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## **IDENTIFYING NEW SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN CROATIA: A GENERATION Z PERSPECTIVE**

## **IDENTIFIKACIJA NOVIH PRILIKA ZA RAZVOJ SPECIJALIZIRANOG TURIZMA U HRVATSKOJ: PERSPEKTIVA GENERACIJE Z**

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**ABSTRACT:** The rapid growth of global tourism has sparked a wave of overtourism, driving destinations to reinvent themselves through more individualised tourist experiences and the concept of sustainability. This study examines the attitudes of Generation Z in Croatia toward emerging tourism products that reflect distinctive local peculiarities. Utilizing both secondary sources and primary data collected through an online questionnaire, this study explores the underlying drivers that enhance the appeal of novel, sustainability-oriented tourism experiences. The findings indicate that Generation Z exhibits distinct tourism preferences compared to previous generations, revealing opportunities to design more diverse and sustainable offerings that may reduce seasonality, alleviate overtourism, and strengthen local economies. The research addresses critical challenges associated with the development of innovative tourism products in Croatia, encompassing strategic alignment with competitive market trends, accurate forecasting of Generation Z demand patterns, comprehensive measurement of economic impacts, targeted education of future tourism professionals, and the optimization of product design to balance temporal and spatial dynamics and prevent overtourism. In conclusion, Generation Z represents a pivotal stakeholder group whose dual role, as future policymakers and market trendsetters, provides valuable insights into the potential for developing sustainable, motivation-based tourism products that reflect the shifting expectations of modern visitors, thereby creating guidelines for creating long-term development strategies and predicting future demand.

**KEYWORDS:** Special interest tourism, Generation Z, market trends, Croatia

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** J15, M31, Z32

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**SAŽETAK:** Brzi rast globalnog turizma doveo je do pojave pretjeranog turizma i nastojanja da se destinacije preoblikuju putem individualiziranih turističkih iskustava i koncepta održivosti. Ova studija ispituje stavove generacije Z u Hrvatskoj prema novim turističkim proizvodima koji odražavaju prepoznatljiva lokalna obilježja. Na temelju podataka iz sekundarnih izvora i primarnih podataka prikupljenih pomoću *online* upitnika, istražuju se čimbenici koji pojačavaju privlačnost novih turističkih iskustava obilježenih orijentacijom na održivost. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da se turističke preferencije generacije Z razlikuju od prethodnih generacija, što ukazuje na priliku za osmišljavanje i razvoj raznolikijih i održivijih proizvoda koji mogu umanjiti sezonalnost ponude, ublažiti pretjerani turizam i ojačati lokalna gospodarstva. Ovo istraživanje bavi se ključnim izazovima u razvoju inovativnih turističkih proizvoda u Hrvatskoj, uključujući strateško usklađivanje s trendovima u tržišnom natjecanju, točno predviđanje obrazaca potražnje kod generacije Z, sveobuhvatno mjerenje gospodarskih učinaka, ciljano obrazovanje budućih stručnjaka u turizmu i optimizaciju dizajna proizvoda s ciljem uravnoteženja vremenske i prostorne dinamike, kao i sprečavanja pretjeranog turizma. Zaključno, generacija Z predstavlja istaknutu skupinu dionika čija dvostruka uloga budućih kreatora politika i nositelja tržišnih trendova pruža vrijedne spoznaje o mogućnostima razvoja održivih, motivacijski utemeljenih proizvoda koji odražavaju promjenjiva očekivanja modernih posjetitelja te pridonose oblikovanju dugoročnih razvojnih strategija i predviđanjima buduće potražnje.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** specifični oblici turizma, generacija Z, tržišni trendovi, Hrvatska  
**JEL KLASIFIKACIJA:** J15, M31, Z32

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth in the number of travellers worldwide has resulted in the appearance of overtourism, a complex phenomenon getting full attention of all tourism destination stakeholders due to its adverse environmental, social and economic impacts. Over the past four decades, following the famous 1987 Brundtland Commission's Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), a paradigm shift toward sustainability and responsible tourism development has pushed forward the concept of special interest tourism. Nowadays, a large variety of specially designed tourism products is available on the market, being continuously developed and diversified in order to meet ever-changing visitors' needs and expectations. The research should provide an answer on main research question: What are the key attitudes and perspectives of Generation Z in Croatia regarding the potential of new special interest tourism forms development in Croatia? Accordingly, the main aim of the paper is to investigate the opportunities for integrating emerging tourism market trends with Croatia's existing resource base, and to provide key challenges that can encounter during the development of new special interest tourism in the destination.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. The path of special interest tourism development - from conceptual foundations towards ongoing product diversification**

