Indonesian students due to its geographical proximity, the country's image, and the reputation of its institutions. It is the third most popular country for international students, and eight of its institutions have been selected as being among the best institutions in the world. Australian institutions are highly recognised in the field of arts and humanities, health sciences, social sciences, engineering and technology, life sciences, and physical sciences (Australian Trade & Investment Commission, 2017).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A quantitative approach focusing on prospective undergraduate students was employed because they tended to consider the host country and institutions before deciding the destination for their study abroad. The study involved final year high school students in Greater Jakarta, Central Java, and Yogyakarta. Judgmental sampling was used to select the samples, on the basis that respondents should come from middle and upper-class segments and be interested in continuing their education abroad. From 120 questionnaires distributed in December 2017 and January 2018, 108 were returned, with only 91 suitable for further analysis.

Sociocultural identities comprise national identity, consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer ethnocentrism. In total, there were 32 questionnaire items measuring these identities. These items consisted of

eight items adopted from Cleveland et al. (2015) and Cleveland et al. (2016) to measure national identity, 12 items adopted from Riefler et al. (2012) to measure consumer cosmopolitanism, and 12 items adopted from Sharma (2014) to measure consumer ethnocentrism.

Destination image was assessed by the destination personality image. Six items measured the destination personality image that reflected each dimension of country personality as developed by d'Astous and Boujbel (2007). Six items measuring institution image were adopted from Cubillo et al. (2006), Duarte et al. (2010), and Li et al. (2013). As the dependent variable, students' intention to choose a particular study destination was measured by five items adapted from Gatfield and Chen (2006), Jalilvand et al. (2012), Phau et al. (2010), and Zeugner-Roth and Zäbkar (2015).

All items were measured by a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). After validity and reliability tests were completed, 44 items were retained in the analysis, with factor loadings between 0.691 and 0.928, and composite reliability of the first-order construct between 0.845 and 0.942 as presented in Table 1.

This research aimed to test the sequential dependence relationship among variables of interest. The results of Mardia's test of skewness and kurtosis showed that the data fulfilled the multivariate normality assumption (skewness:  $b = 1,393.10$ ,  $p$ -value = 0.069; kurtosis:  $b = 2,484.93$ ,

Table 1  
*Validity and reliability tests (n = 91)*

Variable/dimension	Item	Factor loading	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability
<b>National identity:</b>					
National pride		0.855	0.703		0.826
National media usage		0.822			
Dimensions:					
National pride	NID1	0.860	0.692	0.850	0.899
	NID2	0.892			
	NID3	0.781			
	NID4	0.788			
National media usage	NID5	0.899	0.808	0.763	0.894
	NID6	0.899			
<b>Consumer cosmopolitanism:</b>					
Open-mindedness		0.868	0.733		0.891
Cultural diversity appreciation		0.825			
Consumption transcending borders		0.874			
Dimensions:					
Open-mindedness	COS2	0.909	0.726	0.807	0.888
	COS3	0.886			
	COS4	0.754			
Cultural diversity appreciation	COS5	0.826	0.681	0.840	0.894
	COS6	0.896			
	COS7	0.871			
	COS8	0.692			
Consumption transcending borders	COS9	0.861	0.695	0.854	0.901
	COS10	0.805			
	COS11	0.819			
	COS12	0.849			
<b>Consumer ethnocentrism:</b>					
Cognitive ethnocentrism		0.834	0.721		0.885
Affective ethnocentrism		0.901			
Behavioural ethnocentrism		0.809			
Dimensions:					
Cognitive ethnocentrism	CET1	0.869	0.675	0.906	0.892
	CET2	0.835			
	CET3	0.816			
	CET4	0.762			
Affective ethnocentrism	CET5	0.917	0.844	0.907	0.942
	CET6	0.911			
	CET7	0.928			

Table 1 (continue)

Variable/dimension	Item	Factor loading	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability
Behavioural ethnocentrism	CET9	0.890	0.649	0.826	0.880
	CET10	0.880			
	CET11	0.720			
	CET12	0.714			
<b>Destination image</b>	DPI1	0.721	0.522	0.772	0.845
	DPI2	0.718			
	DPI3	0.729			
	DPI4	0.751			
	DPI6	0.691			
<b>Institution image</b>	IIM1	0.852	0.725	0.924	0.940
	IIM2	0.904			
	IIM3	0.829			
	IIM4	0.889			
	IIM5	0.811			
	IIM6	0.819			
<b>Students' intention</b>	SID1	0.883	0.766	0.923	0.942
	SID2	0.873			
	SID3	0.839			
	SID4	0.918			
	SID5	0.862			

p-value = 0.342). The sample size of this study, however, was below the requirement of CB-SEM. Therefore, the data were analysed using partial least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The majority were female, studying at public high schools, Muslim, living in Greater Jakarta, and had monthly expenditures of less than \$75.

As presented in Table 3, the findings confirm the hypothesis regarding the relationship between national identity and consumer ethnocentrism (H1). It was

found that national identity had a significant positive influence on the development of consumer ethnocentrism. This supports previous studies by Conner et al. (2017), Nguyen-Hau et al. (2013), and Vida et al. (2008).

