

Master Tourism Thesis for Aalborg University

The Gap Year Experience



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Introduction

Education is always changing and growing, and one of the newer ideas that have gotten people talking is the 'Gap Year' (O'Shea, 2011, p.142). The term refers to a break, often about a year, which students take after finishing high school and before starting college. Some might also take it in the middle of their college years. It's a break from the regular path of study.

The idea of a gap year has been around since the 1960s, starting in the United Kingdom. It was seen as a way for young people to have different experiences before they began their university studies (Jones, 2004, p. 58). Over time, the idea has spread all over the world, and it's gotten a lot of attention (Heath, 2007, p. 96).

During a gap year, students might travel, volunteer, take up internships, or work. The aim is to help them grow personally and gain practical experiences outside of a classroom setting (Snee, 2013, p.102). Many see this time as a chance to learn and discover new things in a more relaxed and less structured environment (Wallace, 2012, p. 80).

Research shows that there are many benefits to taking a gap year. It can help students develop important life skills, understand other cultures better, and can even improve their academic performance when they return to school (Crawford, 2017, p. 121). However, we don't know much about the personal experiences and thoughts of students who take this journey.

In an attempt to illuminate the underexplored areas of our knowledge, this research study has been precisely designed and conducted using a phenomenological approach, which is often termed as a qualitative approach. The ultimate goal of this scientific paper is to cast light on the unique and diverse lived experiences of a select group of 17 individuals who graciously agreed to participate in our study.

The selection of these 17 participants was not random, but instead, drawn from a pool of individuals within our immediate network or close contact list. These people have been carefully

chosen for their past experiences, specifically for having taken a gap year at least once in their lifetime. The premise of choosing these individuals centers on the fact that their experiences during the gap year are diverse due to various reasons and methods they chose to implement, thereby offering an eclectic mix of insights and perspectives for the study.

Once selected, these participants were requested to engage in a unique and insightful method known as the 'lifeline technique'. This technique enabled the participants to chart their experiences in a manner that best represented their personal journey. This was followed by individualized interviews, where each participant was given the opportunity to dive deeper into their experiences, recalling memories, sharing anecdotes, and expressing their thoughts and feelings in their own words.

These personal narratives serve as valuable data points for this study, helping us to navigate through their gap year experiences and thus shedding light on the different motivations and approaches that influenced their decisions during that time.

In a further effort to systematize and understand these experiences, this study takes into account Jones's seven categories of the gap year. These categories provide a framework that helps in classifying the varied experiences of our 17 participants.

Beyond merely understanding their experiences, this paper aims to go one step further. It not only seeks to categorize the experiences of the 17 participants but also dives deep into the realm of their consumer behavior during their gap year. The study aims to draw connections between the experiences of the gap year and the consumer behavior exhibited by the participants, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of how such life experiences can influence and shape consumption patterns and behaviors.

In essence, this study serves as a comprehensive exploration of gap year experiences, aiming to fill the knowledge gap through a qualitative analysis of real-world experiences and a deep-dive examination of consumer behavior during this significant period in an individual's life.

In the upcoming section, we will outline our problem formulation, highlighting the key issue this paper addresses.

Problem formulation

A growing trend among youth called a gap year, represents a certain period of time filled with various activities, usually following after the completion of their formal schooling. Such activities are, for instance, working, volunteering, and/or traveling that have a direct impact on a gap taker's experience. Experiences gained throughout the gap year help to develop confidence, independence, and many more qualities. However, it is highly emphasized that the choices about what activities to do during the gap year, and what expectations and intentions one might have will determine how successful, and if, their gap year is gonna be (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017).

According to Beaver (2021), a gap year has to be well-planned in order to get the wanted outcome, i.e. a strong likelihood of enrolling in university the following year, higher grades than an average graduate, better career prospects, higher confidence, maturity, and independence. O'Shea (2011) has mentioned there is a notable 'lack of in-depth research on the international volunteering gap year and its purported benefits', with a high emphasis on young adults in the pre-university stage. Many studies focus solely on the commercial side of this phenomenon and from what we know we may promote personal growth and learning (O'Shea, 2011). Therefore, our research aims to dive into our participants' experiences and to explore opportunities and challenges that occurred, short and long-term impacts and/or any other transformative experience that comes alongside a gap year. Additionally, we wish to uncover perceptions of a gap year and potential factors that influence attitude toward the concept, the experience itself, and fulfillment of its potential.

We have decided to build this research based on a lifeline technique, followed by semi-structured interviews with returned gap takers which are going to be thematically analyzed in order to get a better understanding of a gap year phenomenon. The encouragement of interviewees' reflection on the phenomenon and sharing of their own personal experiences enhances a deeper comprehension of the diverse encounters and obstacles they faced during their gap year. It also unveils their retrospective opinions and attitudes toward the concept.

Research Question

Does the concept of a gap year have the potential to create a life-changing experience for its participants?

Sub-questions

1. How do the experiences of gap year participants vary?
2. Can a gap year have a lasting negative impact on gappers?

Literature review

A gap year has been mentioned by numerous researchers, often presented as a ‘growing trend’ boosting one’s career development in the Western world (Coetzee and Bester, 2009). Commonly seen among young adults who embark on a gap year, meaning traveling, studying, working, or living in a foreign country for a certain period of time (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017).

Griffin (2013) states estimates that claim, based on 250,000 annual British gap year participants, a quarter of all British gap takers lie somewhere between the ages of 18 and 25. Harmer and Rogerson (2017) are conscious of so-called ‘gap-year-type breaks’ including post-university gap years, study breaks, and career breaks later on in one’s professional life, for example when they wish to take a break between jobs (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017).

Nevertheless, the gap year is commonly associated with students, with the average age of the gap takers being between 16 and 25 years old and considering the gap year as a time dedicated to some activities after completion of people’s formal schooling that are usually undertaken during post-school or pre-university time. (Herman and Rogerson, 2017). For example, Krause et al. (2005) define gap takers as students who delay entering university for one year after they have completed their secondary school. Lamb (2001) categorizes gap takers as students that enter the labor market for a time before they enter university but are done with high school (noted in Birch and Miller, 2007). Another example is Harmer and Rogerson (2017), who also mentions Cremin, King, and Griffin and present the perception of gap years, i.e. a period of time usually between secondary and tertiary education, hence, a break taken between leaving school and beginning of studies.

There are indeed various ways to define what the practice ‘gap year’ is. One of the beliefs is that a gap year is a 12-month period of time during which an individual undergoes several activities. The gap year might be even exceeded from 12 up to 24 months, however, any period longer than the exceeded time creates confusion and goes beyond the definition of a gap year (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017). Perhaps, yet the most summarizing one is by Jones. He defines a gap year as “any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes ‘out’ of

formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory”(Jones, 2004; noted also in Hillman, 2005; Krause and et.al., 2005; Lamb, 200; Andersen, 2019; King, 2011; Luzecka, 2016; Heath, 2007; Martin, 2010). As the top limit has been stated and means the gap year cannot exceed 24 months, the bottom limit has been set and helps to differentiate between a regular vacation and a gap year (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017).

Jones also concluded that there are seven classifications of ‘‘gap year’’ depending on when the gap took place (Jones, 2004). Examples of the categories are the ‘‘immediate post-university’’ and the ‘‘employment break’’ gap years which are seen in Figure 1.

	Category of Gap Year
A1	Planned Post-School at 16
A2	Planned Post-School at 18
A3	Default Post-School at 18
B1	Undergraduate Break in Study
B2	Postgraduate Break In Study
C	Immediate Post-University
D1	Break in Postgraduate Study
D2	Postgraduate Combined with Course
E	Employment Break
F	Immediate Post-Training
G	Complex Gap Year

Figure 1: Jones’s (2004) seven categories of the gap year.

Although Jones’s definition includes different age groups it’s associated with young adults due to the context of his work, he concludes that his definition could be applied to people up to 65 of age. He makes this conclusion based on evidence that people in the UK practice gap year, with the oldest ones being 65 of age. Luzecka (2016) further elaborates when discussing his work by saying that people can practice ‘‘gap year’’ during their retirement and that it would fall under the term ‘‘golden gap years’’.

In addition, Jones also concluded that there is a wide range of activities that are conducted during the practice of gap year. Some of these activities are traveling, working abroad or at home, volunteering, training, or even retaking exams to improve results (Crawford and Cribb, 2012; Jones, 2004; Heath, 2007, Anderson, 2019). Jones classifies three ‘layers of choice’ meaning young adults face certain decision-making before undertaking their gap year, and that is about the location, whether they wish to undertake their gap year locally or rather go abroad. The second one is a decision about their gap year’s structure if they wish to have this time organized by an external agency or an individual. And the final decision is based on specific activities they wish to experience throughout this break, such as acquiring skills and work experience, earning money, exploring new places, traditions, and cultures, or some of the mentioned above (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017). It is important to note, that people do not practice only one type of activity during their ‘gap year’ (Crawford and Cribb, 2012). In fact, according to Luzecka (2016), most people work and afterward travel during their gap year.

According to Heath (2007), some students practice ‘gap year’ by spending ‘several months in full-time employment in order to finance an overseas trip or volunteer placement in the second half of their gap year, while a growing minority of students spend the entire year in paid employment specifically in order to finance attendance at university, sometimes in the form of paid work experience as part of a university sponsorship arrangement or similar’.

Another gap year definition would be that it is a popular term used to describe a period of time taken by individuals after graduating high school or before starting college or a career. According to Yorke and Knight (2006), a gap year is a time when individuals take a break from their usual routine and engage in various activities such as traveling, working, volunteering, or pursuing other interests (p. 111). This period is also known as a "bridge" between two phases of life, marking the end of one phase and the beginning of another (Cassidy, 2016, p. 159).

During a gap year, individuals have the opportunity to reflect on their lives, discover their passions, and grow personally. As Cassidy (2016) points out, that time away from formal education can provide an opportunity for individuals to discover their strengths and weaknesses,

reflect on their values and beliefs, and explore their interests (p. 159). This self-reflection can lead to personal growth and the development of a sense of direction and purpose.

Furthermore, a gap year can also be seen as a "rite of passage" for young people (Jones & Killick, 2019). As they transition from dependence to independence, they gain valuable life skills such as self-reliance, resilience, and cultural competency. According to Jones and Killick (2019), experiencing different cultures and lifestyles during a gap year can broaden one's perspectives and lead to a greater appreciation for diversity (p. 12).

After reviewing various definitions of the gap year, we have decided to use for this thesis our own interpretation and believe that a gap year is a period of time, typically lasting between 3 to 24 months, during which an individual takes a break from formal education, training or the workplace. It is commonly associated with students between the ages of 16 and 25 and is viewed as a time dedicated to various activities such as traveling, working, volunteering, or pursuing other interests. It is considered a "bridge" between two phases of life and provides an opportunity for individuals to discover their strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their values and beliefs, and explore their interests. In addition, we will follow Sherifi's example (n.d., noted in Andersen, 2019) and use the term "gapper" when referencing someone who is undertaking a gap year.

The History of Gap Year

The history of the gap year began in Britain after World War II, with the belief that if young people had the opportunity to visit other countries and learn about different cultures, there would be a greater possibility of achieving global peace as new generations came to understand other people's customs and ways of life (Seaton, 1997, p. 62). Some argue that the concept of a gap year can be traced back to the 17th century "Grand Tour," which was typically undertaken by the sons of nobility who spent up to three years traveling around Europe in search of culture to advance their studies (Morrissey, 2017, p. 5).

Gap-year travel has been associated by scholars with the term "Grand Tour". Back in the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, the Gran Tour was known to the more privileged ones such as young well-educated men that come from the upper-middle-class (Harmer &

Rogerson, 2003, p. 3). Back then, the grand tour, known today as the gap year, young men traveled after finishing their education in order to delay starting their professional careers, to extend their educational experiences, and to enhance their state of mind (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 3). Furthermore, the places chosen for traveling were located in Europe where the educational experiences would be enhanced by the diverse natural beauties (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 3). Back then, the grand tour also called by the ones performing it “extended education”, has been criticized by people as a way of escaping responsibilities and a way of enjoying entertainment and leisure (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 3). Even if at the beginning, the Grand Tour was possible only for the most privileged ones and had been categorized as an activity that not many could practice at the time, as the times changed, its popularity decreased as Grand Tour started to become affordable to the middle-class as well (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 3).

Scholars such as Jones, King, and Griffin believe that the name of Grand Tour shifted to Gap year around the year 1960 whereas others believe that the practice has been performed after the Second World War by the young generation in order to increase the interaction between countries (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 3). Simpson argues that gap year has also been used in the last two decades as a way of “rebellion and an escape from the formal institutions of education and employment in the UK into a bastion of those same structures” (Simpson, 2005, p. 466). At the same time, Simpson believes that gap year travel has changed its purpose and that people tend to practice it for different reasons for the past two decades. In other words, instead of using a gap year as a way to take a break from education or employment, people seek to experience an “extraordinary experience” (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 4)

The Grand Tour was initially a vague concept, and the form we associate with the eighteenth century was a popularization of a travel phenomenon in which British travelers visited the Continent to prepare for careers as diplomats and public servants (Morrissey, 2017, p. 5). However, the Tour quickly evolved and took on various forms, despite the fact that the locations visited remained largely the same (Storper, 2015, p. 42).

Considered as a way of discovering cultures and increasing personal development in terms of education, The Grand Tour has been comprehended by scholars as an influence upon “the

destinations tourists choose and shapes the ideas of culture and sophistication that surround the act of travel” (Storper, 2015, p. 42). Furthermore, Fussell states that the lost art of traveling ended when the British stopped traveling between Wars as that was the period when practicing gap year travel actually meant something as of today “neither travel nor the travel books could flourish” (Storper, 2015, p. 42). According to the Grand Tourists' letters and memoirs from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the trip was often challenging, with innkeepers and postilions demanding exorbitant rates for subpar meals, unclean hostels, and worn-out horses, and the scenery was sometimes unimpressive (Harvey, 2014, p. 25).

Gap year today

Today, gap year travel continues to be a popular option for students seeking to gain new experiences and personal growth. According to the Gap Year Association, the number of students taking a gap year between high school and college increased by 231% between 2006 and 2016 (Gap Year Association, 2017, p. 2). One of many reasons why that could happen might be due to some important figures who took a positive stance toward the gap year phenomenon. One of them is Prince William of the British Royal Family who changed his perception of gap takers from rebels, hopeless, or unambitious to people likely to be successful professionals (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017). Some schools have shown a positive attitude toward a gap year, such as Ivy League schools, as well as Harvard, especially after Malia Obama took a gap year right after high school and before going to Harvard University (Beaver, 2021). Additionally, students can choose to take gap years at any point in their academic or professional careers and can participate in a wide range of experiences. One of the main benefits of the gap year is the opportunity to gain new experiences and skills. Students who take a gap year often engage in activities such as travel, service, or work experience, which can provide them with valuable skills and knowledge (Gap Year Association, 2017, p. 4). For example, students who participate in volunteer programs can gain valuable experience working with diverse communities, while students who travel can gain cultural awareness and develop language skills.

Despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, gap year travel has continued to be a popular option for students. For example, the number of students taking a gap year in America has increased from 3% to 16% (Beaver, 2021). Some students have chosen to defer their college enrollment due to

the pandemic and take a gap year to travel or pursue other opportunities (Parker, 2020, para. 5). However, the pandemic has made finding activities, and meaningful experiences in a foreign country more complicated, what else, students should be aware of the potential risks associated with travel during the pandemic and should take appropriate precautions to protect their health and safety (Beaver, 2021).

There is some contradiction when considering the literature available that mentions many positive impacts of a gap year and then the statement by the National Center for Education Statistics. It has been stated that the longer students wait, the longer the gap year is, and the smaller chance to enroll in school later on. It has been proved that students who take a year off school are 30% less likely to pursue some degree in the future (Beaver, 2021). However, the gap year remains a valuable and popular option for students seeking to gain new experiences, skills, and personal growth. The concept has expanded beyond its traditional roots and now includes a wide range of experiences for students to choose from. As the world continues to evolve, gap year travel will likely continue to be an important option for young people seeking to explore and grow as individuals. To counterbalance, it is crucial to have a well-structured and planned gap year filled with meaningful activities, with a clear goal and expectations that a student who is taking a gap year will begin college the following year (Beaver, 2021).

Consumer Behavior and Identity

In order to be able to accomplish the aims of this thesis and understand the phenomenon of ‘gap year’ as a whole, we need to understand how the average person in today's world consumes and due to what factors have our consumer habits changed?

We live today in the age of postmodernism. However, how did we arrive at this stage in human evolution? What was the reason for this shift in the paradigm? Before postmodernism, human consumption was classified as modernist. One of the characteristics of modernism is the separation of entertainment accessible by the general public from high culture, which represents artistic expression and intellectual pursuits. This entails the support of distinct social practices and hierarchical rules. The division is evident in various aspects of life, including the

differentiation between public and private spheres, domestic and foreign settings, and the contrast between artistic and realistic expressions (Galani-Moutafi, 2000).

The accuracy and objective perception of reality within the framework of modernism have faced skepticism, leading to a questioning of its relevance and the subsequent emergence of postmodernism as a new intellectual stance (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). However, shifting from modernism to postmodernism was not as easy as might sound. This change was accompanied by protests with much more than simple doubts, students fought for cultural change and desired a shift from the need for possession and materialistic commodities to reach the right to speak freely, individuality, open-mindedness, and unity (Raaij, 1993).

Postmodernism supports a heterogenous social culture and emphasizes the importance of subjective realities constructed by consumers through their own meanings, experiences, and unique perception of the world and society. Additionally, postmodern culture directs substantial focus toward the exploration and celebration of diversity and otherness and also raises questions in order to reach understanding and appreciation (Olivier, 2007; Pachauri, 2001).

It is safe to say that postmodernity freed individuals from modern assumptions and universal beliefs. On the other hand, such an extent of otherness may nowadays raise new challenges when individuals try to define their own identities. Whether identity creation is based on various aspects, sometimes even the need to differentiate themselves may end up in sameness, as people tend to follow and keep up with trends (Olivier, 2007; Pachauri, 2001).

Firat (1993) brought one of many attempts trying to depict cultural developments in postmodern consumption (Raaji, 1993). The main reasons for postmodern change are social and technological factors. We could divide the factors into categories, i.e. among the social changes belong *'fragmentation, individualization, and paradoxical juxtapositions'*, and when it comes to the technological changes we talk about *"hyperreality, complexity, and value realization'* (Raaji, 1993).

If we take a closer look into the categories of social changes, one of the characteristics is individualization, based on individuals owning their personal vehicles, electronics, and

accommodations, and having individual decision-making regarding what products and services they want to consume. The second social change is fragmentation, which represents many various meanings. In the past, it was usual to use one unified lifestyle when attracting an audience, but with the postmodern changes market segmentation started to flourish with a variety of values and preferences. Another characteristic of fragmentation occurs when it comes to the consumption of products, public media, public entertainment, and malls. Strange combinations, such as placing a bank and a bar next to each other in a mall, became normalized. Consequently, society becomes more tolerant of paradoxical juxtapositions (Raaji, 1993).

Regarding the technological changes, except for the development of complex options and innovations, they have significantly influenced the way of consumption, identity creation, way of communication, and perception of new information. These influences could be noticed mostly in public interactions (Raaji, 1993; Belk, 2013). One of the examples by Belk and Llamas (2012) discussed in a study about Digital World by Belk (2013) mentions a driver listening to music in their car. This situation is so-called ‘accompanied solitude’, meaning, the position of being in the car and listening to the music transfers them into their ‘own world’, although being aware of other cars around them. The same applies to people using headphones, talking to their close ones over the phone, playing a game, and/or scrolling on social media. All these activities privatize every individual and put them in ‘accompanied solitude’ (Belk, 2013).

Another noticeable change is in the attention that has shifted from production to the usage of goods. According to postmodernists, it is called ‘the reversal of production and consumption’. Toffler (1970) refers to production and consumption as a combination of both, called ‘prosumption’, as he believes it happens simultaneously (Raaji, 1993). Meaning, consumers do not only use the products anymore but also contribute to their value by adding ‘hyperreality’, i.e. time, energy, skills, customs, and/or any other personal interpretation (Raaji, 1993).

Marx supports this perspective (Firat, 1991) and, as well as Toffler, challenges the conventional division between consumption and production, in contrast to other classical political economists who made a clear distinction between these two processes. Marx argues that consumption and production are internally linked and directly connected to each other. The interdependence is

depicted by what classical economists called ‘productive consumption’ and the ‘production of commodities’. Marx’s perspective asserts that the consumption of a specific commodity holds significant influence over the production process through demand creation. In this framework, purchasing and using goods not only satisfy one’s needs and desires but also play an active role when shaping social structures and dynamics (Firat, 1991).

Many postmodernist thinkers, including Baudrillard, associated great significance with the production-consumption process, considering it a form of symbolic exchange. They view consumption not merely as a straightforward personal act of acquiring and using commodities, but rather an activity that reinforces social codes, and symbolic meanings, and represents ‘*an active appropriation of signs, not the simple destruction of an object*’. In the realm of postmodernism, consumption is seen as a way for individuals to express and define themselves, shaping their desired social identity and influencing how they wish to be perceived in society (Firat, 1991).

Postmodernism brought new views and concepts, which re-written the known set formula of what tourism should be. Some of its main features, i.e. authenticity and individualism have had a significant impact on tourism itself, the way people travel, and the experiences they seek. Instead of following the crowd and visiting typical places designated for tourists, people desire to experience the destination’s nature, explore and live unique experiences (Nalçacı İkiz, 2019). Some of the characteristics of postmodern tourists have been captured by Ryan (1997a) who identified no urge for them to travel away from home in order to have a touristic experience. Secondly, Ryan noted their full awareness of the possibility to ‘escape’ through tourism, and see these opportunities and a variety of options as a way to enhance their self-esteem. And the last view presents so-called ‘ludic involvement’ that represents tourists focusing on any activities in a final destination with a reckless attitude toward their inauthentic character (Arente and Kiiski, 2006).

When it comes to identity, the connection of postmodernism to constant change and encountering different cultures and ways of life may result in an increased challenge when one tries to form a stable identity. A strong focus on individualism and the use of technology, especially for

communication, has resulted in the weakening of social connections and skepticism toward the true authenticity and presentation of reality. Some authors see a threat to having a steady identity due to feelings of fragmentation where individuals resonate with multiple aspects, and hence struggle to find their true self (Schachter, 2005).

On the other side, traditional identity theories presenting one universal theory of identity show the standard of how people should understand themselves. Many authors see these theories as unnecessary because they believe that identity is more complex and impacted by many various factors. Therefore, shaping identity should rely solely on every individual, and no scientific theories should intervene and try to define who they are (Schachter, 2005).

We believe that creating a framework of how people shape their identities and consume will help us understand more about the identity that gappers assume during their gap year, as well more about their experiences. We have decided to explore experiences in the tourism context not only because we believe that it is important such as traveling is the second most practiced activity during the gap year (Crawford and Cribb, 2012; Luzecka, 2016; noted in Anderson 2019) but also because we see a connection with tourism that could be applicable for our research even for those participants who haven't traveled during their gaps.

The tourism industry has shown that it can influence oneself identity, as well as others through the co-creation of experiences and transformational elements (Pritchard, Morgan, and Ateljevic, 2011). The so-called transformation is related to the tourist's attitude and behavior and it can occur both consciously and subconsciously during the tourism journey. Some studies have shown that in some cases tourists would start to care and change their daily habits about topics they learned during their travel. An example of this is tourists who after participating in rural and agricultural tourism are willing to pay premium prices for the products from the destinations they visited (Brune, Knollenberg, Stevenson, Barbieri, and Schroeder-Moreno, 2020). The example shows that through their personal experiences, the tourists undergo self-reflection and adjusted their views, attitude, and behavior on subjects of their daily lives that were taken for granted prior to their trips (Soulard, McGehee, & Knollenberg, 2021). Thus we should regard tourism activities not only as a means through which one consumes tourist experiences but regard them

as a way to accommodate essential needs that a tourist has, even those they are not aware (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Regarded in this way the tourism experience becomes transformative (Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023).

The term transformative experience can be connected to the moment tourists experience profound revelation during their travel and after their return home (Soulard, McGehee, and Knollenberg, 2021). According to Mair and Summer (2017), in order for an experience to be recognized as a transformative one, the tourist has to start questioning their assumptions, belief systems, values, and world views in a touristic setting. The literature on this subject has gained significant sources of evidence to prove the full potential transformative experience can have on ones psyche (e.g., Alahakoon, Pike, and Beatson, 2021; Brown, 2009; Fu, Tanyatanaboon, and Lehto, 2015; Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai, 2017b). Transformative experiences can be recognized as an approach to constructing individuals' identities and societies. The tourism industry itself is good at generating situations in which people are able to reach the potential they are able to by making them reflect on the nature of the world and reconstructing their world views (Reisinger, 2013).

In fact, there are studies that claim that this type of experience is the core of the experience economy. The term experience economy is associated with the belief that consumers do not search only for pleasure (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), but also for meaningful moments and self-realization (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Pope, 2018).

Factors that trigger transformative experiences can be divided into tourists' personal factors and destination factors that also involve the experience itself. However personal factors are considered to have a more significant role. Factors that are considered personal are ones that can be categorized as one of the following examples - 'cognition, facing challenges, special tourism experience, certain behaviors, emotions, and personal characteristics' (Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023). Researchers note that cognitive factors and challenges are two of the most likely triggers to trigger a transformation. Furthermore, tourists with different experiences and demographics could have a vastly different outcomes even if they have participated in similar activities ((Fu et al., 2015; Pung, Yung, et al., 2020; Voigt et al., 2011).

There are a number of studies that contain evidence that transformative experiences can have different outcomes. Fu et al. (2015) that the transformation brought about by this type of experience can be measured by three factors - time (temporary vs. enduring), degree of transformation (minor vs. major), and form (tangible vs. intangible). Fu et al. (2015) also claim that for some tourists the idea of undergoing a transformational experience could be the motivator for their trips but there are also cases where the combination of destination and activities can create a framework for a transformation. This is why it is important to look into the tourists, their motivations, and the activities they are involved in when analyzing their experiences (Reisinger, 2013). In fact, Kirillova et al. (2017) discuss that a peak experience can happen only when the tourists and destinations co-create experiences with the process of personal meaning-making in mind.

Researchers are divided on whatever all tourism types can bring this transformational experience in tourists. Zhao and Agyeiwaah, (2023) study on transformative experiences supports the opinion that transformative experiences are able to be undergone in various tourism contexts, although they do believe that there are some types of tourism that contain stronger triggers for this transformation. According to them, the tourism types that contain those trigger elements/situations are volunteer tourism, educational tourism, and ecotourism. The common traits of the identified transformative tourism types are that they offer opportunities for tourists to interact with locals, the tourists undergo a longer stay and contain various challenges that tourists have to reflect on later (Reisinger, 2013).

Studies on the gap experiences have delved into transformative experiences and what kind of effects the transformation has had on their lives after coming back from their gaps when it comes to volunteering context. There are various motivational factors behind why gappers seek such a transformational journey. The majority of gappers who seek to volunteer during their gap are often motivated because they need to take time from an educational environment and/ or experience 'the real world' and not stay in their 'sheltered life'. Other motivators are the benefit of personal growth and using gap years as mock practice or 'rite of passage' into adulthood. There are also some gappers who seek volunteering as a way to escape their daily lives or even

hope to 'fix' mental issues such as depression (O'Shea, 2011). According to Heath (2007), young adults whose motivation for taking a gap year only so they can travel, whether that includes working and/or volunteering along the gap, expect one of the benefits of such a trip to be the transformation of one's identity and that in order them to have a successful transformation they have to travel internationally,

Gap years are indeed unique and personal experiences, however, according to O'Shea's findings (2011), gappers having very high expectations from their gap can be damaging for them and they can have a hard time making the necessary adjustments to live in a volunteering environment, in fact, in some cases those disappointments have led to gap takers going back home earlier.

One of the transformations of the volunteering journey that gappers experienced was having an easier transition into living independently compared to their peers. In many cases, gappers have shown signs of preferring to live with other gappers during their university years if possible due to being easier to relate to each other (O'Shea, 2011).

After understanding what kind of impacts the gap year experience can have on the lives of the gappers and under what kind of circumstances they have to undergo in order for their experiences to be considered transformative, we believe that we have to look deeper and gain insights in order to understand better their experienced selves. We believe that could be possible through the help of the four realms of experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Before we dive in even further, we have to give an answer to the question 'What is considered an experience?'. A possible answer to this question is defining experiences as intangible products created through the consumers' participants and involvements within a sensory and emotional framework (Carù and Cova, 2007). Another can be that it's a process through which one gains knowledge or skills from doing, seeing, or feeling something or even simply saying that something happens that affects in turn one's feelings (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Another way to look at experiences specified in a tourism context is Anderson's vision (2007), *'tourist experiences can't be bought. They can only take shape in the mind of the tourist. No one but the tourist is fully able to have such control. The experience industry can do no more than provide*

input that the tourist may turn into a tourist experience. To succeed in doing so, the experience industry must provide inputs for experiences that address and fit the needs of the tourist at that particular time. A tourist thus put together resources that, together with her own time and skills, will provide a consumption set for the experience’.