The paradigm shift from overtourism toward sustainability has redefined tourism product development, emphasizing the value of customization and individualized design as key components of responsible and experience-oriented tourism. In addition, the constant requests based on the desires and needs of homogeneous demand groups have highlighted the need for the development of special interest tourism. Moreover, each tourist is actively involved in the formation of a specific niche through its own consumerist practices (Bunghez, 2021). This highlights the importance of understanding tourists' specific interests, which aligns with Trauer's (2006) earlier assertion that special interests can be defined either by special interest activities (e.g. sport, wine, culture, painting, adventure, opera, battlefields), or by geographical area (e.g. Asia, Europe) of homogeneous groups according to a common characteristic (e.g. seniors, women, gay). Similarly, special interest tourism products are tailored to meet the needs of specific market segments, whose size and nature can vary greatly depending on tourists' demographic characteristics, social status, and the geography of the destinations, which include a wide range of outdoor and indoor activities, from sport and adventure to nature-, culture-, and heritage-based experiences (Novelli et al., 2022). The same authors highlighted that special interest tourism offers opportunities for more meaningful and responsible travel experiences and can promote inclusive growth and skilled employment, unlike the low-skilled jobs typical of mass tourism. However, its growth and development should be carefully planned and managed to prevent the emergence of unsustainable practices.

Despite nearly two decades of research, the impacts of niche and special interest travellers, as well as their attitudes and perceptions towards emerging special interest tourism products, remains a relatively underexplored topic (Weiler and Firth, 2021). As suggested by Wen and Wu (2020), scholars should explore this subsector of tourism through the lens of individual markets, as case-focused and in-depth approaches can yield valuable insights into the dynamics of special interest tourism and enhance the effectiveness of related marketing strategies. Hence, bridging the gap between the challenges of tourism development and the growing academic interest in alternative tourism approaches, it is appropriate to examine emerging tourism patterns and evolving travel motivations, particularly through the lens of special interest tourism (Novotná et al., 2019).

### **2.2. Emerging special interest tourism products and the Croatian context**

In light of the expanding tourism market and its accelerating dynamics, the necessity for continuous investment in innovation, creative solutions, and market-oriented adaptation is unequivocal. Given the ongoing development and shifting trends in the tourism market, along with changes in tourist behaviour and travel motives, special interest tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments, driven by the constant creation of new tour-

ism products and supported by numerous specialized providers. However, research into the peculiarities of the tourism market in Croatia and according to the literature on the current trends, there are many recently developed specially designed tourism products with the potential for further development and high attractiveness for certain segments of tourist demand. It is also important to highlight some positive aspects of special interest tourism, as diversification of tourism products can bring many benefits, especially in the context of seasonality, where new or improved tourism products and offers can extend the tourism season (Garanti, 2022). In light of the Mediterranean's pronounced tourism seasonality, there is a clear imperative to identify potentials and develop new special interest tourism products that can alleviate seasonal pressures and enhance the region's year-round tourism sustainability. Hence, the selection of special interest tourism products in this research is guided by market trends, regional relevance, seasonality alleviation and development potential.

One of the products that has experienced quite a boom recently is olive-oil tourism, olive tourism or oleotourism. Additionally, there is a specific time of the year when olives are harvested and then olive oil is made, namely autumn and winter (Guerra et al. 2018), which represents the post-season period, i.e. period outside the main tourist season. This special interest tourism related to olive cultivation is a form of tourism in which visitors are offered with experiences, sensations and emotions related to olives, olive oil, special conditions of olive-growing areas as well as specific landscapes and Mediterranean cuisine culture (Oplanić et al., 2020; Guerra et al. 2018). When talking about Croatia, peninsula Istria is quite known for growing olives, as well as high quality and valued olive oil. Moreover, for the past 20 years it has been one of the most important activities that generates income (Oplanić et al., 2020) and brings other benefits to the local community.

Current trends in the world, such as the desire for healthier lifestyles and investment in one's body and mind, both at home and while traveling, led to the development of this under-researched field of aromatherapy and aroma tourism. It is a process based on holistic principles - contact, communication, and working with people, namely treating a person as a whole and not just a set of symptoms (Gregorić et al., 2020). Therefore, aromatherapy tourism could be offered in the form of visiting aroma cosmetic factories, harvesting aromatic plants and participating in specially designed workshops. In Croatia, aromatherapy and aroma cosmetics are present in certain regions, yet the niche remains underdeveloped. However, given the country's abundance of natural healing resources, they are expected to soon become a part of Croatia's emerging tourism offerings (Gregorić et al., 2020).

