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Enrich yourself by helping others: A web content analysis of providers of gap year packages and activities in the Netherlands

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Abstract

With this article, we aim to contribute to a growing academic and public debate on claims about 'taking a gap year' as (an act of) moral tourism, a means of self-development and ultimately resulting in global citizenship. More specifically, we examined how the gap year discourse is exhibited, influenced and shaped through the representation, promotion and construction of gap year packages and activities on websites operated by providers in the Netherlands. Informed by Bourdieu's model of capital accumulation, we conducted a content analysis of websites operated by providers of gap year packages and activities in the Netherlands. Findings show that narratives about gap years primarily focus on positive and personal (future) benefits of accumulating skills and self-development to potential gappers, and in some cases to their parents. The gap year is represented as a commercial product that allows one to explore the world and the Self. The findings also showed that although Dutch providers promote the gap year product as ethical, emphasis is placed primarily on the 'ethical' benefits for the gapper himself or herself. The article concludes with a critical reflection on how representations of reciprocal altruism by providers

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of gap year packages and activities in practice primarily underwrite the accumulation of (cultural) capital and notions of selfhood.

Keywords
gap year, global citizenship, moral tourism, self-development, web content analysis

Introduction

With changes in education policies, the rise of media exposure, and an increasingly uncertain labour market, taking time out to enrich yourself while doing something 'worthwhile' seems ever more appealing. As such, 'taking a gap year' is an increasingly popular activity for young people in many Western countries (Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2004; Snee, 2014). Whereas gap years were initially looked upon as something for philanthropists, high school drop-outs, rebels or those who had 'nothing better to do', nowadays they are seen as experiences that help young people to become global citizens, ethical consumers, better students and perfect professionals (Simpson, 2004). This emphasis on the gap year as a time to do something good and work on one's personal development is also an important selling point for a rapidly expanding gap year industry. Stirred by, and adding to, the present gap year discourses, providers of gap year packages and activities suggest that a well-planned gap year will give young people a competitive edge through a 'sprinkling of CV fairy dust' (Tobin, 2009: n.p.) when placed in the context of an increasingly liquid society and economic uncertainties.

Resultantly, what was first an act of rebellion against society, education or the working life, and regarded as 'wasting time' or a 'free ride' (Butcher and Smith, 2010), the gap year is now considered a personally and socially rewarding endeavour in which one can gain competitive advantage, become a 'better person' and 'do something good for the world' (Van Trijp, 2014). In the United Kingdom, where the present-day growth in gap year numbers is most evident, rough estimations indicate that the number of young people undertaking a gap year prior to enrolling at a university has risen from around 50,000 in 2003 to 500,000 in 2010 (Mintel, 2005; Neeves and Birgnall, 2010). To cater for the needs of these gappers, numerous organisations offering specialised packages ranging from volunteer work, courses, travel itineraries or a combination have sprung up. To illustrate, Jones (2004) documented 85 British organisations and over 800 international organisations offering overseas placements. Despite the fact that recent statistics are not available, it is likely that, as the number of young people taking a gap year has increased, so has the industry.

In the Netherlands, taking a gap year is, likewise, a popular activity, especially among young people. After several years of uncertainty regarding the Dutch governmental scheme on student loans and, subsequently, the shift from a financial gift to a loan, the number of young gappers is expected to increase again (EP-Nuffic, 2016a). Furthermore, and in line with previous studies, research by EP-Nuffic (2016b) illustrated that young people value the gap year experience as a way to become better informed about advanced education choices or as directly meaningful in the context of their course programmes.

In response to the growing interest among young people, there are now at least 66 organisations in the Netherlands offering packages and activities for gappers (Volunteer Correct, 2016). Simultaneously, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and (semi-)governmental institutions have recently entered the gap year domain with, for example, the inclusion of gap years in the career counselling and orientation strategies of secondary (vocational) schools and in the establishment of a research centre Tussenjaar (Gap Year) at Wageningen University. These developments indicate that, similar to trends seen elsewhere in more mature markets, emphasis in gap year programmes based in the Netherlands is placed on individual, direct and personal actions to help others, and the development of one's skills and sense of self.