The four realms of experience economy explore the level of participation of the tourists and the activities they are participating in. According to Pine and Gilmore (2011), the four realms can be used by brands to enhance consumers' experiences in order for their consumers to feel an emotional connection with them. The four realms themselves are divided into four categories - entertainment, educational, esthetic, and escapist realms of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

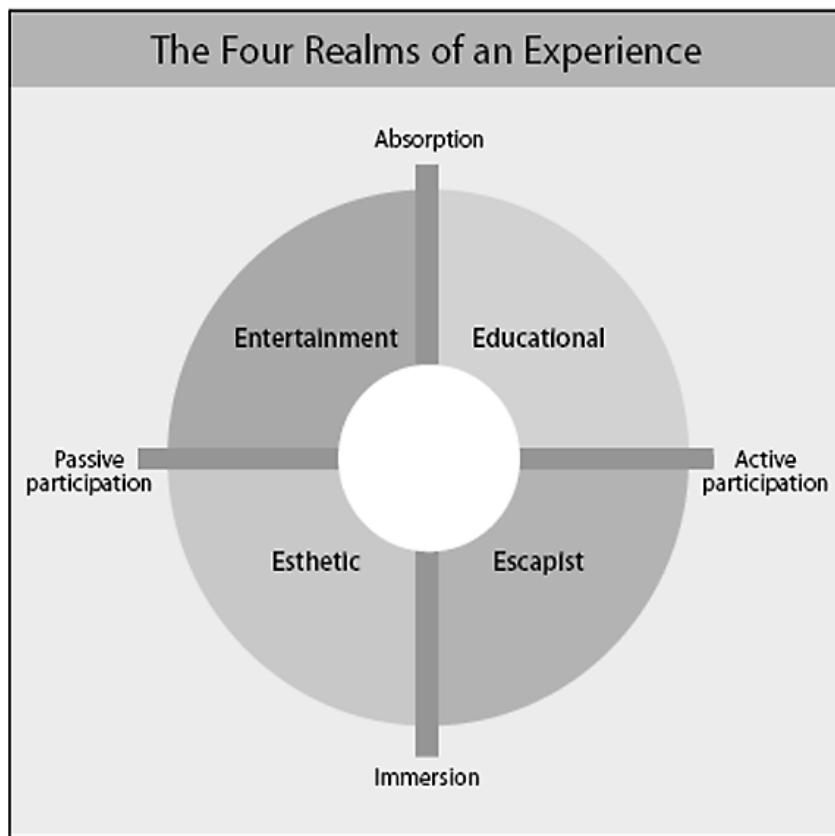


Figure 2: The Four Realms of an Experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998)

The entertainment realm consists of consumers passively participating and absorbing their surroundings through different senses (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Experiences that falls into this

category can create lasting connections with consumers and turn them into return customers if the result of the experience is enjoyable outcome (Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Retief et al., 2018).

The educational realm consists of activities through which consumers through active participation gain knowledge (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). This type of experience has the benefit of turning customers into return visitors through the experience of facilitating a learning environment through which they can be engaged to improve or gain skills which will result in creating an emotional connection with the facilitator (Kim et al., 2007).

The esthetic realm consists of experiences in which consumers are passively immersed in their surroundings (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Thematic cafes and boutique hotels are examples of a way brands can offer this type of experience, through their unique designs and atmospheres they can influence customers to become loyal returnees (Jeong, Fiore, Niehm and Lorenz, 2009; Kim et al., 2007).

The escapist realm consists of experiences that offer full immersion in the activities and require the full participation of their consumers (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Consumers that fall in this category search for experiences that supply them with a way to escape from their mundane daily lives (Valas, 2004: 26) and fulfill their hedonistic needs.

The four realms theory does not offer only four realms, according to Pine and Gilmore (2011), experiences can have elements of more than one realm. In fact, the 'sweet spot' they talk about contains aspects of all the realms. It can be said that the philosophy behind experience economy and the bases on which the four realms were created, is the following quote: *"When a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in theatrical play – to engage him in a personal way."* Pine and Gilmore (1999; 2011)

We believe that the 'four realms of experience' theory is applicable to our analysis of our participants' gap years and understanding if their experiences can be recognized as transformative and if not what kind of factors affected the outcome if this was the case.

Furthermore, we can gain insights into how the chosen activities affected the established goals, motivation, and purpose of the gaps they had and compare them with their outcomes.

Gap year views in different countries

There is an abundance of literature sources displaying how the concept of “gap year” is popular to this day in England. In fact, universities and authority figures such as parents and teachers are advocating today for students to go on a gap year (Luzicka, 2016). According to Crawford and Cribb (2012), paid work is the most popular activity among English gappers during a gap year, and traveling is the second most popular. England is not the only European country that has increased the popularity of gap years.

According to a study conducted by Rusu and Dumitru (2019), the concept of a gap year is not well-known in Romania, and only a small percentage of high school graduates choose to take a year off before starting college or university. The study found that most students in Romania prefer to continue their education immediately after high school, with the aim of obtaining a degree as soon as possible (Rusu & Dumitru, 2019, p. 80). However, the study also revealed that those who did take a gap year had positive experiences and gained valuable skills and personal growth. For example, many gap year participants improved their foreign language skills, gained work experience, and developed new interests and hobbies (Rusu & Dumitru, 2019, p. 82). Additionally, gap-year participants reported increased independence, self-confidence, and cultural awareness (Rusu & Dumitru, 2019, p. 84).

Despite the benefits of taking a gap year, there are still some concerns and misconceptions among Romanian students and parents. One common concern is the fear of falling behind academically or delaying entry into the workforce (Rusu & Dumitru, 2019, p. 81). Some parents also worry about the cost of a gap year, as many programs and travel experiences can be expensive. However, the benefits of a gap year should not be ignored. As Rusu and Dumitru (2019) suggest, gap years can provide valuable experiences and skills that can enhance one's academic and professional pursuits in the long run (p. 85). Encouraging students to take a gap year and providing resources and support can help to increase awareness and understanding of the concept in Romania.

In Greece, the concept of taking a gap year is not very common, but it has gained popularity in recent years. According to a study conducted by the Greek National Youth Council in 2019, only 13% of Greek students have considered taking a gap year before starting their higher education (Greek National Youth Council, 2019, p. 5).

One of the main reasons for this low percentage is the traditional Greek mindset that values academic success above all else. Many students feel pressured to immediately pursue their studies without taking a break. However, there is a growing recognition among young people and parents that taking a gap year can provide valuable experiences and benefits (Kougioumtzidou, 2020, p. 2).

In Greece, gap year experiences often include traveling and volunteering, as well as internships and language courses. Some students choose to participate in international programs, such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS), which provides opportunities for young people to volunteer abroad and gain new skills and experiences (Greek National Agency, 2022).

Others opt for local volunteering programs, such as the Greek Youth Red Cross or various environmental organizations (Kougioumtzidou, 2020, p. 3). While the concept of taking a gap year in Greece is still relatively new, it is gradually gaining acceptance and recognition as a valuable experience for personal growth and development. As more young people embrace this idea, it is likely that the gap year trend will continue to grow in Greece.

Another example is Denmark, Norway, and Turkey, where about 50% of students choose to take a gap year (Beaver, 2021). However, in Denmark, we have found out that there is called a sabbatical which is referred to as a period that is between when Danes complete their upper secondary school and the start of further education (EVA, 2019). EVA conducted a survey that was based on 14,970 students starting their studies in the year 2018, 86% of those students who started higher education that year had previously participated in a sabbatical, and only 14% of them had not delayed their educations. From the figures below, it can be seen that Eva (2019) has found out that the two main reasons for Danes to go on a sabbatical are the need for a break from

education and to experience new things. In addition, the study shows 88% of students partake in paid work and 46% go abroad.

In addition, based on findings from 2016, EVA has concluded that people who don't go on sabbatical are more likely to drop out of higher education. On the website of EVA, the institute has also found based on the same research that more women go on sabbatical and that 53% of them do it abroad. The institute also argues that there is a connection between good grades are more likely to go abroad (EVA, 2019).

"What is the reason why you did not start directly on the program you have now been accepted for after you completed your upper secondary education?"

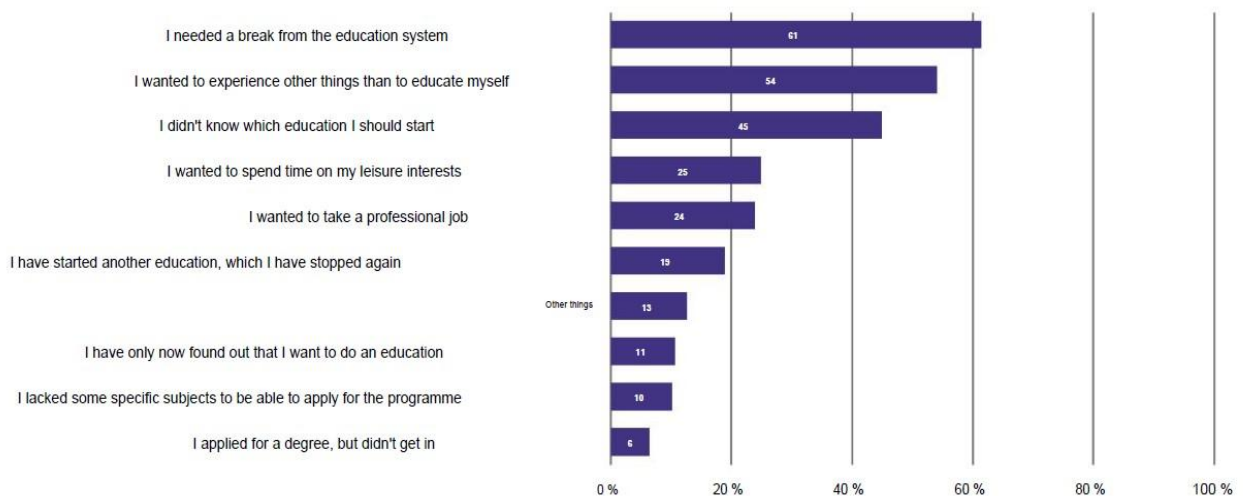


Figure 3: What is the reason why you did not start directly on the program you have now been accepted for after you completed your upper secondary education? (EVA, 2019)

"What have you done in the period between when you finished your upper secondary education and now?"

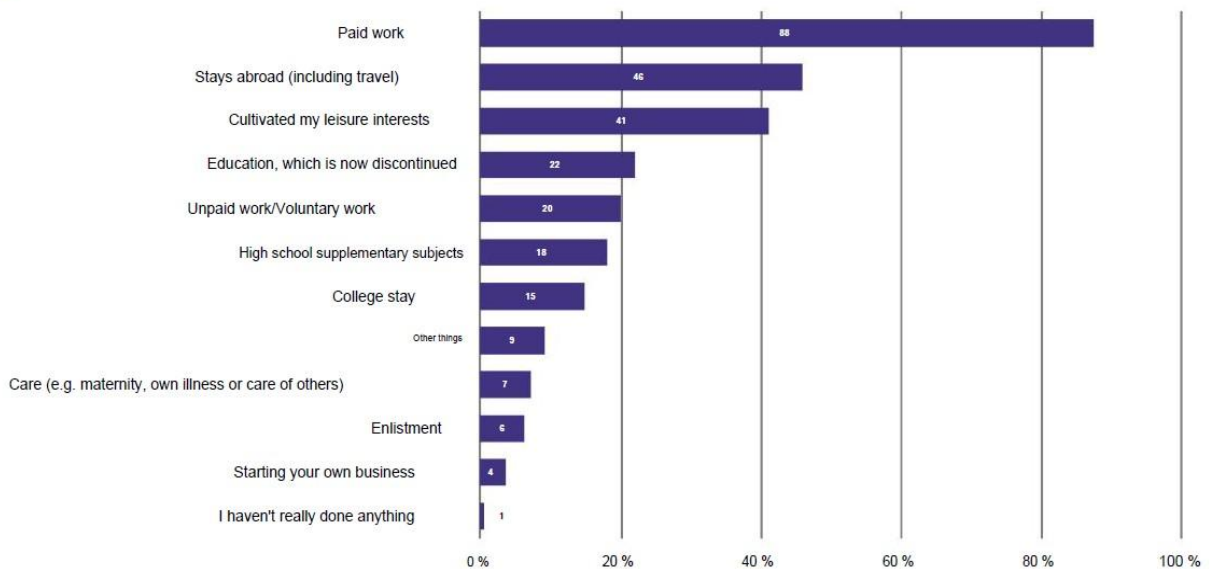


Figure 4: What have you done in the period between when you finished your upper secondary education and now? (EVA, 2019)

The proportion of students who drop out within the first two years. Year 2016.

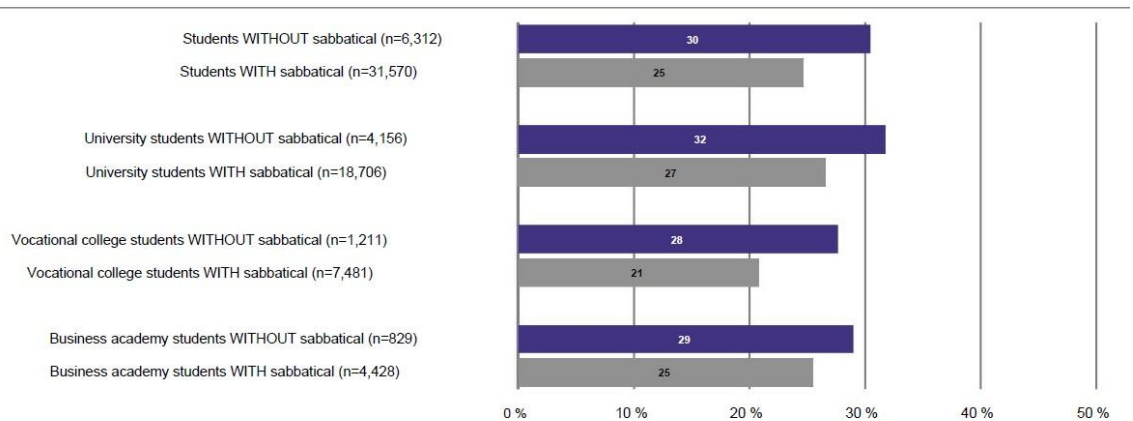


Figure 5: The proportion of students who drop out within the first two years (EVA, 2019)

As for countries outside Europe, some of the advocates for gap years are Australia and USA. In Australia, since 1995 there has been a slow increase in students taking a gap year. In fact, in

2006, 22% of the Australian student population joined the phenomenon of practicing gap year (Curtis, 2014; Curtis, Mlotkowski, & Lumsden, 2012; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). The USA has indeed joined the gap year phenomenon, in fact, some universities even offer financial help so students can be encouraged to take a gap year (Sutherland, 2014). However, although this experience is encouraged, taking a gap year is still not very common in the US, and based on research with the last data available, which is from 2015, among 30,000 up to 40,000 there was only 3% of graduates who decided to undertake this experience (Beaver, 2021).

Considering the length of occurring gap year phenomenon in Western countries, it appeared just recently in China. However, there have been some substantial differences between Chinese and Western gap year experiences. For example, in China, it is typical to take a so-called 'career break', whereas in Western countries it is the opposite, as they usually take their gap year right after finishing their high school studies and before starting their university, or during their studies having a study break. It is because of the cultural context in China, it is natural to finish their education, and deferring their studies is not accepted and even judged by family and society (Wu M., Pearce P., Huang K. Fan T., 2014).

There have been some more differences between Western countries and China. It is mentioned above that there is a prevalence of female gender among participants whereas in China there are slightly more male gap takers. Their usual activity is traveling and the second place is working. They are not interested in their local environment but rather go and explore, especially in Southeast Asia. When it comes to their motivation a big part represents a desire to develop, grow and become more mature, confident, and independent, to understand their inner self and take a break from their daily life. When deciding, they usually get influenced by attractiveness and positive image of a final destination, and/or by the spiritual context of a destination. As mentioned the main reason to take a gap year in China is work-related, such as having issues in their career development, because of a job change, or simply boredom (Wu M., Pearce P., Huang K. Fan T., 2014).

Andersen (2019) indicates that one of the reasons why the phenomenon of a gap year has become so popular today around the world is due to digital habits and that younger generations prefer to spend their money on experiences than on material possessions. Andersen uses

Eventbrite's survey from 2014 as evidence to back up his conclusion. One of the findings of the survey was that 8 out of 10 millennials see experiences as a way to shape a person's identity and a life-long memory. We can see why Andersen supports Sherifi's conclusion that the main reason why young people today undergo a gap year is the desire to experience challenges and gain new memories and knowledge about different cultures, make connections with people, and find themselves while taking this opportunity before they have to resume their daily lives (Sherifi, n.d.; noted in Andersen, 2019).

Demographics

According to the literature the average gapper is from the middle class. In fact, according to some researchers, it has become this popular due to its use of it as a tool to gain a better chance of gaining a job once young adults start searching for employability or/and to become a more attractive candidate for the university program they are aiming for (Heath, 2007; Luzecka, 2016). Another feature that gappers are associated with is that they are more likely to be white, this may be due to the historical colonial roots "gap year" has.

Some researchers have found that gender and home location are key factors when it comes to delaying university entrance. Male students are less likely to defer university than female ones (Lamb, 2001; Hillman, 2005) and students who live in rural areas are more likely to use the practice of gap year as well (Barrett & Powell, 1977; Weaving, 1978; Linke et al ., 1985; Bornholt et al ., 2004; Krause et al ., 2005). Based on evidence from Gap Year organizations Jones (2004) believes that gappers are usually associated with being young middle-class female white adults from South England, due to the fact, people from other classes and ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented. However, King (2011) argues that this may be too much of a simplified conclusion since people who do not fall into this stereotype of gapper may as well be well represented on other networks and social platforms but because of how gappers conduct, organize, or/and classify it may not be attracting the attention of official statistics and Gap Year organizations. For example, as we already said in Denmark gap year is referred to as a sabbatical.

We have to raise the question of whether more women or men practice gap year is true or not and that it should be regarded as an area of discussion. Depending on where and when the statistics are conducted the findings bring different results. In China, for example, more men participate in

the phenomenon (Wu M., Pearce P., Huang K. Fan T., 2014), unfortunately, there is no data as to why this is, so we could only hypothesize that it could be due to numerous factors such as the country's demographics, culture, values or even financial opportunities. In relation, to this, we have not found any studies that compare racial statistics when it comes to gap years, the literature that is currently available has been more focused on findings regarding gappers from the white race and their exploration of the otherness of faraway destinations and the effect it has on the average gapper.

Another argument as to why demographic findings are subjective and that they should be closely monitored is based on the data we have presented above, where we have identified a change in the case of England where in the past gap year was practiced more by men as well (Harmer & Rogerson, 2003, p. 3).

Birch and Miller (2007) build upon research from the USA that looked into students who are more likely to take a year off between high school and university (Carroll, 1989; Berkner et al., 1996, 2003; Horn & Carroll, 1998; Horn et al., 2005) in order to find what are the gappers characteristics and academic outcomes. The studies that Birch and Miller (2007) looked into examined students who either choose to have time off university known as stop-out or who due to various reasons such as low grades delayed their university entry by a number of years.

Birch and Miller (2007) determined that a gap year motivates students to study. They conclude with their paper that students with lower scores are more likely to take a gap year but they are also the ones who are more likely to benefit from this practice. Thus, this practice should be encouraged when it comes to below-average scoring students and/or ones who are unsure of their future. In connection to this, we have found out that there is a very small sample of literature that compares academic outcomes between students who went on a gap year and those who didn't, in order to see if a gap year actually helps students to do better academically (Pearson, 1977; Linke et al ., 1985; Lamb, 2001; McMillan, 2005; Berkner et al ., 2003; Horn et al ., 2005; noted in Birch and Miller, 2007). In fact, the findings from the literature until now on this topic are very diverse. For example, Linke et al. (1985) and Pearson (1977) show that people who participate in gap years do better academically. Horn et al. (2005), Berkner et al. (2003), and Lamb (2001), are one of the researchers that have found that delaying university entry will have negative effects

when it comes to university and the labor market. An important note that Birch and Miller (2007) make is that authors who have identified negative effects do not focus on bad grades in university.

Impacts of a gap year

There is indeed an abundance of research about the various benefits young adults can gain from the gap year (Crawford and Cribb, 2012). This range of benefits includes cultural understanding, personal development, identity work, and educational, occupational, and status attainment (Beames 2004; Pike and Beames 2007; Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Bagnoli 2009 Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; King, 2011; Martin, 2010). Of course, the extent of these benefits differs from individual to individual and it is derived from several factors, e.g. the chosen experience. Researchers have noted numerous benefits from volunteering tourism during a gap year. From the side of locals, it is the progress and all the work volunteers do, the economic support of the host community, or vice versa, from the perspective of participants of the volunteer tourism, their personal growth, better understanding not only themselves but also different cultures, their customs, and traditions (Guttentag, 2009). Every experience, no matter if work, education, or any other kind related, brings its positive sides.

However, taking in mind the growing popularity of a gap year and its enormous list of benefits, we cannot forget and have to keep in mind that there are always two sides to the story and that a gap year is not the solution to all problems young adults have. This is why we should also talk about the criticism this phenomenon has received throughout the years. As mentioned above, volunteer tourism may bring many positives, however, there is always an exception to the rule, and that is when the volunteering experience is insufficiently organized, and hence, might have a very small impact on the country where the volunteering takes place. Besides, it may create misconceptions of the developing countries, which may happen due to a small number of interactions with locals and rather spending time with peers undertaking the same experience (O'Shea, 2011; see also Huxley 2005; Simpson 2004, Snee, 2011).

When considering the research by Coetzee and Bester (2009), their participants reported personal growth, especially regarding their independence and confidence. They got to take care of themselves, manipulate their resources responsibly and face all life challenges on their own. On

the other side, some researchers argue that due to how gap year programs are created and implemented, students gain only the illusion of independence (Ansell, 2008). The same is said for students who decide to stay home and work (Heath, 2007). Here might be beneficial to look closer into the aftermath of a gap year, to get a better understanding of what the experiences of gappers entail during the gap and how it impacted their daily life after their return. For example, O'Shea (2011) found out that some students had a hard time integrating into their society. King (2011) also found that students had problems implementing their new habits and found independence after returning home. Thus, a gap year should not be seen as a tool for gaining independence.

Another interesting view into this phenomenon's impact brings Curtis (2014), and that is the time spent on gap year activities which results in a late entry into their further education, hence, delayed entry into the labor market. Hereby, if we look at a person who has just finished their formal schooling and started working during their gap year, and a university graduate who has found a job within their field, the gappers' income is likely to be lower than the income earned right after graduation.

Although we have not found any further research focused on (non) gappers' earnings, we have already noted many positive features of a gap year that could outweigh other potential opportunities. However, for now, we could only assume that they either do not realize the loss of their earnings, or there has been a relevant reason that overshadows all the negatives of a gap year and in that case, we could categorize their decision among so-called 'opportunity costs', meaning gappers chose to use their resources, i.e. their time, and invest them in a gap year while they could have already been studying and being one year closer to finding a better-paid job within their field of study (Palmer and Raftery, 1999).

In recent studies, the gap year phenomenon has been under criticism because of the recent popularity of sustainability. Luzecka (2016) criticizes that students in England are encouraged to choose long flight distance destinations for their gap year travel from different sources such as universities, parents, gap year organizations, and teachers because the benefits that students gain from the practice are seen as something more important that cannot be gained in closer destinations to home. Co-missions and other various environmental consequences are seen as a

necessary evil. Another study that was based in Denmark, found that gap year travel and the activities it entails are seen as a guilty pleasure when it comes to applying sustainable practices (Andersen, 2019). Another criticism that Luzecka (2016) makes is that gap year helps young adults establish their future travel habits, thus, in choosing long-distance flight destinations they are more likely to continue to go to the same destinations in the future or similar ones. We cannot help but ask - does the gap year need a change in today's climate? Should the change be more about how the gap year is organized in regard to the environmental issues we are currently facing or it should be more about personal issues the practice brings to the average gapper?

We are also wondering whether a gap year travel is truly for everyone. Or should only specific groups of people be encouraged to undergo it? Should all countries implement this practice or should institutions and other stakeholders be cautious about the phenomenon? We wonder due to findings such as the ones O'Shea (2011), who discovered in her research when she was collaborating with a gap year organization that was creating gap year programs that they excluded students with mental health because they believed 'that serious mental health issues can often be dangerous overseas and the year should not be used as a "treatment".'

Whereas research by Beaver (2021) examines American students who undertake some meaningful experience during their gap year right after finishing high school as he believed it might cure the occurrence of mental illness. The majority of the surveyed students expressed a positive change in their behavior and life after completing their experience, for instance, they had developed as a person or developed their professional skills, and the gap year helped them to pursue their degrees and graduate with even higher GPAs than usual graduates. Besides, they felt more independent, mature, confident, and socially capable, especially in a diverse environment. One could already assume, based on all the positives the gap year brings, that this experience certainly helps to reduce the incidence of mental illness. Unfortunately, the research proved that using a gap year in this way is no 'panacea' (Beaver, 2021).

There have been many college students with mental illnesses that are caused by fear or stress which comes from economic concerns, social media pressure, and in the case mentioned by Beaver (2021) about American students, also mass shootings. It may be believed that undertaking a gap year experience might be a good step forward. Even though it might not be the

cure for mental illnesses, it may at least slightly reduce the stress they face, and hence, reduce the likelihood of their incidence (Beaver, 2021). On the other hand, in the research by Coetzee and Bester (2009), some participants expressed increased stress during their gap year due to work and financial concerns. Hereby, we recommend being cautious when referring to a gap year as a 'good step forward' regarding mental illnesses. In that case, putting an emphasis on the importance of a gap year selection according to its participants' needs, e. g. finding a stress-free environment in the case of American students mentioned in Beaver's article (2021).

Having in mind what we have discovered about the literature on a gap year we have to conclude that one of the gap-year controversies is whether gappers get the long list of benefits they are promised or not. Is it the solution that is said to be? In our opinion, the gap year is a very individual experience, due to the connection it has with tourism. As we know, there are no two touristic experiences that are completely the same. We base this statement on the characteristics the tourism industry is known to have such as perishability, intangibility, inseparability, and variability (George, 2021). This is why we believe that some gappers could gain a number of the promised benefits if not all but they are also cases where people come back with more issues and no real solutions to the problems they tried to solve during the gap year. In addition, the promised benefits, are they real or just an illusion? We argue that the gap year phenomenon brings the same results as the placebo phenomenon. We make this parallel because of literature publications of authors such as Ansell (2008), Heath (2007), and King (2011) and their discussions about how gappers only gain the illusion of independence and not a true one due to various factors and circumstances.

Another tension we have noticed is that gappers see themselves as more mature than their peers (Heath, 2007) as well as better travelers compared to the real tourists/'the average backpackers' (Snee, 2014; King, 2011). Is that all true? We have not found any research where there is a comparison between gappers and non-gappers when it comes to gaining specific traits such as maturity or if locals see a difference in behavior between a regular tourist and a gapper. Studies that compare gappers and non-gappers are more about the outcomes they bring on a personal level or how the phenomenon affects the gappers' home environment and not gap year destinations and their communities.

We have had a chance to see some positive and negative sides of the gap year from the participants' perspective. However, even if we loved to, we couldn't bring any more insights from the host communities' points of view due to the lack of research done on this topic. According to Griffin (2013), the gap year is promoted as a great opportunity for personal growth while being surrounded by local children filled with joy and gratitude, it is promoted through stories of returned participants, but no story or view from the host community perspective. Therefore, Griffin (2013) mentions that future research should consider this niche and build upon the very limited amount of work from this side. Also, Guttentag (2009) supports this thought and points out that even though it is very crucial to understand gap takers, it is important to realize that they do not represent the whole story. We undoubtedly agree with the necessity of research and would be highly interested in the literature focused on host communities as we believe it could bring a whole new light onto the topic researched.

Methodology

Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

After a long discussion, we, as the researchers of this thesis, have agreed that our ontological and epistemological views align best with the constructive paradigm. We believe that this fact is significant because it explains better to our readers why we have used the chosen techniques and approaches to discover the answers we search for. In addition, it is important for researchers who may want to use our paper as a basis to build upon our findings or disprove them.

Ontologically, the social constructivist paradigm, unlike the positivist one, does not follow the principle that there is only one absolute truth but there are multiple ones, everything is subjective, and depending on the context, in which it is discussed it can have different interpretations. We believe that reality is subjective and is constructed by individuals that are influenced by their past experiences and knowledge (Smit 2003:128; Cohen et al 2004:19).

Thus, by choosing this paradigm we consider each of the interviewed participants as individuals who have taken the position of "gapper" and use the situation of an interview setting as an

opportunity to gain insights into their reality when it comes to gap year. We see each of the participants' perspectives as valid but not a definitive answer to our problem formulation.

In addition, the way we interpret their reality is affected by not only our past as researchers and any bias we bring but also by the context of time and space those conclusions were made, this means that we do not believe the outcome of our thesis will bring the ultimate truth when it comes to our research formulation but that it will hold a relative truth in the context it was made (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). We also believe that due to the fact that reality is socially constructed and there are multiple truths coexisting at the same time, our conclusions may have been different due to different factors such as different sample sizes or the technique of collecting data (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

In epistemological terms, we agree that as the researchers of this thesis, we have to interact with the subjects of interest in order to find out what their subjective truths are (Schurink 1998a, 240). Because of the nature of the constructive paradigm but also because of the aim of this thesis, we have decided to use qualitative research methods and techniques when collecting data. By choosing to create qualitative research and not quantitative, we aim to understand what our participants' personal truths are and the meanings behind the world they use to express themselves when talking about their experiences. Furthermore, we want to gain rich in-depth data about gap takers experiences before, during, and after undergoing gap years.

Specifically, we have decided to use semi-structured interviews that will be based on the lifeline technique and a general interview guide with themed questions. One of the reasons why we have decided to collect our data this way is because we believe that it will allow us not only to gain rich in-depth data about gap takers' experiences before, during, and after undergoing gap years but also take into consideration the interviewees' personal facts about them when asking questions about their gap experiences (Coetzee and Bester, 2009).

