

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE YOUTH TRAVEL PRODUCT

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ABSTRACT: The paper aims to analyze the specific features of the youth travel product. Among these, the most important is the complexity, which is determined by the four qualitative aspects: wide accessibility, safety and security, flexibility and quality. Another goal of this article is to research the main components of the youth travel product. On these lines, the paper presents the basic components of this type of product, namely: booking services, travel arrangements made by youth, specific accommodation units, recreational activities, etc.

Key words: youth travel, tourism product, youth travel product.

JEL codes: M3, L83

Introduction

Tourism products have a complex content and may be defined as a set of material goods and services meant to satisfy the general and specific needs of tourists, a total of natural and man-made elements, and a package of various services (Patriche, D., Stremțan, F., Ispas, A., 2000). The complexity comes from the multitude of components, participants and types of products. The tourism product is made from different components, which “assembled” give it shape: transport, accommodation, food, recreation, etc., and this variety raises the question regarding the development of a coherent and integrated product. Regarding the multitude of participants, the tourism product is ensured in its entirety by a single economic agent only in rare cases. Typically, companies that participate in a tourism product (whose interests are often divergent) are not integrated vertically or horizontally in a single organization; at most there are more or less formal understandings or agreements between them (Gherasim, T., Gherasim, D., 1999). In order to prevent possible conflicts between companies participating in the creation of a tourism product, a harmonious integration of its component elements is essential, which imposes cooperation between all the involved companies and bodies (transport companies, hotel and restaurant owners, traders, tourism operators and tour operators, coordinating bodies, local communities, etc.). The term of tourism product is used quite liberally, starting from a simple hotel or restaurant, continuing with an amusement park and ending with their totality, all being provided to the client as a homogeneous package (for a fixed price). It is usual for a series of individual products to be called by their own term: hotel product, restaurant product, recreation product, etc., but the tourism product could be seen on a smaller scale (hotel product) or a larger scale (resort, city, country).

Literature review

The reference papers in terms of the features of the youth travel product belong to researchers Richards and Wilson (2003, 2007). The focal point of many studies and scientific researches tends to be orientated towards leisure activities carried on by young people and not towards activities specific for tourism (Roberts, 1983). The studies conducted in the 1970s by Cohen (1973) and Vogt (1976) identify the activities related to the “random travelling” of young people, while more recent studies try to analyze the fact that the youth travel market has been isolated and this is especially obvious in Europe (Seekings - 1998; Horak and Weber - 2000; Pastor - 1991; Wheatcroft and Seekings -1995).

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Another category of reference papers with a remarkable contribution to the study of the main components of the youth travel product belong to Richards and Wilson (2003 and 2007); Clarke (1992), who studied the travels of young people to the sea-side and who reached the conclusion that one in three youth vacations take place at the sea-side; Snak, Baron and Neacșu (2001), Balaure, Cătoiu and Vegheș (2005), Conrady and Buck (2010), as well as the papers written by important bodies in youth travel, such as the World Tourism Organisation (2009).

The features of the youth travel product

The youth travel product is a very complex specific product (all packaged) whose main features are wide **accessibility, safety and security** of transport and tourism facilities, **flexibility** and service **quality**. Of course these four **qualitative aspects** are not restrictive and must be interpreted in a very broad sense. For example, accessibility must be seen in terms of price, as well as availability. In general, young people have gained travel experience by practicing tourism with their parents or family and have the tendency to borrow the same behaviour in terms of exigencies and high expectations. When it comes to the level of the direct performance and to the additional provided services they want quality products (booking systems, web sites, etc.).

Young people want flexible formulas and, as a result, adventure is tempting only for a few. Therefore, flexibility means large availability of the actual tourism offer and of the information offer, which must be rich and complex, especially to reduce the feeling of incertitude related to the tourism product.

Uncertainty is a feature that causes some types of tourism products, especially semi-organized products for exotic destination, to become risky and less desired by young people. Tourists are often targets of aggressors, especially females, but not all regions of the world face this reality. This is why young people need to feel safe both en-route and at the destination.

The price sensitivity of young people is important because their budget is relatively limited and, as a result, their consumer behaviour fits with the behaviour of a demanding client who looks for the best value for money and, in numerous cases, they set certain minimum standards regarding their expectations. Thus, there's a preference for the most competitive prices that reflect a level of demands that seems to rise. In parallel, it appears some young people have a significant discretionary budget for certain recreational activities.