With this article, we wish to contribute to this growing academic and public debate surrounding claims about the gap year as (an act of) moral tourism, or a means of self-development, that ultimately results in global citizenship. More specifically, we will examine how the gap year discourse is exhibited, influenced and shaped through the representation, promotion and construction of gap year packages and activities on websites operated by providers in the Netherlands. While the scope of the study is limited to websites of 33 Dutch providers, the article aims to illustrate a recurrent trend in how gap years are promoted and produced. The article commences with a theoretical discussion of the gap year phenomenon in the context of structural configurations in (Western) civil societies, after which the methodology of the empirical study is described. Subsequently, the article presents the main results and conclusions and gives suggestions for a future research agenda.

New moral tourism, global citizenship and self-development: a theoretical discussion

The development of tourism at virtually any given destination or market is self-evidently and vitally important to achieve a competitive advantage for attracting tourists, sporting and cultural events, and international investors. In many cases, tourism has contributed, or even has become the main contributor, to a country's gross domestic product (GDP), numbers of employment, export earnings and overall attractiveness (Butcher, 2003; Jones, 2005; Wahab and Cooper, 2001). At the same time, as today's tourists are better educated, more experienced and critically reflexive about their impact on others and the environment, they move away from the standard, mass-produced packages and commercial practices that define the conventional and so-called form of 'mass tourism' (see, for example, Feighery, 2011; Fennell, 2006; Macbeth, 2005; Poon, 1989, 1993; Pritchard et al., 2011; Tribe, 2002, 2009).

This counter-movement of including (more) 'ethics' in tourism, initially described by Wheeller (1993) as 'ego-tourism' and coined by Butcher (2003) as 'New Moral Tourism', has formed a framework for a variety of new and alternative terms and forms of tourism for the few, including community-based tourism, ethical tourism, social tourism, pro-poor tourism, responsible tourism and voluntourism (see, for example, Corti et al., 2010; Harrison and Husbands, 1996; Meyer, 2007; Roe and Urquhart, 2001; Weeden, 2002). The key argument made by advocates of these niche products, consisting of both academics and

the industry, involves the notion that these moralised versions of leisure travels are 'justified less in terms of desires of the consumer and more from perspective of its perceived benign influence on the natural world and on the culture of the host' (Butcher, 2003: 5). Tourism is promoted as a vehicle to assist people in their understandings and responsibilities of 'doing good' in the world, in harmony with others and nature. Moreover, this idea of 'doing good' is packaged and promoted through tourism as exciting and unique experiences that are deemed to be far superior to the mass-produced product. In gap year niche, however, components of many packages do not appear to differ much from those offered by conventional mass tour operators; yet by including humanitarian activities – such as volunteering at schools, building projects and hospitals – they claim to provide a moral 'add-on' to the holiday experience (Butcher, 2003; Hermann, 2013; Mowforth and Munt, 2009). Stepping into the ethical arena of a gap year experience is seen as a responsible act, through and alongside travelling, that can help liberate people from poverty or preserve the environment, while obtaining experiences that add to a sort of global citizenship and better career prospects.

In addition, as collective social identities seem to disappear in an increasingly fragmented and globalised world (Giddens, 1991), young people are forced to design their own unique identity through a range of experiences. Undertaking a gap year is perceived as an important means to obtain distinctive narratives of the self, accumulate cultural capital, and therefore, as Snee (2014) argues, retain 'structural advantage' over their peers (p. 43). These advantages are also reflected by gappers who, following their experience, report becoming better informed about socio-political issues, specific cultures or communities; having increased appreciation for family, friends and others; and feeling more confident, effective and mature (O'Shea, 2011). Although gap years are not only about consumption, they are 'de facto' commodified and individualistic touristic experiences (Mostafanezhad, 2014) that can be bought and consumed with the help of a growing industry of different providers.

