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Building a digital trust ecosystem for innovative learning: the formation of complex educational tourism products in Europe

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Abstract: The relevance of educational tourism has been growing in recent years, driven by factors such as globalisation, an increasing interest in immersive learning experiences, and the integration of technology. This growth has opened new opportunities for innovative learning within educational

tourism. This multinational study investigates digital trust theory, focusing on how educational tourism products are formed through online services provided by language schools. To achieve this, qualitative data were collected using web-scraping techniques from 563 language schools across several countries, including the UK, Italy, Germany, Spain, and France. This process helped gauge the growth rate of online services offered by language schools during one academic year. Additionally, surveys and the 'secret client' method were employed to understand how these schools hybridise their online services with educational tourism offerings. Educational tourism managers can utilise the findings from this research to enhance customer loyalty and trust while gaining insights into how online services are utilised during the three phases of tourist product formation: before the trip, during the studies, and afterwards. The results demonstrate practical implementations of online service formats that can serve as a foundation for the innovative formation of educational tourism products.

Keywords: digital trust; educational tourism; online language courses; loyalty; innovative learning; decision-making model.

JEL codes: M21, M31, O33, Z32.

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1 Introduction

Educational tourism provides a unique, immersive environment that enhances innovative learning goals by offering rich, real-world experiences that challenge and expand a learner's creativity (Hwang et al., 2024). In education, the development and delivery of creative tourism, hospitality, and events experience myriad challenges, including digital trust. Distinct from other forms of tourism, educational tourism provides a unique combination of online and offline language learning processes. This unique characteristic sets it apart, making it a particularly intriguing study area. The formation of this tourism product is being conducted online. It extends offline, allowing educational establishments to tailor their offerings to meet the needs of tourists and providing students with immersive, hands-on training.

Educational tourism is a form of travel that aims to gain knowledge, enrich learning experiences, and explore cultural, historical, or scientific sites. This type of tourism involves visiting various destinations to participate in educational activities, such as museums, historical landmarks, and cultural events, and participating in workshops, classes, and lectures (Gutkevych et al., 2024). It is increasingly recognised worldwide as an essential and rapidly evolving sector of the economy, offering significant potential as an effective tool for managing socio-economic development in different countries (Matahir and Tang, 2017). Tang (2021) confirms the positive impact of educational tourism on economic growth in European countries where a travel-friendly environment is being supported at a governmental level, thus boosting the number of educational traveller arrivals in those countries. Among the studies on this type of tourism, Ritchie's (2003) work *'Managing Educational Tourism'* stands out. Organising the educational process for international students requires different establishments to provide a complex range of services: travel agencies, educational centres, transport companies, accommodation providers, etc. Thus, the more diversified a tourist product is, the more

spheres get support and funding, and the better impact it has on the country's economy in general (Barra et al., 2019; McGladdery and Lubbe, 2017).

Tourism or education/training can serve as a trip's primary or secondary motive. Creating a complex tourist product involves integrating various elements of the tourism industry into a cohesive and appealing package for travellers. Such a complex tourist product is designed to address tourists' diverse needs and expectations, incorporating a blend of services, experiences, and resources to offer a complete travel experience. These products are often more attractive than standalone services, providing comprehensive experience tailored to specific market segments (Gherasim and Gherasim, 2023). With this in mind, they claim that educational tourism can be divided into two segments: 'tourism first' which is the segment of educational tourism whereby travel is a primary motivating factor and purposeful learning is secondary' (p.11) or 'education first' which refers to school excursions, language schools, and university/college experiences' (ibid). Such division makes educational tourism products a complex experience involving components from different spheres in their formation (Chkoniya et al., 2021).

Through detailed analysis of current strategies in educational tourism product formation and tendencies of educational tourism modernisation, the paper aims to provide a concise overview of the key perspectives and concepts in educational tourism as well as highlights the potential for future development of the educational tourism industry with the focus on language trips. A base of language schools from European countries was used to represent the most demand for language trips among educational tourists in England, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy. The schools were chosen based on the top 50 Google search engine results pages (SERP); as such, the selection method allowed the schools with higher website ranks and, consequently, the ones with up-to-date information on their websites, including students' reviews.

The survey conducted under the current research paper allows us to explore the development of educational tourism products from both a theoretical and practical perspective, mainly through the experiences of language schools. This process follows a three-stage framework when creating complex educational tourism offerings:

- 1 Pre-trip: this stage focuses on attracting tourists to enhance the appeal of the schools.
- 2 During trip: this phase emphasises providing services to improve the quality of the experience.
- 3 Post-trip: this completion phase follows the trip.

Each stage is designed to engage travellers at different points in their journey, providing a seamless experience that combines learning with travel, ultimately fostering loyalty and encouraging students to return to their destination. The online components of educational tourism products significantly enhance the entire experience, from initial planning to ongoing learning after the trip. These online elements create a dynamic, interactive, cohesive journey that enriches the educational tourism experience.