Likewise, a healthier lifestyle and the trend of "travelling to feel good" are closely related to the concept of yoga tourism. Increased awareness of those benefits, especially preventive health and stress reduction, has ensured a steady stream of primary wellness travellers that are motivated with specific activities such as meditation or yoga retreats (Global Wellness Institute, 2017). Drawing on market trends from the past several years, this trend is expected to continue and accelerate in the years to come, however, research in this area remains in its infancy (Global Wellness Institute, 2017; Dillette et al., 2018). In the Croatian context, significant potential exists for the development of yoga tourism through the augmentation of accommodation facilities and service provisions, with the objective of improving overall competitiveness. New wellness centres focused exclusively on this purpose and offering trend-oriented programs are needed (Kurecic & Svec, 2022). Hence, con-

sidering its current image and development stage, Croatia's wellness industry must enhance collaboration among stakeholders, establish a unified platform for sharing knowledge, and implement national standards for wellness businesses (Ferjanić Hodak et al., 2021).

In accordance with the already mentioned concepts of healthier living habits, nurturing the body and mind and finding balance between work and private life, another special interest tourism entitled slow tourism is being developed. Slow tourism is a growing, sustainable alternative to mass tourism that encourages travellers to slow down and engage deeply with local, traditional, natural, and sensory experiences, though research on this emerging concept is still limited (Agarwal et al., 2018; Serdane et al., 2020). Furthermore, when analysing tourism vulnerability and sustainability on Croatian islands, Slijepčević and Kordej-De Villa (2025) identified a growing awareness of overtourism and residents' concerns that tourism is exceeding physical, ecological, and social limits. Consequently, they emphasize the need to reduce tourism pressure and promote special interest tourism products like slow tourism, which focus on environmental stewardship, social inclusion, and long-term sustainability through strategic planning and inclusive governance. On top of that, evidence of successful initiatives includes the 'Take it Slow' project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund, which aimed to develop slow tourism in Italy and Croatia and produced best practice examples across various categories in both countries (Preston and Pasanen, 2024).

Alongside with the above special interest tourism products, geotourism is, based on its definition, "a branch of sustainable tourism, which instead of focusing on minimizing impact on the ecological environment seeks to preserve all natural and human attributes which render a given location distinct from others" (Ólafsdóttir & Tverijonaite, 2018:2). Although geotourism is under-researched in the context of Croatia, it undoubtedly has the potential to support regional development and help decentralize tourism by shifting visitor flows away from overcrowded coastal areas to inland and lesser-known destinations. It can be achieved through the use of geo-trails, scenic viewpoints, guided tours, geo-activities, and geosite visitor centers (Newsome & Dowling, 2010).

Another intriguing special interest tourism is astrotourism as a distinctive tourism product that encourages tourists' participation and engagement that extends beyond our planet. Namely, it is a special interest tourism, in which tourists are motivated by sky-observation related experiences (Soleimani et al., 2019). Isolated locations with as little artificial lighting as possible are preferred, while possession of Dark-Sky Park certificate increases their attractiveness. It is worth mentioning that Croatia already has several observatories that lure the attention of astrotourists and have a very bright future for the development of this specific form of tourism in the future. According to DarkSky International (2024) There are three Dark-Sky Parks in Croatia: Vrani Kamen, Petrova Gora-Biljeg and Jelsa, while the most famous observatories are located in Zagreb - Grič Observatory, Astronomy Center Rijeka and Observatory in Višnjan, that organize interactive presentations and educational workshops and thus contribute to the popularization of astronomy and astro-tourism (Vrdoljak Raguž et al., 2022).

Hence, rethinking the proposed explanations, geotourism and astrotourism also have an educational role for visitors, therefore they can be considered as a part of educational tourism, a special interest tourism product oriented towards learning. McGladdery and

Lubbe (2017) believe that educational tourism, as an under-researched area of tourism, offers limitless opportunities for future research and development, but also has the potential to contribute to global peace and tolerance. An illustrative example of the development of educational tourism in Croatia is the *International Tourism and Hospitality Academy at Sea (ITHAS)*. Established in 2005 as an international program bringing together students from five universities, ITHAS combines theoretical knowledge with practical experience in a multicultural environment (Arcodia et al., 2021). This experiential learning approach supports student development while promoting Croatia as an educational tourism destination (Arcodia et al., 2021; Krnajski Hršak, 2024).

Considering the positive effects mentioned previously, there is another sub-segment of educational tourism that can reduce the intercultural gap, especially among young people - volunteer tourism or voluntourism. Volunteer tourism combines leisure and altruism, enabling participants to engage in volunteer activities that support social groups in difficult circumstances while also offering opportunities to understand and enjoy local culture through intercultural exchange (Han et al., 2020). Despite often perceiving themselves as unqualified (Hammersley, 2014), volunteer tourists are generally young and passionate individuals seeking authentic experiences, learning opportunities, and affordable travel (Dukić et al., 2018). Although experiences in Croatia are largely positive, this form of tourism remains underdeveloped, primarily due to a lack of regulation and financial support, limited promotion, and insufficient stakeholder cooperation (Dukić et al., 2018; Brezak et al., 2019).