Research Design

Phenomenology - Qualitative research

Our research project's principal aim is to investigate the multifaceted nature of a gap year, centering our attention on whether such an experience has the potential to be life-changing for its participants. Our intention is to unearth any potential challenges faced by those who have opted for a gap year and to identify the critical factors that contribute to a fulfilling gap year journey. This exploration is committed to deepening our understanding of the gap year phenomenon, while also providing valuable insights that could enhance future gap year experiences.

To achieve this multifaceted goal, we will implement a research design based on phenomenology. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that concentrates on probing the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals (Creswell, 2013, p.52). This approach seeks to distill the essence of a given phenomenon or experience, as it is personally lived and interpreted by the individuals involved (Creswell, 2013, p.54). Our use of phenomenology aims to examine the distinct lived experiences of individuals who have chosen to take a gap year.

In this research, we will be employing semi-structured interviews as our primary data collection tool. These interviews will be with individuals who have returned from a gap year, thus providing firsthand accounts of their experiences. The semi-structured format of these interviews will be conversational in nature, thereby encouraging participants to freely articulate their experiences, thoughts, and emotions regarding their gap year. This methodology will allow us to grasp the nuanced complexities and subjective realities that are often lost in more structured data collection processes.

Our study, through its phenomenological research design, aspires to provide a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the gap year experience. We hope to contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge on this phenomenon, particularly regarding its positive and negative aspects. By doing so, we also aim to provide tangible benefits outside the academic realm. The insights derived from our research could lead to the development of more effective support systems, resources, and initiatives. These improvements would facilitate smoother and more

rewarding gap year experiences, thereby enhancing the benefits for individuals undertaking a gap year as well as yielding positive ripple effects for society at large.

Moreover, the results of our research will constitute a substantive scientific contribution to the academic field. The academic significance of our research lies not only in its potential to fill existing knowledge gaps but also in its capacity to stimulate further research and scholarship in the area of gap year studies. In this way, our research will contribute to the broader academic discourse on the subject and lay the groundwork for further investigations into this important life experience.

Bracketing

Bracketing, grounded in the philosophy of phenomenology, involves the process of setting aside, or suspending, a researcher's preconceptions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to focus on the research process itself (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 410). Introduced by Edmund Husserl, bracketing underscores the critical role of neutrality and reflexivity in qualitative research (Dowling, 2007, p. 135).

The term "bracketing" metaphorically indicates the act of encapsulating or "bracketing off" personal interpretations to ensure an unbiased perspective (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 83). This allows the phenomenon under scrutiny to present itself unadulterated by external influence or preconceived notions, resulting in data authentic to the participants' experiences.

Bracketing can be utilized at various stages of a research project, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. During data collection, bracketing may involve researchers consciously avoiding leading questions to minimize bias (Ahern, 1999, p. 410). In data analysis and interpretation, bracketing may involve persistently questioning one's own assumptions to prevent excessive influence on the findings (Ahern, 1999, p. 412).

Despite its advantages, bracketing has critics who argue that true bracketing is impossible due to natural human subjectivity (Ashworth, 1996, p. 10). Nonetheless, the attempt to bracket can aid

researchers in maintaining reflexivity and transparency, both of which are vital for the credibility and integrity of research.

We used bracketing, a qualitative research method in which we intentionally set aside our own preconceptions, beliefs, and experiences to minimize the influence of personal biases on the data collection and interpretation process (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). This method is crucial in phenomenological research, as it allows researchers to maintain objectivity and approach the phenomenon under investigation with a fresh perspective.

In our study focusing on the gap year phenomenon, where lifeline techniques and customized interviews were conducted with returned gap year takers, bracketing was particularly important for several reasons:

Personal experiences: We had our own experiences or opinions regarding gap years, which could have influenced our understanding of the participants' narratives. By employing bracketing, we effectively minimized the impact of our own beliefs on the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 93).

Preconceptions about gap year outcomes: There were likely pre-existing beliefs or stereotypes about the benefits or drawbacks of taking a gap year. Bracketing enabled us to be more open-minded and avoid imposing these preconceptions onto the participants' experiences (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 82).

Cultural and social biases: We had specific cultural or social backgrounds that could have shaped our understanding of the gap year phenomenon. Bracketing allowed us to set aside these influences and appreciate the diversity of experiences shared by participants from different backgrounds (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 94).

Emotional attachment: In studies involving lifeline techniques and customized interviews, researchers can develop emotional connections with participants. Bracketing ensured we

maintained professional boundaries and prevented emotional attachments from skewing the interpretation of the data (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 83).

Confirmatory bias: Without bracketing, we might have been inclined to seek out information that confirmed our initial beliefs or expectations about gap years. This could have led to biased results that did not accurately represent the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 96).

By using bracketing in our research of gap year experiences, we achieved a greater level of objectivity, allowing us to more accurately capture and represent the diverse and unique experiences of returned gap year takers. This, in turn, contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of our study's findings, providing valuable insights for both the academic community and those considering a gap year themselves.

Reflections extracted through the method of bracketing

In our research study, we, Andrea, Catalina, and Yanitsa, aimed to develop an in-depth and unbiased understanding of the phenomenon known as the gap year. To achieve this, we applied the method of bracketing, a process designed to mitigate personal biases by setting them aside during the research process. Each of us brought unique experiences and perspectives on the gap year phenomenon, which further enriched our own understanding of the concept. Researchers' reflection is summed up below and is based on a bracketing exercise that is possible to see in Appendix 1 (McKinney, n. d.).

Andrea, who hadn't taken a gap year, was intrigued by the concept when introduced to it after moving to Denmark. She believed that a gap year could be a fruitful period for individuals to explore their interests and passions without societal pressure, and that it could help prevent future frustrations related to unfulfilled careers or studies. She recognized that some might view this period as unproductive, but she emphasized its potential benefits in self-discovery and self-realization.

Catalina had a personal journey with the gap year concept. In her native Romania, taking a gap year was often viewed negatively and discouraged by the majority. However, upon moving to Denmark, she had the chance to take a gap year between her major studies, which turned out to be an enriching and transformative experience. Her gap year facilitated personal growth, improved her language skills, helped her forge new friendships, and even led her to find her soulmate. She highlighted the potential of a gap year to alleviate mental health issues and to provide a break from the regular educational or professional paths.

Yanitsa had experienced two gap years, though she was not aware of the concept until her Master's. She saw gap year as a time for exploration, decision-making, and personal development. Despite the stresses it might involve, she considered it no more stressful than daily life, providing an opportunity to enhance personal and professional growth.

To ensure the avoidance of biases, we conducted an additional interview using the lifeline technique and a semi-structured interview, mirroring our approach with participants. We examined potential biases overlooked during the initial research phase and tested the effectiveness of our chosen methodology. This enabled us to focus on the participants' stories and draw meaningful conclusions, free from the influence of our personal backgrounds.

In conclusion, our shared experiences and distinctive perspectives on the gap year, viewed through the lens of the bracketing method, led us to a comprehensive understanding of the subject. We believe that a gap year can be a crucial period of personal growth, exploration, and self-discovery, provided it is approached with an open mind and proper planning. We advocate for broader recognition and acceptance of this phenomenon, viewing it as a transformative experience that can positively influence individuals' personal and professional lives.

Observation based on an interview with the researcher

Catalina and Yanitsa's experiences with gap years provide unique perspectives on its value and challenges. Despite cultural resistance in her native Romania, Catalina found the gap year to be beneficial, arguing that teenagers are often more influenced by their teachers than parents when making such decisions. She praises the opportunities a gap year provides: language learning,

financial responsibility, networking, and personal development. Even though she acknowledges the lost time for formal studies, she sees the skills and experiences gained during this period as a worthy trade-off. Catalina would especially recommend a gap year when relocating to a new country, viewing it as a vital adjustment period.

Similarly, Yanitsa sees a gap year as a fertile time for various activities, including professional development, social interaction, and self-reflection. She acknowledges its potential for aiding career decision-making, offering valuable buffer time in our choice-abundant world. However, she also acknowledges its double-edged nature: while it can lead to discovering one's passion, it can also generate overwhelming doubts. Yanitsa advises against setting excessively high expectations for a gap year, emphasizing the importance of keeping an open mind. She also stresses the need for goal-setting and planning to optimize this time, advocating for a balance between enjoyment and self-improvement. Yanitsa would consider taking another gap year and encourages others to resist societal pressure when deciding. She feels a better understanding and normalization of the gap year concept in her home country could lead to more accomplished lives.

In conclusion, both Catalina and Yanitsa perceive a gap year positively, attributing it with a range of benefits. Despite the recognition of potential drawbacks and challenges, their testimonies highlight the transformative potential of this period, advocating for broader acceptance and appreciation of the gap year concept.

Abductive reasoning

Another approach that affects our research design for this thesis is that we have chosen to apply abductive reasoning to how we gain knowledge and the conclusions we will make. This means that based on our findings, we will make a probable scientific conclusion that would answer our problem formulation. However, it is important to note that the conclusion we make is in a sense the best one we could make based on the data we have gained access to, thus, any new data or one we have overlooked, could turn our conclusion to become untrue (Tavory and Timmermans, 2012). One of the reasons we have chosen to apply this approach is that we had prior assumptions about gap year and we wanted to test them in a broader sense.

We tested those assumptions through the method of interviews while still following the framework of phenomenology. Meaning that when the interviews were taking place, we tried to not think or ask leading questions based on what we wanted to test, we wanted to hear what our interviews had to say. As we already mentioned in the upper section, bracketing was a helpful method for being aware of what our bias was and how to minimize it while conducting interviews and analyzing our data.

Data, data collection, and data sampling

Life-line Technique

While diving into a gap year phenomenon, we did have a chance to encounter numerous methods and techniques used to uncover new sides and bring various perspectives onto the research or a similar topic. One of these methods is the so-called Lifeline Technique, which is identified by Brott (2005) and is well-known, especially among career counselors, as a postmodern career counseling method that focuses on exploring and revealing one's past and present true life and is also used in this thesis (Coetzee, 2006; Coetzee and Bester, 2009).

The technique itself may be used and presented in different ways and with different aims. One of the examples may be a workshop or an exercise where facilitators introduce the lifeline technique and have a hands-on approach as they interfere in the workshop in order to set the right and reflective mood. This may be done by showing a video, having a check-in discussion, creating a safe space, and navigating their participants to reminisce about important moments of their life with the aim to ease the process of lifeline creation. In this case, the expected result of the workshop is to get an understanding of their life, and all the events that have happened, and be able to 'connect the dots'. The technique used in this way focuses more on the past and helps participants to realize the course of actions and their relevance in life (LEAP, n. d.).

Another approach is commonly used by career counselors who guide clients through their life stages, i.e. school period, first job, starting a family, and help them to explore significant points for each chapter of their life. With this approach they co-construct their client's own story,

deconstruct that story with follow-up questions, and at the end, they try to identify and construct their future chapters. If we were to compare this approach to the workshop, in this case, the aim is to help and guide clients to find their desired career, and hence, is more focused on the future (Brott, 2005).

For this thesis, we have decided to incorporate the lifeline technique when gathering our data with the hope to get closer and unveil new perspectives on our participants' gap year experience. We got inspired by the approaches that we have found and created our own version and implementation of this technique.

Our version of the lifeline technique is composed of 6 simple steps that are clearly explained to each participant through an in-advance prepared 'Lifeline Technique Guideline' (see Appendix 2) that is shared with them. The guideline introduces the participants to the researchers, the topic, context, and aim of this paper together with logistical information and recommendations. The mentioned 6 steps explained the process of the technique from taking a pen and paper/iPad, through writing down a list of all memorable moments and/or events since they were born until now; noting down feelings attached and people (in)directly involved with those experiences; making a graph and marking all listed moments, up to sharing their lifeline with us. While all the instructions were provided in the guideline and/or through further clarification in case a participant had some follow-up questions, all the answers and the content of their lifeline were made by the participants as well as the decision about what experience they chose to share and to not share (Coetzee, 2006).

Asking interviewees to write their lifeline from the day they were born is a powerful tool for understanding their personal and professional journey. In order to study the influence and experiences associated with a gap year, and to facilitate personalized interviews that will yield meaningful data for our analysis, we have requested our interviewees to trace their life journey starting from the day they were born.

Requesting interviewees to chart their life course from the day they were born is a potent method for comprehending their personal and professional evolution, aligning with life course research

(Elder, 1998, p. 5). In the context of examining the influences and experiences of a gap year, this approach has several compelling advantages. The technique begins by helping us understand the interviewee's life context. It enables us to delve into their lives, offering insight into their decisions and experiences, which resonates with the approach of oral history interviews and life narratives (Portelli, 1991, p. 25).

This understanding helps clarify the motivations behind taking a gap year and how this decision aligns with their overall life trajectory. As the interviewee lays out their lifeline, we can identify key decision points and influences, enhancing our understanding. We gain insight into when and why the decision to take a gap year occurred, and whether it was a spontaneous choice or part of a broader plan, as numerous studies have found that gap years can contribute to personal growth, self-confidence, and career clarity (O'Shea, 2014, p. 88). Moreover, this exercise is about more than just data collection. It also serves to build rapport with the interviewee. By showing interest in their entire life, not just the gap year, we create a comfortable environment for sharing personal experiences and emotions, a vital aspect of qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 51).

As we compare the individual's life before and after the gap year, we start to capture its impact more accurately. Questions emerge: Did their life trajectory change following the gap year? What skills or experiences did they gain, and how did these factors influence their later decisions and opportunities? This journey through their lifeline gives us a holistic picture of the interviewee's experiences. This comprehensive view is invaluable in helping identify patterns or trends, such as recurring motivations, personal growth, or shifts in perspective.

Finally, this process encourages interviewees to reflect on their life journey, aligning with the concept of reflective practice (Schön, 1983, p. 40). It is not just about us gaining insights; it can also stimulate thought-provoking conversations during the interview as interviewees may recognize the influence of the gap year on their lives in ways they hadn't previously considered. Through understanding their life history, we can also identify any potential bias in their reflections about their gap year. If they had particularly positive or negative experiences before or after the gap year, this might shape how they perceive and discuss the gap year itself, as

memory is reconstructive, not reproductive, and individuals' memories of their experiences are influenced by subsequent events and their current state of mind (Loftus, 1997, p. 72).

If we compare our way of implementing the lifeline technique to the one interpreted by Brott (2005), we could say that our research focuses solely on the 'de-construct' part of our participants' story and the 'co-construction' of their story was prepared by themselves. We decided to let our participants work on their lifeline on their own as we believed it provides them with the best safe space we could provide and ease the process as some of our participants live in far distance. Besides, we wanted them to take their time with no pressure or distractions to reflect and dive into their memories, to recall all significant events and moments of their life.

The technique is presented through graphic illustration with horizontal and vertical lines, a lifeline template is possible to see in Figure 5. The left edge of the horizontal line represents the participants' date of birth and the other edge represents their current state, i.e. the date when the lifeline was created. The vertical line shows whether their energy was low, neutral, or high depending on a specific event happening.

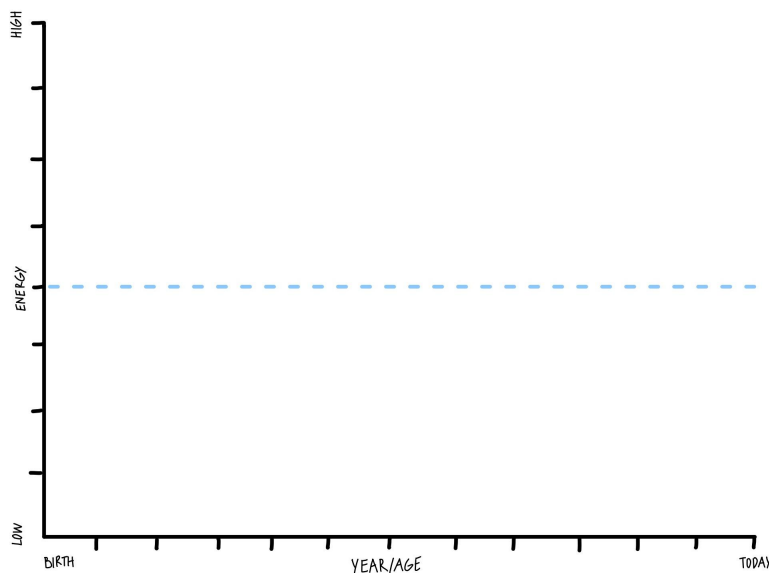


Figure 6: Graphic Illustration of Lifeline Technique - Template (Own construction, 2023)

However, the technique was not intended to be used as the main part of our data collection, but rather as a supportive method for our semi-structured interviews. After reviewing the lifelines of our participants we were able to peep inside significant memories, events, and moments of their life. Based on that, we created some additional follow-up questions to our interview guidelines in order to get more insights in regards to the topic of this thesis.

Semi-structured interviews

As we have already mentioned we have chosen the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews as the only method to gather our primary data. The interviews were gathered based on the information from the life-lines the participants made prior to the interview. Thanks to this technique and the concept of semi-structured interviews, each interview was tailor-made based on the lives of the interviewees (Cohen et al 2004:271). An example of this is asking the interviewee about their mental health in a specific period of time because their lifeline showed depreciation of depression. Since our approach has uncovered some sensitive information we have considered what ethical considerations are applicable to our thesis. We have created a separate section about them that can be seen further down.

In addition to the lifeline, we had prepared a question guide (see Appendix 3) as is the standard process of conducting semi-structured interviews. The interview guide that we created did not dictate the order in which the researcher in question was conducting the interview (Cohen et al 2004:271). Each researcher had the freedom to follow up on any leads that were discovered from the personalized life-line graphs that the participants made and/or when during the interviews were held. Because of this, we as the researchers were able to create a natural flow to the conversation. We chose this type of interview because we believed that we had some questions for which we needed answers, but also the freedom to follow up on anything that we have not thought of prior that could lead to new discoveries connected to our problem formulation (Smith, 1995). As Klave (1996, 62) has pointed out, one of the characteristics of interviews of any kind is that it is created between individuals often under the premise of a conversation. This is supported by Smith (1995a, 1) who also believes that the researcher enters a state of a ‘psychological and social world of the participant’.

The people who participated in our research were chosen based on the principle that they have undergone a gap year at least once and could reflect on their experiences. In addition, the sample was chosen from our personal networks, thus, we applied the ‘convenience sampling’ method to gain participants (McCombes,2019; revised in 2022). One of the biases this method brings is that we interviewed people we knew because they were easy to get in touch with and were more likely to agree on an interview, thus, with this sample we can not say that they are considered to be ‘the average gapper’ or that their opinions are the majority of what gappers have. In addition, we cannot say whether our participants were or were not more open and honest during the interviews when it comes to their inner thought due to our prior relationship.

All interviews were conducted individually between a researcher and a participant. The timeframe of the interviews varied between 20 minutes and one hour. The majority of the interviews were conducted in an online setting with the help of the platform Google Meets or Zoom due to the fact that the participants were not in the same country as us, the researchers. In addition, the interviews were recorded through the recording function that Zoom has, through the recording function on our laptops, or when in person with a recording app. Some of the interviews were transcribed and then translated due to the fact that interviews took place in the native language of the interviewees, and therefore, it was necessary to create a translated version of them. In those cases, we have tried to make our translations as close as possible to the phrases that the participants used so that their true meanings were not lost or interpreted wrongly.

The time period that the sample was gathered was between the middle of April and the beginning of May. During this period we contacted twenty-two gappers for interviews, six of which later changed their mind about taking part in our research. One of the reasons we were given for changing their mind was that our research area was too personal for them, another was that they could not make time for the whole research process.

From the table below, it can be seen that our final data sample consists of seventeen participants that are similar in age. The majority of them come from various backgrounds in East Europe and identify themselves as male. Furthermore, we have gathered a sample that consists of different types of gap years, and we have categorized them according to Jones’s seven categories (2004) mentioned in our Literature Review.

Although Jones talks about seven categories, counting with the sub-categories, there are eleven options among which we were able to classify our participants (Jones, 2004). Based on that, we have recognized eight various types of gap years. As the first two categories we identified ‘A2 Planned Post-School at 18’ and ‘A3 Default Post-School at 18’. The main difference between these two types is the intention to take the gap year. Whereas the A2 is usually applying for late entry to university, doing research and making plans in advance, sometimes even with external help, the A3 ends up taking a gap year due to situations that unexpectedly occurred, e.g. inadequate grades in order to pursue higher education, or simple change in mind regarding the university or employment choice upon graduation (Jones, 2004). Hereby, when referring to A3, we talk about a default option. When it comes to our research sample, A2 was the second most usual as it occurred among five of them. Regarding the A3 category, we found its characteristics only with Matej, Milan and Laura.

Another category talks about undergraduate students (B) and could be divided into two subcategories which represent those who conduct their gap year in the middle of pursuing a degree (B1 Undergraduate Break in Study). This subcategory was the most prevalent and could be seen among six of all gappers. The other subcategory (B2 Undergraduate Combined with Course) represents people who chose a so-called ‘sandwich year’, meaning they decided to add gap year activities upon their studies (Jones, 2004). This way was rather rare and could be seen only in Raaqem’s case as upon having an internship during his gap year he added another specialty to his studies.

A gap year taken after finishing undergraduate or postgraduate degree represents the C Immediate Post-University which was the case of Radoslav, Alina and Sophia. As for Felicia, her gap year is D2 PostGraduate Combined with Course which represents the gap year activities being focused on courses of academic nature. Another category is G Complex Gap year referring to more complicated circumstances that are not fitting into one category only, we found Mathilde’s gap year to be matching with this definition. As the last category that occurred in this research is E Employment Break and we could see its patterns with Sophia as she wished to enter the work market right after completing her university (Jones, 2004). For more information, please see the table below and in relation to our participants’ gap year experiences, we will further elaborate in our Findings section.

Fictional name	Generation	Nationality	Gender	Professional Status	Personal Status	When was the gap year	Number of gap years	Gap year duration
1. Jakob	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Danish	Male	BA student	Taken	A2 Planned Post-School	1	12 months
2. Rebeka	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Slovak	Female	Employed	Taken	B1 Undergraduate Break in Study	1	14 months
3. Radoslav	Generation Y (1981-1996)	Latvian	Male	Master student; self-employed	Single	C) Immediate Post-University	1	12 months
4. Marcus	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Danish	Male	Soon-to-be student; employed	Single	A2 Planned Post-School	1	8 months
5. Raaqeem	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Tunisian	Male	Master student	Single	B2 Undergraduate Combined with Course	1	3 months
6. Matej	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Slovak	Male	AP student; works part-time	Taken	First gap: A3 Default Post-School at 18; Second gap: B1 Undergraduate Break in study	2	1 gap was 6 months 2 gap was 12 months
7. Matus	Generation Y (1981-1996)	Slovak	Male	Bachelor graduate	Taken	B1 Undergraduate Break in study	1	24 months
8. Milan	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Slovak	Male	Master student	Single	A3 Default Post-School at 18	1	8 months
9. Laura	Generation Y (1981-1996)	Romanian	Female	Employed	Taken	First gap: A3 Default Post-School at 18; Second gap: B1 Undergraduate Break in study	2	1 gap was 24 months, 2 gap was 12 months
10. Beatrice	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Romanian	Female	Employed	Taken	A2 Planned Post-School at 18	1	24 months
11. Mathilde	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Polish	Female	Works part-time outside her education; has a BA education	Single	First gap: A2 Planned Post-School at 18; Second gap: G) Complex Gap Year	2	1 gap was 1 year; currently on 2 gap and has been for 2 years
12. Alina	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Polish	Female	Master's student, works part-time in her field	Single	C) Immediate Post-University	1	1 year
13. Martin	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Bulgarian	Male	Soon-to-be a student in an online BA program	Single	B1 Undergraduate Break in Study	1	3 months
14. Gavral	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Bulgarian	Male	Soon-to-be a student in an online BA program	Single	B1 Undergraduate Break in Study	1	3 months
15. Sophia	Gen Z (1997- 2012)	Hungarian	Female	Works outside her education; BA Education	Taken	First gap: C) Immediate Post-University (after graduating AP); Second gap: E) Employment Break (Entering the workforce officially)	2	3 months each
16. Adrian	Generation Y (1981-1996)	Romanian	Male	Employed	Soon-to-be married	B1 Undergraduate Break in Study	1	7 months
17. Felicia	Generation Y (1981-1996)	Romanian	Female	Student; works part-time	Married	D2 Postgraduate Combined with Course	1	24 months

Table 1: Data sampling demographics (Own construction, 2023)

Ethical Considerations

This thesis and the whole research study were conducted in alliance with the ethical guidelines of Aalborg University. The ethical issues that have been taken into account and properly followed:

Consent

All participants were approached either on social media or in person proposing a participation in the research study. When being approached, everyone was informed about people working on the research, the topic and purpose of the research, importance and context of the consent, the lifeline technique guideline (Appendix 3), and an interview process. After participants confirmed their willingness to participate and signed a letter of consent, the researchers processed further with the data collection.

Confidentiality

Besides being introduced to the aim and context of the research study, the participants were assured about the confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy that would be maintained. One of the actions taken was an interpretation of the gathered data under the fictional names of our participants and categorizing their age among generation (Beresford Research, n.d.; Deczak, 2019). The participants' demographics were shared only with the participant's consent and as well presented only under a pseudonym.

Deception

During the entire occupation of the participants with the study, there has not been any misleading or deceiving information regarding the aims of this thesis and/or the research itself. The aims and context of this study were presented before any of the methodology tools were applied or activities to gather data commenced. Each participant has signed an electronic consent letter and received a copy of the letter that has been signed, provided together with all the necessary information regarding the research study, i.e. the aim of the thesis, methods used, a way of gathering and processing data, and information about its interpretation.

Physical and emotional well-being

All of the participants interviewed were not assaulted, and/or harmed in any possible way, both physically and emotionally, during the data-gathering activities of this research. It was highly emphasized to not share any information that would feel too painful or uncomfortable to be shared. The participants of this study are personally connected to the researchers. Therefore, every researcher interviewed a person with whom they are connected in their private life in order to create a safe space and ensure better comfort for the participants. What else, the researchers informed participants about the option to detach themselves from the participation in the research, to not answer questions that could reveal unwanted and/or to not continue/shift a certain discussion in a different direction if it feels unpleasant. No human rights were violated and/or ignored during this research.

Data analysis

After gathering all lifelines, adding tailor-made questions to our interview guide and conducting interviews with the participants, the first part of our analysis began. According to Smith (1995b:1), qualitative analysis of interviews starts with the transcribing process. Hence, when creating a transcript from the interview, a researcher has a chance to engage properly with the participants' answers and stories (Coetzee, 2006). All the meanings might not be obvious at first glance and listening to the interview more than once could bring more thoughts and understanding from the researchers' side.

The case of our thesis is slightly different from the traditional approach presented by Smith (1995b:1). In order to use our time more efficiently, we have decided to transcribe all the conducted interviews by using modern ways of today's world, i.e. artificial intelligence. All the transcriptions are possible to see in Appendix 4. Thanks to this approach, we avoided multitasking which could have led to a decrease in the quality of the analysis. Additionally, we could dedicate more time to re-reading the interviews with our full attention. By going over the answers, noting down thoughts and subsequently discussing our codes, we believe we have successfully enhanced our understanding of the interviews.

Data have been analyzed according to the framework we had made based on phenomenology and a social constructivist paradigm we follow in this paper. We targeted our main focus on constructing meanings based on interactions with our participants and their opinions. Every interview was analyzed by two researchers who had not done that specific interview to avoid any possible biases that could arise from the previous discussion with one of our respondents.

Based on the discussion among researchers, and interactions with our participants, we have decided to transcribe all the online and physical interviews by using ‘Good Tape’ by Zetland in Copenhagen, a fully GDPR-compliant service, which allowed full confidentiality of our recordings and their immediate deletion after processing the transcription (Good Tape, 2023). After that, the generated transcriptions were re-read and corrected, if necessary, by the researcher who conducted the interview.

As mentioned, embracing digitalization allowed us to save some time that has been immediately devoted to further analysis with the aim to unveil more perspectives. The transcripts were split and handed over to the researchers who did not conduct that specific interview in order to start the data analysis. When examining the gathered data, thematic analysis was applied, an approach that entails detecting and scrutinizing information within the data. The transcripts created have been reviewed a couple of times and all potentially meaningful units were captured and marked. These parts represent similarities and/or differences of every participant’s experience and/or motivations, and any other meaningful context relevant for the purposes of this study.

While revisiting the transcripts, the researchers also focused on noting down parts helpful to better understand a perception of gap year and how it could be utilized for a greater benefit. Afterward, the researchers had a discussion about codes and their additional notes, based on what larger families, the main themes, and potential suggestions for the future use of our analysis were made. Due to the size of the table of our thematic analysis, where all the codes, families, and themes are presented, we have decided to create a separate document, hence the table is possible to see in Appendix 5.

The findings' themes have been discussed and arranged into sections to create a clear overview allowing the reader to get a proper comprehension of our findings. The identified themes have been described, compared, and contrasted with the existing literature.

The discussion among researchers has persisted and both the themes and prospective suggestions were taken into account, aiming to bring new academic and/or managerial contributions in response to our results.

Findings

This section of the thesis is divided into four main themes. The themes were created based on our codes that were later grouped based on chronological order. Meaning that theme one explains personal and external factors that we perceive as important to understand why our participants consume their gap the way they did. The second theme explains the gap year experiences the gappers lived through. The third one explores the outcome of our participants gap experiences fourth theme remarks on what the gappers said looking back at their experience and in regard to their future, such as what their personal reflection about a potential future gap year are or whether they would recommend it.

