

What passes through foreigners' minds when they think about Madrid

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Theme

The image that Madrid conveys to the outside world –under-diversified and overlapping with Spain's– sells it short compared to the reality revealed by objective data.

Summary

Like almost all the world's most important cities, Madrid seeks to strengthen its 'brand' by improving and diversifying the image it conveys to the rest of the world. At the start of the current decade, however, this image was still closely bound up with the stereotypes implicit in Spain as a whole, featuring barely any trace of the city itself barring the Real Madrid football team. Culture, entertainment and quality of life remain, as with the rest of the country, the areas where foreigners' perception of the city is most positive; it is, however, worth mentioning that the perception of other aspects, which might be thought to pass more under the radar, such as diversity and transport, is also notable. As far as the correlation between image and reality is concerned, although no major differences are recorded in any individual respect, there is a certain general underperformance in the 'Madrid brand'. This fact entails scope for reputational improvement, which is particularly pronounced in everything related to its liveability and transport, and in the years ahead has the potential to extend to everything related to the environment.

Analysis

1. Introduction

In today's image-centred society that we all constitute, the actors who seek to publicise and improve the appearance they convey to others are increasingly numerous and diverse. One of the domains most affected by this trend in recent years is that involving territories, whether [countries](#), regions or [cities](#), all seeking to position their 'brand' in the global collective imagination while searching for pay-offs in the form of exports, inward investment, tourists or foreign students. Spain has not remained on the sidelines of this rivalry, as shown by the various initiatives that have been launched over recent years, something that has enabled the image conveyed by the country –with its respective strengths and weaknesses– to be subjected to in-depth scrutiny, and the necessary measures of public diplomacy to be taken in consequence. Also entering the fray has been Madrid, which with its various [advertising](#) and [branding campaigns](#) has sought to mould the image it sends out to the rest of the world.

In this regard, the rankings compiled by independent sources are a fundamental tool both for measuring such images and for ascertaining the degree to which they match the

facts of each territory, ultimately enabling policy-makers to devise an appropriate design and assessment of the brand strategies being employed. However, this should be no hindrance to acknowledging some of their limitations. In the case of Madrid, this is exemplified by the fact that, owing to the absence of figures for the metropolitan area, it is sometimes assigned data that actually belong to the greater Madrid region (*Comunidad Autónoma*) or even the whole of Spain, in what is likely to be to its statistical detriment. Moreover, there tends to be an anglophile bias in the international urban rankings that may undervalue Madrid's influence on the Spanish-speaking world. And although it may be an issue that affects all cities alike, it is also worth highlighting that the habitual delay in publishing statistics hampers perceptions of the most recent improvements.

Proceeding on this basis, with its advantages and disadvantages, the current analysis relies chiefly on some of these rankings in search of answers to two specific questions: what are the elements that make up Madrid's image abroad? And is this perception consistent with the reality of the city?

2. Madrid, capital of Spain (and of world football)

In order to answer the first of these questions, the *City Perception Survey* (CPS), which in its latest edition analysed the global perception of 10n of the world's major cities (as well as Madrid, these were London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Singapore, Amsterdam, Berlin, Seoul and Shanghai), enables us to tease apart some of the most important characteristics constituting the Spanish capital's image.¹

The first thing to highlight in terms of the words most closely associated with Madrid by global public opinion is the strong link that exists with Spain (Figure 1). First, the word 'Spain' is the one with which it is most closely related, the word 'capital' also being among the 10 most mentioned. Furthermore, generic words such as 'football', 'hot', 'bullfighting' and 'food', which could equally refer to the majority of places in Spain, occupy the other high-ranking positions; and 3% of the respondents report being unable to associate any word with the city, even in terms of Spain. Comparing the results with those obtained from the 7th edition of the Spain Image Barometer (*Barómetro de la Imagen de España*, BIE) confirms the high degree of overlap that exists between the images of Madrid and Spain, which is also made up of a series of historically entrenched stereotypes (something that is *not necessarily negative*) as a consequence of tourism, sport and folk customs providing the traditional ways of accessing the country.

¹ The 2022 City Perception Survey, compiled by the Mori Memorial Foundation, asked 200 people in each of the 48 cities included in the 2021 Global Power City Index to suggest three words associated with each of the 10 top cities in the ranking: London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Singapore, Amsterdam, Berlin, Seoul, Madrid and Shanghai. For more information see the 'Methodology' section of the 2022 CPS.

Figure 1. The 10 main elements/concepts associated with Spain and Madrid

	Spain (BIE 7)	Madrid (CPS 2022)
1 st	Bullfighting	Spain
2 nd	Sunshine	Football
3 rd	Food	Nothing
4 th	Culture	Hot
5 th	Cities	Bullfighting
6 th	Football	Real Madrid
7 th	Tourism	Food
8 th	Flamenco	Beauty
9 th	Beauty	Capital
10 th	Modernity	Culture

Source: the author based on the 7th wave of the BIE and CPS 2022.