Across all three stages (pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip), the effective use of online resources helps educational institutions build trust through transparency, quality, and responsiveness. Additionally, it promotes loyalty through personalised engagement, continuous learning, and a sense of community. Institutions that effectively manage these stages will likely develop lasting relationships with participants, encouraging repeat engagement and positive word-of-mouth. This three-stage model illustrates how loyalty

is formed based on digital trust theory, which contributes to an improved reputation for language schools and the successful development of tourism products.

2 Theoretical background and hypothesis development

The pedagogical revolution in language teaching has transitioned from emphasising rote memorisation, grammar drills, and teacher-centred methods to more innovative, student-centred approaches prioritising communication, real-world tasks, and interactive learning (Kohnke et al., 2024). Contemporary language teaching methodologies, such as communicative language teaching, task-based learning, technology-enhanced learning, and flipped classrooms, reflect a broader shift towards fostering fluency, critical thinking, and learner autonomy rather than merely instructing on the mechanics of the language (Eliyahu-Levi, 2024). This transformation underscores an ongoing effort to make language learning more engaging, practical, and adaptable to the diverse needs of learners (Deniz, 2024). At the same time, from a tourism business perspective, language learning has become an attraction tool or a part of tourist products, starting with online studies (Xie and Ritchie, 2019). Lokkesmoe et al. (2016) state that completing immersion in a new language led to visiting the country for a better acquaintance with its culture and traditions. As Castillo Arredondo et al. (2017) and Sie et al. (2016) students from non-English-speaking countries, primarily from the European Union, make the world's most significant part of language trips annually. The tendency to know any other foreign language apart from English and their native one among such students is growing (Marinescu, 2017). Terhune (2016) and Huensch and Tracy-Ventura (2017) stand that for European students' cultural traits, acquaintance with a new language mainly starts online – firstly from a general overview of the country.

Many language schools implement massive open online courses (MOOCs).

This service can help bring students to language schools (Harazneh et al., 2018; Hornikx and van Meurs, 2020). Online language courses are cheaper than regular courses at the school, and the existence of online courses is an opportunity for a language school to gain extra profit from its regular product – language courses (Hodgson et al., 2019). Recent studies show that the crucial role in the success of any business is the appropriate use of virtual marketing tools (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). This is especially important for those spheres with opportunities for online and offline practices like language schools. The limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought rapid change in this sphere. The necessity to keep the business afloat, as well as the rise of demand among consumers for online studies of foreign languages, made those language schools that specialised in offline services implement online courses, while those schools having this service developed without pandemic limitations have improved the supply by creating learning platforms, thus improving delivering process of online courses to the students. The complex educational tourism products play three significant roles for the language schools: promotional tool, which serves to form trust among new customers; online formats for diversification of the regular offline educational processes; and loyalty formation instrument according to Mahalingappa et al. (2018).

Over the recent years, despite educational tourism's growth, language schools have diversified to those that specialise only in offline studies, immersion programs, and on-site tourism, with no or limited offers in terms of online products.

2.1 *The impact of digital trust on educational tourism: navigating online services post-pandemic*

The rapid rise of online services during the year of the pandemic made online presence an integral part of a complex educational tourism product (Mubarak and Petraite, 2020). Recent studies show (Berhanu and Raj, 2020; Johnson et al., 2022) companies' productivity over the last decade has been significantly affected by social media and the rise of open innovation, which is closely interconnected with the theory of digital trust. This concept pertains to users' confidence in the security, privacy, and reliability of digital technologies, platforms, and services (Elshaer et al., 2024). It serves as the foundation for positive user experiences and plays a crucial role in the widespread adoption of digital technologies across various fields, including online learning (Pozo et al., 2024). Digital trust stands not only for collaboration among stakeholders in the creation of open innovation but also reflects customers' attitudes toward the reliability of a company and its services (Koh et al., 2019).

Therefore, to enhance the company's competitive advantage, especially in an educational sphere where the school serves as an expert in all kinds of knowledge, including technology-related ones, it is essential to demonstrate the capacity of the school's technological background and the availability of online education products can achieve this. This is specifically notable during the pandemic time when customers drastically switched to the usage of digital services.

According to Kolb's experiential learning theory, learners achieve the best results by constantly practising and experiencing what they learn. Following Kolb's experiential learning theory, it is essential to identify the core components of his model that should be included in an effective online education product. The practical part must be provided as a priority of any online education product, along with real-life examples. In foreign language studies, it can be achieved by webinars with native speakers on everyday life topics, as the closest example is to the feelings of a learner, the more chances for the learning material to be perceived. Another critical component of online education products is the rotation of the learning phases. The learning process must be constructed in four core steps: experience, monitoring, conceptualisation, and experimenting. Reflecting on these steps in the process of foreign language studies, it can be simplified to the following scheme of an effective online education product: the opportunity to face real-life linguistics and word implementation, accompanied with explanations by providing examples, and finally, the opportunity for the students to implement new knowledge through self-projecting. This approach can diversify educational offline processes and bring more experience to foreign language students, thus effectively carrying out one of the core roles of complex educational tourism products (Rátz et al., 2020). To ensure the loyalty of students in educational tourism, schools need to form online products solely based on unique experiences that students have had at the school to guarantee that their next trip will be as immersive and memorable as every preceding trip.