Factors influencing the perception of gap year consumption

The first identified theme introduces the reader more closely to the gappers of this research and to their personal views and beliefs that had partial merit in their decision about taking a gap year. We believe depicting their traits will help the reader to relate and immerse into situations the participants have gone through, both prior to and during their gap year, and develop their individual way of definition of themselves and their identity. Simultaneously, the section points out elements, and internal and/or external influences that occurred and affected the perception of this phenomenon and formed their identity.

When considering the option of a gap year, many factors might play a role, some more significant than others. In the case of this thesis, we had a chance to encounter a truly diverse pool of personalities, their various views on life, and their individual preferences. Hereby, we are

positively surprised to see how accessible is the opportunity to take a gap year for every individual. Whether someone is a people person as Rebeka:

‘ ... since I remember I've always been let's say 'social butterfly' so some introduction to new people or being in touch with new people was always giving me the energy you know.. they were somehow recharging my energy ... ’.

Rebeka's lively energy is accompanied by impulsive actions without second-guessing which may result either in some rushed decisions, in this case, it is changing university due to external issues that could have been solved, or getting an unforgettable experience as when Rebeka took a gap year and got an exceptional work experience in Dubai. On the other side, we could see Jakob who stands for 'measure twice, cut once'. This attitude was of great support before and during his gap year when he was trying to figure out a big life struggle and present his final decision to the outer world.

In contrast, rather than being a 'social butterfly' someone might resonate with being a 'wallflower', as did Raqueem. Even during his gap year experience, he felt too bashful to approach strangers. From a similar perspective, one may be introverted and open to interacting, but will rather spend time in their own company, as in the case of Radoslav.

However, being introverted does not stand for ignorance of opportunities and/or any new experience. Raaqem felt too shy to approach people during his gap year but was brave enough to take one, especially when considering the rarity of this experience in his home country. Ever since Raaqem's childhood, he stood out from the crowd, sometimes in a favorable way, however, many times the close-mindedness of his hometown brought up many challenging situations, such as being judged and mocked due to his dissimilarity. We could compare one story Raaqem mentioned as a turning point when he got what his appetite for being different and gave him the strength to face even adverse situations.

‘ ... A math teacher and she was writing something on the board, and as she was erasing, I was like, Miss, Miss, Miss, isn't that supposed to be this way, the other way around? And she was

like, she stopped the whole course, and she started giving me a speech ... Raaqem, I knew this, I believed in you, I've always seen you in a good light, and I'm really proud of you, good job. This is a mistake that I didn't notice, and nobody else noticed, but you did ... I had the courage to take initiative and to call her out on that mistake ... '.

As is possible to see, sometimes bravery and openness to enter uncharted waters may result in an advantageous outcome, same as for Jakob, who took a bold step during his gap year and re-shaped his whole identity from scratch.

Sometimes a bit of adaptability might be useful when taking and having a gap year, as one has to face many unknown situations, and/or returning back and adapt to their daily life. Raaqem did encounter several changes connected to moving to new places and facing all kinds of new environments. However, his perception of change shifted over time:

'So at first I stayed like 1 year to adapt, and then 6 months, and then ... it just took me a month ... I think that I'm very grateful to these experiences because I wouldn't really be this comfortable with the idea of adapting to different environments and the fact that I traveled a lot abroad and lived abroad. I don't think that it would have been this easy for me to feel some sort of comfort in moving from place to place. But not only feeling comfort when I move but also seeking that and wanting that. And being always on the lookout for new experiences and being always hungry for going to new places. '.

Nevertheless, a bit of rigidity might be of use as well. Rebeka's stubbornness ensured following all her desires. However, it does not have to be a definite 'either or', even in Rebeka's case, her rigidity is softened with a bit of open-mindedness which might be beneficial when trying to consider all the options available. The same applies to Radoslav, who remained open toward new opportunities and thanks to that, tried and got to know himself and his preferences better. These kinds of situations have helped to develop their self-awareness. For example in the case of Rebeka and Radoslav, who openly admitted to being lazy to do an extra step, or the other way around, for Marcus finding out about his ambitious side.

We believe our sample and their diverse stances are a good demonstration of zero discrimination in regard to personal characteristics, traits, and various preferences when conducting a gap year together with highlighting the significance of their affinity when facing certain scenarios and deciding on their future steps.

In spite of that, not only personality characteristics play a role, but also situations in life, environment, and people who surround us, shape and define our sense of self. Our gappers come from diverse backgrounds, ethnicity, race, culture, and society, which provided them with different options and opportunities. All of that formed, sometimes even unconsciously, their perception and understanding of a gap year.

Some of them have noticed a certain awareness of this phenomenon in their home country. In the case of Mathilde, even if society is aware of this phenomenon, taking a break is rather rare compared to the usual path of Polish graduates. The same for Alina, who expressed a typical expectation of society, or rather pressure on students to continue their studies straightaway after finishing high school. She as well mentioned the mindset spotted among Polish people:

‘the longer they wait with starting their studies, the lesser possibility it is that they would actually end up at university doing something meaningful in their opinion’.

The same for Felicia:

‘... in Romania, high schoolers are pretty much pressured into taking a bachelor immediately, under the pretext of if they wait too long, they’ll be too old for it ...’.

Alina noticed that individuals who feel the urge to take some time off and might consider alternative paths instead of pursuing immediate studies after high school often succumb to the fear of wasting time, resulting in silencing any future contemplations of a gap year.

Seen through Milan’s eyes, he pointed to the prevailing perspective in Slovakia that allows for only two paths of continuation after their high school studies. Fresh graduates either apply for a

university and pursue a degree or find a job and start working full-time. For those, who feel indecisive, there is nothing in between. Milan noticed the negative attitude of his home country and the perception of *'unsuccess or failure'* when it comes to a gap year. He noticed the way gap takers are thought of as *'being an immature person who is not able to explain their reasoning'* with which Milan found agreement. He views the concept of a gap year as a sign that *'you screwed up something, or you cannot realize something'* and fears that if such a thing got normalized, it would end up with even more people being unable to decide about their future. Matúš has the same inference as Milan, he noticed people in Slovakia seeing a gap year negatively, and he also did find comprehension of this view.

'It makes sense because it is squandered time, if you look at everyone who takes a gap year, at least from those whom I know, 99% just waste their time and that only 1% gets something out of it. They all plan to get something out of it, but not everyone achieves it. Usually, everyone is just traveling and spending money.'

One of Matúš's experiences has only reinforced his negative perception of gappers, i.e. his older brother's gap year. The pursuits of his brother lay in traveling abroad and experiencing a spiritual life. Matúš sees the impact this experience has had on his brother and considers it detrimental to his development. After Matúš's brother returned from his gap year, he reached the understanding of the needlessness of his studies and opted to discontinue them. Due to this aftermath, Matúš regards a gap year as harmful and does not support its pursuance.

In this scenario, we would like to bring Rebeka's view on education as we believe, based on the expressed opinions and insights, that she is more inclined to be supportive of Matúš's brother's actions.

'I think the education is really important. It doesn't matter in which age you are, you should always try to focus on yourself on getting new information or getting new skills. Right now, I'm not talking about the education from books but sometimes education about yourself, about your mental health, how your body works, even for example, let's say work, career, getting new experiences and new skills.'

Even though many societal views, also by some of our gappers, are strictly negative, we came across some exceptions when a gap year is considered useful. For instance, Milan acknowledges this concept only if someone needs to earn money for studies, in case of any unfavorable economic conditions. We came across similar limitations of suitable options for a gap year. Sophia expressed that Hungarian people view the concept of a gap year as an activity when someone wants to work and save money between studies, however, they do not perceive any other possible options of this concept. For example, Martin and Gavral's gap year was composed of activities focused on enjoying life, relaxation, and dedicating efforts to courses, mental well-being, and physical health. However, they also deemed an official gap year only the time spent with productive activities, not all the activities between their studies.

Also, Raaqem gave us an idea of how a gap year is perceived in his home country and that it varies based on the age range as well. He perceives that many parents and employers see a gap year as '*a waste of time*' and every gap year needs a proper justification. One example of proper justification in his country is the so-called 'REO' a.k.a. Reorientation Exam, the last high school exam which takes them to university. In case of a bad score on this exam, some people prefer to cancel enrollment to their university and take a break and prepare for another 'REO' exam. This is the only reason that is perceived as sufficient enough to take a gap year. Anything other than that, such as traveling to work and/or taking a break because of one's mental health, is considered useless. However, he has noticed more and more young people being open to this option.

From a contrasting viewpoint, upon analyzing Marcus' take, we have encountered another stance, in this case notably optimistic. Danish culture showcases a comprehensive understanding of the complexity, potential, and opportunities associated with a gap year.

In addition to Danish awareness of the phenomenon, Marcus further expressed that:

'I would say it's almost like a Danish tradition that when people finish their gymnasium they go out traveling, maybe for like, okay two months, three months to do something you know, travel, to some work..'

This is supported by Jakob's comment:

'I think it's almost more normal to do it than not to do it now.'

Additionally, we noted some critical opinions and fears regarding the discontinuation of further studies in the paragraphs above. Jakob as well admitted the risk of stopping one's studies during their gap year, he says:

'I know a lot of people, they take one gap year, and then they take one more, and then they take one more, and then they never start.'

In this case, the only difference is Jakob's open-mindedness when considering the possibility of changing one's mind about studies. He acknowledges such actions and believes they are driven by one's desires and needs.

Danish environment has impacted not only their residents, but also people coming to the country in order to pursue their studies. For example, Adrian, who was conscious of the term itself but nothing behind it, he only got to understand its purpose after moving to Denmark and seeing that many high school graduates take one. The same for Felicia who found out how supportive impact may a gap year have on decision-making regarding one's future career path. The new environment has shifted even Matúš's critical opinion regarding a gap year:

'... I can see it on myself, I consider it more positively because have that safety net here, and it is much more accepted. Here it is softer, you can change your fields, in Slovakia it is not that much common. Here they don't mind if you do or don't have it.'

Decisions about whether to take a gap year are built upon opinions, sometimes unconsciously, formed based on one's background and their current life situation and needs. Yet, even if knowing what the next step is, 'man proposes, but God disposes', some external influences might occur and impact all the plans one might have. Therefore, we took a closer look into the extent to which our participants' opinions were influenced and the direct factors that triggered such influence. Based on all the valuable viewpoints of our participants, we noticed three primary external influences, i.e. education setting, relatives influences, and the impact of important figures in their lives.

Educational Environment

The majority of schools initiate certain activities with the aim to provide support to their students in order to ease the pressure of making a decision about their future. Among these initiatives are advisory sessions with teachers and/or any designated representatives, school fairs, and/or school visits where students get to meet and ask questions about potentially attractive universities. Unfortunately, some of the activities might not end up being as useful as initially intended, one of the examples is Matej whose class took a career test to decide which path fits best for each one of them. However, he did not find this initiative anyhow beneficial for his decision-making. Similar feelings had Matúš who experienced a class visit:

'One time, we had an interview or discussion with one man, it was for 15 minutes, but he looked like he is forced to do it. Basically, he was telling us we are stupid and we should apply anywhere asap. Officially it was guidance, but unofficially I don't believe this has influenced anyone at all.'

If we look into some more examples, Laura and Felicia also experienced some unsuccessful meetings that were either supporting stereotypical gender conventions or focusing on traditional career paths without being open toward any possible alternatives, including a gap year. We noticed the other side as well, not only showing too few options might be an issue but also too many. Although Jakob was introduced to all the possibilities and opportunities available, it ended up being counterproductive as he got overwhelmed and needed some time to decide which one of the options might be the right for him.

In such cases, we could not help but notice the inefficiency of these initiatives to find students' desired path or to provide them with tools/methods on how to navigate their decision-making in order to reach their final decision. Lacking proper guidance can lead to outcomes when some of our participants applied for university out of necessity and later discovered it was not the right path for them, resulting in the decision to take a gap year anyway. We believe that if they had been provided with all the information and set of actions, and/or past experiences, they could have saved valuable years.

Relatives Influence

Another significant player in one's life is their family and relatives, the most common influential relatives of our participants are their parents. Sometimes, our participants were already aware of their need for a gap year, however, due to the pressure from their parents' side, some of them were pushed to choose any university and pursue their studies. Such case was for Radoslav:

'... she [mother] didn't want me to take a gap year right after the gymnasium. So I just, yeah, I just took whatever ...'

Parents' expectations may result in various scenarios, for instance, Matúš, who dropped out from his studies but kept it a secret for another 10 months in front of his parents, all of that due to:

'Pressure. I think I just didn't want to get pressured. Because everyone, especially from my father's side would pressure me a lot. It would be, it seems, a tragedy to not have a university ...'

Matúš wanted to avoid something that, for example, Alina experienced, i.e. her mom discouraging her from taking a gap year as she feared troubles regarding her future education. Or in Rebeka's situation when she did not have the inclination to study more, but her father and his side of the family pushed her to finish her studies.

Even though parents have the best interest in mind, sometimes it ends up differently. Martin and Gavral's father did not let his children take a gap year at first as he wanted them to finish their studies in order to find and get a great job opportunity as soon as possible.

However, in certain instances, parents come to some extent of understanding of the concept, and that happened for Martin and Gavral whose father still did not fully agree with the concept but:

'This time, he let us choose what we want to do with our lives and where we want to study and stuff like that because the first time he realized that we couldn't figure out what we really want to do with that little time that we had ... And I think that he made the best decision now to let us choose what we want.'

Sometimes it might be difficult for parents to see their child's potential thrown away, which was the case with Milan's parents. Their opinions differed and even though they felt and tried to encourage him to study, they have never pressured but respected Milan's final decision. Similarly reacted Adrian and Matej's parents who understood their reasoning and let them decide on their own. However, it might depend on a way of spending one's gap year. Mathilde mentioned a different attitude toward her gap year and her sister's. Parents saw a tangible plan that Mathilde prepared for her gap year which assured them of her maturity. But in the case of her sister, they got afraid of her losing time as they did not feel the deeper meaning of her time spent off school.

Some parents experienced a different attitude toward a gap year during their youth period, Jakob mentioned:

'... it was not normal at all back then. Back then, they called it a 'fjumreår' ... That's like a fooling around year.'

However, in spite of having a negative reputation of a gap year in mind, Jakob's parents remained open-minded toward the concept. They set certain boundaries, such as the maximum length of Jakob's gap year, which was one or two years. Overall, they understood his need to take a break after finishing the gymnasium.

Another example of acceptance, but from a bit different perspective, came from Raaqem's side whose parents felt genuinely happy about the news. It was especially due to the rarity of opportunities such as this in Raaqem's culture. He said:

'They were really supportive of this idea, and for them it's very prestigious for their child to travel abroad and to work abroad, so it was even better than just studying.'

As can be seen, parents might influence their children's gap year time-wise, however, we did encounter some cases when parents' actions inspired their children regarding both taking a gap year and activities choices during their gap year.

As Marcus' parents were on their gap year as well, it felt more natural to take one right after his studies. He also mentioned a great desire to travel, and that especially due to his parents who pushed their children to study languages, took them on various travels, and set a great example by taking a gap year themselves. Marcus' mother worked abroad as an au-pair and his father traveled internationally as a backpacker. Even though Jakob's parents did not take their gap year, he also got inspired by various trips his family took and hoped to go on an adventure on his own during a gap year.

Important Figures

In one's life, not only family stand an important role but also people whom they encounter alongside. These individuals may also have a certain part in decision-making, such as choosing a university, deciding whether to take a gap year, selecting activities, destinations, and/or deciding on the duration of the gap year.

For Beatrice and Sophia, it was their boyfriends who influenced a decision regarding their final destination during a gap year as they wanted to spend time with them simultaneously having their gap year. A similar case was for Martin and his brother, whom he perceives as his best friend when he got influenced by deciding about certain situations and activities before and during his gap year in order to stay close to his brother.

If we compare to Matúš's experience, his surroundings impacted his decisions on a bigger scale. He followed his friends from the point of choosing the first university, through getting to his gap year, engaging in various activities during the gap year, until choosing his current university.

The biggest change was for Milan whose whole life and plans were turned upside down after his breakup. This experience also prompted him to undertake specific actions that were based on certain confusion and anger.

And sometimes, there might be almost no influence, no education that provides guidance, no parents interfering in one's development. It might be due to the trust and supportive approach of one's parents, or due to individuals being mature enough to make their own decisions. We could see such scenario with Alina:

'...I would say I didn't have that parents' pressure on me anymore because I was already an adult three years after moving out to another country. So the influence was very much decreased...'

Another example of someone who is being their own influence is Raaqem. Actually, he felt surprised by the ordinariness of opportunities such as career guidance at school. Moreover, when his parents started indirectly talking about his future, although he appreciated their good intentions, Raaqem has always made them aware of his independence which made them trust and supported him and his decisions.

All of the mentioned above have shaped our participants' views and opinions on the importance of education. Some of them found its relevance, such as Marcus who sees it as an important part of one's life but at the same time believes it does not define an individual. Another standpoint is from Rebeka, who does not consider having a degree as a necessity and rather values when someone possesses general knowledge about important events that have happened and/or are happening right now in the world. In the case of Jakob and Milan, formal schoolings, such as high school and university, stands an important role in their life. A bit different approach has Martin and Gavral who do not focus on education itself rather than the 'final product', i.e.

getting wealthy. And for some, such as Radoslav, Raaqem, Matej, and Matúš, education is relevant, both formal (university) and informal (courses), however, they struggled to access their full potential due to low motivation during their studies.

To recapitulate, a gap year might not differentiate between shy and an outgoing person, however, their personality might affect the way the experience is perceived and lived. The way a gap year is conducted could be shaped due to more different factors than just a personality type. We have noticed external factors that are directly connected to the participants, such as educational system and its opportunities and influence of family and/or our gap takers' surroundings. By encountering certain situations and mentioned influences in their life, the motivation to embark on a gap year was shaped. Not only the motivation to start, but also the flow and outcome of the whole lived experience will be introduced in the next themes.

The lived experiences

Theme two of our findings section consists of three subsections that explain in more detail the actual gap year experiences the participants in our research went through. We also implement here the four realms of experience theory to understand better their experiences, as well as to help us analyze if their overall gap year experiences could be transformative.

The Interplay of Expectations, Motivation, and Inspiration

Each one of our participants brought unique view on their gap year, some of them started theirs already with certain expectations in mind, some of them with none, and some had a specific motivation in mind that drove their actions.

We could see multiple reasons for conducting a gap year, for instance, we noticed need for personal development, as for Beatrice it was her wish to become independent and be able to take control of her life due to the unpredictability life had brought her.

'My parents' divorce was challenging, but it also made me realize that life is unpredictable and that I should seize opportunities when they arise. The gap year was an opportunity for me to take control of my life and explore new possibilities.'

Additionally, she saw the gap year as an opportunity to explore new possibilities not only in regards to herself but also for discovery of external world and its unique parts. Curiosity was in this case the triggering factors. Similar desire was shared by Laura who mentioned:

‘Ultimately, I made the decision to take my first gap year based on my personal interests and desire to explore the world outside of academics.’

Unexplored territories and need for adventure were a big motivator for more participants. Jakob mentioned his desire being rooted in his childhood when he, thanks to his parents, created travel habits and perception of a gap year as a great opportunity for an adventure. Another example of seeking new experiences was in Marcus’s case. He expresses that throughout his gymnasium was a desire for adventure a recurring thought. His love for traveling was, as well as for Jakob, integrated into himself by his parents.

‘And at the same time, my family has also always travelled a lot. And I was hoping to go on an adventure in my gap year ... just have like my own adventure ... so it always came down to that I wanted to do it for the throughout most of my gymnasium time.’

We could notice this pattern already in the Literature Review, where according do Eva (2019), one of the two main reasons for Danes to go on, so-called ‘sabbatical’, gap year is to experience new things. However, for Marcus it meant even more than an opportunity to explore, he found a personal trigger as he wanted to experience the Danish gap, the rite of passage that has been established in younger generations in Denmark.

‘It was during my gymnasium studies, I would say, it’s almost like a Danish tradition that when people finish their gymnasium they go out traveling maybe for like okay two months, three months, to do something you know, travel to some work ... I want to do it more than just for like three months maybe it's always like I want to go away for a long time to experience what it's like and really ... ’

Furthermore, he believed that the gap would help him from the professional perspective as well. He hoped to choose the right path, and also to learn some valuable life lessons along the way.

'... Also at that point I wasn't really sure if I was going to study, or what I was going to study. So it was nice to have one year to make up your mind. I also think that really helped me make a better decision than what I would have done if I did it in the gymnasium ... '

Being indecisive with need to 'figure out what to do' occurred among our interviewees more often than other reasons. Together with the need to take some time off from studies. Some of the examples are Beatrice whom experienced unexpected situation concluding in the need to find new career path for her.

'Failing the police school exam was disappointing, but it made me realize that I needed to reassess my career path and find something I was truly passionate about. Taking a gap year provided the opportunity for self-discovery and personal growth, which ultimately led me to my current career.'

Or Matej who found disagreement with the way his subjects were taught, which resulted in low motivation to participate. He noted that the university was not the right match for him. Thus, he used the gap as an opportunity to figure out what he should do and which path would be the best for him.

'I would say there wasn't any match at least in my opinion but then I found out that there is but not in that case, so I, I was like okay, I won't focus on this thing that much because it's not it's in not my interest and yeah.'

Similar struggles connected to low motivation, compounded by additional mental issues, were encountered by Laura, who felt the need to fight these issues first to continue in her studies.

'I think the main reason I dropped out was that I hadn't yet found the right path for me. I was struggling with anxiety and self-doubt, and I didn't feel a strong connection to the courses or

programs I was enrolled in. Each time, I felt that taking a break and exploring other options would be more beneficial for my personal and professional growth.'

Losing motivation is another reason next to path reassessment that troubled our participants the most. We noticed this occurring issue while conducting interview with Jakob, Matúš, Matej and Radoslav. They expressed:

'My personal goal that year was just to find motivation for university and find the education I wanted.'

(Jakob, 2023)

'... I knew in advance that I'm going to, I don't want to study anymore because I'm tired, I'm bored ... '

(Radoslav, 2023)

'... I somehow slowly stopped going to school, it wasn't about exams, but about my absence. I couldn't do my exams because I had too many missed classes and with that lost many credits. I'd say that I lost my motivation because of that ... And then I started doing anything.'

(Matúš, 2023)

However, motivation regarding the professional environment does not necessarily have to be due to tiredness or boredom. Even though Mathilde used one of her gap years to de-stress from her studies:

'So, yeah, it was again about all the, you know, like exams and evaluations and a lot of stress. ... And sometimes it was like a lot of a lot of things to do, you know. And but it was not only the university ... But it was, you know, like I was working a lot as well to get a school and so on. And then there was also going to the Danish classes to learn the Danish language. So it was a lot of stuff going on and I was just very busy. So maybe, you know, not always I find time to do all the things that I wanted, you know, I needed, for example ... With the job, you know, because, you know, sometimes I didn't want to do the job, but I needed to have money.'

The other one was fully focused on her professional development and gaining work experience.

' ... dream, you know, just to do that. So, you know, just leaving the country just gave me that boost and so on. But I didn't need to stress about the grades and tests and exams and so on ... And yeah, so I could get a little bit of working experience and live in another country and so on.'

Raaqem and Matej also perceived a gap year as a great opportunity for their professional development. However, in a bit different sense. Whereas Matej hoped for a new perspective on the work environment. Raaqem aimed to develop his professional self and contribute by the experience to his curriculum vitae:

'Honestly, the expectation that I had was to move forward in [name of the organization]. It wasn't really a personal gain, more than the fact that I would be more popular, more visible to the global network, it would give me more chances to advance to the regional board or the global board another day. It was one of my dreams and my ambitions to work for [name of the organization], so for me that internship was the perfect opportunity to accommodate myself to the global board's vision and way of work, but it wasn't anything regarding my personal acquisition of new information ... I wouldn't miss this opportunity, you know, like, traveling to the Netherlands with all expenses paid, they're going to pay me a salary, they're going to accommodate me, it's going to be very efficient and very practical in my CV, and everything, so it was an easy decision.'

For some participants the gap year did not feel the same as for Raaqem and his full confidence in relation to his future decisions and pursuits. In case of Mathilde, she felt certain confusion due to too many *'choices to consider'*. We noted similar situation with Matej who mentioned:

' ... it was also the reason for a gap year because I was deciding between maybe three fields of study ... '

At the same time, some of our interviewees has already decided what they wish to study, such as Sophia. However, while pursuing her bachelor's degree, she found out that her field of study does not fulfill her and she felt the need to make changes in her life and find a new path.

'Facing reality and realizing I have to take control back over my life. It really was a long process.'

If we think of professional development, for some it meant deciding on their future steps, changing perspective on work, finding motivation and/or mastering their professional skillset. Nevertheless, we encountered another perspective, and that is a simple need to become economically independent. A goal that Radoslav says he had for his gap:

'I earned for the goal that I wanted to achieve without even borrowing any, without lending any money from anybody.'

Not all participants fell under 'either, or' option. Such case is Martin and Gavral who anticipated to accomplish all the goals they set for both personal and professional development. They both desired to improve their mental and physical health. Besides, they were motivated to do anything that would help them to find the right path in regards to their further education. As Martin mentioned:

'... My goals were to find a new major and a new university and also to go to fitness.'

Even though their goals overlap in many areas, there are certain differences. An example is Gavral's wish to attend driving lessons during his gap year period. He also expressed:

'... I wanted to achieve some goals. I wanted to attend my driving lessons and to gain back the 10 kilograms that I lost when I was in Belgium. And also to find a new major that will fit me and to be to choose a new university.'

With a motivation or any other goal in some of our participants' sight, they get inspired when planning on their further activities. However, sometimes it might not be as apparent as it seems. In this case might be beneficial to be open-minded toward outer inspirations. For instance, Jakob had three inspirations for how his gap could be done and what activities would be suitable for his goals and preferences. One of his methods of finding inspiration was using one of today's social media platforms Facebook through which he gained knowledge about how others did their gaps. Another was conducting research on organized group travels as well as asking about what his gap friends plan to do on their gaps.

'I was looking at, you know, group travels. I don't know what to call them, where you go in a small group of people and you visit the same places and everything is planned out ... some agencies. But also just looking at Facebook, but also just talking to my friends, because most of them are going to have a gap year as well. So what are you going to do? Maybe I can do the same. Some inspiration.'

Even though Mathilde's desired destination changed after a while, she still represents a great example of how one might get inspired, even if unconsciously.

'I didn't have a plan for it ... I remember I went to this presentation ... she went to Australia for like a year to do the gap year before her studies. Like, wow, that's so cool. This is something I would love to do, you know. And yeah, but I didn't do that. But that was, you know like I wanted to do that.'

Furthermore, we would like to raise one more different perspective about that being driven by certain desire, expectation and/or motivation might not be for everyone. Matúš and Adrian expressed they had neither expectations, purpose nor a specific plan they wished to accomplish during their gap year. Rebeka found alignment with this kind of approach and also expressed no expectations from her gap year.

'... I am a person who is going with the flow, so of course, I am having some targets in my life, like, ok I will finish this till this time, or wanna do this till that time. But in this time, I was like

what's gonna come, I am gonna take. I am gonna see, I am gonna get new, you never know so in this point, I was like 20, I was like: what's gonna be, it's going to be, I wasn't thinking much about like okay, you should do something else.'

Navigating the Gap Year Experience

The various preparation strategies employed by our interviewees for their gap years present a diverse array of approaches to this transformative period. A few, such as Jakob, Marcus, and Beatrice, considered the prospect of a gap year during their high school years. Jakob meticulously mapped out his gap year to follow high school, while Marcus, though relying on a travel agency for logistical aspects, still maintained an element of flexibility in his planning. In similar fashion, Beatrice also planned her gap year following high school.

A large proportion of our interviewees embarked on their gap year due to either personal decision or a compelling need to pause their academic pursuits for varied reasons. Matúš, for instance, took a break after losing interest and motivation in his university studies in Bratislava, prompting him to drop out. Laura, having already experienced two gap years, embarked on her second one after realizing her current academic major did not align with her aspirations, necessitating a change in both her life and career path. Alina, our participant from Poland, consciously planned her gap year primarily as a means to bolster her professional skills, an investment she hopes will facilitate finding a job during her Master's degree and increase her financial stability.

'So my gap year, just to clarify, was after my bachelor's and before my master's ... And the decision was based on the fact that I noticed how much time it took me and how much stress it took me to focus both on finding a student job and on my studies ... so that I have a good start in the new education.'

Gavral experienced a three-month gap in his studies and, despite not being able to achieve all three of his goals, still found this interlude beneficial. It granted him an opportunity to discover new motivation for his studies and to explore programs more aligned with his interests and future objectives. Adrian, too, experienced his gap during his studies, a result of deciding to switch

majors midway through his academic journey. Even though his gap year wasn't entirely planned, it was an outcome of his shift in academic focus.

'It was somewhat expected, since I knew I would have to wait between my 2.5 year UCN education and the start of the AAU Bachelor in Medialogy. The gap happened because I knew I did not want to pursue a career in software developemnt since I find that somwehat boring so I went in a different direction - Medialogy allows for more imagination to be used as well as learning how to work in various fields rather than becoming experience in one.'

Additionally, Rebeka, our sixth participant, also utilized her gap year as an intermission between her academic studies. Her rationale for taking this break was directly tied to her transition to a different university and her financial circumstances, as she discussed in her interview:

'So I didn't get the scholarship so I had to pay, and in that time, it was like quite a lot for me to handle so I decided to change university. So I left Prague, it was super amazing, it was the best time of my life, and it was like the college, life is amazing and I switched to the university in Slovakia, in Trnava. This university was because of the money situation, and because I'm the type of person I didn't want to tell my parents 'okay guys now you have to pay this and this more' because I still have two more sisters so I cannot ask them to right now put everything on me and what if now, so in that time, I'm the type of person who is like, once I feel something, I will do it.'