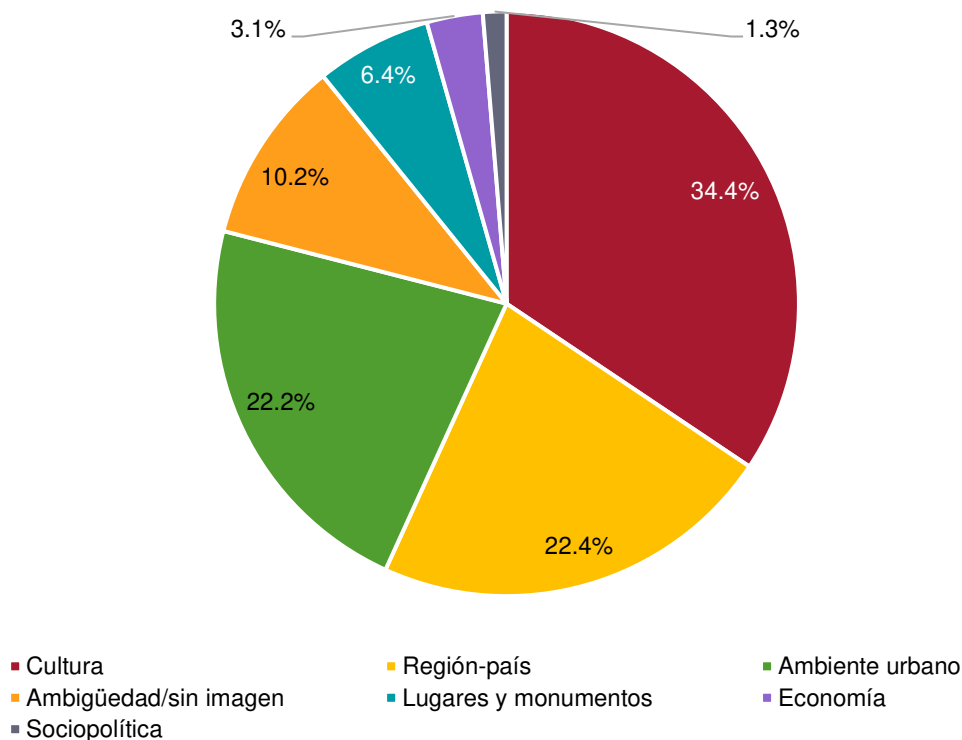
It is significant that this aspect of Madrid's image bears a greater resemblance to the oriental cities included in the report –where there is a conspicuous absence of homegrown features differentiating them from the wider country of which they form a part– than to the other Western cities, where homegrown emblems and features abound (the Statue of Liberty, double-decker buses, the Berlin Wall, the Eiffel Tower, canals, etc). In this regard, 'Real Madrid' is the only reference that explicitly involves Madrid, and the fact that it is the only club mentioned in the report, despite some of the other cities being home to some of the sporting entities with the greatest media exposure on the planet (New York Yankees, New York Knicks, Arsenal, Chelsea, Paris Saint-Germain and Ajax), serves only to confirm the strong and homogeneous connection between football and Madrid that has become engrained in the global imagination, with the only exception of North America, where bullfighting continues to hold sway as the archetypal spectacle favoured by Madrid's residents.

There is, however, a major gulf in perception depending upon whether the respondent has ever visited the city. It would seem only natural that all those who have actually been there are capable of conjuring up an image of the city. And it is also understandable that this subclass should mention to a much greater extent (almost three times as many) such an intrinsically Madrid-specific icon as the Prado Museum, to the detriment of some of the more stereotypical elements at the national level. Similarly, the image of Madrid among those foreigners who have visited it at least once overlaps to a considerable

degree with the image Madrid's inhabitants have of their own city, in the sense that the latter also stress its tourism and the importance of its museums, outdoor celebrations and *tapas* when it comes to forging its identity. However, the correlation between the two perceptions is significantly reduced when they refer to aspects with a greater degree of sophistication, such as the cosmopolitan nature of the city or the attractiveness of its shops, which are markedly more emphasised by its residents than by its visitors. In another demonstration of the 'Hispanification' of Madrid's image, this last finding is in keeping with one that repeatedly emerges from the BIEs, where Spain's image as a country for visiting is systematically superior to the one it has as a shopping destination, and in turn greatly superior to the image it has as a country in which to invest.