Before the pandemic, every country had a different approach to providing tourism services. Some countries used to be more technology-oriented in their services (for example, the UK and Germany). In contrast, others have been more service-oriented in providing exclusively tourist services (for example, Italy and Spain). This difference allowed technologically oriented countries to better adapt to the circumstances caused by the pandemic. At the same time, it was more challenging for the mainly service-oriented

countries to integrate online components into their services. Thus, the hypothesis is about online service use in language schools:

Schools with well-developed online services can quickly return to the regular pace of educational tourism providers at the end of the pandemic, thanks to the provision of online services and regular tourism offers.

As Goutam (2019) notes, referring to Kahneman's psychological theory of the human decision-making model with a focus on customer loyalty theory, to successfully form products in any commercial sphere, they must meet the expectations of the customers' needs to be able to satisfy their individual needs; require to present the customers' final results of their engagement with a supplier, and in the case with language schools it means at the stage of loyalty formation, the schools need to guarantee the students their language progress and specific achievements within a particular stage of their studies; the success of a product lays in the ability to present the customer importance of belonging to the community of other users of the product. Considering all the factors mentioned above in the formation of educational tourism products can bring language schools to a higher qualitative level and ensure loyalty among students. It can be postulated in the last educational tourism products hypothesis:

Educational tourism products' online elements are used on a three-stage basis: when attracting a tourist to enhance schools' appeal, when providing tourist services to improve their quality, and in the completion stage to empower loyalty and motivate the student to the destination return.

H1 The educational tourism providers' online presence has increased globally.

Lianrong and Rui (2019) noted that current trends in educational tourism, especially in language trips, require tight cooperation between channel providers as consumers' behaviours raise demand for the development of communication tools. Therefore, the implementation of e-marketing tools is nowadays considered an integral part of tourism product formation among language schools, which provide a complex product of online studies and offline experience (Zhang et al., 2020). In the sphere of language trips, the provision of online courses can be an effective e-marketing tool (Webb et al., 2017).

H2 The growth of online components is enhancing the presence of language schools in the educational tourism market.

The educational tourism sphere as a business aspect is always in high need of proving competitive advantage. As Golmohammadi et al. (2012) noted that the milestone of competitive advantage among language schools is the implementation of innovations in delivering their products to consumers. Having a website for sharing information with clients is not enough, especially for representatives of language schools (Ponsignon and Derbaix, 2020). Users of online courses have reported in research conducted by the language learning application Duolingo in 2018 that the opportunity to choose an instructor, detailed course description, as well as easiness and diversity of payment methods play essential roles in their choice of a language school and states for a higher quality of the services provided. This draws the line under the importance of language schools developing online products innovatively to have a competitive advantage over the schools that successfully implement online and offline educational practices.

H3 Online and offline educational practices increase the potential student's request.

2.2 *Online education boom: changing consumer behaviours and new learning trends*

Even though the online education market has over 20 years of history, the experience of 2020 revealed the potential for the rapid growth of this sphere in the upcoming years. Thus, before the pandemic, the broadcasts for worldwide MOOC growth were around 12 billion US dollars, and after seven months of lockdowns and a dramatic rise in demand for online education, the sphere is estimated to be 72 billion US dollars between 2020 and 2024 (Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020). This fact encloses changes in consumers' behaviour and the formation of new habits among them. Indeed, many students confirm the positive impact of online studies as a less time-consuming, more cost-effective and convenient process overall (Gómez et al., 2018; Torres et al., 2023). However, academics specialised in language studies note the importance of face-to-face communication with native speakers as the most effective way to learn a foreign language (Blyth, 2018; Drejerska, 2024; Pasanchay and Schott, 2021). Moreover, according to Redondo-Carretero et al. (2017), students who experienced an educational trip to the country where the language they learned is spoken confirm the positive impact on their language skills after such trips. This leads to the idea of the language school's necessity for hybridisation between online and offline products. As researchers from Duolingo note, such services allow the students to book a course in the country they tend to visit with minimum risks as the service is guaranteed to be provided (Duolingo Blog, 2020). On the one hand, online practice allows the students to estimate the school's suitability to their needs and interests. Still, at some point, only online practices are not enough to master the language and get a unique experience from immersion into a foreign country's life and culture.

As Bustreo et al. (2018) note that the rapid growth of online education worldwide has caused changes in consumers' behaviour. The formation of tourism products must consider new conditions that the sphere of educational tourism faces. In comparison with other forms of tourism, educational tourism has a significant advantage during the time of pandemic caused by COVID-19, as this type of tourism could stay afloat by providing products of online education, which can further service the language schools as an additional channel for attracting potential students for the offline sphere.