Examining the activities that our participants engaged in during their gap year, it becomes clear that these were predominantly related to work, travel, leisure, hobbies, and a myriad of other pursuits. Jakob, driven by his passion for travel, made a spur-of-the-moment decision to visit the Czech Republic for employment purposes. On the other hand, Radoslav mentioned his frequent spontaneous decisions during this period, despite his overarching aim to return to his studies afterward. Importantly, he refrained from imposing any pressure or expectations on himself as he navigated through his gap year.

'I just, yeah, took a day after the day.'

Throughout his gap year, Radoslav chiefly engaged in leisurely pursuits, such as domestic travel and work. Similarly, Marcus embarked on global travels during his eight-month gap year, exclusively dedicated to exploring diverse locales. His journeys were motivated by a desire to delve into the local cultures and cuisines of his destinations. When queried about the principal highlights of his travels, Marcus responded:

'of course the people, the culture and the food.'

Marcus began seeking out more physically demanding activities as he reflected on the initial phase of his gap year, which was predominantly filled with leisurely pursuits like partying. Upon retrospection, he realized the need to be more active and prioritize his health, encompassing both mental and physical wellness:

'They [travel group] were all great but we partied a lot at the start of it ... I do three first countries I went to, it was a lot of partying and you know having a good time, also experiencing the culture ... it was almost like a beer every day and you know smoking cigarettes on the beach you know stuff like that ... I remember when we got to Cuba and all of a sudden I had like this sensation that I was not doing what I wanted to do ... I was traveling but I was still not doing what I wanted to do, so I was like okay, I gotta change my mindset on this ... so when I got to America I quit smoking like I haven't smoked for almost a year now ... and I also like put the parties like of course there's got to be room for a party now and then but you know it wasn't every day anymore ... I did Muay Thai or Thai boxing as it's called also and you know it was it was weird because I always used to train a lot and then I went on a three-month bender of just partying you know eating and not caring about my body and then I got back to it and I felt like this motivation that I could see okay my health is getting good again like I could start running and I was actually becoming more muscular again because I could see like my muscle mass was depleting throughout my travels but ... and luckily when I met up with the group some of the guys and girls I was traveling with they also found it very interesting to do Muay Thai so we started to do it together where all the places that we traveled and it was a lot more the people I travel with in Southeast Asia it was a lot more okay let's go see something with the culture like it

wasn't it wasn't that much about the party anymore okay let's learn and let's try and understand and that's really what changed my perspective.'

Drawing from the highlighted excerpts, it becomes evident that Marcus experienced an epiphany regarding his gap year. Instead of primarily focusing on partying and other recreational activities, he acknowledged the need for a more engaged approach. This transformational shift in his mindset led him to explore varied activities that enabled a deeper understanding of local customs and cultures, as well as providing a platform for self-discovery.

Raaqem shared that his primary engagement during the gap year was an internship. This role provided an avenue to put his university-acquired knowledge into practical use, despite the inherent challenges. According to him, this was his most significant challenge. Yet, he chose not to dwell on these difficulties, instead shifting his focus away from them.

'I would say the biggest challenge would be to take what I learned from school and apply it. And try to make sense of it and try to re-utilize it in some way into my work because that didn't happen. I remember we studied a lot about mass communication and customer behavior and I could have applied some of those learnings to my work. But I didn't really focus on that.'

He reflects that he appreciates the locals and the way they treated him.

'Custom, culture. Yeah, I think this is what I remember from Dutch people. Vibrant, energetic, good English speakers, good communicators. Very empathetic. I spent Ramadan there, half of the audience listening knows Ramadan or Napa is a month where we fast. And very specific celebration to Muslims. So it was very difficult to live there. Theoretically, but practically, everybody was comprehensive, everybody was empathetic.'

Matej, a participant from Slovakia, revealed that one of his primary undertakings during his gap year was applying to universities. He approached his second gap year without a concrete plan, preferring to navigate it step by step. Over this period, Matej worked as a taxi driver for slightly over a year and pursued opportunities in the IT sector. Concurrently, he explored various

educational courses, enrolling in a few later on. A significant change during his gap year was relocating to Prague for a while, motivated by his relationship with his girlfriend. This move brought about the unique challenges associated with adapting to a different country.

'No it was just me working and figuring out about if I even want to go into IT again and yeah getting know to which way should I go ... Like working and maybe applying for for job in IT field and then finding out about some courses ... Yes I guess because it was right after dropping out of school and maybe all together also with doing career it was for one year maybe one and a half ... Well I think yeah she was the reason but it wasn't like I for me it wasn't the situation that I lose or drop something in Slovakia it was just moving there.'

Matej intended to resume his studies following each of his gap years. However, he was uncertain about which direction would best align with his needs and interests on both occasions. He did not strategize for either of his gap years, instead viewing them as organic periods of his life's progression, as reflected in the quote below:

'Yeah it came naturally because it was like I dropped out in the middle of school year I guess so there's half an year of mandatory period of me having a gap year and then it was just me deciding which way I will go and maybe maybe it was just for some of the months and then it was just waiting to get to Denmark.'

Milan, akin to the other study participants, utilized his gap year to fulfill personal objectives that surfaced during this time. Initially, his desire for a gap year was fueled by a reluctance to pursue further studies and the need to secure future plans with his ex-girlfriend, which led him to seek employment overseas. As time passed, work became his emotional refuge, and the gap year ultimately served as a platform to manage his emotions and reassess his priorities.

'I was working, then I went abroad, then I was fighting all the feelings from breakup, I was sad, then I went to work, I needed to find something to keep my mind occupied so I found a job and then started preparing for those admission tests.'

Regarding Matúš, our research team observed that his gap year was primarily composed of leisure-oriented activities. His approach to this period was spontaneous, often guided by the influence of his friends. As per his own account, he devoted much of his time to socializing and enjoying parties, while also spending a portion of the period traveling internationally.

'No no, we were just partying all the time, ... just wasting my time and partying ... we were going everywhere, I went to Germany, to Scotland ... '

Nevertheless, Matúš also shared that his gap year involved a degree of work. Initially, he sought refuge from the pressures of family expectations by immersing himself in various distractions and diversions, essentially seeking escape wherever possible to evade confronting this tension.

'I stopped in October and then I just went somewhere for 2-3 days, to get lost, then I was working in Bratislava ... Various jobs, low-skilled jobs. I finished my school when I was 18 yo, so I was still quite young.'

Much like many of our participants, Laura and Beatrice leveraged their gap year to attain financial autonomy through full-time employment. Laura elected to spend her gap year working as a full-time employee and intern, discovering that online courses offered a means to delve into her interests and hone her skills. Similarly, Beatrice engaged in work during her gap year, supplementing this with travel and immersion in local English culture.

'I also took the time to travel and explore the country, visiting different cities and experiencing local culture.'

For Mathilde, the gap year was more than just a hiatus; it was a dream and an adventure she could embark on before stepping into adulthood. She took comfort in the fact that this period offered her the space to explore potential career paths and unwind, backed by the support system she had in place - from her home country, Poland, and her close-knit family in Ireland, where she moved for her gap year.

'So that was like, I can relax now, you know. Of course, like there was also, you know, I was a bit stressed about not having a job for some time and so on. But it was also kind of like it wasn't that serious. Right. So it wasn't that serious yet. And I felt secure with my family. And so, like, you know, it was also a lot of fun to it, I would say, you know, like a lot of like it was like an adventure.'

*'So even if I, you know, searched for the job for like a few months, it was still. Yeah, it was still like, you know, I was basically a teenager, so I didn't know anything about adult life ...
... So, yeah, like I didn't take this, that, that seriously at that point in my life.'*

During her first gap year, when she was not working, Mathilde spent her time traveling and partaking in a variety of leisure activities. This period also served as a healing phase for her, assisting her in rekindling her motivation to return to her studies.

On the other hand, Martin and Gavral do not perceive their interim period before starting new university programs as a 'gap', since they believe such a time should be centered around productivity and pursuing future objectives, rather than engaging in leisurely social activities.

'Because in those few months, I have left there I think that there for me to go out more with friends and go to parties because after that I need to study hard for my university for my first semester.'

(Martin, 2023)

In his interview, Gavral additionally expressed that his gap period concluded the instant he was formally admitted into his chosen university.

'Because I was already chosen in one of the universities that I applied ... I will focus more to make my relationships with my friends better, so I couldn't lose them when they go to different countries. And because of that, I will have to go to parties a lot. This is why I will focus more to have fun and chill with them. Because after my university. After the first of September, I will start

to study in my university and I will have to focus more on myself and I will have to study really hard to get my degree.'

Sophia conveyed to us her journey of self-discovery and career exploration during her gap year. She began tackling the challenges that she had struggled with in her first gap year, leading her to uncover fresh interests and new objectives for her life.

'Working out, for health benefits ... so I developed an interest in wellness, fitness, weightlifting and it took me one year to get to the point where I am at. I lost significant amount of weight and fat, gained muscle mass and I decided that I want to perfect my knowledge about this so therefore I decided to take a course about what's it called certified to be a personal trainer and a nutrition coach.'

She has also participated in activities such as work, attending courses, and traveling. But because she also used to travel as a way to escape from her daily life.

'Travelling as much as possible so I was away from "problems".'

From our conversation with Adrian, one of our Romanian participants, it was evident that his gap year activities mirrored his everyday routine, incorporating work and indulging in his hobbies. Additionally, he also sought leisure through international travel as well as exploring places within his home country.

'I worked part-time delivering papers and working as a busboy/bartender in a bar, spending most of my free time on my hobbies - playing the guitar and computer games. I also traveled a bit, both home and abroad.'

Rebeka engaged in various activities during her gap year, as she shared in her interview. Firstly, she began working, finding enjoyment in her job and appreciating the freedom of having leisure time. This work experience not only provided her with financial independence but also offered valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth. One of the highlights of Rebeka's

activities was her travel experiences. She vividly recalled a vacation to Egypt, where she felt a sense of liberation from the usual academic stress. Traveling during her gap year allowed her to immerse herself in new environments and cultures, free from the pressures of university commitments. It provided her with a refreshing break and a chance to explore different parts of the world.

Rebeka's choice to prioritize travel and leisure during her gap year demonstrates her desire for new experiences and a break from academic responsibilities. It allowed her to fully embrace the moments of relaxation and adventure, without the burden of impending academic deadlines or obligations. This intentional focus on self-discovery and enjoying life's experiences contributed to the overall positive and fulfilling nature of her gap year. By engaging in work and travel, Rebeka was able to strike a balance between personal growth and enjoyment. Her activities during the gap year served as a catalyst for self-reflection, exploration, and a break from the pressures of academic life. Through these activities, Rebeka created lasting memories, developed a broader perspective, and fostered a sense of fulfillment that shaped her gap year into a transformative and rewarding period of her life.

'I started working I was enjoying, you know, like the free time. I was travelling, I remember we went to, for vacation, to Egypt, and you know like, no like feeling like oh my god, now, I have to do this for my university or something. No, I knew like, I am out of the, I am having off from the work, no stress, no nothing, you know.'

Furthermore, traveling was an activity for Rebeka, she has used her gap experience in order to do things that were not fulfilled in her childhood:

'For example, when I was like, I remember my friend, he came to me, if I wanna go to for vacation to Egypt, I was like yeah, why not, for example, after that, when I visited Egypt I was like, ok, I would love to travel more, you know. It was more like, like wait, wake up call - you should travel more, you should do this this this. Because me with my parents, we have never traveled like we never going to the vacation abroad, just like in the country or something. So I was like, ok, in that time for the first time, I started to be thinking about being a fly attendant.'

Looking at the challenges our participants had to face during their gap year, we have noticed that most of them have encountered issues related to Covid-19, financial state, family and romantic relationships, physical and mental states and many others that will be presented below.

Covid-19 has been one of the main issues for our participants. Jakob, Radoslav, Marcus and Alina have all encountered difficulties during their gap year due to Covid-19 restrictions and have all talked about them in their interviews with our researchers.

Jakob stated that unfortunately due to Covid restrictions, he wasn't able to fulfill his desire for adventure or his full travel plans.

'... quite a hassle to move to the Czech Republic during Covid. Also, I could have maybe traveled a bit more from the Czech Republic to other countries nearby if it wasn't for Covid. I only got to go to Vienna and Bratislava It was meant to be an adventure. And even though I had friends where I lived, where I lived at a big collegium place, then we couldn't really go out. We couldn't even stay in the public areas of where we lived for longer than 10.'

Covid affected not only his travel plans but his work experience as well as he didn't have access to the full office atmosphere since he had to work remotely and was insulated from the team environment because of it.

'But then after four months, that changed and Denmark was way more open than the Czech Republic. And then I didn't really fancy staying because I was just working remotely from my small apartment.'

The pandemic was one of the three challenges Jakob identify that he had to overcome during his gap. Another one was moving abroad and having to deal with the language barrier and experiencing the local culture which resulted in culture shock as well as having to be more social and having to go out of his comfort zone in order to make connections with people.

'Yeah, the first challenge when I arrived in the Czech Republic was everything, hahaYeah, everything is in a weird language, haha ... But the train station in Brno is not very nice. And that was the first place I saw. And I was like, okay, this might be a short trip, haha. Luckily, the city was way nicer. And I have now seen that they're going to be very niceYou know, I had to, for the first time ever, I had to get my own friends. They were not going to come to me. So I had to just walk up to people and ask if they wanted to hang out. And luckily, most of them were in the same situation as me. Yeah, it made it easier. But that was a huge success for me personally. Because I'd never had the courage before to just walk up to people and talk with them.'

Radoslav told us that one of the challenges he notes that he had during his gap was keeping up with mundane routines. However, he also sees them as one of the positive things about the gap. The routines and the whole experience in general were used as a practice run for adulthood. Radoslav also sees his gap as helpful in reaching economic independence, work experience, and responsibility. When he talks about responsibility, he perceives it as being responsible to manage your everyday life, and economic resources, as well as being responsible at work.

'A routine ... I mean, it's like, it's a perfect example of a grown-up life. You need to wake up early, you need to go to work, and only, like, in the evenings you are off. Yeah, you have some free times or you have some time during the weekend. Yes. So you get, like, prepared for adulthood. But again, it really depends on your character.'

'So it's like, I would say, an economic independency. Mm-hmm. I would say responsibility ... I mean, I feel like I always have been responsible whenever it comes to any kind of job. I would say, like, in general, like, working experience. So it's just the most positive thing.'

Another challenge was dealing with boredom which resulted in him using work as an escape. This challenge was also created due to Covid, thus, he also had to deal with other challenges and consequences related to the virus.

'I mean, at the beginning I was like chilling and waiting for Corona to relax. But then it didn't happen. And I was completely bored. So I just went working full time.'

Marcus was able to visit various destinations, even with the Covid restrictions he had to overcome. Another challenge he had to overcome during his travels was language barriers. He perceives that sometimes he could not experience the local culture and visit only tourist places because of it. In his mind, the authenticity in some places was affected.

'Thailand for example is very well known for having like the sweetest people ever and they were so amazing ... I didn't really have like a negative experience with the locals ... it was always like okay maybe this person got mad at something I did but I know that they know that I'm just a dumb tourist and where you are more inclined to spending time with people with those gap takers or more trying to explore and get to know locals it was mostly you know experiencing with the groups I was with ... I did try to talk with a lot of the locals but most of the time the places I went you know language barrier is still there ... I went to South America they only speak Spanish I knew very very little Spanish some of them knew a little bit of English but not most of them and in Thailand yeah when you get to the touristy areas they're gonna speak a little English but the rest of the places they don't speak any English at all ... so it can be hard to develop like a close relationship with the locals if you don't have like a common tongue you speak the same language but you know you still get the best of it.'

Just as Marcus, during her trip to Barcelona, Mathilde also had anticipated encountering locals with limited English proficiency, a presumption which she discovered to be accurate. Consequently, overcoming language obstacles became a part of her gap year journey. As she put it, *'... I was actually quite correct about the language barrier'*.

Another difficulty Marcus met was that he had to interact and communicate with various personality types. Specifically, he mentioned his fellow gappers, as well as the problems he had with his agency. The organization had overpromised what they could do and when he was in trouble he had to figure things out himself.

'There are some parts about traveling through continents that was very difficult especially because I was promised some support from the agency I was going with but they didn't really support me and also Corona was still happening in Asia at that point so it makes it made some stuff a little bit difficult but I managed it all it was and in the end looking back in it it was like okay yeah that was also quite the learning experience but you know I take it as it comes ... '

Another complication Marcus reflected he had to figure out was that *'sometimes when you're traveling like I did you end up in some you know you end up in some fucked up places'*.

A final challenge that affected Marcus' life after his gap was his financial situation. He reflects that it made sense such that he had traveled for 8 months but because of it in the end he was broke and had to find a job.

'I always find it a little bit annoying that I had to stress so much about money in the end but also I was traveling for eight months ... at the end when I got back I had like no money like no money at all I was broke when I got back to Denmark so I was very like okay I just need to get back to work and I need to go back to work now ... '

Looking at Raaqem's challenges during his gap year, one of them was that Raaqem had to convince his teachers to let him go on this gap such that it was not part of his curriculum. He had to justify it in the eyes of others why he went on a gap. This is something Raqem reflects that he would also have to do with his future employers.

'... another challenge is convincing my professors, my teachers on how to ... Pitching this opportunity to them and convincing them that it's a very good opportunity for me and that they should let me go. Because they could have ... it was possible, it was in their hands to dismiss this or to reject this opportunity. And tell me that, hey, we're not going to get you to sit for your exams again. So the whole administration and some of the teachers supported me well in this operation, let's say. And I'm grateful for that.'

'Because I would have stopped, interrupted my studies, and I would have had a gap semester, like, something that I ... without anything to do. So, the decision that I got eventually, that I took eventually, was to choose another specialty, to add a third specialty, or a second minor, which was business analytics at the time. So, that decision came to compensate for that, or to justify that gap semester, as if, hey, if a recruiter once asks me, why did you take five years to graduate instead of four years? I would answer him that I added another specialty. I wouldn't tell him that I traveled to the Netherlands, or worked in the Netherlands.'

A challenge that comes with this type of gap is getting used to the new environment and the local culture and customs.

'Dutch people are very direct. Which is something that I don't really necessarily enjoy. Because I come from a school or from a pattern or from a culture that is very soft, that is very loving, that is very kind-caring. So even if I'm saying something, even if I'm giving you a negative feedback, I would sugarcoat it, package it, like in some intros and outros and stuff. But the Dutch person would just go, you did this wrong, you shouldn't have done this. That's not how we do this. Which, ironically, is a better way to grow. But I had to take time to get used to it.'

As we have noted above, Matej's main activity during his gap year was to apply for universities and this was challenging because he was unsure of what he wanted to do, as well as practical issues in general. Another challenge he had to overcome was to find a job. However, he appreciates the end of his high school as a more stressful period than the gap.

'First gap year it was that testing because I had to go to like different town like maybe three times and doing some tests math tests during my gap year so it was more or less for me without practicing that stuff ... so applying in general ... Um it wasn't stressful at all like in my case it was like in my case it was like, yes working and I had some difficulties about even finding job or doing something or finding out what should I do ... Yes yes like depends because it was like eight years so like in the end of high school yes it was more stressful than my gap year.'

One of the challenges Millan had to overcome during his gap was work balance as well as preparation for taking his entrance exams, in addition to acquiring financial resources for his university goals.

'I still had a job, actually two jobs, I needed to prepare myself for those admission test, it wasn't for free, it was difficult. ... I didn't know a person can manage even 3 days without sleep, haha.'

Matúš was faced with the daunting task of disclosing his decision to pause his studies to his parents. Given his father's unsupportive stance towards taking a gap year, coupled with his own reservations, he was able to conceal his sabbatical from academics for a period of 10 months.

'And basically, I was just checking our mailbox when we receive the official statement, we received it in August, so I managed to hide it for another 10 months after the official drop out.'

Beatrice, one of our participants who spent her gap year in England, confided that despite engaging in various activities, she faced several challenges. These included coping with feelings of homesickness, dealing with cultural shock, and adjusting to the English lifestyle.

'... being away from home was difficult at times, and I had to overcome homesickness and adapt to a new environment.'

Mathilde confronted a couple of challenges as she began her gap year journey. One of these was securing employment. Furthermore, she was driven by the quest to discover her ideal path, which also proved to be a challenge. While she did not ultimately find the perfect path, the experience helped her to narrow down her options. This might be one of the factors contributing to her later decision to diverge from her chosen bachelor's career trajectory.

'I mean, the one thing that comes to my mind is that I couldn't find a job for some time ... While trying to find this one thing that I want to do and this one university that I want to go to. The challenge was that it didn't happen. It didn't just show there and say, oh, it's there and you need to do this. That's the only thing. It got more narrow, but I still had a choice to make.'

Alina encountered several challenges during her gap year. One significant obstacle she identified was her struggle with maintaining discipline to adhere to the routines she had established for herself. Additionally, she found herself frequently needing to reassure her mother about her commitment to resume her studies after the gap year. Alina also mentioned that her travel plans were curtailed by the Covid pandemic, limiting her opportunities for exploration.

‘ ... sticking to schedules ... So you really have to develop discipline. It's not like I'm complaining about it because I still achieved within a year what I planned. I don't remember that time that clearly but I think there were definitely times when I was just procrastinating.’

‘She [mother] was scared about it. Yeah, but I was assuring her that it means that I would just take a break for one year and that's it and I will continue my studies. When it comes to Alina's personal growth, she sees that she gained not only valuable hard skills but she also used this experience as an opportunity to understand herself better.’

Both physical and mental challenges presented themselves to the two brothers, requiring their resilience and determination to overcome. Martin reflected on his experience, expressing his decision to prioritize his health and well-being by staying and focusing on fitness and healthy eating. This shift in perspective led him to opt for online studies as a means of achieving his goals without compromising his physical and mental state. Similarly, Gavral faced the task of understanding the impact of his co-dependency on his brother Martin and how it could influence his own future. This realization prompted him to assess his priorities and make choices that aligned with his personal growth and development.

‘The way I choose my major in Belgium was because I want to go with him in Belgium. But at that point in my life, I didn't really realize what my major will be. I just wanted to be with him. And I know that this wasn't the best decision. But at that point in my life, I did that. And maybe that's how it happened. But I think one of the most important things for me is to be with my

brother because he was always with me.'

(Gavral, 2023)

The gap year served as a period of healing for various mental and physical challenges that the brothers had encountered. It provided them with an opportunity to address issues such as demotivation, feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and the shock of significant weight loss. Additionally, they were able to address any physical ailments or injuries that had accumulated during their time abroad. This period of reflection and recuperation played a crucial role in their overall well-being and helped them regain balance and resilience before moving forward.

'Yeah because when I was in Belgium I was kind of in a bad environment because I didn't find the apartment sooner so I stayed in a house with some granny so I was kind of embarrassed to use his stuff to cook and I eat only sandwiches and fast foods so I lost a lot of kilograms and when I was when I come back to Bulgaria I was even skinnier ... Yeah, when I was in Belgium I feel sometimes I feel a little bit lonely even though I was with my brother. I want to be with my family and friends. So when I come back from the Christmas holiday I realize that I really miss my family and friends and even my dog because I missed him so much and I realize I want to be more time with them.'

(Martin, 2023)

'Yeah, because when I was in Belgium, my health and my physical health were really bad.'

(Gavral, 2023)

Looking at the challenges that Rebeka had to face during her gap year, they have been mostly regarding family life relationship, when asking her about the challenges she has experienced, Rebeka stated that:

' ... More like the relationship with my parents, because we started spending a lot of time together right? Because I didn't go to school, I was just working and coming back home, so 100%, relationship with my family. Especially with my mum, and I think that's it.'

During her gap year, Rebeka faced several challenges, primarily related to her long-distance relationship and the pressure she received from her family regarding it. These challenges resulted in frequent conflicts and disagreements, leading to strained relationships. Her family expressed concerns and disapproval, advising her against certain choices and actions. These conflicts primarily affected her relationship with her parents, as they spent more time together due to her not attending school and focusing on work instead. The strained relationship, especially with her mother, became a significant challenge for Rebeka during her gap year.

'Long distance relationship, my family was pushing me a lot because of this relationship, so also, I had a lot of like fights in this relationship, like with my family because of this. Because they were like: 'aah this is not good, and you shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that'

To summarize, all of our participants have encountered certain situations, such as feeling the urge to change their major, dropping out from the university, being overwhelmed, and so on, that got them to a certain point in their life when a decision regarding their gap year had to be made. Their decisions were based on considerations of all the influences and their personal preferences. Some of the decisions were made unconsciously, their gap year started naturally but they got to be aware of it only after a while. Several of our participants intended to take a break, however, they did not plan or set any goals or specific actions for their gap year. Typically, their plans involved spending time relaxing and/or working. On the other side, three of our participants, Marcus, Alina, and Sophia, planned their gap year activities but preferred to keep it flexible at the same time. The majority of our participants intended to return to studies after their gap year, one exception was Milan who initially did not intend to both have a gap year and pursue a degree.

Exploring the Impact of a Gap Year

We classify our data sample as one that contains unique gap year experiences. Even though we have identified that the experiences have overlapping personal factors and activities, we see that the combination of those factors and activities is what makes the outcome unique and the gaps 'theirs'. However, the saying that there are exceptions to every rule applies to some degree to the

case of the twin brothers – Martin and Gavral. As we already mentioned in the previous sections we have discovered a curious finding in those two experiences, thanks to the lifeline technique we have identified that Marin and Gavral follow the same path and that they share a similar if not even identical cognitive process as well as belief systems, values, and decision making. We believe that due to those factors, the content of their answers was similar or completely the same when it came to their reflections and the outcome of their gaps. Thus, we see a connection that people who share the mentioned factors and fall into the same life path could share similar experiences, especially in the case of twins.

In addition, we and our participants recognize that there is no such gap experience that is completely positive. We found out that the majority of our sample identified their gap year experiences as ones in which the positives outgrow the negatives impacts, thus they viewed them in a positive light when it comes to their overall outcome.

Raaqem for example, classifies his gap year experience in the Netherlands as ‘... *all in all, it was a pretty positive experience.*’

Another example is Jakob. During the interview, we asked him to tell us three positive and three negative things about his gap, and he managed to tell us only two negatives. His answer was that:

‘... positive things, it was definitely socializing with people from different countries. And two was finding out what I was going to do in my future. And three was getting the motivation for studying back. And negatives, it was probably quite a hassle to move to the Czech Republic during Covid. Also, I could have maybe traveled a bit more from the Czech Republic to other countries nearby if it wasn't for Covid. I only got to go to Vienna and Bratislava.’

In the case of Marcus, the benefits overshadow the challenges. In one of his answers he even says that the negative situations he experienced back then, he can see them in a positive light because, in the long run, they were challenges he benefited from later.

‘Of course, there are negatives sometimes when you're traveling ... it's hard to look back and see the negatives I would say but sometimes when I get these are like positives so yeah looking back at them yes it doesn't have to be.’

Laura is another example of which the overall impact of the gap year is seen in a positive light. She is one of the gappers who experienced multiple gaps and when we asked how her gaps affected her, she answered that it was beneficial in various ways, however, one of the negative consequences of undergoing multiple gaps was that it impacted her negatively economically. Ultimately, however, she sees it as worth it because it helped her develop her current self.

'On the positive side, I learned a lot about myself and developed essential skills through my various jobs and experiences. My gap years also helped me understand the importance of hard work and perseverance. On the negative side, taking multiple gap years did result in some financial challenges and a longer time to establish my career. However, I believe the personal growth and life experiences I gained during those years were well worth it.'

However, we have also identified that the gap year experience can be categorized as having negative outcomes due to traumatic consequences. Such is the case of Sophia's first gap which resulted in her having health issues such as depression, stress, anxiety, and loneliness, at some point she even mentions that she had physical symptoms, such as heart palpitations and panic attacks. When we asked Sophia if her gap was more stressful compared to her time at university and her current daily life she responded *'Definitely. Felt useless and out of society.'*

'I developed a generalized anxiety disorder and social anxiety. Still living with it. At worst I experienced scary physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, panic attacks etc ... I was stuck in not so well paying jobs, and it was not even full time. It is really difficult finding a good job in Denmark as a foreigner. Felt hopeless. Was on A-kasse for a few months which was also very stressful for me ...'

Those negative consequences that we mentioned followed her after her gap year and are ones she has to fight to this day. Sophia's case is an interesting one, she is an example of how the term 'unique' really applies when it comes to the gap experience. Her first gap had a negative outcome that resulted in negative consequences that impacted her mentally and physically.

However, her second gap was actually ultimately the opposite and she sees it as a positive experience. During this gap, she worked on the goals she established for it, as well as the challenges that come from the previous one and from this one. We won't go deeper into which

challenges she had to overcome such as what we went through in the previous sections. During her second gap, Sophia was able to turn around her life and find a new purpose and outlook on life, which is why this is one of the reasons we identify her gap as a transformative one. We will dive into this more in the pages below. In addition, Sophia notes that due to her first gap year experience, she knew what not to do, she even remarks that she is now open to having a third gap year in the future if the right opportunity comes her way.

'Well the first gap year was definitely not great, the second one was better because I started learning more about myself. So the first one was ... I guess it was also important because I knew how I should not spend it and then on the second I started focusing on how to spend it and I can imagine having another gap year but that's hopefully with traveling or because of finding my actual dream job or focusing on moving somewhere else and start over I guess.'