Industrial tourism, a form of special interest tourism, also known as factory tourism, has lately attracted the attention of the scientific community. Industrial tourism may occur either in deactivated production sites, such as company museums, or in active industrial facilities that attract visitors for their educational and experiential value (Moral-Moral & Fernandez-Alles, 2019). Although research on industrial tourism is slowly increasing, it remains limited and predominantly focused on deactivated sites (Montenegro et al., 2022). In contrast, the study of active industrial tourism and analyses from the perspective of companies that open their doors to visitors are still relatively rare (Montenegro & Sousa, 2021). This is also the case in Croatia, where research on industrial tourism remains limited, despite the growing interest in promoting factory tours, traditional crafts, and local production sites as part of the tourism offer.

Wedding tourism is becoming more and more important, as people want to travel whenever they get a chance and celebrate these important moments in a special place, far away from home. Wedding tourists engage in travel to celebrate their own marriage or that of family, friends, or acquaintances (Bertella, 2017). Therefore, many destinations, particularly in the Mediterranean, are increasingly promoting themselves as wedding and honeymoon tourism destinations and investing more in this niche to position themselves as attractive choices for such travelers. Durinec (2013) claims that some governments in the Mediterranean have started to implement promotional campaigns for wedding tourism, but there are many more opportunities for public and private actors. To understand wedding tourism as a contemporary and emerging social phenomenon, it is essential to gain a comprehensive insight into this special interest tourism product (Sharma et al., 2025). In the context of Croatia, wedding tourism is developing in practice, but, to the best of our knowledge, there is limited research supporting understanding of its potential for transforming local tourism practices.

On the contrary, there is mystic tourism, a branch of cultural tourism, in which the tourist begins a purposeful journey to gain sagacity or visit the sacred places of mysticism (Shirmohammadi & Abyaran, 2020). Mystic tourism involves different activities such as workshops, praying in monasteries, attending a spiritual death and rebirth ceremonies, leaving flowers, crystals or candles in places that are considered to be magical or sacred (Albert Rodrigo, 2020). However, mystic tourism also includes guided tours through mystical parts of a city, such as abandoned houses, churches, and cemeteries, enriched by captivating storytelling that brings past events to life. In Croatia, a country rich with history and folklore, storytelling plays a crucial role in creating immersive experiences that evoke myths and legends, sparking visitors' imaginations and enhancing the appeal of these sites. For example, tours in the medieval town of Ogulin exploring the legend of the witches of Klek Mountain or stories of hidden cemeteries as thematic night tours of Zagreb present new possible ways of (Botić & Kovačić, 2024; Matečić et al., 2021). These narratives can not only preserve local heritage but also transform ordinary places into enchanting destinations for mystical tourism in Croatia.

### **2.3. Generation Z as the trend setters and active participants in new special interest tourism products development**

Attitudes, perception and behaviour of different generations are generally shaped by the time they were born, and they live in, which is why all of them are interconnected by common experience and values, there are significant differences between generations, as well as resemblances within them. Although there are a few, slightly different approaches in defining Generation Z or shorter Gen Z, it often includes young people born between 1997 and 2012 (Popşa, 2024). Francis and Hoefel (2018:2) believe that “as global connectivity soars, generational shifts could come to play a more important role in setting behaviour than socioeconomic differences do”.

It is well-known that even before the concept of influencer became established in everyday life, young people played the main social role by creating and interpreting trends (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Young people are often the ones setting trends, but at the same time those who are the fastest to embrace changes and adapt to them. On the other hand, it is quite challenging to teach Generation Z and prepare them for the labor market. As Cilliers (2017) stated, teaching Generation Z implies going beyond traditional teaching-learning strategies and looking for ways to teach to capture the imagination, interest, and understanding of this generation.

When it comes to their peculiarities, generation Z demonstrates distinct travel behaviours compared to previous generations, reflecting major changes in decision-making, travel behaviour and expectations (Uysal, 2022; Bilińska et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2023a; Seyfi et al., 2023b; Pinho & Gomes, 2024; Popşa, 2024; Yağmur, 2024; Konieczna & Trybuś-Borowiecka, 2025; Rajput & Gandhi, 2025; Ribeiro et al., 2025). Generation Z is usually described as a generation that is more concerned about the environment than previous generations with an emphasis on a strong ethical dimension, as they are addressing global issues such as climate change, environmental degradation and reduction of biodiversity, but also problems of a social nature (Seyfi et al., 2023a; Rajput & Gandhi, 2025). Although Pinho & Gomes (2024) reported that their expressed theoretical concerns do not fully align

with their practical behaviour, Konieczna and Trybuś-Borowiecka (2025) found out that many members of Generation Z prefer local destinations, choose trains over airplanes, and limit long-distance trips as expressions of environmental responsibility, which reflects an internalization of sustainability values and signal the emergence of a more conscious, post-consumerist approach to tourism. This trend, while reflecting a shift in consumer motivations toward minimizing environmental impacts and potentially limiting travel mobility, highlights the significant potential for developing alternative, climate-friendly forms of special interest tourism (Konieczna & Trybuś-Borowiecka, 2025).