3 **Methodology**

3.1 *Websites parsing*

Research conducted by National Geographic in 2017 among European users of one of the most popular online education products, the language learning application Duolingo, showed which languages are in the most demand worldwide among learners. The Duolingo service totals about 120 million users worldwide. Thus, according to the respondents who participated in this research, English remains the most popular language to learn, followed by French, Spanish, German, and Italian.

Hence, at the first stage of current research, to understand how language schools in the five above-mentioned countries operate, what formats of online education they provide, and how those formats work on hybridising online education with a trip to a country of the language a student learns, over 500 language schools were analysed during

the period of February-March of 2020, soon before the global COVID-19 pandemic has started.

First, the schools that appeared in Google search were chosen. They were taken from the first 5–7 pages of the search engine results. This allowed getting to different schools specialising in online education and courses in the country where the language is spoken. The schools that were selected for analysis were chosen based on the existence of operating websites and the customers' activity in review forms, meaning only those with recent customer feedback and up-to-date websites were chosen. Since the English language is the most popular among others, the most schools were found there: 201 in total. For other schools, after 7–8 pages, some of them were represented twice. Therefore, the number of schools for analysis varies per country: 84 for Italy, 100 for Germany, 76 for France, and 100 for Spain.

Secondly, based on the research about current trends in online education, there were selected categorical words, which helped to define how often different schools in different countries use these trends. Extra categorical words were used to analyse whether the schools with well-developed online programs specialise in hybridising online education and educational tourism. The words used under current online education trends are e-learning, webinar, podcast, mentoring, online conference, assignment, application, platform, online course, gamification, and smartphone. At the same time, the words that indicate the tendency to hybridise two education formats are immersion, travel, and accommodation. A brief explanation of each word should be provided to explain why certain words indicate the tendency of a trend in a school.

Thus, e-learning implies any form of studying online without attending school. The webinar is quite a popular form of online education product, too. However, it is more popular for universities than language schools, but a small percentage of them also provide this type of learning. Podcasts are also more typical for higher education establishments. Still, in the sphere of language studies, this type of educational product is used for the students' self-education in addition to the main program of the course. Mentoring refers to the services a school provides that aim to reduce clients' time seeking help by offering personalised consulting for each student. The terms 'online consult' and 'Mentor' both pertain to forms of guidance or support, but they differ significantly in their nature, approach, and the relationships they create. While mentorship emphasises long-term personal development and ongoing support, online consults are more specialised, short-term, and focused on specific issues. Online conferences are similar to webinars but are considered broader online events and are mainly typical for universities rather than language schools. The word assignment also goes along with online studies and is commonly integrated with online platforms. The application is one of the most popular forms of online products, and some language learning applications have conquered the educational world due to their simplicity, availability, and mobility. Another online product form that closely aligns with the application is an online platform. Sometimes, these two forms are provided together in the same school, complementing each other by making the educational process more efficient and stable. The online course itself is a popular form for the language learning industry and apart from the above-mentioned lessons by Skype, there is a tendency in the language schools to create their courses, which can be provided with specific software usage of other programs created, especially for the online course. Finally, gamification and smartphones are the two last categorical words that also go close to each other. The first word makes the educational process more manageable, interactive, and enjoyable for the students. As for

the tendency for smartphone involvement in language learning, it is a demand when most of the tasks can be solved remotely, quickly, and without the need to attract extra equipment.

Speaking of the categorical words that indicated an existing tendency to attract students from online space to offline (in the case of language schools – to the countries where the language is spoken), the first word that proves the usage of this tendency is immersion. Immersion language schools mean the best way to master language skills is by immersing oneself in the sphere where the language is spoken, and no online tool or application would allow that. Another word that indicates online language schools aim to bring students to the country where native speakers of the language are being taught live, which is called travel. Regular language schools commonly use this word, which is one of the main reasons people learn foreign languages in general. Finally, there are many words in regular language schools. Online language schools can also use accommodation. In the case of using all these three words on the portals of online language schools, it could be concluded that the schools tended to attract students from online to offline and vice versa.

To find matches of the categorical words on the websites of language schools, a program on Python was written, which allowed students to parse all the pages of all the schools. The parsing results were, by default, downloaded to an Excel Tabel where, in front of each school, indicated the categorical words matching found on the school's websites.

For analysing received data, the findings by each categorical word for each language school were summed up by columns. The medium value for each categorical word was found. This allowed us to see the schools' tendencies in 2020 towards the hybridisation of online education products and educational tourism. All the medium-value data were collected separately to show the tendencies typical for offline studies and online education.

An initial division separation of the data of categorical words on those indicating tendencies towards the development of online studies and those proving the feature of the schools in providing language courses in addition to distance studies.