The third outcome we have discovered is one we consider to be negative as well. However, this outcome is not the consequence of something traumatic that happened during the gap year. It is due to being seen in a negative light because of the gappers personal views about the gap year concept in itself. Examples that fall in this category are Felicia, Milan, and Matúš.

Felicia is someone who although acknowledges that her gap year experience was beneficial to her, she still can not fully see it as a time that was not wasted due to her upbringing and values we mentioned in the previous sections.

'For me, the only negative is that, since I did grow up in Romania, that mentality is still instilled in me, and I feel like a wasted 2 years of my life, even though I am aware that it was beneficial.'

Milan and Matúš share Felicia's opinion that their gap year experience was a period of that was 'lost'. However, Felicia sees this as a challenge that she has to overcome but Milan and Matúš do not. For Milan and Matúš, 'time' has a dual meaning. On one side they perceive 'time' positively in the sense that they had free time during their gaps, on the other side 'time' is perceived as 'lost' and is seen as a too valuable resource that can not be overshadowed when it comes to evaluating the impact of the whole experience.

'... it is squandered time, ... Usually, everyone is just traveling and spending money.'
(Matúš, 2023).

We have mentioned already a few times that what made our gappers, as well as us, consider their gaps a positive experience was the benefits the gappers gained. We see a direct link between their motivation, activities, and pre-gap opinions on the benefits they gain through the experience. We mentioned that the gap year experience can be beneficial in various ways for the gappers. An example is the personal growth we have identified that some of the gappers had undergone.

One of the examples we noticed is increased confidence. Raaqem notes that his gap helped his personal development and that one of the aspects was that he gained more confidence during his gap year in the Netherlands.

'...my confidence, my self-esteem changed a lot, my ability to approach strangers on the street changed, ...'

Another benefit he gained from living in a different country was cultural understanding and being open towards other customs and personal quirks. Raaqem also notes that this was not solely due to getting used to Dutch culture but living in an international environment as a whole. This was because of his living situation where he lived among different races and genders. As he said, that came with various challenges he had to overcome over time. However, he values this time because he gained cultural understanding because of it.

'... the conditions there and living for the first time ever, living in a mixed ... When I say mixed, it's both in races and genders and nationality and everything. So it was a bit of a new experience to me but that was an awesome experience because I lived with a Brazilian and a Mexican and Portuguese and a German and an Austrian. Everyone. Yeah. It was really great. But that also comes with its challenges, how to live together, the cultural understanding and everything.'

Beatrice and Mathilde are another example of how through living abroad they become more open and knowledgeable about the local customs, as well as gaining a degree of cultural

understanding. Mathilde also notes in her interview that she did not have stereotypes about Ireland due to her connection with her family that was living there, however when she looks back on the experience she sees it as a positive one which makes her appreciate the Irish culture more when compared to her background and time spent in Denmark.

'it was just very nice to experience them [Irish local people] myself, you know? So yeah, but it wasn't a stereotype that I had before. But after coming back, I just really appreciated the hospitality of the people there ... Because everybody was smiling and everybody was just greeting me on the street, strangers or no strangers ... So that's what actually surprised me personally. Because I knew that from the stories. But I didn't think it was until that point, you know? And also right now, comparing it to Danish people. I can even see it very clearly that they were just so friendly and so open ... That was just something that I really appreciated back in the day ... And yeah, I think I value that experience a lot ... And it was completely different to the experience from Poland. Because Polish people are not that nice.'

Rebeka, Milan, and Laura are also ones who become more open-minded due to their gap experiences, however unlike Beatrice and Mathilde, they gained this new aspect to their personality through their work/living in their home country.

Marcus was also someone who gained cultural understanding, it was due to his eight months of traveling around the world. However, unlike the previous examples, he went on his gap with the idea of learning and gathering knowledge about different cultures. Thanks to this experience Marcus remarks that he sees himself as more mature than his peers.

'I have friends who I worked with as a welder who like when I went away they stayed in Denmark and they you know kept working made very good money but they haven't changed like the slightest bit ever since I left there's still the same people they still do the same thing they're still in the street every Saturday and Friday you know yeah the same stuff and you know that's fine if that's how you work but I'm just like that wouldn't have worked for me I think that would have taken a toll on my mental health a lot so yes.'

We also found that Mathilde's first gap experience helped her become more mature. The experience was beneficial to her in other aspects as well, such as gaining some insights into what is like to be an adult.

'I would say so. I think I became more aware. I tried the adult life already, working and so on. I think it's made me a little bit more mature. As I said before, I was just a teenager when I tried that, and so on. I didn't take life so seriously. I guess definitely I matured doing that and so on. I experienced a lot of things. I think there was a growth in me.'

Radoslav, Matej, and Andrian used their gaps as 'trial runs' for adulthood. Radoslav notes that routines played an important role for him when it comes to this opportunity.

'A routine ... I mean, it's like, it's a perfect example of a grown-up life. You need to wake up early, you need to go to work, and only, like, in the evenings you are off. Yeah, you have some free times or you have some time during the weekend. Yes. So you get, like, prepared for adulthood. But again, it really depends on your character.'

Interestingly, Radoslav sees routines as something negative as well. Marcus and Raaqem see their gaps as an opportunity to escape routines and a break from studying.

Raaqem says: *'I got to detach from school and try to, like I found myself away from the classrooms, from the boring routine of just like going to your school and attending courses. ... the opportunity and detachment from campus life.'*

According to Marcus, breaking free from routines was also a framework that helped put his mind in the mindset that he was in a gap year and a way to take action towards using his gap to the fullest.

'I think that's very important part especially when you just got out of you know school and the daily work routine I think it's very important for a person to like break the habit of okay this is my normal schedule to okay what am I doing today ... '

More than half of our data sample, also appreciates their experiences because through them they retained their motivation to continue studying. Some of them used their gap years as a break from studying as well.

According to Jakob, the moment he remembers that he regained his motivation to continue to study was when he was working in the warehouse.

'It's also motivated me a lot to get an education, to get a better job and a job. Both a job that pays better, but also mostly just one that is in my line of interests. Because you really feel, okay, if I was not to get an education, this would be my job for the next many years. Then you think, no, no, no, I need to get an education ... after I came home from the Czech Republic. It was when I was working at the warehouse. Because the only goal of working at the warehouse was saving up money for university. And I really didn't like working at the warehouse. So I did it just for the money and in as short time as possible. So the warehouse made me look forward to university. So it was bad in the situation, but it was actually quite perfect to motivate.'

In connection to this, we determine that many of our gappers were motivated to go on a gap in order to find out what to study, or/and which career path to take. We discovered that more than half of our sample had this mentality.

Felicia, remarks for example: *'... it helped me decide exactly what I would like to focus on in the future, career-wise.'*

Alina for example connects this to understanding of herself in general as well.

'I think I got lots of learning about myself and what I would like to do in the future and what are my natural skills and not the forced ones. I got a better understanding that for example, marketing is not a field for me. I prefer to position myself as an advocate for a user. I'm going to shove this product up your ass no matter if it's morally wrong or not. I thought that now I'm going to design all the way.'

In some cases, such as Mathilde's, gappers felt overwhelmed by the options on what to study. Mathilde says that her first gap year experience was helpful to minimize some of the options for her future career.

For instance, Laura used her second gap for finding her motivation to study and find her career path, but also as a healing process in which she worked on her issues during the months that her gap took place.

'I think the main reason I dropped out was that I hadn't yet found the right path for me. I was struggling with anxiety and self-doubt, and I didn't feel a strong connection to the courses or programs I was enrolled in. Each time, I felt that taking a break and exploring other options would be more beneficial for my personal and professional growth.'

Similar examples are Sophia's second gap, Gavral and Martin's gaps, and the second half of Marcus' gap in which he had a revelation and started working to improve their health condition. Milan also used his gap as a way to deal with his grief after his break up with his girlfriend.

Rebeka also had a similar revelation during her gap due to which she started to take care of herself even after her gap.

'Especially now, when I already know about like, I'm taking care about my mental health, and I'm trying to read some stuff about mental health, and trying to figure out how my body how my mind works to keep myself in peace and not to have any hard feelings for anybody. I'm trying to be really open-minded about this.'

On another spectrum, Radoslav sees his gap as helpful in reaching economic independence, work experience, and responsibility. When he talks about responsibility, he perceives it as being responsible to manage your everyday life, and economic resources, as well as being responsible at work.

'So it's like, I would say, an economic independency. Mm-hmm. I would say responsibility ... I mean, I feel like I always have been responsible whenever it comes to any kind of job. I would say, like, in general, like, working experience. So it's just the most positive thing.'

Through our analysis, we found out that our sample uses the word 'independence' with different value attachments to it. For example, Radoslav, Rebeka, Milan, Matúš, and Matej see that one of the benefits of their gaps is the economic interdependence they gained through working.

'Money, I earned some money and I think I wouldn't earn as much if I am a student.'

(Matúš, 2023).

However, Beatrice, Matej, and Rebeka use it also as being independent, being confident in their decisions, and standing up for themselves.

'... independent so I, I learned how to like spend money like to apply for the jobs like to like to maybe behave in like office situations but yeahYeah maybe that independent that I didn't rely on someone to help me with application or like doing that maybe administrative stuff to get into university or for me it was maybe also easier to get into Denmark because I was that independent so yes and yeah what was the question.'

(Matej, 2023)

Rebeka, unlike Matej and Beatrice, gained independency through her work experience. Something else she gained thanks to her work was self-confidence. When we look back and compare it with Raaqem's case, the only difference between them was that Raaqem's confidence comes from communicating with others.

'I started to work, I had a full time job I started earning money not just for summer job or something, but really money, you know. And things like, ok, now I'm becoming more independent, I'm in this age, and I'm not like depending on the money of my parents, of my family. So of course, also with this stuff, I'm becoming like kind of proud of myself. So of course, also self confidence went up, right ... I wouldn't say like start, but I learned a lot at this work, even how to

... speak, how to solve the problems in the work. For example, when the guests are complaining, and all this stuff ... So in the end, it was good.'

(Rebeka, 2023)

Rebeka is not the only one that benefited in more than one way by working during her gap. For example, Milan benefited from his gap in developing his personal growth by accumulating a range of different soft skills such as problem-solving skills, patience, flexibility, teamwork, working under pressure, as well as gaining motivation after a needed break from school.

'Hmm, it gave me life experience, such as communication with people, tolerance, patience, flexibility, working under pressure, insomnia ... then teamwork, experiencing situations that could be sometimes very spicy, I think you get to learn how to stay on top of things ...'

Another example of how it is possible to gain various skills through working is Laura who expressed:

'My gap years gave me the opportunity to work as a barista, which taught me valuable skills like communication, customer service, and time management.'

Felicia was also someone who gained skills through working, in her case, she gained customer skills as well as language skills.

'I did, in terms of language skills and customer interaction, as I worked for most of my gap year as a nail tech in a Danish salon.'

Beatrice remarks: *'I worked at various jobs, which helped me gain valuable work experience and develop new skills.'*

Twelve out of seventeen of our interviewees saw their work experience as beneficial, due to various reasons. For example, Raaqem was able to use some of his university knowledge during his internship. Another example is Adrian, who was able to hone his existing skills.

‘I got better at my hobbies, not necessarily new skills. My jobs helped me in developing new skills, such as enhancing my communication skills ... and learning how to make new cocktails for my friends [bartending job].’

Adrian notes that his gap year was also useful for him to work on his hobbies. Other gappers have also mentioned that their gap year was helpful to explore their interests and find out what they like and dislike or even discover new hobbies. Laura for example remarks, *‘I also had the chance to explore my interests through online courses, internships, and personal experiences, which helped shape who I am today.’* Sophia had a similar experience during her second gap. Other gappers who used their gaps to explore their interest are Beatrice, Rebeka Alina, and Mathilde.

‘I think I got lots of learning about myself and what I would like to do in the future and what are my natural skills and not the forced ones. I got a better understanding that for example, marketing is not a field for me.’

(Alina, 2023)

Marcus also explored his interests during his gap but in the sense that he participated in activities that were connected to existing interests such as the local food, traveling, or activities that helped him accomplish his goal of challenging himself - visiting volcanoes, and martial arts.

Jakob and Beatrice have also commented that their gap experiences helped them make friends with people all around the world.

‘I learned a lot about myself, gained independence, and discovered new interests. I also made lifelong friends and connections.’

(Beatrice, 2023)

Furthermore, Jakob, as well as Marcus and Felicia, remarked during their interviews that the gap year had helped them become more social and used it as an opportunity to socialize.

'I also used time to participate in different activities to help me meet new people, such as knitting evening, boardgames events and so on ... '

(Felicia, 2023)

'... I had to get my own friends. They were not going to come to me. So I had to just walk up to people and ask if they wanted to hang out. And luckily, most of them were in the same situation as me.'

(Jakob, 2023)

In some cases where the gapers interacted with other people, they gained the benefit of communication skills. Gappers who fall into this category are Rebeka, Adrian, Millan, and Laura. On another spectrum, we have identified that Alina was the only one that benefit from their gap year in hard skills.

'So I think during my gap year, I had so much done and I learned so many new skills like I learned Illustrator, Photoshop, basics of Adobe Premiere Pro, and some After Effects, and developed my first professional portfolio of certain design cases. '

Finally, we want to bring to attention our participants who have benefited through their gap years by creating or transforming their identities. We classify Jakob, Raaqem, Rebeka, and Sophia's second gap as such.

Jakob, perceived as a 'cycling guy' the majority of his life, decided to use his gap year as a starting point to reshape this persona of his. He decided to let go a 'cycling identity' due to loneliness he had experienced. He also experienced this kind of loneliness in the Czech Republic while working remotely because of Covid restrictions. Although he again perceived loneliness very negatively, he managed to develop a completely new and positive perception of work environment. During this experience, he developed his preference for working in an international environment and studying a major that allows him to connect and work with different types of people.

'My personal goal that year was just to find motivation for university and find the education I wanted ... When I graduate here at university ... want to get a job in an international company ... I had socialized with a lot of people from different countries. So that was also a big personal growth because I never really talked to foreign people before ... I think it made me love people from other countries because they bring something different. Most Danes are quite similar ... Working in the Czech Republic, you know, I wouldn't know if I would have taken the job at [name of the company] before. I would have been a bit shy ... But now it was actually something that made me want to take it because, you know, I love to be part of the international environment.'

Raaqem noted during his interview:

'I changed. My personality changed, my way of seeing the world changed, my confidence, my self-esteem changed a lot, my ability to approach strangers on the street changed, my perception of having fun changed, my openness to try new things changed. It's a lot. I became a whole different person after that.'

Although Sophia does not specify that her identity changed during her second gap year, we see it as such because during it she found that she wants to be a physical instructor and started working towards this goal while working on her newfound interests such as weightlifting and training in general.

In addition, we recognize that there is a link between the activities, benefits and challenges the gappers experience during their gap journeys, thus in the following pages we will explain why and how we have identified our participants gaps when considering transformative experiences and the four realms of experience economy.

Before we continue we want to note that we have identified almost every gap year experperince as a transformative due to some kind of challenge the gappers had to overcome or internal perception they gained trough the experience. We also recognise that all the gappers who

undergo their gaps with the mentality to find out what to do in the future, such as what to study or which career path to take, were automatically classified as transformative experiences such they were searching for change, a transformation from their pre-gap year mentality.

Transformative Edutainment Experiences

We will first go through the gaps that we categorize as edutainment experiences because we have identified them as the majority of our data sample. When we say edutainment experience we mean that we have discovered aspects of the educational and entertainment realms of the four realms theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The educational elements are about something the gappers learned about themselves, skills and/or a revelation they had. The majority of the gappers experienced this element in connection with overcoming some kind of challenge and/or from working or attending courses. As for the entertainment elements from their gap year journey we have identified that its connected to traveling and participating in leisure activities such as events, hobbies, etc.

Our first example of the educational category is Jakob. Overcoming the challenges we mentioned in Navigating the Gap Year Experience, as well as changing his gap activities and goal from traveling to work, we see this a transformative experience in the sense that Jakob through the educational elements of his gap learned valuable soft skills for his personal development and because he had to re-evaluate his perspective on work and work environment that he gained through his first full-time job in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, his desire to study was reinforced during his gap as well as gaining a new perspective on why education is important for his future. In fact, the last months of his gap were spent gaining economic resources on his goal to ensure his future plans. Furthermore, as we mentioned in the above pages of this theme he used his gap as a starting point of creating his new identity.

'Yeah, I definitely did. It's also motivated me a lot to get an education, to get a better job and a job. Both a job that pays better, but also mostly just one that is in my line of interests. Because you really feel, okay, if I was not to get an education, this would be my job for the next many years. Then you think, no, no, no, I need to get an education.'

'... after I came home from the Czech Republic. It was when I was working at the warehouse. Because the only goal of working at the warehouse was saving up money for university. And I really didn't like working at the warehouse. So I did it just for the money and in as short time as possible. So the warehouse made me look forward to university. So it was bad in the situation, but it was actually quite perfect to motivate.'

Similarly Rebeka's gap year provided her with a transformative experience. The combination of work, travel, and leisure time allowed her to break away from the usual academic routine and explore new avenues of personal growth. Through her activities and adventures, Rebeka gained a fresh perspective on various aspects of life. The opportunity to work during her gap year exposed Rebeka to new challenges and responsibilities, fostering a sense of independence and self-confidence. This, in turn, influenced her perception of work and her understanding of its potential for growth and development.

Moreover, the travel experiences she enjoyed during her gap year played a significant role in expanding Rebeka's worldview. Visiting Egypt, in particular, provided a moment of realization and awe, inspiring her to seek more opportunities for exploration and adventure. This exposure to different cultures and environments prompted a shift in her perspective, igniting a desire for further travel and a broader understanding of the world.

Overall, Rebeka's gap year had a transformative impact on her. It allowed her to break free from the constraints of her previous academic routine and gain new insights and experiences. The combination of work, travel, and leisure time provided her with a fresh perspective, fostering personal growth and development that would shape her outlook on various aspects of life.

Raaqem similarly to Jakob had an identity transformation. Another reason why we see his gap year experience as transformative is because it put into perspective the differences between university lectures versus internship as a learning process and that he discovered that would prefer to have more practical lessons in university than just being an observer. Furthermore, like Rebeka, his traveling activities, as well socializing ones, helped him transform his personality.

' ... I never thought of it before, but I think that being in a position where I needed to work, like actually, in my internship in the Netherlands, it changed the way I felt about being in the classroom because I was actively providing value and creating content, but when I went back to the classroom, I was passively receiving information, so that was very different. And I noticed that there needs to be more of those experiential, immersive experiences in our schools. So yeah, my perception changed, but not drastically. It didn't really make me less motivated to study, but it just opened my eyes to what could have been and what should have been.'

We believe that Laura also experienced identity transformation due to her gap years. She chose to work as a full-time employee, as well as an intern during her gaps. She found out that online courses were one of the ways she could explore her interests as well as work on her skills. Because of those activities, we classify that according to the four realms of experience, Laura explored with her gap year the educational and the entertainment realm (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). We have identified elements from the entertainment realm because Laura mentioned that she explored her interests through personal experiences, unfortunately we are unable to say what they are and if we have classified her experience correctly.

'My gap years gave me the opportunity to work as a barista, which taught me valuable skills like communication, customer service, and time management. I also had the chance to explore my interests through online courses, internships, and personal experiences, which helped shape who I am today.'

Unfortunately, we cannot say if both gaps for Laura were transformative and to what degree they were because of lack of information, but what we can say is that the gaps had an effect on her identity development as well as on her belief system.

'I believe the personal growth, work experience, and self-discovery I gained during those years were instrumental in my life journey. Those gap years allowed me to reflect on my goals and aspirations and discover my true passions and interests.'

Beatrice like Raaqem participated in activities such as working during her gap year as well as traveling and experiencing the local culture in England. We classify that the activities she participated in fall into the educational and entertainment realms because she not only gained hard skills from her work placements but soft skills as well. In addition, she traveled for leisure, however, she has also met with not only difficult situations as a tourist but also as a person living in a different country.

'I worked at various jobs, which helped me gain valuable work experience and develop new skills. I also took the time to travel and explore the country, visiting different cities and experiencing local culture.'

We see Beatrice's gap as a transformative one due to her gaining not only new perspectives on her views on education, which in turn motivated her to continue studying, as well as reevaluating her beliefs on life itself, but also due to becoming more open-minded. In fact, she herself describes it as such.

'Yes, my gap year played a significant role in my decision to go back to university. It helped me understand the importance of education and gave me the motivation to pursue higher education in Romania ... The gap year I took in the UK was truly transformative for me. It allowed me to grow as an individual, become more independent, and develop a broader perspective on life. I learned a lot about different cultures and met many interesting people, which expanded my horizons significantly.'

Mathilde's first gap year is another example of how a gapper regains their motivation to study. In her case she underwent this gap because she was trying to find her path. Mathilde also traveled for leisure activities abroad when she was not working during her gap year as well as participated in other kinds of leisure activities. Her gap was also used as a time of healing and a tool to find the motivation to study again. She perceives that her gap helped her develop in aspects such as maturity as well as gaining some insights into being an adult. Considering this and the activities she participated in, we see elements of the educational and entertainment realms. Furthermore,

we classify this gap as a transformative experience because she perceives it to have changed due to her gap.

'I was just trying to see what I like and so on. I would say so. It's hard to say what exactly, but I would say so. I think I became more aware. I tried the adult life already, working and so on. I think it's made me a little bit more mature. As I said before, I was just a teenager when I tried that, and so on. I didn't take life so seriously. I guess definitely, I matured doing that and so on. I experienced a lot of things.'

Alina also traveled for leisure and participated in courses that helped build her portfolio. Her transformation was due to her realization that the study program she planned to apply for Master's was not for her and had to decide on a new study path because of it. Her transformation had long-term consequences that affected her current path, as well as her future.

'I think I got lots of learning about myself and what I would like to do in the future and what are my natural skills and not the forced ones. I got a better understanding that for example, marketing is not a field for me. I prefer to position myself as an advocate for a user. I'm going to shove this product up your ass no matter if it's morally wrong or not. I thought that now I'm going to design all the way.'

We also see that her gap year helped her explore her likes and dislikes in general as well, thus we identify that it had some kind of effect on her overall identity.

From the interview with Adrian, we can see that he focused on participating in activities he already was doing as part of his daily life such as working and spending time on his hobbies. He also traveled for leisure internationally and in his home country, thus we conclude that Adrian's experience include elements of the educational realm, as well as the entertainment realm (Pine and Gilmore, 199). We believe that one of the reasons why Adrian's gap looks like this is because he had no expectations of the experience, as well as no goals he planned to accomplish.

'I worked part-time delivering papers and working as a busboy/bartender in a bar, spending most of my free time on my hobbies - playing the guitar and computer games. I also traveled a bit, both home and abroad.'

After analyzing his experience, we conclude that although Adrian's gap year experience was beneficial for him in some areas such as increasing his motivation to study, ultimately however we find a small degree of transformation when it comes to changing his perspective on work, gaining a new perspective on the privileges he has, as well as gaining a better understanding of what being a proper adult is like.

'I got better at my hobbies, not necessarily new skills. My jobs helped me in developing new skills, such as enhancing my communication skills as well as learning the city in which I live in a more in depth manner [delivering papers around the city] and learning how to make new cocktails for my friends [bartending job]. ... It did motivate me - it showed me what hard work is and the luxury that I have by having the choice of going for a higher education level, as well as the opportunities that will come with it. It also helped me get a better grasp on what being an adult is and helped me focus on becoming a more driven person.'

Felicia throughout her gap year combined activities from the entertainment and educational realms in order to accomplish her goals, as well as understanding and exploring herself and building a new skill set.

'... it helped me decide exactly what I would like to focus on in the future, career wise. apart from the personal growth that happened during that time, since I got engaged, I also used time to participate in different activities to help me meet new people, such as knitting evening, boardgames events and so on ... I did, in terms of language skills and customer interaction, as I worked for most of my gap year as a nail tech in a Danish salon.'

We are unsure to what degree Felicia's experience was transformative for her, especially with the fact that she is still struggling with her views on a gap year. However, we can conclude that this

experience was transformative in the sense she explored and found new interests that come up with their own challenges and difficulties.

Transformative Educational Experiences

From what we have understood from Matej's gaps, both of them contained elements from the educational realm due to the learning process he went through and the personal growth he experienced. Both of his gaps could be considered to hold a transformation because they resulted in him making a decision on which path to take afterward, however, we see his first gap as a more transformative one because he has expressed more personal growth from it. Such as gaining independence and using it as a practice on how to be a real adult.

Afterwards, we can see that he applied the things he learned from this experience when he moved to live in Denmark. Furthermore, his work experience taught him that this type of working environment was not for him as well as that he needed a different work balance. This new understanding about himself also increased his motivation to continue studying.

'Like before I got into my first job I was thinking all the time that it is for this year and then I will move on but during that period I gained that feeling about like okay right now yes I have I'm more confident into going there because I don't want to do this for all my life ... Like working because yeah I had to do something at least and that was the reason for me to to somehow maybe hate that life of working and like ... Yes like that that infinite loop of going to work and then going back home and doing work that I don't like or not like but doesn't feel me or I'm not that quite interested in ... '

'..it's work and I just need to fight to go in there and waking up with that feeling that okay I don't want to waking up with that feeling that okay I have to go in there but I want this to work in like working on something that I feel that I want to and then it's not work it's just doing what you want and you get paid for it.'

We have placed Matej here because we are unaware of what other activities he participated in, apart from working and traveling for work. Thus, we identify from what we know that his gap contained educational elements.

Similarly, we do not have enough information about Mathilde's second gap to determine if there are other aspects of her gap year apart from educational ones. However, we can identify a transformation from what we know. Mathilde gained a new perspective on work and life in general. Compared to before, she had specific views on how education and work should look like, now she has a more flexible mindset and believes that age does not matter and you need to just follow what makes you happy, and if it does not work out, try another. Thus, we perceive that this gap has been a transformative experience.

'And so right now I would say that it's, you know, that it's I don't consider a job something like, oh, you have it once and then you need to continue it until the rest of your life and until you retire, you know. So right now I would say like it's yeah, you can just change it. You can like you can just change different fields or like the job within your field and doing something a little bit different ... And, you know, like trying new stuff and like even going to the college or university if you're like, I don't know, 30, 40, 50. So, so, you know, like for me, it's like right now it's like it doesn't mean necessarily this one thing, you know, it's just like, you know, experiment, experimenting and experiencing things. And, you know, like in a different way. So I would say, yeah, I'm not that worried because I remember when I finished high school, I was super worried. And I thought that you know, like picking the university or college, it's like so important. And you need to know this one thing and only one thing.'

As we said already, Sophia's first gap year had a negative impact on her that is still affecting her to this day. However, we can see that because of her financial situation as well as her need to feel useful, she had a change in her belief system on what kind of jobs she was willing to apply for and work. Unfortunately, we are unable to say if this transformation was short-lived or if it has had any effect on her current views and beliefs about the workforce and her position in it. Even though we can see that she applied a similar mentality when looking for jobs on her second gap, we are unable to say if it was due to Covid situations or because the first transformation affected

her. Furthermore, we cannot analyze if it had a positive effect on her after her first gap. The gap also has elements from the educational realm of experience economy because of the work experience she gained through the various jobs she was able to work in.

'I started appreciating any kind of jobs at some point better because it really sucked being out of the job market and society per se so I just took anything that came my way I was still not like happy but at least I felt myself useful again.'

Transformative Experiences:

Educational, Entertainment, and Escapist Realms

During his gap, Radoslav mainly participated in leisure activities such as traveling domestically as well as working. Because this experience helped him prepare for adulthood and gain a deeper understanding of what being an adult is like, we see this gap to have brought a small degree of transformation with long term effects. In addition, because of this learning process, we conclude there were aspects of the educational realm, as well as entertainment, one due to him describing his gap as a time he was 'chilling'. In addition, there are elements of the escape realm due to his use of work as a way to deal with boredom and perhaps some other issues we are not aware of that happened because of Covid.

'And I mean, meanwhile, I had some free time or had a lot of free time. So I was like, yeah, just driving around Denmark and finally got to explore two islands that I wanted to visit. Yeah, but it was like even a nearly a spontaneous decision.'

Similarly, Matúš spent the majority of his gap year with 'partying' and traveling abroad for some time. We see mostly elements of the leisure realm when it comes to his gap year.

'No no, we were just partying all the time, ... just wasting my time and partying ... we were going everywhere, I went to Germany, to Scotland ... I even got to Denmark because I met my friend in the city and he mentioned all the conditions and I really liked it ... '

In addition, he was working during his gap as well and that, at first, he tried to escape his life because he did not want to face the pressure from his family, so he escaped everywhere he could to avoid dealing with this conflict. Thus, we conclude that there were also elements of the escape realm and the educational realm as well due to him gaining a new perspective about what kind of profession he would like to work in the future, and learning more about himself as a whole.

'I stopped in October and then I just went somewhere for 2-3 days, to get lost, then I was working in Bratislava ... Various jobs, low-skilled jobs. I finished my school when I was 18 yo, so I was still quite young.'

'After while, I realised that it is not as much fun, then I noticed that my older colleagues were really tired and their back hurt, etc. That's when I realised that I want to work in the office because this job is difficult. Many times people in the office complain about their job, but I don't think it is as much as the other one ... But yeah, it gave me something, it gave me bigger morality, because at school I didn't have that much as at work, that I will wake up on time, etc. etc.'

Due to this new perception that he gained while working physical labor jobs, he realized that the manual work environment is too demanding, and too difficult, as he saw his older colleagues struggling with their physical conditions. Therefore, he started appreciating different work conditions, such as the office environment. In addition, Matúš gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of his colleagues and people working in jobs requiring physical labor. This experience made him realize that he wanted his future long-term job to be in an office position. We see this as a transformational experience with a long-term impact.