Almost all respondents had strong national identification, even though they were still at the identity formation stage. This inclination might be the result of civic education at school and strengthened by government campaigns to raise national awareness in the last three years. They were proud of their home country, which stimulated a domestic country bias that was shown through their perceptions of and emotions toward local products.



Table 2  
Profile of respondents (*n* = 91)

Demographic characteristics		Number	Percent
Gender:	Male	40	43.96
	Female	51	56.04
Type of school:	Public high school	57	62.64
	Private high school	34	37.36
Religion:	Islam	69	75.82
	Christian	7	7.69
	Catholic	14	15.38
	Buddhism	1	0.01
Domicile:	Greater Jakarta	43	47.25
	Central Java	22	24.18
	Yogyakarta	26	28.57
Monthly expenditure:	Less than \$75	73	80.22
	Between \$75 and \$110	14	15.38
	More than \$110	4	4.40

Table 3  
Hypothesis testing (*n* = 91)

Path	Regression path	t-value	p-value	Remarks
NID → CET	0.468	6.331	0.000	Supported
NID → DPI	0.341	3.853	0.000	Not supported
NID → IIM	0.154	1.233	0.218	Not supported
COS → CET	-0.170	1.685	0.093	Not supported
COS → DPI	0.580	10.917	0.000	Supported
COS → IIM	0.378	4.216	0.000	Supported
CET → DPI	-0.180	1.865	0.063	Not supported
CET → IIM	-0.057	0.456	0.649	Not supported
DPI → SID	0.509	5.745	0.000	Supported
IIM → SID	0.362	4.161	0.000	Supported

Note: NID = national identity, COS = consumer cosmopolitanism, CET = consumer ethnocentrism, DPI = destination image, IIM = institution image, SID = student's intention to study in the host country

The national identity of respondents was strong, but maybe not fully developed. On one hand, these young respondents wanted to fulfil the expectations of society by showing high nationalism, but on the other hand, they wanted to be acknowledged as cosmopolitan. This explains how consumer

cosmopolitanism might have had some influence on consumer ethnocentrism, even though the relationship was not significant (H3). The respondents were highly exposed to foreign cultures and global media. They tended to associate modern lifestyles with foreign products, particularly from the

West. As a consequence, their positive perceptions of and sentiments toward local products did not necessarily make them avoid foreign products, which was reflected in the relatively low score in the behavioural component of consumer ethnocentrism.

The overall Australian destination and institution images were positive. From several personality elements measuring the destination, the respondents perceived Australia as an entertaining and organised country. Their perceptions of Australian institutions were outstanding in every feature measured.

Contrary to the proposed hypothesis (H2a), a significant positive effect of national identity on destination image was found. The effect of national identity on institution image (H2b) was insignificant. Similar to the research by He and Wang (2015) and Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015), the results of this study confirm Brewer's (1999) argument that people with strong national identification did not always have a negative stance against other countries unless the home and foreign countries were in conflict. There is the possibility that the respondents categorised Australia as an ally due to its geographical proximity and outstanding government-to-government relationship. An allied country is usually perceived as a broader home country in-group, which in this study context leads to a favourable evaluation of Australia as a preferred study destination.

The study fully supports the hypothesis of the positive relationship between consumer cosmopolitanism and destination

image (H4a) and institution image (H4b). The findings are similar to those of Jin et al. (2015) and Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015), albeit in different study contexts. Cosmopolitan respondents were open-minded and appreciated cultural diversity, thus they were more willing to explore something different in their daily life. Australia and Indonesia have different cultures, economic status and lifestyles. The Australian education system is also different from that of Indonesia. As such, respondents with high cosmopolitanism traits tended to perceive Australia as an exciting place and believed that studying there might fulfil their needs for variety.

The results showed an insignificant negative relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and destination image (H5a) and institution image (H5b). As aforementioned, respondents' knowledge of and emotions toward local products did not simultaneously lead to negative behaviour with regard to foreign products. The respondents were more rational in evaluating products, including education services. Since Australia has a higher economic development status than Indonesia, they perceived Australian education to be better than the home one, which in turn makes the negative effect insignificant. These findings are in line with the studies by Guo (2013) and Jin et al. (2015).

It has been found that both destination and institution images had significant positive effects on students' intention to study in Australia (H6 and H7). This supports the findings of Basha et al. (2015),

Li et al. (2013), and Wilkins and Huisman (2011, 2014). Due to the difficulties in assessing the quality of life and education in Australia prior to the decision-making, respondents tended to evaluate the host country based on destination and institution images. They believed that the outstanding images of the host country and institutions might lower their perceived risks when studying in the country, which influenced their study destination preference.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study found that students' host country selection was strongly influenced by their perceived images of the destination and institutions. Based on the findings, national identity and consumer cosmopolitanism have a positive influence on the formation of the destination image. However, only consumer cosmopolitanism has a significant effect on the institution image. Similar to studies conducted in developing countries, this research has failed to prove the negative effect of consumer ethnocentrism on students' intention to choose a host country based on their perceived image of the destination and institutions.

This pilot study involved only a small number of respondents and used partial least square-structural equation modelling to analyse the data. Future research should use a larger sample size and employ more sophisticated statistical analysis. Future studies could also test the model in other countries of origin and different study destinations.

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