Overall results from 2020 show that less than half of the schools tended to hybridise online and offline studies forms, transforming those forms into loyalty or trust towards the schools. In addition, online studies were not developed either; only a small number of analysed schools had any offer regarding online studies (those schools positioned themselves as the places for immersion programs and mainly attracted the students for the trips). The results were conducted in 2020, not long before the global changes in every business sphere caused by the COVID-19 unintentionally allowed us to prepare a strong base for further research conducted in 2021 – one year after the language schools passed through the pandemic restrictions.

3.2 *'Secret client' method implementation*

Having an overview of the changes within one year in online products offered among the schools, it was possible to understand how the schools work with a new offer and how they use it to form loyalty and trust among their customers. In the second stage of the current research, it was decided to implement the method of a 'secret client' and get in direct contact with the schools' representatives to reveal how the availability of online services works for the development of educational tourism.

Among the 563 schools analysed, the results of website parsing showed no matches for online offers and offline practices. This allowed matching 422 schools for further analysis. Then, the list of categories was approved that needed to be presented in the e-mail that would be sent to the schools from a potential student who is planning to start with online studies at the schools and, as soon as the pandemic ends, to visit the country for a long-term stay. Finally, a block of questions related to the trip was covered. Whether the school assists with getting the visa and booking the accommodation or if the school has any connections in this field and with such a popular type of student accommodation as host families; lastly, it was asked whether the schools provide any cultural activities to the students when they visit the country. The categories included in the pot were considered to support the third hypothesis of the research. It should be noted that considering current global restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the questions were addressed with a future perspective, not necessarily current situations, as, for example, asking about cultural activities during the lockdowns is unreasonable. It is essential to see what practices were implemented when there was no restrictions rather than what cannot be done now.

Once the request was sent to the matching 422 schools, the replies were received from over 50% of the respondents. Some requests were sent twice for the most accurate further analysis. Out of 422 schools initially matching for the investigation, it was found out some of the schools have changed the format of providing the services: even though their websites stated that they have both online courses and the offer of studying in the country where the language is spoken afterwards, some of the respondents replied they either provide online services only or vice versa. About 50 auto replies were received notification about permanent or constant termination of the operations of the schools caused by the pandemic-related crisis resulting from COVID-19. Therefore, the number of replies was 250 based on the criteria when respondents answered every question covered in the 'secret client' e-mail. Even if the answer was 'no', it was still used for further analysis, meaning that the respondents considered the question, and this type of service is not available at the school. However, it still brings the data for consideration within the scope of the research. The results of both qualitative data collections will be discussed in the following section.

4 Results

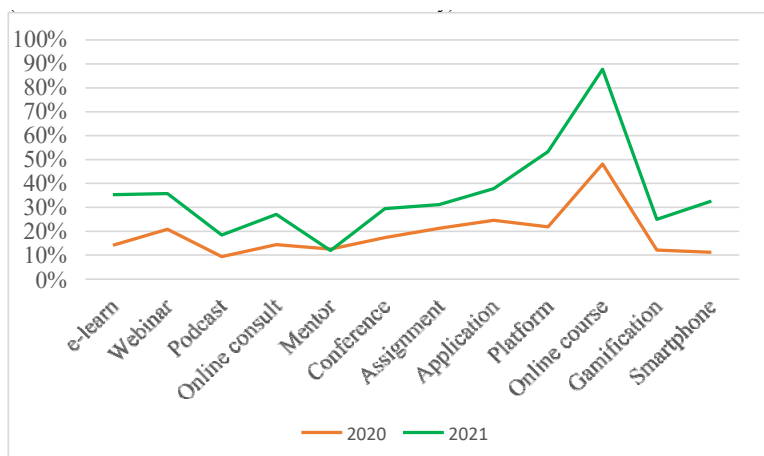
4.1 Online services growth rate analysis

Thus, the same 563 language schools from five European countries were used for the analysis in 2021. The schools' websites were parsed again to find the matches for the above-mentioned words indicating online or offline presence only and the presence of both factors in the schools. The purpose of this stage was not only to run a comparative analysis of the changes that happened in the schools during the year similarly to find out how the formats of online education are being spread following the three-stage approach about the formation of complex educational tourism products enshrined in the research question of the current paper. It was initiated to find out how the schools offer online courses to the students at the early stages of information gathering, what services are provided along with online classes, and what offers exist at the end of the course. These

three stages reflect the loyalty formation idea through the digital trust theory for better language schools' reputation and effective formation of a tourist product.

As presented in Figure 1, there is a tendency towards online course growth in all five countries and other forms of online study components. The following commonly presented word matches after the online course became an online platform. Compared with 2020, the platforms exist in the schools on average in only 21% of the schools, while the same schools in 2021 have shown the presence of online platforms among 53% of the schools. Other online formats or components of online formats also tend to be presented more rapidly than a year ago. At the same time, the offer of immersion practices and services accompanied by either has no changes at all with the data of 2020 or even tends to decrease among the schools.