Besides prioritizing social and environmental responsibility, their travel planning is highly digitalized, relying on social media and booking apps, and focused on unique, experience-driven activities rather than material consumption (Uysal, 2022; Popşa, 2024). As members of Generation Z are active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, these networks often shape their opinions and influence their decision-making processes. Furthermore, Rajput and Gandhi (2025) suggest that eco-conscious Gen Z travellers are best engaged through immersive storytelling, personalized eco-tours, and sustainability-focused experiences, while less engaged travellers benefit from awareness campaigns, simple explanations of eco-benefits, and introductory experiences that reduce barriers.

Having in mind that Generation Z will soon be actively involved in tourism policy making, their attitudes, perceptions, and ideas regarding new directions and opportunities for tourism development were considered very important in the formulation of future tourism development strategies. According to all of the above, it can be assumed that their decisions will go in the direction of digitalization, sustainability and encouragement of socially responsible consumption. Hence, with respect to the way they perceive things and the world around them, their perspective is considered crucial in the context of recognizing opportunities for development of new special interest tourism in Croatia.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

In order to examine perception and attitudes of generation Z regarding new special interest tourism and their possible development in Croatia, primary research was taken. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the research that includes the attitudes and perceptions of generation Z about new special interest tourism forms, is not found in the literature. Papers related with this topic of research who involve one generation (not necessarily generation Z) are related to only one new special interest tourism form. Of the analysed special interest tourism, the largest number of papers related to demand attitudes is found in the field of olive oil tourism (e.g. Murgado-Armenteros et al., 2021; Parrilla-González et al., 2020; Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019; Agüera et al., 2017), volunteer tourism (e.g. Pompurová, 2020; Andereck, 2012) and educational tourism (e.g. Tang et al., 2025; Hussein et al., 2022; Wijayanti et al., 2017). A smaller number of studies are found in the area of demand attitudes related to geotourism (e.g. Tessema et al., 2022) and wedding tourism (e.g. Graciano, 2020; Del Chiappa & Fortezza, 2016), while papers related to demand attitudes on astrotourism, aromatherapy tourism, mystical tourism, yoga tourism and industrial tourism are still lacking. Accordingly, the survey questionnaire used for this research was created by the authors (not taken from any previous

research), and the trends in the area of new special interest tourism forms analysed in the theoretical part of the paper was used as a basis for the research.

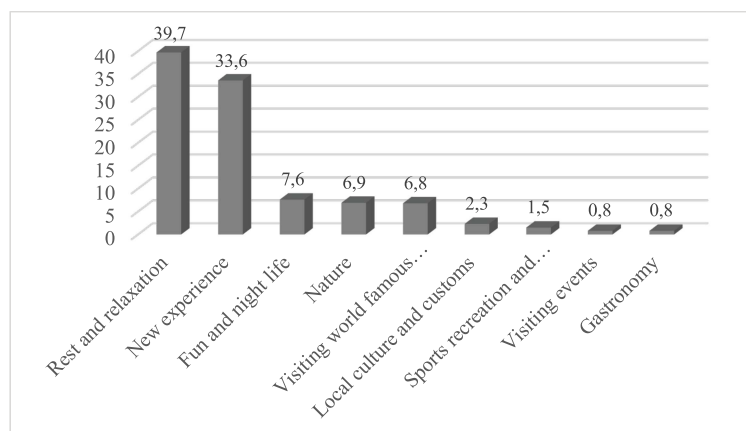
Research instrument used in the paper is a structured online questionnaire created in Google Forms. Data were captured by using Microsoft Excel. For the data analyses, authors used descriptive statistics. The questionnaire consists of three parts. First part provides general information on personal profile and travel characteristics of respondents. Second part examines motivation and factors that influence travel decision, while third part examines attitudes and perception on new special interest tourism and their development in Croatia. Survey was distributed and collected in October 2024 among student population major in tourism, due to the fact that they represent future decision makers and tourism product creators. Research sample included students from the University of Zagreb. Link on the questionnaire was distributed via teaching platforms. In total, 132 questionnaires were collected.