The combinations between different components of a tourism product won't be necessarily homogeneous in terms of the price level. For example, a young person who chooses an adventure product or an outdoor vacation will look for economic conditions of accommodation and transport, but will dispose of important amounts of money for recreational and entertainment services.

Therefore, youth travel present several paradoxes, such as:

- Young people are going through their first travelling experiences, but already have high expectations and standards;
- They look for a flexibility of tourism services that is synonymous with freedom, but not at a cost of high uncertainty;
- Young people are rather traditional regarding their destinations, but relatively creative in terms of future tourism activities;
- They are open minded, but are also concerned for their safety;
- They are consumers who pay attention to the prices of tourism products, but, nevertheless, travels are still part of the most desirable "consumer" products.

Young people, particularly Europeans, consume tourism products of different nature: in the winter – a trip south in a formula that includes all services – and during the summer – backpacking through Europe.

The components of the youth travel product

In conjunction with these requirements, we may identify **the main components of the youth travel product** and the conditions to be met. Generally speaking it's about:

1. *Access facilities* – which refer to the variety of the available means to reach the chosen destination, as well as the actual services (quality, price, length of trip, checking points, etc.). These facilities are mostly assessed from the perspective of their economic accessibility rather than the physical distance.

2. *The value of the tourism potential, its variety and attractiveness* as a determining element of the trip.

3. *The existing endowments* regarding accommodation, food, recreation-entertainment, therapy, etc., which due to their diversity, comfort level and price may restrict travelling to a particular destination and the *personnel (human resource)* who influence the quality of services and the satisfaction through their work, level of training, competence and professionalism.

4. *Services* associated to the tourism product (Balaure, V., Cătoi, I, Vegheş, C., 2005) which determine the volume of the categories of tourists that demand it through their level of diversity and complexity.

The mere enumeration of these elements is not enough to shape the tourism product, in other words, it doesn't result by simply summing them up, it will be the result of a combination that will ensure the satisfaction of the tourist, as well as the interests of the services' provider.

In analyzing the distinctiveness of the youth travel product, we should highlight the main aspects regarding booking, means of transportation, the chosen accommodation units, the duration of the stay, budget, as well as the activities carried out during the stay.

Booking services

With the introduction of new technologies, the booking method of tourism products has changed, particularly in the field of youth travel because young people are the most avid users of these types of communication means. Out of the young people who book in advance, half of them make online bookings for air travel and 60% book accommodation services online also (see table no. 1). A second way used by young people to book tourism services is through travel agencies, which can make reservations for transport, insurances and tours. Niche tourism products, like working, studying or volunteering abroad, are sold by a relatively small number of travel agencies.

Table no. 1.

Methods used for booking tourism services/products

Tourism services/products	Online (%)	Through a travel agency (%)	By phone or fax (%)
Air travel	51,7	38,3	10,0
Terrestrial transport	48,6	40,6	10,8
Accommodation services	63,5	21,2	15,3
Foreign language courses	54,9	27,9	17,1
Working abroad programmes	57,1	25,4	17,5
Studying abroad programmes	55,7	24,8	19,6
Volunteer programmes	58,3	24,5	17,1
Insurance	45,9	39,5	14,6
Tours	41,2	47,4	11,4

Source: Richards, G., op. cit., p.17.

Deepening the analysis by researching the evolution over time of the youth's options for booking travels shows a significant increase from 10% in 2002 to almost 50% in 2007 regarding the use of Internet, which is increasingly considered a trusty solution for searching information, as well as for booking tourism products. These data are correlated with the information regarding tourism in general, meaning that in 2009 (January-August to be more precise), 59% of the European tourists used the Internet as a source of tourist information (Richards, G., 2007).

The tendency to make reservations through various channels depends of the style of travel. Backpackers tend to book flights through travel agencies rather than the Internet and for accommodation services they make bookings online and use travel agencies less.

Certain general features of choosing the channel used to book tourism services/products outline two aspects:

- Online bookings are often made by women with high levels of education and income;
- Travel agencies are used by men belonging to a younger age category, students, with low level of education and income.