Figure 1 Offer on online services in language schools of five EU countries in 2020–2021 (% of the total of the schools included in the study) (see online version for colours)



The findings show that even those schools that did not have any offer for online practice previously have modified their program and launched any form of online studies, or even several of them. For example, many schools have started implementing any form of gamification in their courses: in comparison with 2020, where gamification was found only in 11% of the schools, the data for 2021 show that it is now applied in 24% of the schools – the raise has nearly doubled. As mentioned earlier, one of the typical aspects of online studies nowadays, which usually goes together with an online platform and gamification, is the availability of smartphone courses. Therefore, the presence of offers for online classes via smartphone in 2020 was also on average among 11% of the schools, and in 2021, this offer is available already in 32% of the schools. Considering that these schools still tend to be the providers of tourism services, it can be concluded that their complex tourism products have become more substantial and more diversified thanks to the availability of online components.

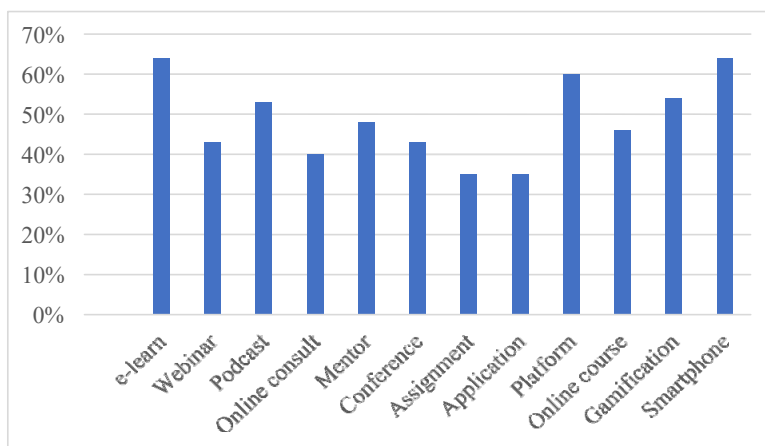
These findings support the first hypothesis, as the educational tourism providers' online presence has increased globally. Still, at the same time, this streamlined effect has brought the ordinary educational tourism product to a new level where not only travel and academic services are provided, similarly a pre-trip online practice that allows immersing into the country's language and culture at the very early stage.

Following up on the common changes in the online services offered, the growth rate of the services was detected. As presented, the findings show that even those schools that did not have any offer for online practice previously have modified their program and launched any form of online studies, or even several of them. For example, many schools have started implementing any form of gamification in their courses: in comparison with 2020, where gamification was found only in 11% of the schools, the data of 2021 show that now it is applied in 24% of the schools – the raise has nearly doubled. As mentioned earlier, one of the typical aspects of online studies nowadays, which usually goes together with online platforms and gamification, is the availability of smartphone courses. Therefore, the offer for online classes via smartphone in 2020 was also on average among 11% of the schools, and in 2021, this offer is available already in 32% of the schools. Considering that these schools still tend to be the providers of tourism services, it can be concluded that their complex tourism products have become more substantial and more diversified thanks to the availability of online components.

These findings support the first hypothesis, as educational tourism providers' online presence has increased globally. Still, at the same time, this streamlined effect has brought the ordinary educational tourism product to a new level where not only travel and academic services are provided. Similarly, pre-trip online practice allows one to immerse oneself in the country's language and culture at a very early stage.

Following up on the common changes in online service offers, the service growth rate was detected. Figure 2 shows that online service dynamics are typical, especially for e-Learning platforms, gamification, and smartphones. These findings support the hypothesis about the rapid growth of online services among selected schools. Figure 2 illustrates that the dynamics of online services are particularly typical for e-Learning platforms, gamification, and smartphones, as these elements appeared more frequently on the websites of schools. These findings support the hypothesis regarding the rapid growth of online services among the selected schools.

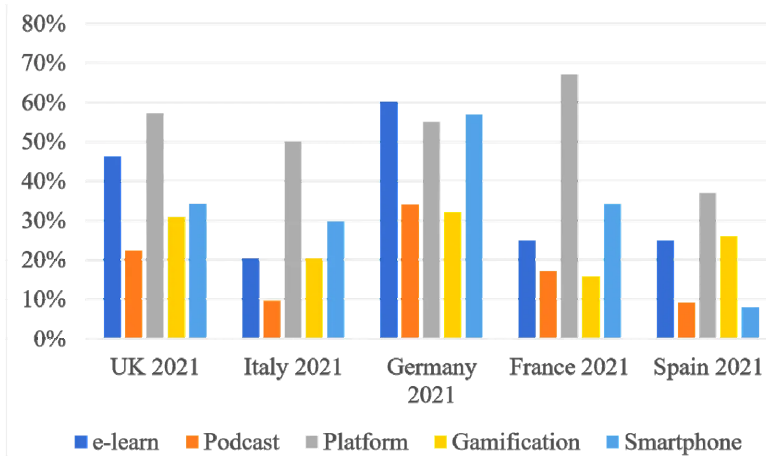
Figure 2 Online services growth rate in five EU language schools between 2020–2021 (% of the total of the schools included in the study) (see online version for colours)