Research sample included 102 (77.3%) females and 30 (22.7%) males. When it comes to respondents' travel frequency, most examinees (31.3%) travels twice a year, while 26.5% travels once a year. Other examinees take three or more trips in one year. Due to the fact that sample consists of students, 42.7% travels with family members, 32.8% with friends, 22.9% with partners, while only 1.5% travel alone. Social networks (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc.) represent the most importance source of travel information for almost 40% of examinees, same as recommendations from friends, partner or family members. Other web sources (Tripadvisor, Expedia, etc.) represent main source of travel information for 20% of examinees. As expected for the student population, the vast majority (85%) make plans for the trip between one week and three months before.

More than half of respondents decides and chooses primary travel motive by themselves, while some of them are influenced by recommendations and information provided by other people (31.8%), some of them use motives of their travel companions as their own motives (13.6%) or prefer that someone else decides on their primary travel motive (2.3%).

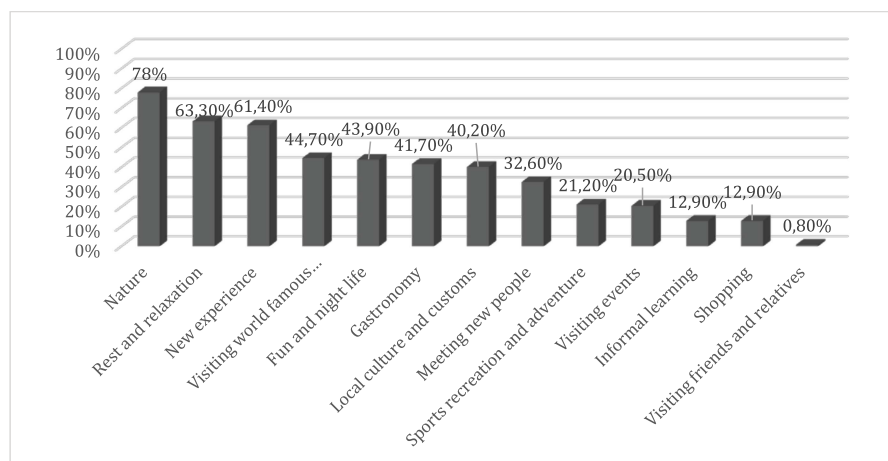
Travel motives are one of the main drivers for special interest tourism development. Therefore, it is important to examine is there a connection between motives and new special interest tourism forms which could be developed in years to come. The most frequent primary motives are shown in Graph 1.

**Graph 1.** The most frequent travel motives (%)



Rest and relaxation represent the main travel motive for almost 40% of respondents, while new experiences account for 33%. Fun and night life, nature and world famous sights are the main motives for about 7% of respondents, sport is the main motive for 1.5% of respondents, while less than 1% of respondents are primarily motivated by events and gastronomy when traveling. In addition to the most common main motive for travel, respondents were asked to list other travel motives, and the results are shown in Graph 2.

**Graph 2.** Other travel motives (%)



Source: primary research

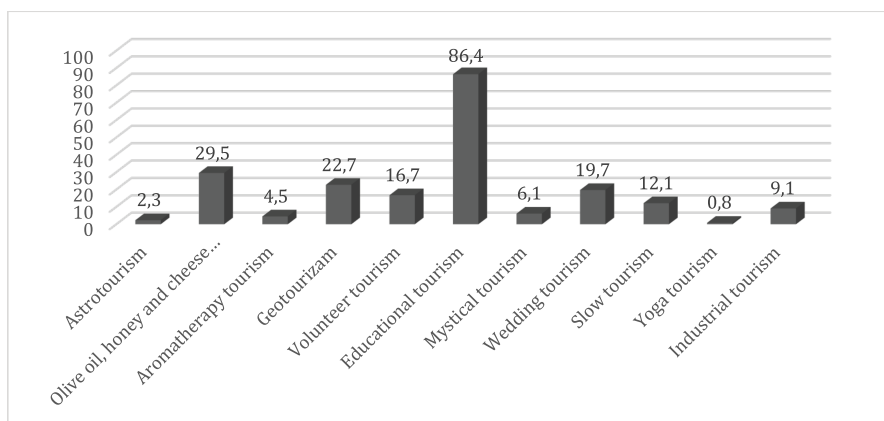
Respondents were able to tick several of the motives offered. The largest number of respondents (almost 80%) are motivated by the beauty of nature, while recreation and relaxation as well as new experiences are the motivation for more than 60% of respondents. More than 40% of respondents occasionally travel for fun and nightlife, which is to be expected given that this is a student population. A group of motives related to culture, including local culture and customs and gastronomy, also ranked highly. The motives least represented by respondents are informal learning, shopping and visiting friends and relatives.