In line with Butcher (2003) and Simpson (2004), we argue that, in practice, a person's individual contributions to development are (often) limited and generally derive from a personal mission or pursuit. Nonetheless, the ethical practices and credentials advocated by gap year providers, which configure them as authorities over a certain kind of moral experience, are rarely questioned. Instead of just 'seeing something of the world', the gap year experience is promoted as an ethical alternative for both the host society and the gap year traveller. Resultantly, consumer choices are converted into moral choices, having fun into moral responsibilities, and innocence into cultural awareness. Ironically, these practices are stirred by global commerce and, as Snee (2014) argues, 'might have little to do with global citizenship, but instead [are] the result of global consumerism' (p. 25). Promoting competitive difference, in that sense, is merely a way for providers to open up new markets for consumption (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004) and could ultimately reproduce, rather than challenge, dichotomies about the global North/South division and views of the Self/Other, Helper/Receiver and Modern/Authentic (Butcher, 2003; Heath, 2005; Kendall et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2012; Snee, 2014; Week, 2012; Zavitz and Butz, 2011). In promoting gappers to become citizens of the world – people who are part of, and feel obligated to, a larger community – gap year experiences foremost seem to cater to the purposes and benefits of the consumer. This 'semantic dilution' (Magnette, 2005) renders the concept of global citizenship as something that is directed towards enhancing

self-development (or self-betterment?), including enriching one's economic security, prosperity and individual capacity to compete in the labour market.

Acts of self-development can be viewed as forms of reflexive identity work (Giddens, 1991), an element to strengthen bonds and bridges between individuals and communities (Putnam, 2000). In our study, we followed Bourdieu's (1986) model of capital accumulation in which self-development is foremost an outcome of the investment in cultural capital: it is a 'work on oneself' (p. 85). Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital, as a theory, is able to disrupt the 'common-sense view, which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes' (p. 84). Instead, he argues that 'scholastic achievement' is the effect of a class-based distribution of forms of knowledge and (good) taste, and essentially, linguistic capital. This implies that cultural capital not simply facilitates the fit between habitus and field (what Bourdieu refers to as the 'the game'), but is also an aspect of the strategic deployment of agency to enhance that fit. In case of the gapper population, Jones (2004) noted that White, relatively affluent, privately educated women with higher socio-economic backgrounds dominantly characterise the group. Although external factors might influence the participation rates, these young people are both economically and culturally privileged compared to their peers. Even though Bourdieu's (1986) notion of agency is often criticised for its emphasis on homogeneity and passive agents, the conceptual apparatus still offers a valuable starting point to explore whether and how providers of gap year packages and activities reproduce social structures at the same time as promoting 'packages of good intentions' (Snee, 2014).

Additionally, although Bourdieu's concept was initially designed for research on education, researching how cultural capital is acquired through gap year experiences can enhance the broader understanding of competences that add to the reproduction of advantage in, among others fields, the education system (Atkinson, 2010). As mentioned previously, in practice, gap year experiences have shifted from 'altruistic' acts to (formative) educational projects to enhance career prospects (Soper, 2009). When conducted in the 'right' way, the experience is said to provide gappers with opportunities to undertake learning and education in areas of their life beyond what is offered at home and conventional leisure travels (Snee, 2014). Additionally, Heath (2007) and O'Shea (2014) describe how gappers position themselves from their peers through a 'hierarchy of experiences, based on both location and length of time' (O'Shea, 2014: 27), marking 'certain "types" of gap year more worthwhile than others' (Heath, 2007: 91). Prospective gappers are, therefore, encouraged to make the gap year count and to bring a level of seriousness into their gap year planning in order to maximise the accumulation of cultural capital. Arguably then, gap year experiences must be viewed in terms of moral tourism and as (a tool for) self-development. After describing our research methodology and reporting our empirical analysis of Dutch gap year provider websites, we discuss the ways in which gap year packages and activities are promoted, constructed and represented in these terms of moral tourism and self-development.

Methodology

Although there is an increasing number of studies focussing on the gap year (or related phenomena), there has yet to be a Netherlands case study focused on the gap year as (an

act of) moral tourism, a means of self-development and ultimately resulting in global citizenship. Guided by both inductive and deductive reasoning, our aim was to examine discourses that the gap year exhibited, influenced and shaped through the representation, promotion and construction of gap year packages and activities by providers in the Netherlands. In line with Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), we examined these discourses under the umbrella of constructionism, arguing that public knowledge and ways of representing the world are products of discourses, and how we as individuals understand and make meaning of those experiences is created and maintained by social processes (Burr, 1995). Constructionism is critical of taken-for-granted knowledge since, as Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) argue, our knowledge of the world should not be seen as objective truth. Gap year discourses, in this sense, hold no fundamental truth, yet are contingently constructed and supported through historical and cultural interchanges and interplay among people.