There is an interesting relationship between flight reservations and the tourist experience in terms of less experienced tourists and more experienced ones preference for travel agencies, while tourists with intermediate experience prefer online bookings. This proves that travel agencies cover the needs of young people who demand more information – those who are just starting their “tourist career” and those who request more adventurous and complex programmes.

Regarding the type of tourism intermediaries, specialized travel agencies for the segment composed of students and young people are very important for the youth travel market, even for online bookings. Almost half of the respondents involved in a study conducted among 8500 young people worldwide by the World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation in 2007 mentioned they reserved flights through travel agencies. In general, the role of travel agencies is to provide information to clients, information that will reflect the complexity of the tourism product, as well as the availability of the provided products. Although young tourists are predisposed to turn to travel agencies to acquire standard products, such as air and terrestrial travel or accommodation, products like work or study abroad programmes are more complex and are purchased through other channels.

Table no. 2.

Distribution channels for tourism products on the youth travel market

Tourism products/services	General travel agencies (%)	Travel agencies specialized on youth travel (%)	Travel agencies specialized on other categories of tourists (%)	Direct booking (%)	Other booking method (%)
Air travel	21,2	47,2	6,1	22,9	2,6
Terrestrial travel	13,2	25,5	6,7	46,8	7,7
Accommodation services	8,9	23,1	6,8	46,4	14,7
Foreign language courses	6,6	20,0	9,2	47,8	16,4
Working abroad programmes	6,5	24,0	10,7	40,2	18,7
Studying abroad programmes	5,8	18,6	5,4	48,2	22,1
Volunteer programmes	5,6	22,6	8,1	40,5	23,2
Insurance	12,9	41,7	6,3	31,1	8,1
Tours	16,7	31,2	9,3	33,1	9,8

Source: Richards, G., op. cit., p.18.

With age, travel experience and income also increases the direct booking of flight tickets or other terrestrial means of transportation through travel agencies (usually online). Experienced tourists who are usually older and with higher incomes are more interested in using their knowledge to create their own tourist packages and turn to intermediaries only to book accommodation. While young people with less travel experience usually turn to a specialized travel agency to make reservations, more experienced tourists turn to the web site of the agency make bookings. As a consequence, it's not surprising that the use of travel agencies specialized on youth travel is dropping dramatically after tourists pass the age of 30.

The most important factor that influences young people when making travel arrangements is the *price*, which doesn't surprise because many of them have a limited budget. The price is followed by *the quality of the information and services provided by the travel agency or the provider of tourism services, the reputation and quality of the tourism product, its flexibility, the possibility to make online reservations, access to products specialized for young people and the range of available products*. Despite the attempts of many intermediaries to develop brands on this market, young people don't feel like this is an important aspect when making the decision to practice tourism.

Many of these factors have the same importance for all categories of tourists (age, experience and income), the first two factors, namely the price of the product and the quality of the information, are considered the most important.

Preferred methods of travel used by young people

Tourism movement implies the travel of people to near or far places chosen as destination. Therefore, for the unfolding of the tourism traffic between the places (countries) of residence and the tourist destinations, people turn to a wide range of modes of transport. The existence of an adequate transport infrastructure and the access to various destinations are some of the most important preconditions of their affirmation on the international market (Snak, O., Baron, P., Neacșu, N., 2001). The movement of young people often requires the combined use of several modes of transport, depending on the distance, the characteristics of the chosen itineraries, the condition of the communication channels, the intensity and seasonality of the tourist flow, the competitiveness of the prices charged for various modes of transport, the rapidity and convenience of the travel, etc.

In order to reach the chosen destination, most tourists turn to air travel (52%) and the rest use services of terrestrial transport, such as: roads (38%), railways (only 3%) and sea travel (6%) (U.N.W.T.O., 2009).

The main modes of transport used by young people are: bus, car and train, followed by air plane and other means of transportation (see figure no. 1). Young tourists under 26 years old prefer to travel by train, bus or with their own car or to hitchhike; and tourist over 26 years old like to travel by plane (Richards, G., Wilson, J., 2003).

Regarding air plane travel, it is used by young people who visit remote tourist destinations like Canada, Australia, Thailand, England and the United States. However, most European destinations have a low number of tourists who arrive by plane because London is an important spot for arrivals by air and most young people reach this European capital and use other modes of transport to travel on the continent.