Finally, the spread of the most popular online services was revealed, showing offers on which services have more usage in each country (Figure 3). One of the most developed services turned out to be the platform and the usage of smartphones. Other services vary

slightly by country. Different offers occur since all the investigated countries have different cultural backgrounds and customer care approaches. Hence, the growth of certain online services depends on the: for some countries, social learning is the usage of learning platforms that can implement a core element, while others are first all concerned with the security aspects and, in this regard, tend to develop their offer on online services following authentication factors developing the compatibility of the platforms with smartphones, and so on.

Figure 3 The most spread online services revealed by each country (% of the total of the schools included in the study) (see online version for colours)



All of what has been discovered within the first stage of the research has provided the ground for further investigation on the core idea of the research related to the stages approach aimed at the offer before the start of the course; along with the course process, as well as at the end of the course to enhance tourist product by online services at the language schools. Furthermore, these findings support the second hypothesis, indicating that the growth of online components is as expected enhance the visibility of language schools in the educational tourism market. However, it will be possible to prove this interdependence after a certain period once the educational sphere returns to its regular pace at the end of the pandemic.

4.2 Secret client method implementation

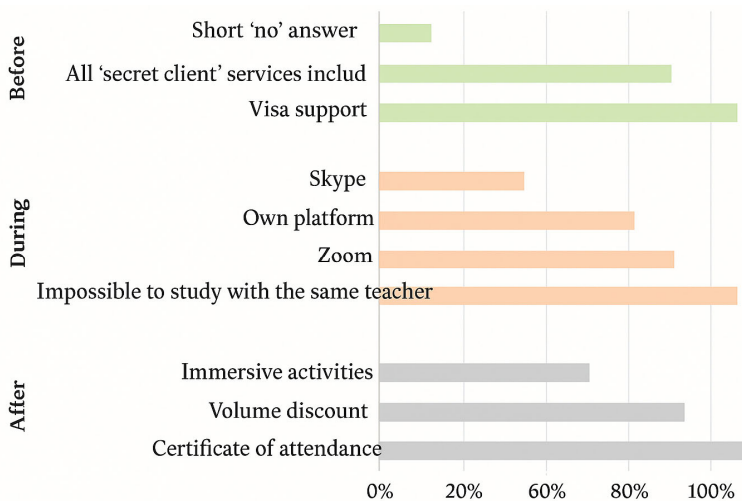
What could be commonly noted from respondents' replies is that even though they represent different countries, the manner of going through the request and the business tone of the replies to repeats from country to country; what made the analysing process more efficient – having relatively similar replies and the base for investigation. Among some of the respondents, there was noted a unique cultural behaviour towards their potential client: the greeting manner, examples referring to the country of origin of the client, ensuring their future students about being a trustworthy supplier for other potential clients from the country where the 'Secret client' is coming from. Finally, soon after the first reply was sent, the schools' representatives actively followed up on the status of the client's inquiry. They ensured that the information was delivered correctly and that their

potential client was still interested in the services. Such a professional marketing approach allowed to ensure that those schools selected for the analysis on the second stage of current research indeed suit the needs for answering the main research question about the three-stage approach for the formation of loyalty and trust among the students of language schools before they book an offline course at the school, along with their online studies experience, as well as afterwards.

The ‘Secret client’ approach outcomes demonstrate several common tendencies towards availability of the services offered on a three-stage basis: before the trip, during the studies, and after the course, which currently exists among language schools (Figure 4). One of them is related to how the schools deliver their online courses. As it was one of the first questions, approved upon the raise of platforms offer found in the result of websites parsing, it was essential to understand how exactly change looked.

Usually, when an institution uses the word ‘platform’ in its services, the schools have their customised e-Learning platform or even an independent learning management system. In the case of the investigated language schools, it turned out most of the schools (70, 8%) tend to use the word combination related to the ‘Zoom platform’, meaning the most popular way of providing online lessons among the schools is by Zoom. Moreover, the schools describe that they mainly use Zoom for group lessons; Skype, according to 39% of replies, provides individual lessons. Other schools note that delivering online lessons depends on the teacher’s preferences.

Figure 4 Availability of the services offered on a three-stage basis: before the trip, during the studies after the course (% of the total of the schools included in the study) (see online version for colours)



Schools number who specify they have a customised platform, not only any of the above-mentioned online services for delivering the lessons, but it was also found that 62.8% of the respondents have such a platform. Even though these schools have their platforms, they still mention that the platforms are integrated with Zoom service, and they use it for running blended learning when the students go through online modules on their own, as they have access to the course materials through the platform and online pieces of training are organised with the integration of Zoom.