In light of the set of words provided by the survey respondents when asked about Madrid, it is hardly surprising that the domain that predominates in the foreign perception of the Spanish capital should be that of culture, including sport and traditions, which clearly surpasses that of the other cities in the study, followed by the regional-national domain (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, at the other extreme, the importance of the economic sphere is the lowest of the 10 cities under investigation, the outcome of a weak link with (although not necessarily a judgement of) business and technological elements, a circumstance where it coincides with the perception of Madrid residents themselves. And with regard to emblematic places, Madrid ranks only above Shanghai, Seoul and Tokyo, owing to the aforementioned absence of iconic monuments and venues, which in turn has a bearing on the fact that only Shanghai, Seoul and Singapore elicit more ambiguity in the replies, stemming from a degree of ignorance that prevents some foreigners from associating the Spanish capital with specific aspects.

Figure 2. Distribution of the perception of Madrid



Source: the author based on City Perception Survey 2022.

At this point it is not unreasonable to suggest that, given its demographic and economic dimensions, comparing Madrid with some of these 'megacities' may distort the analysis in certain ways, which justifies the advisability of turning to a report titled *The State of the City*, where Madrid's image is compared with group of nine cities deemed to be equivalent in terms of a broad range of variables: Amsterdam, Berlin, Dubai, Miami, Milan, Santiago, Sydney, Toronto and Washington DC.²

This alternative comparative framework confirms Madrid's modest reputation in all things involving economic matters and innovation; but also its superior ranking in all things linked not only to urban experiences and dynamism but also to diversity, but especially to its liveability and transport, both these latter areas being where the perception of the Spanish capital gives it a third-place ranking among its 'peers' (see Figure 4). All this is in a context in which the Madrid perceived by people who are acquainted with the city is markedly better than among those who have never visited or lived in the city.

3. The 'Madrid brand': one step behind its reality

It is clear, in light of the above figures, that Madrid's foreign image rests solidly on social, cultural and human foundations, to the detriment of economic, technological and knowledge-based domains. But does this perception actually have an objective basis, or can it be solely attributed to certain reality-distorting stereotypes? On the basis of the urban indicators reported in the *Global Power City Index* (GPCI) it is evident that, among the 10 cities analysed by the CPS, Madrid was ranked fifth in 2022 in terms of 'cultural interaction' (scoring particularly highly for its nightlife, where it was outperformed only by London), but 10th both in terms of 'economy' and 'R&D', undermined by weaker data on per capita GDP, patents and world-class universities³ (see Figure 3). Thus, for good and ill, it seems clear that the image conveyed by Madrid in these areas is in general terms a fair reflection of reality.

² *The State of the City*, drawn up by The Business of Cities and Madrid Futuro in 2024, is based on external sources of perception and performance, comparing Madrid with nine 'peer' cities (Amsterdam, Berlin, Dubai, Miami, Milan, Santiago, Sydney, Toronto and Washington DC) in 10 areas: Business and investment, Prosperity, Innovation ecosystem, Knowledge and skills, Transport and digital, Experience and vibrancy, Liveability and affordability, Diversity and inclusion, Environment, and Resilience.

³ In the 2023 Global Power City Index, compiled by the Mori Memorial Foundation, the 'Cultural interaction' variable contains indicators relating to trendsetting potential, tourist resources, cultural facilities, visitor amenities and international interaction; the 'Economy' variable includes indicators related to the size and attractiveness of the market, economic vitality, human capital, the business environment and the ease of doing business; and the 'R&D' variable includes indicators related to academic resources, the research environment and innovation. For more detailed information, see the 'Methodology' section of the 2023 GPCI.

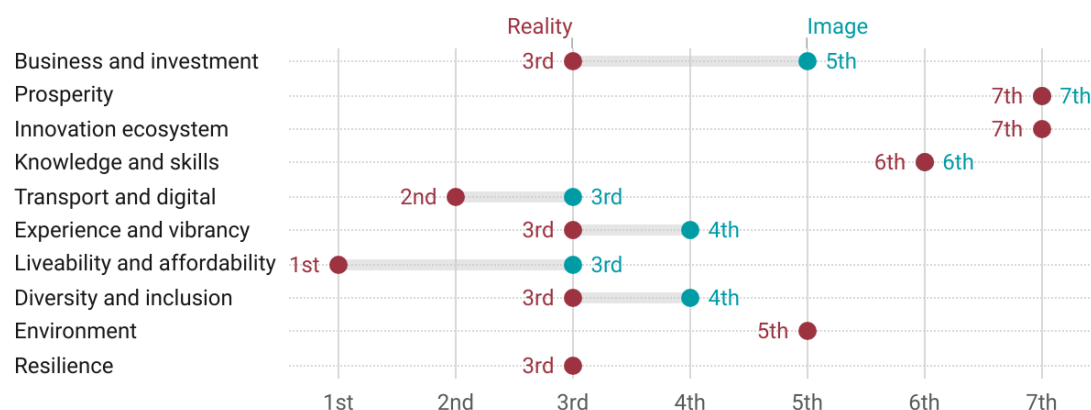
Figure 3. Classification in objective indicators

	Cultural interaction	Economy	R+D+I
1 st	London	New York	New York
2 nd	New York	London	London
3 rd	Paris	Tokyo	Tokyo
4 th	Tokyo	Singapore	Seoul
5 th	Madrid	Shanghai	Paris
6 th	Berlin	Amsterdam	Singapore
7 th	Singapore	Paris	Shanghai
8 th	Seoul	Seoul	Berlin
9 th	Amsterdam	Berlin	Amsterdam
10 th	Shanghai	Madrid	Madrid

Source: the author based Global Power City Index Yearbook 2023.