Our study used a qualitative methodology informed by ideas of discourse and grounded theory. More specifically, we examined discourses surrounding the gap year phenomenon through a qualitative content analysis of websites operated by providers of gap year packages and activities in the Netherlands. Besides the explicit inclusion of the term 'gap year' on promotional websites, other key words such as 'world trip', 'working abroad (for young people)', 'volunteering abroad', 'volunteering gap year', 'learning a language abroad', 'gap year organisation' and 'gap year tour operator' were included in our search list. These words were used separately and as combinations through the online search engine Google.com. Based on the total number of hits, and the time and resource constraints that qualitative researchers face, it was deemed impossible to gather an exhaustive and fixed sample. The final sample of 33 provider websites consisted of 12 providers catering to gap year experiences only, and 11 to volunteer work and 10 to language courses that included gap year packages as part of their product. The decision whether to include certain volunteer work or language course providers in the sample was based on their mentioning the word 'gap year (tussenjaar)' on their website or in their promotion material. Only providers with offices in the Netherlands were included in the sample. Table 1 provides an overview of the providers included in the sample.

Between 26 August and 3 September 2014, texts describing products or packages, programmes, testimonials and newsletters were selected and randomly assembled in the workbench software ATLAS.ti. Analysis followed a constant comparative method that involved comparing data during multiple analytical stages and readings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The process of coding included four stages: open (close reading and developing tentative labels for themes), focused (reorganising, combining and redefining general codes), axial (identifying relations between the codes) and theoretical (connecting to theoretical concepts) (Charmaz, 2006: 63). To become fully immersed in the texts, the dataset was initially read several times before categorising segments of the data. Summarising and analytically accounting for pieces of data resulted in understandings about the gap year beyond merely theoretical statement. The analysis started with deductive coding, operationalised in a categorisation matrix and based on theoretical insights derived from the above literature review. Additionally, as certain themes emerged during the data analysis that could not be directly linked to the predetermined categories, open or inductive coding was applied as well. This gave way to new and alternative insights

Table 1. Overview of providers included in the sample.

Gap year providers	Link to website	Location, based in	Market, operates for
Activity International	http://www.activityinternational.nl/	The Netherlands and Belgium	Dutch and Belgian market
Asia Backpackers		The Netherlands	Dutch market
Bienvenido Gap Year	http://www.bienvenidogapyear.com/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Bureau Buitenland	http://www.bureaubuitenland.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Fulbright Center	http://www.fulbright.nl/	The Netherlands and the United States	Dutch and American market
Gap Year At Sea	http://www.gapyearatsea.com/	Internationally, HQ in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Joho	http://www.joho.nl/studie/tussenjaar/ http://www.wereldreis.nl/	Internationally, HQ in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Kilroy	http://travels.kilroyworld.nl/	Internationally, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Stage Nepal	http://www.stagenepal.com/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Travel Active	http://www.travelactive.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Weg Wijs	http://www.weg-wijs.net/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Xtreme Gap	http://www.xtreme-gap.nl/	Internationally, HQ in the United Kingdom, office in The Netherlands	Dutch, Australian and UK market
AFS Interculturele Uitwisselingen Nederland	http://www.afs.nl/	Internationally, HQ in the United States, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Be More	http://www.be-more.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Commundo	http://www.commundo.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch and Belgian market
Dare2go	http://www.dare2go.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Global Spirit	http://www.globalspirit.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Het Andere Reizen	http://www.hetanderereizen.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Projects Abroad	http://www.tussenjaar.nl/ http://www.projects-abroad.nl/	Internationally, HQ in the United Kingdom, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Gap year providers	Link to website	Location, based in	Market, operates for
SIW	http://www.siw.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Travel For Change	http://www.travel4change.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Volunteering Solutions	http://www.volunteeringsolutions.com/nl	Internationally, HQ in the United States, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
WLS International	http://www.vrijwilligerswerk-buitenland.com/		
Don Quijote	http://www.donquijote.nl/	Internationally, HQ in Spain, office in The Netherlands	Dutch, American, UK, German market
Easy Languages	http://taalreizen.com/	Internationally, HQ in Belgium and France, office in The Netherlands	Dutch, UK, Spanish, Italian, German, French, Portuguese, Polish, Japanese and Russian market
Education First	http://www.ef.nl/	Internationally, HQ in Switzerland, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
ESL Taalreizen	http://www.esl-taalreizen.com/nl/	Internationally, HQ in Switzerland, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Inter Language	http://www.interlanguage.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Into	http://www.into-highschool.nl/	Internationally, HQ in Germany, office in The Netherlands	Dutch and broad international market
Italstudio	http://italstudio.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Plus Taalreizen	http://www.plustaalreizen.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Study Globe	http://www.study-globe.com/nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market
Study Travel	http://www.studytravel.nl/	The Netherlands	Dutch market