On Sophia's path to finding herself and what career path she should take, Sophia started to work on the challenges she was unable to overcome in her first gap, which led to her finding new interests and new goals in life. This made her experience a transformational journey in which she created a new identity and experienced a literal physical change.

'Working out, for health benefits ... so I developed an interest in wellness, fitness, weightlifting

and it took me one year to get to the point where I am at. I lost significant amount of weight and fat, gained muscle mass and I decided that I want to perfect my knowledge about this so therefore I decided to take a course about what's it called certified to be a personal trainer and a nutrition coach.'

As we mentioned, Sophia took a similar process of applying and choosing job opportunities in both her gaps, however, during her second gap year she took jobs that had also the purpose to accomplish her goal of reaching a better physical state.

'... so my last gap year that definitely put another perspective on life because it happened during Covid and that's when I started applying for jobs and I took anything which came my way first and with this job I got to focus on growth because I didn't care about the job specifically but it helped me get to where I wanted to be physically and like mentally as well and I focused on my personal growth instead of the job so it led me to the way to be a personal trainer and be a stronger person.'

From the statement above we categorize Sophia's experience as a transformative one. Due to her having to overcome challenges in different areas, as well as seeing the transformation being implemented even in her life after the gap. Considering that Sophia participated in activities such as work, attending courses, and traveling, we see elements of the educational and entertainment realm. But because she also used traveling and working as a way to escape from her daily life, we conclude that her gap journey had also aspects of the escape realm. We also want to note that we connect her working out and psychical activities to the entertainment realm because it was something she found enjoyment in and described it as newly found interests.

'Working out, for health benefits and it was a great mental distraction too. Travelling as much as possible so I was away from `problems.'

Transformative Educapist Experiences

We placed the gap year experiences that have elements of the educational and escapist realms or also known as the educapist category (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

When looking through Milan's gap we see aspects of the escape and education realms from the four realms of experience theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). We identify that through work Milan has accumulated different skills set and that with time, work became a way to escape from his feelings, and ultimately his gap year was used as a way to process his emotions and priorities.

'I was working, then I went abroad, then I was fighting all the feelings from breakup, I was sad, then I went to work, I needed to find something to keep my mind occupied so I found a job and then started preparing for those admission tests.'

We consider his gap to have a small degree of transformation due to the life-changing experience he underwent during his gap. Because of this experience, he decided to study and use the remaining time of his gap to apply for university programs. We classify this experience as a small degree of transformation due to his initial motivation/trigger being more about proving to his ex-girlfriend he 'could do it' and not because his perspective on education or belief system changed. In fact, his motivation changed during his bachelor's.

'After the breakup ... I got a huge rage, I was so angry. Before the breakup I planned to work and she would study, to get our own apartment etc ... I had no plan whatsoever to start university. So yes, my plans changed and especially because of this relationship, to show to prove that I can do it ... it was the initial motivation for me ... Now I want to move with my career, find some great people and start living and fulfilling my dreams.'

When it comes to the case of Gavral and Martin, they see their gap years as something productive for their future goals. Which is why the months that they have left before the start of their new education is left out of their gap year because it would be solely about socializing and partying. We see elements of the educational realm from their experiences that resulted in them undergoing a transformation. Both of the brothers used their gap years to find a new major. The gap year was also a time to stand up for themselves and become more independent when it comes to the choice of their study environment, Bulgaria, and the way of study, online programs. Both topics at hand are in contrast with what their father has always desired for them. In

addition, the gap year concept allowed them to recover mentally and physically from the environment they were in prior to their gaps.

Thus, we consider both Martin's and Gavral's experiences to have transformative elements with long term effects as they literally transformed their bodies by the end of their gap years. However, we are unable to say if one the experiences was more transformative and if yes, in exactly what way.

We want to disclose that we were unsure where to place their experiences because unlike Sophia in her second gap year they did not express that they used working out as a way to escape their daily activities, as well that they enjoyed it. Just that it served them to accomplish their goals such as recovering their mental health. This made us contempt that through their physical activities they entered a state of leaving behind their worries and negative memories, this is why we conclude that we also identify elements from the escape realm.

The 'Sweet spot' Gap Year Experience

We have identified only Marcus' gap year experience as what Pine and Gilmore (1999) describe as the 'sweet spot', meaning that we categorize Marcus' experience to have aspects of all four realms. We make this conclusion because Marcus traveled not only for leisure but also to immerse himself in the local culture of places he visited, gain knowledge, and learn from the gap experience itself. Marcus also saw this gap as an adventure, thus, we identify that his gap had aspects from all four realms of the experience economy.

Furthermore, Marcus' experience is transformative not only because of the challenges he overcame during his gap but also because of the change in his attitude he undertook in the middle of his gap that we mentioned in the sub-section 'Navigating the Gap Year Experience'.

Another reason why we perceive his gap as transformative is that he experiences a transformation in the sense that he decided that he wanted to continue his education after a gap year. Thus, this transformation has also long-term consequences.

‘I was never really sure what I wanted to do after also one of the main reasons why I went on a gap yearbefore I took a gap year I didn't know what I wanted to do so it was actually mechanical engineering was like that was actually something I figured out when I did get back home I found out that but during my travel it was like okay I know I want to study that was the one thing like that's an experience I want to have and I want to better myself academically.’

Furthermore, he experienced a physical transformation, which still affects him such he has not smoked since his gap year.

To summarize, the experiences of the gappers show that the way they consume affects not only what activities they consumed but also the way they consumed them and the effect it had on them such as if their experience could be considered a transformative one and to what degree.

Individuality and consumer behavior played an important role in their motivation for their gap experiences and the approach they used to conduct their gaps. It is true that they had overlapping areas when it comes to motivation, views on gaps, and activities, however, the combination of those factors is what made each gapper’s experience theirs.

We also noticed that all the gappers had multiple triggers for their gaps and factors that motivated them through their journeys. In addition, the majority of our research participants’ experiences included elements from the educational and entertainment realm. Furthermore, we found ourselves classifying every gap as a transformative one to some degree due to our gappers showing some degree of change in their previous beliefs, views, and/or behavior because of a learning process they went through and because every gap year comes with its own challenges. Thus, to some degree, we can conclude that gap experiences bring transformation, however small or short-lived it is.

Therefore, if someone wants to experience a transformative experience, we recommend that they consider the gap year concept and how they can make their own to suit their needs and goals.

Reflection on a Gap Year Experience

Conducting interviews with our chosen sample, young adults returned from a gap year, allowed us to see not only their sole experience but also their additional thoughts when looking retrospectively at their experience. Drawing from their insights, reflections, and sharing of their views, we are able to present what they wish they had done differently, and vice versa, what experiences, even if the whole gap year, they wish to relive once again.

Reliving the Journey: Retrospective Exploration

We believe that after conducting the experience, one may take a step back and have a better overview of the ‘before’, ‘during’, and ‘after’. With that in mind, we hoped to unravel our participants’ emotions in relation to the overall gap year experience in comparison to their ordinary life.

For some of our participants, the experience helped with their stress moderation as a gap year allowed them to ‘letting off steam’, for example, Mathilde said:

‘ ... I didn’t need to stress about the grades and tests and exams and so on. So that was like, I can relax now, you know ... ’

For some, the experience offered invaluable encounters that would otherwise be unattainable, as Marcus mentioned:

‘ ... the amount of experience you can gather in eight months during it like I did for a gap year I don't think I could have gathered that in like ten years of staying here in Denmark. ’

Moreover, we could witness the direct aftermath of a gap year when Alina expressed:

‘ ... developed my first professional portfolio of certain design cases. Which enabled me to get a job in a very good company in Copenhagen. So I can certainly say that if not for the gap year and all these great things that I did during the gap year, I would be probably struggling in

another shitty student job. And I would suffer from so-called de-skilling, where students after bachelor studies end up in the same kind of washing toilets. Right? So yeah, with this portfolio, I got a job in a company that is connected to my profession, just to clarify.'

However, in some other cases, a gap year brought more additional nerves, concerns, and/or uncertainty. In Raaqem's circumstances, preparation for his gap year and activities itself were truly demanding. Although the stress was increased, it did not have any further negative impact, but the actual opposite, it proved him the worthiness of his gap year.

'I think, you know, obviously the stress level before [starting his gap year] was the highest because I was, you know, waiting for the visa. Trying to coordinate with my teachers, trying to plan for my internship, trying to set my expectations clear ... So that was a bit stressful. But later, after I returned, I was all bliss and gratitude and a feeling of joy and satisfaction that I can't remember ever having something equal to it.'

As was possible to see in 'the lived experience' of our participants, Sophia went through a stressful period of her life, which led to a negative experience during her first gap year. Yet, she decided to take another one with hope to get a different outcome. Sophia reflected on the struggles she had faced during the first gap year, the progress she had made during the second one and her desire to undergo one more with belief to move forward:

'Well the first gap year was definitely not great, the second one was better because I started learning more about myself so the first one was ... I guess it was also important because I knew how I should not spend it and then on the second I started focusing on how to spend it, and I can imagine having another gap year but that's hopefully with traveling or because of finding my actual dream job or focusing on moving somewhere else and start over ... '

Precisely as mentioned above, some of our participants openly expressed their aspiration to not only repeat some of their experiences but to undergo the whole experience of a gap year in their near future. Such a decision is noticed to be rooted in their ongoing desire. As Marcus' commented:

'I hope to do it again when I finish university, I have dreams of course, maybe not eight months but you know, findings ways where I can maybe still travel and work at the same time would be optimal, definitely the ignite, I guess you call it, to travel is still there.'

However, it does not necessarily have to stem from the desire to relive the same experience but fulfill dreams that were not possible to realize during their first gap year, as in the case of Radoslav due to Covid regulations and some additional issues occurring along the way. However, these unfortunate circumstances were not big enough to make him abandon his ambition to travel. In addition, Radoslav firmly believes that his envisioned gap year awaits him just around the corner.

'I mean, I guess a perfect gap year is happening after June this year. I hope so because I don't have any plans at all to apply for a job or anything. And now finally, I just want to explore the world. But again, our world is not stable. So I can't plan anything. But I mean, I have some thoughts regarding where I want to go or what do I want to experience. But so far I haven't planned anything.'

Even though Radoslav have not planned anything specific yet, he has already created certain expectations from his next gap year. At the same time, he is aware of unpredictable situations and open to try new tempting opportunities.

'... the way how I see the upcoming gap year is a sort of an enlightenment travel. Maybe if I find something interesting or find an opportunity in another country or another place like in Denmark, then maybe I can do something there and just move there and live there. So yeah, I'm open for anything that life brings. But of course, it has to make sense ... '

Taking another gap year could be motivated by seeing and experiencing the profound influence of the first gap year. For instance, Laura expressed she would take another gap year experience since:

'I believe the personal growth, work experience, and self-discovery I gained during those years were instrumental in my life journey. Those gap years allowed me to reflect on my goals and aspirations and discover my true passions and interests.'

According to O'shea (2011) gappers prefer to seek preference of other gappers. We did not encounter such a thing while doing our research. Even though Raaqem did not express initial plan to repeat his gap year, he expressed genuine interest when we asked whether he considered looking for a community of gappers. We have noticed that this thought might have inspired him to consider another gap year.

'You know, that would have been a very good idea. I wish I could go back five years ago and do this ... But thank you for the idea ... I'm going to apply it next time I grow up.'

Another scenario represents individuals who might not feel the urge to take another one, but at the same time, they are open toward its possibility, for example Jakob who additionally stated certain expectations before possibility of taking another gap year:

'... if I was going to do one again, then I think it would be after work. You know, after, when I graduate my master's. And maybe get a job for like five years and then save up some money to be able to take a gap year. Because life is expensive. And I don't want my gap year to be stressed. And I will be stressed if I don't have enough money for it. But you'll probably get sick and tired of working. So if I can feel, okay, I need a break, then I'm not hesitant to just take a year off.'

We could also peep into Alina's reflection who felt optimistic after conducting her gap year, however, might not feel the necessity to take another one. Based on her sharing, we could see consideration of both pros and cons that come with a gap year:

'I am not sure what I would do ... finishing university faster would mean that by the present time I will have more work experience. At the same time, I think the gap period made me a better person overall.'

We also got to see purely negative stance toward having a gap year and that by Matúš who would not conduct another gap year, also he noted:

' ... I regret having it. Because I realised how much time I lost and that I could be done with school by now and work. Or don't know, my friend is Senior right now ... I wouldn't say that I have screwed up my life but I slowed things down.'

Reshaping the Experience

As mentioned earlier, some reflections raised ideas regarding actions, specific moments and/or other aspects of their gap year that could have been more beneficial, if approached differently. One of the challenges of our gappers was the Covid-19 pandemic. Upon reflection, they realized that they could have utilized their time more productively, even while abiding restrictions, one of the examples is Radoslav:

' ... like the first couple of months, while waiting for corona to end, because I started working like first, by the middle of October. So I was basically doing nothing for like three months. So I could have done something productive ... I would say I would have started working much earlier.'

In Sophia's case it was about external factors that influenced her decision regarding destination-choice for her gap year.

'I could have left the country for better job opportunities I guess, I could have done that and I should have done that but I stuck around because of my boyfriend is Danish and I just wanted us to stay together, so yeah, I should have been a strong independent woman.'

When talking about the influence, as also mentioned before, Matúš got influenced by an external factor as well, i.e. his father's expectations regarding studies and friends' influence. Matúš admitted that taking a gap year right after finishing high school studies could have been more beneficial for him.

'... to have a year off, work and make my mind what I want to do further on, what university. At least me, because we were 18 years old, we had no ideas what we want to do. But then when you start your bachelor's, then you have to continue based on that bachelor's.'

Raaqem presented his approach to life, i.e. not having any regrets and looking back *'in all pride and happiness at all my life decisions'*. Although, at first, he seemed to doubt his decision about having a gap year as he perceives that without this time spent, he would have graduated earlier. But right after that, he expressed his recognition of the experience as his main goal, to develop professionally, was accomplished.

'... So before I was just sitting in class and attending courses and not having a very clear idea of what I'm supposed to do the day that I graduate. But then I think the internship, even though it wasn't really very much connected to my studies or to what I wanted to do, but at least it gave me the sense of working professionally in a serious environment and working full time, getting paid for it. So it introduced me to that context more formally than my previous experiences.'

The one and only regretful thought Raaqem mentioned regarding his gap year experience was about the length of his gap year, as he wishes it to be longer and develop professionally further on.

We have not captured any other possible changes and/or regrets our participants had wished to change. Additionally, Milan and Rebeka expressed they cannot recall anything they would wish to change. Moreover, Rebeka voiced:

'... I'm not the person who has some regrets, even if I'm saying like ... hmmm, no ... I don't, I don't know, I do good decisions, I do shitty decisions, but I don't regret them because in that moment, I wanted it that way ...'

Likewise for Jakob, who mentioned that he could have regretted his job choice after returning back to Denmark.

'... maybe that I got a job at a warehouse where you were just like working as a robot. And you didn't really learn anything from it because it was just manual task work. So maybe I could have got a bit more fulfilling job there.'

However, even after having some initial doubts, he immediately expressed that manual work and his experience at the warehouse was a great reality check, and hence, doesn't regret having this experience at all.

Reimagining the Phenomenon

Up until now, we have discussed the factors that have shaped our participants' initial idea of the phenomenon, their lived experience and the passage of time, which emerged as additional influential factors shaping their perception. Not only they formed an attitude toward a gap year, but also created future expectations and/or ideas of their 'perfect gap year'. Such contributions portray their own subjective realities built on their own understanding, interpretations and encounters with the outer world, and represent the current age of postmodernism at the same time (Olivier, 2007; Pachauri, 2001).

If we were to put together some of the views, we would notice one often occurring pattern, and that is the need for the 'unknown'. The craving for exploration and finding new diverse places and perspectives is also one of the typical signs of postmodern culture (Olivier, 2007; Pachauri, 2001). In Sophia's case, it was very clear and straightforward: *'3-6 months of traveling'*. The same for Jakob who would love to: *'go on one of those group travels to see all parts of the world, in Asia, places you don't really go.'* However, that would present the other half of his gap year, the first one would be spent by working at *'a fun job'* to save up some money for his travels. For Marcus, it was highly important to have his experience only partially customized in order to have the freedom to move and explore as he likes. Additionally, Marcus sees his gap year approach as a good learning experience for him in order to be decisive, to be able to take actions as well as be independent.

'... when I think about my own gap year, most of it was not that tailored ... I really like that because it gave me a sense of okay I need to take charge of this ... I found it perfect for me that

it was not tailored ... they're like you're gonna see this in the capital and you're gonna live at this place but then after that it's like go do whatever you want and it was actually when it was the go do whatever you want that was when I have the most out of it ... I think that's very important part especially when you just got out of you know school and the daily work routine I think it's very important for a person to like break the habit of okay this is my normal schedule to okay what am I doing today ... '

Mathilde also perceives this time perfectly spent when experiencing new situations and looking for own likes and dislikes. She finds it most efficient when one goes and travel and/or lives in a foreign country.

'I would say that's a very big experience and like very nice one ... if that's possible, you know, like jus trying to kind of, I don't know, like find yourself in another doing stuff ot whatever, you know ... And maybe not necessarily finding what you want to do, but knowing more like ending with knowledge about what you like to do and what you don't like ... and which way to go ... or which way you want to try. So I would say that would be the perfect gap year.'

Rebeka sees her perfect gap year in the same way as Mathilde, she finds it a useful way to the process of self-discovery, as a way to find what she wants to do in her life. Additionally, she pointed out that her view on a gap year's usefulness does not change even if the outcome of it is the discontinuation of one's studies. A bit different perspective brings Alina, whose perfect gap year is more action-oriented with the aim to not only get to know herself but also find and develop new skills and abilities. She sees a gap year as a free ticket to getting new life skills and experiences, as the time that should be dedicated to trying out different things, talking to different people, and challenging yourself. Alina considers it the perfect time to face all the scary things and situations in order to develop new personality traits, such as discipline, persistence, and/or public speaking.

Raaqem views a gap year in two ways. The first one is more academically focused with the aim to develop professionally, and the other one is focused more on one's mental well-being and preparation for the roughness of life. He thinks of a gap year as a chance to:

'... validate your own school choices or your own university academic choices, not what I did, because what I did was a bit distant from what I was studying. But ideally, a student would go on an internship abroad or go on a Erasmus or whatever program, exchange, maybe that's another of an exchange semester, so you wouldn't lose time from your studies, but you would invest that time in another place. But if you take a take a gap year, it would be to confirm or deny your choices, but also to relax and have fun, work on your mental health, try to have a break from the pressure of university and from career, just to prepare yourself for the pressures that's going to come with work and after school.'

Our participants got to consider whether they would recommend a gap year experience even further on, such as to their friend, their relatives, or anyone else. They often took into account more elements before answering and not/recommending this experience. For example, Adrian communicated:

'I think it depends on the person ... for some it would be a good idea while for others it might not make sense. It all depends on how sure you are on what you want your future to be about. If you are certain that the education you want to follow is right for you, a gap year might not be fully needed. Saying that I am not trying to diss the gap year, even if you are certain on your part, taking a break might help you see things better.'

The same attitude has Rebeka who base a decision about recommendation on a receiver's needs and current feelings. Felicia would look at their career prospects, whether they are aware of their desires, in that case she would encourage them to follow their career path. Or in case of any indecision, she finds taking a gap year *'quite useful'*. Radoslav was more vocal about certain important considerations that would need to be discussed before recommending.

'First of all, it depends on the age. Like, did you just get out of the gymnasium, or you want to take a break between the bachelor and master's, or is it only after master's you want to take free year? Look at the situation, look at the, how much have you accomplished, what are your needs

and wants, and take a decision ... if a person doesn't know what he or she wants to do in the life, like after gymnasium, then sure, take a break.'

Matej and Alina would opt for a similar approach as Radoslav, they would be open toward having a discussion and would try to understand their reason and see/help set further steps. Here the opinion about a gap year between Matej and Alina varies a bit. If Matej were to recommend, he would want them to work and get money for themselves. Whereas Alina sees working during a gap year as useless repetitive activity that will not bring any future development. She expressed:

' ... if they tell me I've got a plan, I want to learn this and that and I need a lot of time daily in order to practice this skill, then I would say yes, just do it. If it's going to help you with either growing as a person or developing your career further, then just do it ... '

Milan and Matúš would slightly disagree as they would want to direct people into making their own decision, however, both of them would not recommend taking it. Matúš would even try to emphasize downside of having a gap year, i.e. time list, and in case of Milan:

'I wouldn't recommend. Because I don't think it is a normal thing, I think it is not rational, for any normal person, it is not a good thing.'

We could notice a contrasting view from Marcus and Mathilde's side who would wholeheartedly recommend having a gap year without a trace of hesitation or doubt. Marcus expressed:

' ... because the amount of knowledge and wisdom you get from it I guess you know wisdom is not only what you like intelligence wise it's also like what you learn from your past experiences and the amount of experience you can gather in eight months during it like I did for a gap year I don't think I could have gathered that in like ten years of staying here in Denmark.'

However, Mathilde pointed out a lack of awareness about the concept of a gap year in her home country. Moreover, she expressed high appreciation of any initiative trying to normalize this

concept. One of the ideas she mentioned was a space at high school for returned gappers to share their experience. Although she would sincerely support an initiative as such, she did not wish to be the one to share her experience due to her anxiety of public speaking.

' ... if my high school would ever invite me to the high school to talk about my gap year, like I would I would be like, wow, OK, that's so nice. Maybe I would not do that because I don't want to talk in public, but like I would be like, oh, this is such a nice idea, you know. So, yeah, maybe I would go, I don't know, maybe I would convince myself to go and like not to be scared of the, you know, talking publicly. But yeah, I would think it's like a very cool idea. So I would definitely recommend it to people. And, you know, I would definitely like to talk with people about it.'

Also, we noticed the same thought during Matej's interview. He added upon Mathilde's idea that:

'I would maybe show them some people who had this gap year and their story and what helped them because of that gap ... reasoning why and their story if they end up good or bad.'

Even though we came across some ideas on how to normalize this concept, we also noticed that implementing such a thing could lead to various outcomes. On one hand, it could solve some of our gap takers' inner conflicts, such as the one we mentioned earlier with Felicia and her feeling of guilt due to negative perceptions in her home country. Even though she felt the gap year was beneficial for her, Felicia felt in constant contradiction that this period was a lost time.

' ... the only negative is that, since I did grow up in Romania, that mentality is still instilled in me, and I feel like a wasted 2 years of my life, even though I am aware that it was beneficial.'

On the other hand, some of our participants still see the gap as misspent time and normalization of this phenomenon would be rather counterproductive. Milan mentioned:

' ... by normalizing such a thing, you would support it and this 'indecision' would occur much more than now.'

In summary, every gapper in this research embarked on a unique journey, moved forward, gained valuable insights, discovered their personal preferences and got to create plenty of memorable experiences, both beautiful and occasionally challenging. And as was mentioned in our Literature Review by Kirillovat et al. (2017), a peak experience may happen only through co-creation of experiences between the tourists, the destination and personal meaning-making in mind. Throughout the interview process, some participants retrospectively reached the 'meaning-making' approach resulting in certain realizations and developed a new-found appreciation of their gap year. Moreover, we could have witnessed 'the concept of reflective practice' by Schön (1983) mentioned in our Methodology section, and see how the process of our data collection provided our participants with space to give their gap year some additional thoughts and identify moments and feelings they had not noticed before. One of the examples is Raaqem, who expressed:

'So I think I looked back now with your questions, you helped me realize that it was this gap year that was one of the highlights of my life.'

Besides that, we could see new ideas either on how a gap year experience could have been perfected and/or even on how this concept could be brought among a wider audience. However, these remarks were not supported by every participant and hereby, it opened our mind to further discussion and questions that might be a great continuation for future research.

Discussion

Our study supports the opinion that a gap year experience can be beneficial, however, both from the advice the gappers made for future gappers and their own reflections on their experiences, we contemplate that a gap year should be considered an option for people who are unsure what path to take and/or ones who have goals that can be accomplished with the gap. Furthermore, the majority of our participants' have concluded that the gap year has been a beneficial experience for them. The majority of those who opened up about their mental and physical health, actually used their gaps to improve them. In addition, most interviewees stated that their gap year experiences were less stressful when compared to university exams and their daily lives.

Although we have had one case where the gap had actually a negative impact, so much so that even to this day Sophia still has chronic anxiety and other health issues. Thus, we recommend a gap year to be practiced with caution and to not be seen as fix to all problems. This is one of the reasons as to why we created a guide on how future gappers should approach gap year in our Managerial implications.

However, we believe that if the concept of gap year is applied with caution and people are aware of benefits and challenges it comes with, then we suggest for the gap year phenomenon to become a globally normalized concept. We believe that gap year has potential to become a successful tool for creating transformative experiences and personal development among young adults and people without an idea for what their next step in life should be.

Although we believe the gap year has potential to improve and develop new traits and skills in people, we would like to point out that some participants of a gap year might have already developed these characteristics before conducting a gap year. One of the examples is Alina, who had already gained her independence before undertaking a gap year. On the other side, even though some participants had possessed certain traits before having a gap year, they still might have space to improve and develop further on. Such a case is possible to see with Rebeka, who considered herself to be open-minded, however, after her experience, she felt she gained a new perspective and open mind on more aspects of life.

We also want to give attention to postmodernity on how otherness affects individuals and raises challenges for them when they define their own identities. Even when people want to differentiate themselves from the crowd, their efforts still may result in uniformity when it comes to them creating their identities because they follow trends (Olivier, 2007; Pachauri, 2001). We raise this aspect to attention because we believe that this has affected to some degree our data sample in the sense that our participants may have been following trends or the norms on how to do their gap years in the places they are from and/or live in. An example of this could be considered that during the interviews some of the gappers who had a more negative view of the concept were more willing to open towards the concept such they have been living in Denmark.

Furthermore, postmodernism consumption focuses on identity creation and experiencing memorable moments, this may be why gap year is often used as an opportunity for young adults to do exactly that. Moreover, we have discovered that gap year is a practice that is very welcoming for transformations, thus people who desire to undergo a transformative journey should consider the gap year concept if it suits their needs and goals.

As we mentioned, consumption plays an important role in making the gap year experiences unique. We believe that gap year can be a beneficial experience and be considered an individual experience even with various factors overlapping. Our findings are used as evidence that gap year is a beneficial experience only when the gappers themselves make it beneficial. What we mean by that is that it should fulfill their goals and the combination of various personal factors and destination activities will make the gap experience their own.

However, there are exceptions to everything, our sample shows an example in which the twin brothers Martin and Gavral, have almost identical gap experiences. Through the use of the lifeline technique we have discovered they have a similar cognitive process, values and shared experiences. We believe that when it comes to specifying twins, there may be a connection on how their gap experiences share a lot of similarities or are almost identical as is our case. However, there is not enough evidence to conclude if this is true to all twins, which is why we suggest for other researchers to delve deeper into gap year experiences with a case study of twins. Furthermore, we want to note why we suggest this type of research area. It is because our interviews support that this is not true for the average siblings. We have had cases in which our participants compared their gaps to their siblings and they had very different outcomes and experiences to their own.

Something else we have discovered is that the gap year experiences should not be considered a once in a lifetime experience because the majority of our participants are open to having another one in the future and some of them even discussed with us their plans/considerations on how their next gap will go. Furthermore, we have examples of gappers who have undergone multiple gaps. When it comes to this subject, we have not found any research which explores if gap year

is a once in a lifetime experience or if gappers are seen as repetitive participants, only that the way gappers traveled during gap can have lasting effects on their future travels (Luzicka, 2016). We also want to talk about how complex is to identify gappers when they undertake the role of tourists during their travels on gaps. Gappers are often associated with volunteering, backpacking and organised travels. Our sample shows that the majority of the gappers who went traveling during their gaps did it for leisure reasons and in some cases it was due to spontaneous decisions because a friend or a family member asked them to go with them or the destination offered cheap travel options. In these cases, the gappers could fall under a variety of tourists groups such as individual travelers, international tourists, domestic tourists. In the case with Marcus, some of his activities fall into adventure tourism, while others fall into food tourism.

Because of some of the topics we raised attention to and our Findings, we have decided to create a new definition about what is gap year.

Theoretical Implications

We have presented multiple views on a gap year in our Literature Review section. From a gap year being a time spent on traveling, studying, working, or living in a foreign country for a certain period of time (Harmer and Rogerson, 2017), through entering the labor market for a time before entering university (Birch and Miller, 2007), up to time 'out' of formal education, training or workplace (Jones, 2004).

Before conducting our research, we did not resonate with only one definition but rather more smaller parts of all of the mentioned ones. Therefore, we have created our own interpretation of a gap year for this thesis. However, after analyzing all the gathered data, we came into realisation that the definition do not fully correspond to our perception anymore. We still identify a gap year as a period of time that usually lasts from 3 up to 24 months. We also see a gap year to be '*a "bridge" between two phases of life*' and as a provider of opportunities for personal development and reflection on their values and themselves, as mentioned in our interpretation.

However, we have reservations to some parts, or rather feel a need of further specification of the definition. One of the parts are a gap year being presented as a sole '*break from formal*

education, training or the workplace’, and/or a time focused only on *‘activities such as travelling, working, volunteering, or pursuing other interests’*. Hereby, we decided to reformulate the existing definition and create our own contribution to the academic field and slightly new perspective on a gap year concept.

Our new perception is built upon our interviews, especially the ones with Martin and Gavral, who did not consider the time they had left until the start of their new university programs as a ‘gap year’. For them, the gap year is more about productivity and working on one’s future goals, and not about leisure activities, such as socialising. In the interview with Gavral, he states that he considered his gap to have ended the moment he was officially accepted into his university of choice.