It was also noticed among 73% of the respondents that they could provide all mentioned services requested in the 'secret customer' inquiry. Only 3.6% of the schools do not offer a certificate of attendance at the end of the course, while most schools have them. The request that 86% of the respondents have considered impossible was about the possibility for the student to continue studies during an immersion program with the same teacher who studied with them online. This question was initially considered the most likely to have a 'no' answer since it is complicated to organise and fulfil such a request.

However, even though most respondents honestly noted that this could not be done, asking this question allowed us to see how the schools work toward forming loyalty among their clients. If several schools (13.2%) only provided a short 'no' answer without any clarifications, the rest explained their position, apologised for not being able to guarantee it, but assured their potential student that all the teachers at the school are highly professional and changing the teacher will not affect negatively on the student's progress during offline studies.

Covering further replies on the request, it was found that 77.6% of the respondents are ready to provide a volume discount to the student upon their request; some of the schools immediately offered their current special pricing; others tended to be more accurate in giving the discount straight away and preferred to clarify first more details about the trip of the student, and in particular, the duration and the type of the course, as group courses are cheaper than individual studies. A common tendency among those schools that offer volume discounts is that they provide special course pricing for at least 12–14 weeks. The same rule applies to the question about assistance with getting a student visa. Most schools (89.2%) guarantee that a letter of acceptance can be provided at the embassy of the country where the student is going. Still, not more than that and some of the respondents mainly highlight that having a letter of acceptance does not guarantee a potential student's approval for the visa.

One more question shows a confident attitude towards the formation of schools' loyalty and willingness to satisfy any requests of their potential clients. This question is about activities schools can offer students during their offline studies. It revealed comparatively similar activities provided by the schools, like how they see the perspectives of future operations in a short-term period. Therefore, 46.3% of the schools answering the request for possible activities note that during the lockdowns in 2020, there was no space for providing these services. Still, they assure us this will be available soon, and they will continue their best immersive programs as soon as such a possibility appears.

5 Discussion

This paper investigated the changes that occurred in language schools during the pandemic regarding offering online services, focusing on the perspective of educational tourism development. The aim was to reveal how the language schools use online services to form customer loyalty and trust and to understand how online services are used during three phases of tourist product formation: before the trip, during the studies, and afterwards.

The findings revealed in the first stage of the research show that the online component has become an integral part of the complex educational tourism product. In addition, it was found out that schools in different countries differently implement online

services, being more concerned either with the engagement of the students through specific tools of online products or still being more concentrated on the tourism services offered; what is the result can cause less efficient transformation into up-to-date educational tourism provider in comparison with the schools that manage to hybridise both forms successfully. Finally, the results extracted from the ‘secret client’ request implemented to 422 schools confirmed that the schools tend to work towards forming a complex tourist product, and online services are a milestone in this process. Moreover, the results show that language schools can integrate online formats with tourist products to strengthen their presence in the educational tourism market.

Overall, the results show that schools realise the importance of providing online services, and the growth rate of some proves that fact. The respondents’ replies, who were contacted by a ‘secret client,’ highlighted several core approaches existing in the language schools recommended for implementation by educational tourism representatives to enhance potential clients’ interest in language trips. Hence, one of the essential requirements that guarantee students’ loyalty and improve trust among the clients is meeting all the needs of a client and demonstrating readiness to adapt to the requests of their customers by providing not only typical tourism products similarly able to satisfy the needs for the demand on online services. The online services broadcasting presence, in combination with regular tourist activities arranged by the language schools, strengthens the trust towards such a school, thus enhancing the educational tourism role and its development.

6 Conclusions

Based on the trends identified during this study, the orientation of language schools to include online components in their products in both educational and tourist services, it can be concluded that language schools will have to compete acutely with specialised academic and tourist platforms providing a wide range of online services, primarily with platforms providing MOOCs. Therefore, as future research areas, it is possible to foresee the study of formats for the interaction of language schools with such platforms. At the same time, this cooperation can be implemented by placing advertisements for language schools on these platforms, creating, and promoting language and tourism products jointly with the platforms. It can also be assumed that if language schools (primarily British and German language schools) that introduced online technologies into their activities during the pre-pandemic period were in a more advantageous position during the pandemic, then schools with an increased level of services would have certain competitive advantages in the post-pandemic period (since during the pandemic the level and quality of different types of online services provided by schools in other countries have approximately equated). The priority should be constructing creative and innovative immersive learning journeys tailored to diverse students. This means getting to know learners so it would be possible to empower their journey of acquiring knowledge, collaborating with others, thinking critically, and solving problems. Consequently, services associated with offline communication will gain prominence. The objective is to spark their creativity, involve them as collaborators, and guarantee that technologies and pedagogical approaches facilitate their learning rather than detract from it. The emphasis is placed on the learning experience itself, and by prioritising the students’ journey, it

becomes possible to support the forthcoming generation of decision-makers capable of utilising community engagement and critical thinking to develop innovative solutions.

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