The next variable included involves factors that influence the decision to travel. The reason for inclusion this variable is establish a link with the development of the offer of new special interest tourism. The respondents rated 10 factors with values from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale (1 - factor does not influence the decision to travel at all; 5 - factor influences the decision to travel completely). The highest rated factor is the travel cost (4.57), which was expected, since respondents are students. It is expected that this factor will become less important as respondents enter the labour market. The decision to travel is also strongly influenced by the expected quality of service (4.44), the content of the trip (4.39), the distance and availability of accommodation (4.25) and the availability of information (4.21). As expected, respondents are also strongly influenced by online reservations and the uniqueness of the product. Slightly lower rated factors are environmental acceptability, benefit/harm to the local community and the level of challenging physical activity.

In line with the main objective of the study, the main part of the research concerns

new special interest tourism (previous participation, desire for future participation and possibilities for development in Croatia). When it comes to previous involvement, the only special interest tourism in which most respondents had previously been involved was educational tourism. Almost 30% of respondents were involved in olive oil, honey and cheese tourism, while around 20% of respondents were involved in geotourism and wedding tourism. A smaller number of respondents (about 10% and less) participated in the other new special interest tourism included in the survey, as shown in Graph 3.

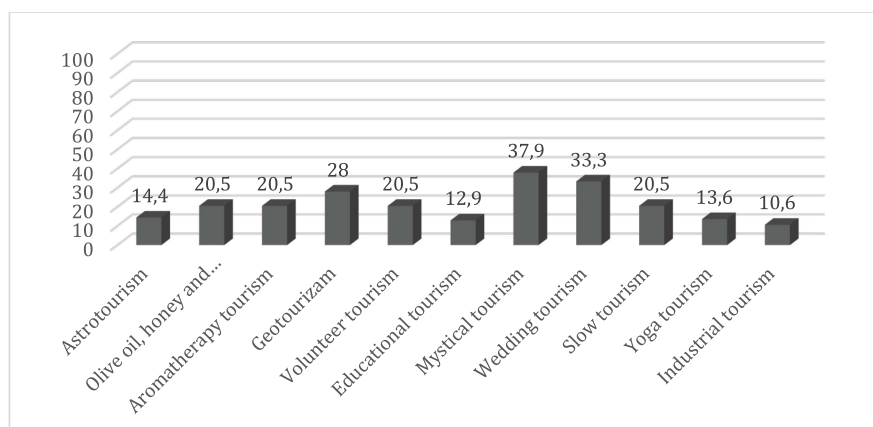
**Graph 3.** Participation in new special interest tourism (%)



Source: primary research

When it comes to the desire for future participation, respondents showed the most interest in participating in mystical tourism, wedding tourism and geotourism (around a third of respondents), while a fifth of participants would like to participate in slow tourism, volunteer tourism, olive oil tourism, honey tourism and cheese tourism. The other new special interest tourism listed are of interest to 10-15% of respondents, as shown in Graph 4.

**Graph 4.** Desire for future participation (%)



Source: primary research

In order to investigate the possibilities of developing new special interest tourism in Croatia, respondents were also put in the position of future experts in the field of tourism who are well acquainted with the tourism market of the Republic of Croatia. This part of the research was possible to conduct due to the fact that respondents took classes which involve special interest tourism concept and recent trends on the market (new special interest tourism forms). They were asked to express their opinion (on a Likert scale from 1 to 5) on the possibilities of developing new special interest tourism in the Republic of Croatia. Respondents believe that olive oil, honey and cheese tourism, educational tourism, geotourism, aromatherapy tourism, volunteer tourism and wedding tourism have the greatest potential for development in the Republic of Croatia. Mystical tourism, slow tourism, yoga tourism and industrial tourism were rated with slightly lower average values. The only new special interest tourism that was rated below the average is astrotourism.

In addition, respondents were asked to mark the regions of Croatia where they thought new specialty forms of tourism could develop. Almost a fifth of respondents considers that the greatest potential for the development of new special interest tourism lies in Central Dalmatia and its islands. In addition, half of the respondents believe that new special interest tourism should be developed in coastal Croatia, while the other half believe that continental Croatia is better suited for new special interest tourism development.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Even if the importance of the development of the special interest tourism market is undisputed, the fact remains that new special interest tourism emerges almost daily. However, only part of them stays on the market and attract the attention of demand over a longer period. When new special interest tourism emerges, destinations that want to develop their offer in line with a particular new form need to be sure that this investment will bring results, i.e. that it is not just a passing trend. In addition, to the experience of destinations that have already implemented this trend, it is important to gather information from potential demand. In this study, information was gathered from Generation Z, which will account for a significant proportion of the demand for new special interest tourism in the coming years.