Young people who choose air travel and car travel usually have higher incomes and more tourist experience, while the train and the bus are used by the youth with lower incomes.

The most important means of transportation used at the destination are walking, streetcar, metro, buses and local trains, as well as rented vehicles or hitchhiking. Young people under 26 years old prefer to use their own car, to use bicycles or to walk, while the youth over 26 prefer to rent a car or to turn to domestic air travel. There are young people who use more exotic modes of transport, such as: freight boats, kayaks, camels, donkeys or elephants.

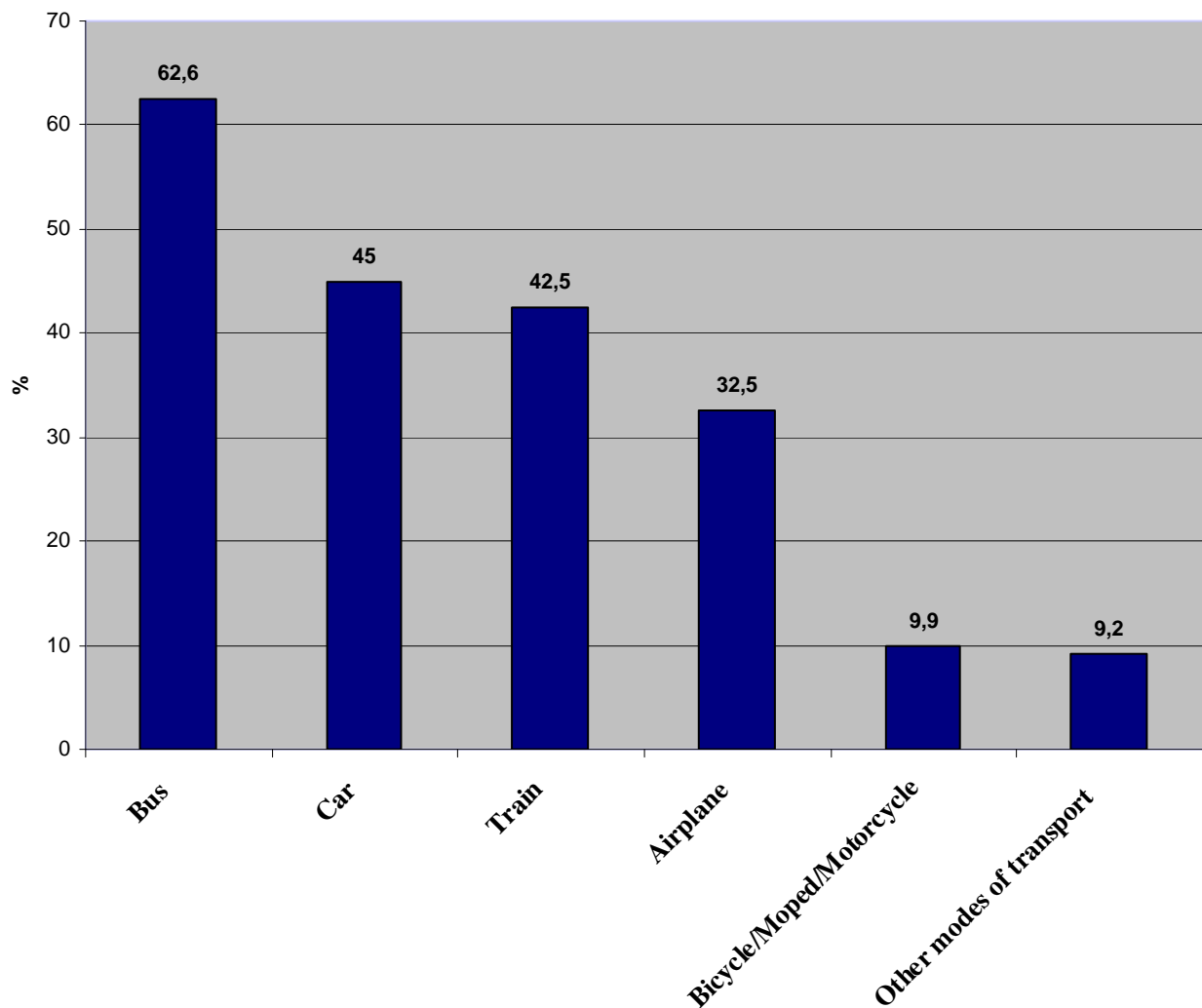


Fig. no. 1 - Modes of transport used by young people when practicing tourism in 2007

Source: Richards, G., op. cit., p. 24.