Therefore, we see the gap year concept as a limited period of time that could happen between any activities that require a full-time commitment from their pursuer, such as when studying, working, and undertaking any kind of traineeship. However, we wish to emphasise that *‘a limited period of time’*, to which we refer our gap year concept, does not represent the whole time between the end of a specific activity and the start of a new one, e.g. the end of high school and the start of university.

Although we still find an agreement with Jones’ (2004) seven categories of the gap year, we would like to point out one exception regarding the A3 category, i.e. ‘default post school 18’. This category represents students who take a gap year due to unexpected occurrences at the end of their formal schooling. We see a possibility of spending the whole time or certain period of time by unproductive activities, for example by waiting for the next possible enrollment. However, we do not consider the time spent on such activities as an official gap year.

When referring to the limited period of time, to the gap year, we mean the time committed to beforehand planned activities with set objectives, goals and an expected outcome. Among these activities could be, as mentioned before, travelling, working, volunteering, or pursuing other interests. Every activity during the gap year should ensure a step closer to an overall goal, to a vision of one’s gap year. As a goal, or a vision, could be considered contemplation of the next

phase in life, career reassessment, and any similar decision that is connected with a big decision about one's future life. Meaning, if a break between two activities lasts, for instance, 10 months, but a person dedicated only 5 months of their time to meaningful activities with the purpose to get closer to their envisioned future, then they can say their gap year lasted 5 months.

With this approach, we expect to see more 'tangible' results when comparing the beginning and end of the gap year. Moreover, we consider this specification to be crucial as we believe it may raise positive impressions of this concept. We also hope the gap year concept gets recognized as an effective utility of time for people who feel unsure about their next big step in their life. Additionally, by inclusion of meaningful activities, we wish to avoid experience such as Matúš had:

'Yes, I lost some of my habits, discipline, and also once you try the freedom, it is a bit difficult to come back to the routine. It feels like people having a gap year just purposelessly sell out that time off to develop themselves, if they don't work on themselves properly everyday. And I think noone does it.'

We are under impression, that labeling the entire break between two parts of one's life as a gap year, encompassing leisure activities, partying, and relaxation, has led to close-minded opinions in regards to this phenomenon. We found understanding of this perception due to the unspecified definition. Even though we believe that having time off might be beneficial for some people and may bring results in terms of recharging energy and/or finding motivation, we still consider the concept's purpose to be elsewhere.

Additionally, we would like to emphasize that some participants of our research did use their gap year as a way to 'escape' their daily routines, however, we found certain dissimilarities that distinguish the 'escape' motivation behind having a break. One represents the motivation to relaxation and the other motivation behind undergoing a gap year. One and main difference is rooted in the selection of activities. As mentioned, none of the leisure activities are considered to be part of the gap year, and hereby we do not consider individuals taking a break from studies in

order to 'run away' as part of the gap year. On the other hand, time spent by purposeful activities can be referred as the gap year period.

Not only Martin and Gavral's interview, but also other ones reinforced our decision to raise the addition to the already existing definition of the concept. The other interviews made us notice more open-minded attitude toward a gap year when people see a plan, a structure, and/or at least some idea what their, usually children, would wish to do during a gap year. And vice versa, we have spectated close-minded and doubtful attitude when seeing people planning to go with a flow and without purpose. Such case was possible to see with Mathilde:

'And I remember, I don't know, I think my parents didn't think that about me because I had a different plan, you know. I just wanted to travel and maybe go to Australia or like go to live somewhere else and like try to provide for myself and, you know, like try something. So I got a plan actually. But I remember when my sister also did the gap year, my mom was like, but aren't you just losing your time? Because she didn't do anything. Like she just stayed in Poland and she was working.'

Due to mentioned cases, we believe more people would open toward this concept if they see measurable achievements and/or deeper reason driving their actions rather than improvised break without any plan and/or purpose. Alina's perspective on the gap year recommendation validates our assumption:

'... If it's just because they want to get an A-kasse and sit on their ass doing nothing, then I would say no, don't do it. But if they tell me I've got a plan, I want to learn this and that and I need a lot of time daily in order to practice this skill, then I would say yes, just do it. If it's going to help you with either growing as a person or developing your career further, then just do it ...'

We also hope for recent high school graduates that our definition would lift certain pressure of their shoulders to continue in their studies straightaway if they do not feel like going to. This wish is based on Matúš, who believes he would have saved more time if he had come on a gap year right after completing his high school education. He also added:

‘ ... There were children who knew what they want from life, for them a gap year is useless, but for those who are unsure, then I think would be best to go right after high school.’

To summarize, our interpretation of the gap year concept represents a limited period of time and usually lasts from 3 up to 24 months. We see different generations being open to practice this concept, as shown within our sample size. The gap year may represent only a part or the entire period between two stages of one's life, depending on the type of activities undertaken. The purpose of the gap year concept is to engage in meaningful activities and pursue predefined objectives that directly contribute to ‘gappers’ getting closer to their goals. The gap year is considered a ‘bridge’ between two life phases and can be spent by traveling, working, volunteering, or pursuing other interests, provided that they align with the set vision. Any alternative way of utilizing the gap year, than what is specified in our definition of the concept, is regarded as a simple break from one’s current life.

Managerial implications

While conducting and analyzing the interviews, we got to hear and read many useful points of view. Building upon that, we have identified the main insights on how to ensure the success of a gap year, or at least to mitigate possible challenges occurring and try to get to the wanted outcome. By ‘wanted outcome’ we consider some way of development, regardless of whether it is personal or professional in nature. Especially due to the lack of awareness about the gap year concept and fear of losing time, we believe the guideline will be of help keeping participants aware and accountable of their progress, and support them when navigating their gap year to get closer to their desires. In addition, we would like to mention that in order to create this guideline, we have followed our new definition stated in the theoretical implications.

The guideline should directly impact participants of the gap year and/or people considering to take one. The instructions are intended to assist individuals in selecting and following activities which will help them to get closer to their envisioned goals, for instance, a school choice, reconsideration of career path or exploration of educational options. We perceive our suggestions as crucial as the time without any commitment and/or duties might result in ‘wasting time’ as some of our participants expressed in their interviews. For example, Sophia said:

'Well, I think one of the negative sides of a gap year is that you get lazier if you don't force yourself out of the door or to sit for a dedicated hour or two to look for a job or take a course online or whatever and yeah, you really have to push yourself to start something with your day because you can really easily get into this swamp and just be miserable ... '

We believe that by following our steps, participants make themselves more accountable for their actions and with this approach, their gap year will end up as Mathilde expressed:

'I don't think it's a waste of time. It can be an investment in yourself and in the growth ... '

We also see some more instances of how people could indirectly benefit from the advice we provide. Some of the examples are school and/or career counselors and parents who are at a crucial stage of their children's decision-making regarding their future paths. By following our advice, we aim to provide valuable insights on how to approach and to make the most of a gap year. Even though Raaqem is not a parent himself, he immersed into role and expressed possible occurring worries when it comes to children deciding about their future. We find our guideline useful as a support for parents like Raaqem would be, in order to navigate their children into the right direction.

'Maybe they're too excited about what they have that they don't see or they don't think about possible consequences, whether positive or negative. So I would really help them take that decision in a wiser way.'

Besides mentioned, we can also see how non-profit organizations and/or travel agencies can benefit from these instructions. By analyzing this information in mind, they can easily prepare customized experiences that align with the unique needs and preferences of their prospective participants or clients.

Although we have confidence in the advice provided, we would like to acknowledge that the guideline is based on an analysis of 17 semi-structured interviews with returned gappers. Our

contribution is built upon their reflections and newly shaped perspective of a gap year concept, thus, we have not tested the guideline in any way. Additionally, we would like to emphasize that despite our sincere standpoint that the information provided might have a beneficial impact on its participants' development, we cannot ensure the absolute fulfillment of goals or solutions to all issues.

Furthermore, we cannot guarantee a uniform experience for everyone, as each individual's experience is formed by numerous factors. Among these factors are one's unique way of consumption and perception of reality, their upbringing, and/or any other internal and external influences that may impact their views.

The Gap Year Guideline

Making the Right Choice

Before conducting a gap year is important to decide whether one wishes to take a gap year or prefers to spend their time by other activities that are not aligned with our definition of the gap year concept.

Therefore, we have prepared a set of leading questions that should one ask themselves and/or be asked by a third party in order to ease the decision process. When it comes to travel agencies and non-profit organizations, we believe they should ask these leading questions as well as it may help them immerse into the experience flow of their potential participants and/or clients.

1. Do I feel overwhelmed by the tasks that have dealt with until now?
2. Do I feel strong enough to face challenging situations in order to develop myself?
3. Do I feel satisfied in the current state of my life?
4. Do I feel a need to relax and let off some steam?
5. Do I feel the need to enjoy my freedom by enjoying leisure activities?

We suggest answering YES/NO and providing additional reasoning for the answer. Moreover, we encourage you to dive deeper into the questions, even by adding new ones, allowing you to

contemplate the option of a gap year more thoroughly. The questions provided serve as a starting point for initiating thoughts about a gap year and finding out whether it is the right step ahead. As for Rebeka's straightforward opinion, we also would not like to underestimate this step:

'Do you really feel that you're gonna have a year gap and you don't feel it that way, or you're gonna have a year gap because you're lazy ass, you know like sometimes, I believe even when you are like ok I will have a year gap or something, sometimes you can have a gap year because you are lazy.'

Therefore, answering questions may end up in two ways. The first one with a need to rest and 'escape' from a daily life in order to recharge, or just because of being 'lazy ass'. In this case, we do not refer to the gap year concept but to a break when one chooses to spend their time in leisure activities that bring them full satisfaction.

The other way represents the decision to conduct a gap year which is followed by set steps of challenging situations and any other experiences in order to develop and achieve, or at least get closer, to desired outcome.

Undertaking a Gap Year

After making the initial decision, we consider the saying 'communication is a key' as the right way to kick off considering the gap year direction. Surrounding oneself with a network of supportive individuals, or even leading a conversation with their inner self, allows potential gap year participants to unveil their struggles, needs, and desires further on. Building upon their needs will help to find the purpose and answer the 'why' in regard to their gap year outcome.

If one knows to define what they need, it may provide a big help when deciding what they want to achieve. Finding the purpose eases the following step, i.e. setting the goal of their gap year. Participants of this research expressed suggestions to always know what will be another step in one's gap year. As Jakob mentioned:

‘ ... my other advice would just to be to always have in the back of your head what you want to do next ... ’

As well as Sophia supported that in order to have an efficient gap year, one should find the reason behind:

‘ ... having a vision, a goal. If that lacks, the gap year will turn into gap years and your life will fly by ... ’

Raaqem supported this idea by recommending to choose the subject of the gap year relatable to activities with one’s career. He raised an important question that needs to be asked: *‘does it help me in my future career?’* However, in order to open this concept to a wider audience, we allowed ourselves to suggest choosing of the gap year subject as anything relatable to the desired outcome.

With a set vision in mind, a proper planning has to be done. However, before diving into the planning phase one must decide on what activities they wish to pursue to approach the wanted results. Based on our interviews, we have categorized the essential characteristics that selected activities must possess into three categories, i.e. adventure, challenge, and education. We would like to pass on some thoughts by our research participants to support our categorization:

‘I would advise them to be open minded, take advantage of opportunities to learn and grow, and not be afraid to step out of their comfort zone. Use the time wisely to explore different interests and be willing to change direction if something doesn’t feel right. A gap year can be incredibly transformative experience, but it’s essential to approach it with the right mindset and motivation.’

(Laura, 2023)

‘ ... being open towards challenges meeting new people go into places you don't know learning about the culture trying to food all that ... you know sometimes you get shy when you're traveling and you're meeting new people and if I could say one thing to myself just, don't, just let

go of the shyness because it doesn't matter and so we can say that your gap year can take a credit for your personal growth or some life skills.'

(Marcus, 2023)

' ... look at the opportunities, have some, explore and experience ... '

(Radoslav, 2023)

'I would just say try different things. Try different jobs and just try to follow your dreams and so on. Try some new stuff, right? Not necessarily a job, maybe a hobby. Just try. Just spend this time on trying new things. Don't think that it's a waste of time ... '

(Mathilde, 2023)

' ... go abroad and talk to people from all over the world ... And if you do something in your gap year; you know, maybe you have a chance to try out a job. And if you think, or maybe, for example, I was at the warehouse and we had an office next by. And we talked a lot with the office people. So you also get a bit of inspiration from them for what you want to do next. So maybe get a job where you can save up money and get some inspiration for what you want to do next. '

(Jakob, 2023)

' ... maybe try some like courses or some lessons ... Because for example, for me 100%, when I stopped studying, for the year when I was working, somehow, I became also the lazy ass because I already was out from the studying for the year right. So going back that is my hope, so if you gonna stop study for a year try to not stop studying. I'm not saying about the school but in general, try to read, try to educate yourself, constantly ... '

(Rebeka, 2023)

Once is decided on specific activities, the planning phase is coming. This phase is comprised of two sub-phases, one that is focused on participants' development and the latter one on logistical issues.

When it comes to planning of the personal/professional development, it is needed to set not only goal, but also certain indicators that keep its participants obliged to continuous progress toward their goal. Under indicators, it is possible to imagine objectives that participants wants to achieve on the journey toward their ultimate vision. Raaqem confirmed:

'And then another factor would be maybe to keep track of your evolution, to keep journeying or to keep writing milestones or to keep observing your changes, observing the new things that you're learning ... '

From the logistical point of view, if one plans to spend their gap year in activities requiring further preparation, such as traveling, participants need to plan accordingly. For example by saving a certain amount of money in order to travel safely and stress-free. As Marcus expressed:

'... people who I've met since then, who are thinking about going on a gap year, I always tell them, whatever you think this is, whatever you think you're gonna spend up money, double it, because of course, it might not be necessary, but I always find it a little bit annoying that I had to stress so much about money in the end, but also, I was traveling for eight months and I know people mainly just travel for like three to four months maybe most of the people I know did that so eight months was quite excessive but you know most of the time just go for it.'

Completion of a Gap Year

Someone might think that a gap year ends by finishing all the activities planned. However, there is one last, but not definitely not least, step left, and that is reflection. Raaqem's perception and feedback perfectly capture the relevance of this phase. Therefore, we would like to share his view:

'it's of the utmost importance that you go through a debriefing, whether introspective or guided, just like we're doing now. And now, I want to thank you for this opportunity because I wish that this happened before. I wish that this happened five years ago. It would have changed my way of thinking, but this gap year, gap semester, it would have really made me more mindful about my choices. Maybe even chose another career. I don't know. But this is a great initiative. I

congratulate you and your team on everything that you've been doing with the questions of the interview, with this whole model methodology. Because it's really, really important and it's really game-changing that you debrief and that you go through an inflection like this.'

To give a brief overview of our guideline, at first, a participant needs to properly consider whether they wish to take the gap year. If yes, following process is comprised of setting a goal, choosing activities, planning objectives and additional pursuits ensuring smooth progression of chosen activities. All of that should ended by retrospective reflection on the whole experience and moving into the next big and exciting phase of one's life.

Conclusion

To capture the core of a gap year phenomenon, we have adopted a phenomenological approach which enables us to explore 17 individuals and gain deeper understanding of their experience, and hence the concept itself. Through the implementation of a bracketing method, we became more aware of our position as researchers and maintained a distance from our own biases towards the concept. In order to get closer to the participants of this research, we have chosen a lifeline technique that introduced us to the participants' most significant moments throughout their whole life. Based on each participant's lifeline, the customized questions were created upon the original semi-structured interview guideline. Through interviewing gappers, we got to know their unique personalities formed via significant events and influential factors in their life.

We could witness a wide pool of different characteristic traits and personal preferences. Hereby, we believe a gap year concept does not have a specific and/or typical personality type that is more likely to take a gap year. Despite that, there are other influential elements that do play a role in our participants' decision-making process.

One way to undertake a gap year is right after completing high school studies. Such a case happened for participants who were surrounded by society supportive of this phenomenon, and/or by people open-minded towards this concept. The typical motivation behind taking a gap year after high school completion is a desire for travelling, often accompanied by a need to take a

break from an academic lifestyle and figure out one's next step. In some cases we encountered a unique motivation, as a gap year was perceived to be a 'rite of passage'.

We noticed parental influence among this group of gap takers, with parents inspiring their children to travel and, in some cases, even encouraging them to take a gap year. However, we saw other sources that also seemed to have an inspiring character, including social media platforms where individuals could see experiences shared by returned gap takers, organised travel opportunities, and/or interactions with peers who were facing the same or similar situations.

Additionally, we recognized another group of gappers who faced significant external pressure to pursue a degree immediately after completing high school studies. This pressure stems from societal conventions in our participants' home countries, as well as the hopes and expectations of their parents.

We believe that the absence of quality initiatives supporting students when making decisions about their future paths, coupled with external pressures, has a high potential to result in young adults making rushed decisions and subsequently experiencing regret. Many of our participants expressed their fear of losing time when it comes to a gap year. However, it is important to note that as a result of this process, some of our participants lost interest in continuing their studies. Consequently, by not taking an initial gap year, our participants ended up wasting more time pursuing an unwanted degree, which eventually led to the realization that a gap year was needed after all. Moreover, we consider important to note that although a gap year brought many new opportunities and facilitated personal growth for our participants, the feeling of guilt associated with the perceived loss of time remained engraved in their minds. This sense of guilt stemmed from the values instilled in them during their upbringing.

In this case, our participants are motivated to take a gap year in order to reevaluate their further steps, such as change of their study programme or a career field. Besides that, we noticed various motivational factors among all the participants. For not our surprise, many of our gappers seek adventure, need to explore, which beautifully mirrors postmodern era as many of our participants

felt urge to experience something unusual, however, by following this ‘trend’ they ended up in certain sameness. However, we would like to emphasise that despite their initial motivation arouse feeling of similarity, each participant’s experience is unique due to their distinct perceptions and one-of-a-kind identities. However, we would like to voice an exception to the rule with regards to our twin participants, whose motivations and experiences were almost identical. We believe this similarity can be attributed to their shared life experiences.

Among other motivational factors were both professional and personal exploration. Our gappers saw an opportunity to find motivation, which confirms Birch and Miller’s (2007) argument about a gap year being a great way to motivate students to continue their studies. Another possibility provided by the gap year concept is to de-stress from their study life, gain work experience, explore new interests, deal with an overwhelming number of options, improve and develop new skills, and become economically independent. When it comes to personal desires, they wished to learn valuable lessons, become independent, improve their mental and physical health, use the time to heal themselves from personal occurrences and/or find certain escape. Another exception to the rule are participants who felt no urge to set a goal and/or find motivation to conduct their gap year.

The majority of participants who had set goals achieved what they wanted. Some of them gained even more skills and experiences than anticipated. We have noticed a gap year to be perceived as a ‘trial’ for adulthood when one may experience the real life and learn responsibility. In addition, by exploring different interests, they were able to discover their career path or, at the very least, narrow down the great number of options available to them. Furthermore, gaining work experience resulted in increased confidence in the workplace and economical independence. We noticed our participants to be more focused on gainining soft rather than hard skills. More gappers mentioned their improvement in problem-solving, teamwork, communication, customer service, and so on. Whereas only one participant of a gap year actually developed new hard skills. Additionally, the time spent during a gap year allowed our participants to rediscover their motivation, as they temporarily ‘ran away’ from their obligations.

Something that was hard to miss is the extent of personal growth the participants went through. We encountered more cases where our participants reassessed their priorities, such as when they started appreciating and taking better care of their mental and physical health. Thanks to work experience, the gappers enhanced their confidence in relation to their professional endeavours, self-assurance and/or communicating with their surroundings. Here we would like to raise the contrast between our study and O'shea (2011) who expressed that some students had struggled with communication and independence after returning home. In this thesis, our participants seemed to experience the complete opposite and rather developed their open-minded and outgoing attitude, alongside their emerging independence. While we did mention economical independence, it is worth noting that our participants also developed a strong mindset and the ability to stand up for themselves. Even though O'shea (2011) noted a gap year should not be considered as a tool for gaining independence, we would like to emphasize that this concept might take a certain credit for our participants' development.

They as well consider themselves more mature in comparison to their peers who did not partake in any new opportunity. We believe that a certain part of their personal growth is due to traveling and exploration of new opportunities which also opened their mind to the world and enhanced their cultural understanding.

To reach such outcomes, our participants had to overcome challenges and engage in various activities. While some activities were planned, we noticed that many individuals preferred day-to-day planning and opted for flexible options during their gap year. Such activities are traveling, both domestic and international, leisure-oriented activities, informal education, working, applying for further studies, exploring new interests, also by getting out of their comfort zone. All of these activities have demonstrated that a gap year has the potential to encompass various realms of experience theory, if not even all of them, and the participants' preferences are the primary determining factor when choosing which ones.

We mentioned not only engaging in activities, but also facing certain challenges. These challenges included external pressure on their professional development, the need to adequately justify their actions to gain respect, interacting with diverse personality types and cultures,

experiencing cultural shock coming from language barriers and resulting in homesickness and the urgent need for adaptation. Additionally, the impact of Covid-19 was another significant challenge that affected the overall gap year experience.

Although the beneficial aspects of a gap year outweighed the negative ones, we did notice certain risks that we would like to address. Several of our participants expressed that a gap year might be demanding when it comes to financial resources, hereby we wish to point out the importance of balance between work and spending time by traveling. If one does not push too far, which did not happen in the situation of our participants, we do not consider economic issues as a long-lasting affect on our participants.

However, we have identified a significant issue where one of our participants experienced enduring negative consequences as a result of their gap year experience. Here we would like to refer to Beaver (2021) mentioned in the Literature Review, who expressed that experiencing meaningful activities during a gap year might cure the occurrence of mental illness. With that in mind, we would like to emphasize that if one does not establish goals prior to their gap year and does not make sure to follow them, it may result in triggering several serious health issues, such as depression, stress, anxiety, and so on. We would like to refer to a gap year as a ‘good servant, bad master’, emphasizing that individuals can benefit from a gap year when it is properly managed and controlled. However, if the situations gets out of control and starts controlling the participants, it can become problematic.

We would also like to highlight the high level of self-awareness that our participants possess. Thanks to this self-awareness, we believe that even though they have not have fulfilled every need and might experience some feelings of regret, their gap year has planted a seed in their minds, motivating them to continue their personal development even after completing their experience.

Considering everything the participants of this study have shared and the experiences they have lived, we are confident in stating that a gap year has the potential to create a life-changing experience. Moreover, we believe that a gap year has a strong potential to create positive,

transformative experiences for its participants. However, it is important to note that this should not be taken for granted, and any positive outcome can be achieved only through proper planning and self-control to mitigate potential risks. Additionally, we would like to emphasize that while we recommend considering a gap year, we do not assert that it is suitable for everyone. The decision to undertake a gap year should be made based on an individual's personal needs and desires.

Future research

This section outlines prospective research directions that could further enhance the findings of our study, proposing key areas of interest that warrant future exploration and addressing unresolved queries. Our research delves into the multifaceted experiences of participants during their gap years, examining the related opportunities, challenges, impacts, and transformative journeys, as well as the perceptions and determinants of this unique experience.

In the discussion, we touched upon some additional areas that could be worth further investigation. One of those is about whether twins with the same upbringing and similar life experiences might be an exception to the rule that every gap year experience is unique and individual.

Besides that, we see there is a big chance for future studies to compare how gap years are viewed in different European countries. This could help us understand how culture and society affect attitudes towards gap years, improving our knowledge of this common activity. Based on that, we would like to raise our curiosity about whether our definition would instigate a positive view in the perception of these European countries.

On top of that, in the discussion, we expressed a supportive attitude toward the idea of normalization of the concept globally. Based on the outcome of the study in relation to European countries, we would like to see whether a gap year could be perceived as a successful tool for personal development and should be normalized.

Based on our literature and findings we found additional topics worth consideration. One of those concerns the literature stating a gap year as a popular concept in Europe, however, our findings shows that it's not exactly the case (Andersen, 2019, p.19). Some of our gappers state in their home countries that the gap is seen in a negative light as well as that the concept is not that well known or understood. There is a need for more research on this topic. In addition, we have seen that there may be generational differences when it comes to values and gap year views. Thus, we conclude that we may see a rise in popularity in those countries in the near future when it comes to gaps after high school. This is why we believe that it's important for other researchers to help us fill this gap in the academic world.

Building upon this understanding, the examination of the consequent educational and career outcomes of gap years within various European contexts would be a valuable avenue for future exploration. This prospective research could employ longitudinal studies, thus offering considerable insights into the long-term ramifications of choosing a gap year.

A complementary area that calls for further investigation is the largely uncharted employer perspectives towards gap years across European nations. In-depth research into this topic could shed light on how gap year decisions are perceived within the professional sphere, subsequently informing student choices.

The role of socio-economic variables in the decision to pursue a gap year also emerges as a critical focal point for future exploration. By zeroing in on this aspect, subsequent studies could illuminate its bearing on decision-making, thus revealing whether gap years are universally accessible or a privilege of the few.

Lastly, in light of the extensive societal shifts triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be worthwhile to examine its influence on the perceptions and realities of gap years. Have the educational disruptions made them more popular, or have the numerous challenges rendered them less viable? Such an inquiry offers a promising trajectory for future research, promising to shed light on the resilience of students and educational frameworks during periods of monumental change.

One area we could have looked into was how well our guidelines worked for gap year travelers. We would have checked if they were really helping people plan their gap years. We also thought about seeing if they were useful to travel agencies and non-profits who work with gap year travelers. As part of this, we planned to get feedback and make changes to make our guidelines better. This way, we could have made sure our guidelines stayed helpful for everyone involved.

We could have potentially looked into the relevance of gap year travelers for travel agencies in future research. Studying the travel behavior of gap year takers could benefit travel agencies by helping them tailor services to this audience's needs. This could open a new market segment, resulting in potential increased revenue. However, the value of targeting this group would depend on their purchasing power, the size of this market, and the cost of adapting agency services to fit their needs. Ultimately, whether this audience is worth targeting hinges on the potential return on investment and alignment with the agency's strategic goals.

We also considered the idea of making gap years more widely accepted. Our objective would have been to change societal and cultural views about gap years by working with schools, employers, and others. By doing this, we could have helped make gap years a more regular choice, shifting the current norms and perceptions.

Another area we thought of exploring further was our understanding of a 'gap year'. We recognized that 'gap year' can mean different things in different situations - such as cultural, geographic, or socio-economic contexts. So, we planned to dig deeper into these variations. The aim would have been to develop a more complex understanding of the gap year concept, revealing its potential for individuals and society. This research could have then led to a broader, more inclusive definition of a 'gap year', which would be beneficial for future research and practice.

Limitations and deliberations of the research

In the course of completing this comprehensive study, we encountered a plethora of limitations and challenges that compelled us to engage in deep contemplation and meticulous planning. A

thorough understanding and interpretation of the obtained results demanded an intricate grasp of these multifaceted subtleties, many of which were unexpected and nuanced in nature.

One of the predominant constraints that we grappled with involved the multiple interviewing techniques that were utilized during the study phase. The interviews varied significantly from one to another, each presenting a different array of questions, a unique ordering of these questions, and even distinctively divergent styles of conducting the interviews. This variance introduced a degree of unpredictability into the responses of the participants and potentially compromised the uniformity of the data. The consequential inconsistency in the obtained responses could have potentially skewed our findings, thereby directly impacting the scale of the gathered data.

Adding another layer of complexity was the fact that this research marked our inaugural use of both the lifeline method and the phenomenological approach, which turned out to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, these methods introduced us to a number of unexpected challenges that tested our adaptability and problem-solving skills. On the other hand, they also presented invaluable learning opportunities that broadened our research skillset. However, the steep learning curve associated with these methodologies may have adversely affected the depth of our findings, primarily due to our nascent stage of familiarity and our relative inexperience with these specific techniques.

The lifeline technique, despite its potential advantages, proved to be a significantly time-consuming process, much more so than initially anticipated. The unexpectedly long duration of the lifeline interviews caused several potential participants to opt out of the study, thereby reducing our sample size. This contraction of our participant pool had a potential domino effect on our findings, potentially limiting the extent to which our results could limit the number of experiences the researchers have uncovered and interpreted.

Furthermore, even though clear instructions were provided, a handful of participants encountered difficulties in fully understanding the lifeline methodology. The misinterpretations that arose

from this confusion might have caused these individuals to inadequately or inaccurately represent their experiences, thereby potentially undermining the quality of the data collected.

Compounding this issue was the fact that the interpretations of the instructions varied greatly among the participants, leading to a wide range of lifeline constructions. This disparity manifested itself in the form of vastly different depths and levels of detail across the lifelines, which may have influenced the comparative analysis of the data.

The semi-structured format of the interviews, while fostering an open-ended and participant-driven conversation, had its own set of drawbacks. Ensuring a uniform level of quality and depth in the data proved challenging as the participants had varying degrees of expressiveness and understanding. Some participants were more direct and succinct in their responses, while others tended to be more expansive and forthcoming with their experiences. This heterogeneity, while rich in individualistic detail, could have led to an imbalance in the coverage of different experiences, thereby leading to potential bias in the collected data.

Finally, we must acknowledge the considerable time investment, and effort required by the entire process from both the study team and the participants. This not only could have affected the study's overall feasibility and reproducibility but might have also deterred some individuals from participating fully or even participating at all.

In light of these considerations, it becomes imperative to bear in mind these numerous limitations and points of deliberation when evaluating the results of the study. Despite these challenges, it's important to remember that this study has been a rich source of insight and has illuminated potential areas for improvement and refinement in future research using these methodologies.

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