Furthermore, in addition to the interest in demand for new special interest tourism forms, two other very important components need to be taken into account before drawing conclusions: the market situation, i.e., the experiences of other destinations regarding the development of a particular new form of special interest tourism, as well as Croatia's potential in terms of the resources (which also involves human resources). The theoretical review has shown that these are not passing trends, but forms of tourism that will occupy their share of the market in the future. On the other hand, the analysis of resources and the development of new special interest tourism forms in Croatia has shown that there is potential for the development of each of the analysed form as follows:

- Astrotourism – many areas with low light pollution and the existence of certified dark sky parks
- Olive oil, honey and cheese tourism – great development potential, due to Istrian and Dalmatian oils, island cheeses, continental and Mediterranean honey; existing

- wine routes; potential for branding indigenous products and creating gastro-routes
- Aromatherapy tourism - rich natural resources of medicinal herbs and Mediterranean flora, as well as an increasing focus on wellness tourism
  - Geotourism - rich geological heritage, including national parks, nature parks, and numerous geothermal springs
  - Volunteer tourism - heritage preservation, ecological projects, working with local communities
  - Educational tourism - summer schools, archaeological camps, culinary workshops, professional seminars
  - Mystical tourism - rich Slavic mythology, legends, historical mysteries, and religious tourism (pilgrimages)
  - Wedding tourism - castles, historical cities, attractive coastline
  - Slow tourism - natural resources (rural areas) are ideal for slower, more mindful travel, with great potential for development in the continental part and hinterland
  - Yoga tourism - peaceful locations (islands, mountains, continental regions)
  - Industrial tourism - preserved industrial heritage (old factories, mines, railways) and active plants (e.g., breweries, oil mills), with growing potential in larger cities

The research showed that respondents have only been involved to a small extent in some of new special interest tourism, but that they have a desire to be involved in some of the forms in the future. Furthermore, new special interest tourism forms included in the research rely heavily on sustainability, destination heritage, authenticity and technology, the very values we associate with Generation Z.

Taking all the above into account, it can be concluded that Croatia has the potential for the development of new special interest tourism. Accordingly, authors provided several key challenges that will encounter during the development of new special interest tourism products in Croatia (but also in other destinations, according to their specific situation):

1. Market diversification - despite the large number of trends, destinations must take into account that they are oriented towards those trends and products whose development can position them in the market and achieve a competitive advantage. In doing so, it is important to make projections of potential demand and think about factors that will influence the purchase decision making process of Gen Z in 10 years ahead.
2. Measuring the achieved effects - one of the main challenges in the market of special interest tourism is measuring economic effects. Therefore, in the very process of developing a special interest tourism, it is necessary to think about the variables that will measure the achieved effects that will serve as a basis for successful decision making at destination level.
3. Labour force – the lack of workforce in the tourism in Croatia raises the question of how to ensure sufficient workforce for new specialized tourism products and is today's globalized tourism labour market capable of optimal reallocation of workforce according to new market trends? Destinations must be aware of the importance of the workforce that will provide services, because the impact of workforce

on the service provided and the tourist experience is extremely large. Therefore, it is crucial to have educated professionals specialized for new tourism products.

4. Optimize new tourism products' development in terms of time and space - manage tourism product development towards time optimisation according to local resources and control a spatial pressure of tourism development to avoid overtourism.

Due to all mentioned, it is possible to conclude that further tourism market segmentation and related specializations are ongoing processes that need to be further investigated and discussed.

According to their motivation, lifestyle and behaviour, Gen Z is much different from previous generations. They are becoming a dominant trend-setter and soon will actively participate in tourism policy making (in many different roles). It is necessary to prepare for incoming changes to provide top-notch services and sustainable tourism development.

Scientific contribution of the paper is reflected in: filling the gap in the existing literature on providing empirical insights into the specific tourism attitudes of Generation Z (Gen Z) within the Croatian market, understanding how the development of specialized products can be used as a strategic tool for further tourism development in the destination, identifying key challenges which can occur in the process of new special interest tourism development. Furthermore, paper can provide a base for creation of guidelines for policymakers and tourism stakeholders, enabling them to optimize new product development processes and achieve a competitive advantage.

Although this study provides valuable insights into attitudes and perceptions of Generation Z related to emerging special interest tourism products that could be implemented and offered in Croatia, it has its limitations. These arise from the number of respondents and the geographical distribution of the research. The conclusions of the research would be more relevant if the number of respondents was larger and included students from all parts of Croatia. Furthermore, the research should also include the supply side of the market. Accordingly, the main recommendations for future research would be to conduct the research on a larger sample across the whole of Croatia. Also, future research should include tourists who are primarily motivated by new special interest tourism, considering the age structure of the respondents in order to explore differences between generations.

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