It is clear that youth travel can not develop without transports. As a fundamental element of the tourism product, transports determine the volume of the tourist traffic, having an active role as stimulant of the tourist traffic's growth.

Specific accommodation units

Accommodation services are the essential component of the tourism product, given the fact that, by definition, tourism implies a person staying for a certain period of time far away from home. As a result, the tourist flows consisting of young people will be directly influenced by the size and typology of this activity sector, as well as by the quality of the provided services. In order to call them tourists, young people must have at least one overnight stay at the destination and, ignoring the fact that some of them spend the night at friends, relatives or acquaintances, the vast majority requests accommodation services.

When we refer to accommodation services for young people, they have several opportunities for accommodation. On the hotel market there are specialized units called youth hotels or hostels that provide cheap, but comfortable accommodation and a unique atmosphere that can't be found in hotels. A hostel is more than an accommodation unit, it's something special, a place where young people can enrich their culture and multiculturalism by meeting people from all over the world.

Regarding the types of facilities provided by a hostel, most put at the disposal of tourists a laundry room, phones, Internet, information, safe for valuables and minimum food services, namely breakfast.

These types of accommodation units have developed in Romania also over the past 15 years; they are spread all over the country and provide services at international standards. An old tradition in this field are the school camps that currently belong to the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports or the private school camps (for example, Năvodari Camp with a capacity of 4000 beds).

The comparative analysis of two studies conducted by the International Student Travel Confederation and the World Tourism Organisation on the youth travel market in 2002 and 2007 showed that the preferences of young people for types of accommodation units changed in the last years. Therefore, if in 2002 visiting friends or relatives was the most popular accommodation, followed by hostels for backpackers and independent hotels and hostels, in 2007 the main accommodation unit for young people was the hostel, 60% of respondents saying they stayed in a type of hostel (World Tourism Organization & World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation, 2008). Independent hostels or hostels for backpackers were used more frequent (37%) than official hostels under the Hostelling International brand (24%) (see figure no. 2). It's interesting that even the proportion of respondents who checked-in at a hotel has increased, indicating a growing convergence between cheap hostels and hotels on the youth travel market.