Here, however, it is again worth framing Madrid's low economic and technological ranking, in terms of both its image and its reality, in the fact that this report compares the Spanish capital with a very limited group of global cities. Thus, if the analytical focus is broadened to the world's 48 main cities, the GPCI itself reveals that in 2022 Madrid's ranking in the objective Economy and Technology indicators was 34th and 30th, respectively, thereby promoting it to the third quartile.

To counterbalance this circumstance, if the comparison is made with the nine 'peer' cities included in *The State of the City*, more nuanced and optimistic results are obtained in terms of the potential of the 'Madrid brand' (see Figure 4). And indeed, while there are no major differences between image and reality here either, two positions at most, the city's objective ranking on all the aspects without exception is at least at the same level as the perception, which suggests scope for reputational improvement.

Figure 4. Madrid's image as opposed to its reality

The position of Madrid's image and reality compared to its 'peer' cities. Note: image data not available for the 'Innovation ecosystem', 'Environment' or 'Resilience' spheres. Source: the author based on The State of the City 2024.

More specifically, it is worth highlighting the areas of 'Liveability and affordability', 'Transport and digital' and 'Experience and vibrancy', where Madrid's real situation places it in first, second and third positions respectively. With regard to the first of these, Madrid's strength rests on its prolonged life expectancy (85.4 years, the second highest of all European regions),⁴ its level of security and high quality of life, [which represents an attraction for digital nomads](#), and for globetrotting talent in general; this should not, however, serve as an excuse for overlooking certain elements capable of improvement, especially with regard to an affordable supply of housing compatible with recorded salaries. Meanwhile, with regard to Madrid's transport network, the chief characteristics that catapult it beyond almost all its 'peers' are its geographical coverage, affordability and [environmental sustainability](#); such positive data should not, however, obscure the shortcomings that exist throughout the greater metropolitan district, or the still limited use of bicycles as a typical form of transport. Meanwhile, as far as the vibrancy of the city is concerned, its broad [cultural](#), fine dining and leisure offering ensure its place as a top destination both for urban and business travellers (demonstrated by the fact that it is home to five of the 100 most-visited museums in the world, and its being recognised as the [world's leading meetings and conference destination](#));⁵ although in this respect there is also a notable gulf separating the centre from the outskirts of the city.

Lastly, although an image-reality comparison cannot be carried out in the environmental domain owing to lack of perception data, it is worth pointing out the progress that Madrid has made in this area in recent years, which, apart from the ongoing improvement in air quality, is reflected by such acknowledgements as its inclusion by the European Commission in the EU's Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission, and its designation by the UN as one of the 'Tree Cities of the World'. However, the ferocious rivalry between cities to gain recognition in this particular area, and certain shortcomings such as the heterogeneity of green spaces over the extent of the metropolitan area and the shortage

⁴ See Madrid en el mundo 2024: Rankings publicados en 2023, Madrid City Council.

⁵ Ibid.

of recharging points for electric vehicles, still prevent Madrid from obtaining a higher ranking in relation to its 'peers'.

Conclusions

There are two main conclusions with regard to the image that Madrid projects abroad and the extent to which it reflects reality. The first involves the city's highly 'Hispanified' perception, which enables it to further underscore its image as a tourist destination thanks to the 'halo effect' lent it by Spain's importance in terms of culture, entertainment and quality of life, but which also represents a handicap when it comes to differentiating itself and forging a 'Madrid brand' around more idiosyncratic and diversified features enabling it to avoid the trap of a tourist monoculture. The second involves the deficit between Madrid's image (moderate but extending to almost all domains) and the reality, something that should be seen as an opportunity to the extent that it suggests the existence of certain scope for improvement when it comes to publicising itself abroad, especially bearing in mind the fact that the perception of foreigners already acquainted with the city is significantly better than those who have never visited it.

Madrid's ability to calibrate its image and match it to a reality relying on the various town halls in the metropolitan area and on the regional and national governments according to their respective areas of competence will to a large extent depend on whether it can play a leading role on the world stage at a time when, [in the wake of the pandemic](#), cities are destined to be key actors in the 21st century.⁶

⁶ The author wishes to express his thanks to the Mori Memorial Foundation and The Business of Cities for allowing access to data not published in the 2022 CPS and *The State of the City*, respectively.