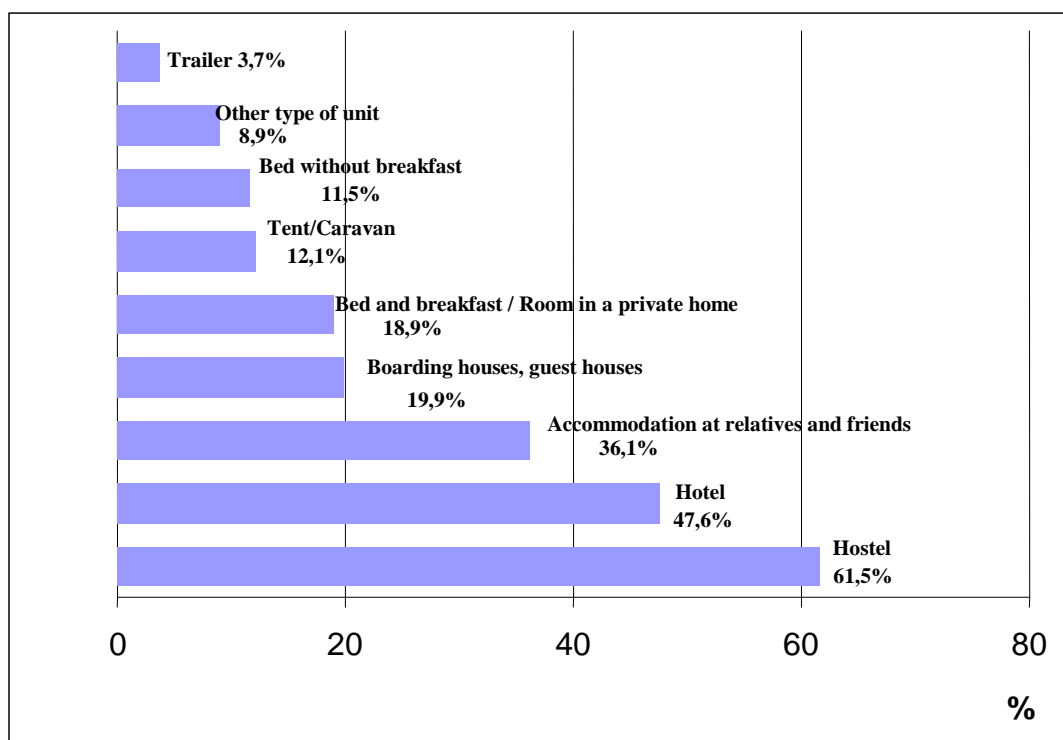


Figure no. 2. - The type of accommodation unit chosen by young people during their last major trip in 2007

Source: ***World Tourism Organization & World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation, *Youth Travel Matters – Understanding the Global Phenomenon of Youth Travel*, World Tourism Organization, Madrid, 2008.

The fact that young tourists look for accommodation services at a lower price or stay at friends or relatives means that a large portion of the budget that is allotted to practice tourism is spent at local level, having a positive impact over the local economy and community and not over large traders (for example, national or international hotel chains).

The travelling style of young people tends to have a big impact over the choice of accommodation. Therefore, backpackers turn to hostels, particularly the independent hostels, in a

greater extent than other categories of young people, and those who see themselves as “tourists” prefer to stay at hotels rather than hostels.

In terms of age, people over 26 years old prefer lodging in hotels, which underlines that they are willing to spend increasingly more for accommodation services as they grow older.

The option for a particular type of accommodation is related to the motivation to travel. For example, those who are lodged in dorms for backpackers are motivated by the search of thrills and adventures and by the desire to socialize with their travelling companions. Hotels are more used by those who seek rest, relaxation or a calm atmosphere, and those who stay at friends or relatives prefer to emphasize their social motivations.

Recreational activities

Generally, in terms of the tourism demand we are witnessing two categories of demands for vacation formulas (Snak, O., Baron, P., Neacșu, N., 2001): the “classic” demand from tourists who choose traditional vacations and new types of demands for active vacations, which, in contrast to traditional vacations, are becoming known under the name of “authentic vacations”. This new type of demand refers to the customers willing to reconsider the concept of leisure time and it’s gaining a growing number of followers, especially among young people whose demands are heading towards dynamic formulas of tourism: discovery, adventure driven, physical performances and self-improvement in sports (for example, hiking, climbing, sports games, water sports, competitions and contests on various themes organized by professional guides or entertainers). Obviously, the tendency to imitate is leaving a mark in this field, accelerating the shift towards active, unique holidays that have an element of surprise. From this perspective, the traditional tourism services (accommodation, food, and to a certain extent transport or visiting programs), which will still be the major components of the tourism arrangements due to their nature, are joined by a new component: recreational services. As a result, they can no longer be considered marginal services, requested occasionally, becoming one of the motivations behind the decision to accept packages of “active holidays”.

The most frequent activity for young people who make long journeys abroad is visiting the most popular tourist attractions and the cultural objectives (historic monuments and sites, museums, religious buildings, castles, cultural events, etc.), followed by meetings with the locals, spending time in restaurants, cafes and clubs; at the antipole is the accumulation of work experience and the development of new skills. It’s obvious that the cultural actions represent an important element of the activities carried on by young tourists during their stay, in contrast with the hedonistic image that young travellers usually generate. The affirmation and development of cultural tourism are stimulated by the curiosity of young people and by the raising of the education and civilisation levels.

In analyzing the motivation of young tourists it’s not surprising that most travellers get involved in a wide range of activities during their stay, which underlines the desire to seek various experiences. In addition to the mentioned activities, other types of activities carried on by young people during their stay are: visiting non-tourist areas or areas with little importance in terms of tourism, relaxing on the beach, participating at various events and festivals, shopping, observing nature, learning foreign languages, visiting friends or relatives, practicing sports (climbing, surfing, skiing, water sports, etc.), “on the trail of...” adventures, volunteering and more.

Backpackers in particular are involved in more activities than other segments of tourists on the youth travel market (even when they know beforehand how much time they will stay in a region) and their expectations are an experience that happens “once in a lifetime” and which needs to be fulfilled. They combine relaxation, cultural and social activities because of the long period of stay in a tourist destination. Everyday activities like shopping and going to cafes and restaurants are at the top of the list of things young people do during their stay. Maybe this desire to experience the daily life of a destination is also expressed by spending time in those locations where they can meet

with the locals and enjoy the everyday atmosphere. Earning money and working as a volunteer are among the few activities young people care for; they contribute to the financing of the stay and to personal growth. The youth who call themselves something else than “backpackers” tend to work, study or work as volunteers during their stay. This might explain why they reject labels like “backpackers” or “travellers”, because they often work within the local communities or live for long periods of time in one location and don’t perceive their experience as a tourist experience.

There is also a close relationship between the *motivation and experience* of young travellers on one hand and the number of different activities they engage into during their travel, on the other hand. In general, tourists who are mainly motivated by activities like experimentation-search, such as exploring other cultures or developing certain skills, are more active than the tourists who are motivated by activities of relaxation, such as avoiding commotion and crowds and looking for psychic rest. As the tourist experience increases, the number of activities carried out during the stay also increases. Therefore, according to studies (Richards, G., Wilson, J., 2003), young people who took over 10 trips are much more active (regarding the number of activities) than those who took less than 3 trips. These findings substantiate the idea that backpackers in particular are tourists eager to experience. Young people who are motivated by the desire to contribute to the development of the tourist destination and those who evade commotion and crowds tend to deliberately avoid certain activities that don’t meet their needs and desires, such as: visiting museums, participating in sporting competitions, studying or learning a language; while young people who are motivated by the desire to contribute with something where they travel avoid spending time in restaurants or bars, the emphasis being put on “doing”, meaning getting involved in the life of locals. In contrast, the youth motivated by the desire “to explore other cultures” place the emphasis on “watching” (as if there is a link between exploring other cultures as a motivation and sitting in restaurants to “watch” the daily life of local people more than getting involved in it).

There are also differences regarding *the preferences of men and women* in terms of spending leisure time. Young women prefer to walk or travel in the vicinity of the tourist destination, to participate at cultural events, to spend time in cafes and restaurants and to go shopping, while young men like to watch and participate in sporting competitions or practice extreme sports.

The activities carried out by young people during their stay are in direct correlation with their *home country or region*, therefore, the activities related to nature and the wild life are the most popular among youth from Eastern Europe (eg. Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, etc.) because they have lower incomes and can’t afford as much to go shopping, to stay in cafes and restaurants, etc.

Recreational activities depend also on the specific of the *tourist destination*. For example, going to the beach is a traditional way to spend leisure time for those who visit Greece, Spain, Australia, India or Thailand; walks appeal to young people visiting Australia, South Africa, Japan, Egypt or Mexico; going clubbing is specific to destinations like Ireland, Australia and Thailand; and cultural events, visiting museums and historic objectives are the main activities carried out by young tourists visiting Japan, Egypt, England, Germany and China. India has the highest percentage of young volunteers, followed by Japan and South Africa. England and Sweden are favourite destinations for work & travel programmes, and the United States and Australia record a high number of young people who travel to study – because they are English-speaking countries, the study in a foreign country is facilitated.

Of course the activities undertaken by young people vary in accordance to the *type of the chosen stay*. Therefore, *thrills* are considered a source of pleasure in a mountain destination and young tourists seek activities related to snow, such as *winter sports*, and the “holiday and amusement center” is a place where young people free themselves from family constraints and make *new friends*. The tourism services preferred by the youth are those which integrate *playful activities*, which imply limited efforts and allow discovering the surroundings. It is obvious that the main motivation of linguistic travels is *learning a foreign language or discovering others*. Training

in a foreign language, working abroad, discovering another country or another culture are the main reasons behind linguistic tourism, but young people are meeting with other people in order to communicate and discover new situations. *Conviviality* is another element desired by young people during their stay and it has to be present at the destination and in all the places of amusement. *The need to escape from the daily routine* is another motivation to travel for young people and so is the *desire to discover new places and people* and the practicing of *activities related to sea and sun*.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it may be said that the youth travel product is extremely complex, having features that differentiate it from other categories of tourism products and components adapted to the always changing requests and needs of youth.

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