HQ: head quarters.

beyond those confirming the existing literature on the gap year phenomenon. When no additional codes could be assigned to the texts, the codes were compared and re-grouped based on resemblances or contradictions and labelled as themes.

Before presenting the findings, it is important to stress some boundaries of our empirical work, particularly with regards to the role we play as agents within the gap year discourse. As Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) argue, a researcher who does research on a discourse is often part of the culture and phenomenon under study, and therefore shares many of the common-sense and taken-for-granted understandings expressed in the data. In this case, the primary researcher was a Dutch, female student in her mid-20s with certain experiences similar to those of gap year products. It is thus possible that fragments of text concerning the gap year discourse were taken for granted and, as a consequence, were not (fully) analysed in the results. Accordingly, our analysis is best viewed as being partial. Furthermore, personal values and truths influence the way data are perceived or analysed. As this research project is based on the social constructionist perspective, it is believed that all 'reality' is socially constructed. The way the researcher makes sense of reality and truth is therefore also partly socially constructed; the researchers are part of this construction process. Accordingly, our analysis is best viewed as being situated. Another boundary concerns the vast amount of information that the Internet has to offer (Herring, 2010), creating the danger of getting tangled in an overload of information and potential data/media. With the help of key words, thematic categories and other predefined restrictions for the sample, the extensive amount of Internet text was effectively reviewed with(in) a reasoned time and resource limits. Additionally, most website texts analysed were in Dutch and translated into English by the authors for publication. Since specific sayings, words or concepts in Dutch are not entirely translatable into English, our rendering herein might silence meanings lost in translation from data to representation.

Findings

The central aim of our web content analysis was to examine claims about the gap year as (an act of) moral tourism, a means of self-development and ultimately resulting in global citizenship. To accomplish this, the objective of the content analysis was to look at how the gap year discourse is exhibited, influenced and shaped through the representation, promotion and construction of gap year packages and activities on websites operated by providers in the Netherlands. The findings are presented in two sections; the first concerns the gap year as (an act of) moral tourism, and the second illustrates the gap year as (a tool for) self-development.

The gap year as (an act of) moral tourism

The findings from the content analysis foremost illustrated providers' notions of offering 'different' packages and activities compared to those offered by more conventional tourism-related organisations. This construction of the gap year as an alternative to conventional holidays was demonstrated by a number of identified themes that work to enlarge this difference. These stories, often describing the packages and activities as something

'metamorphic' and 'adventurous', are used as a magnifying glass to enlarge the distinction, both in time and space, between their offerings and more conventional packages and activities. By doing so, they create a sense of uniqueness that contrasts other leisure moments, representing the gap year as act of ethical consumption and something that 'ordinary' tourists would never consider doing. By targeting, as Butcher (2003) notes, those with a more 'sensitive' behaviour with regards to environments and cultures, providers claim to offer ways to 'make a difference to issues held dear through what and where one buys' (p. 2–3). This narrative of moral superiority is illustrated in texts from websites operated by Gap Year at Sea and Xtreme Gap:

> Yes, you can book a flight to Thailand, and spend a few months in South-East Asia among thousands of backpackers who all do the same stuff. For sure, you'll get a tan. And see some nice beaches. But if you're up for a life enhancing experience that truly bridges the gap between youth and adulthood, this is your moment. (Gap Year at Sea, accessed 27 August 2014, translated by authors)

> Young people who are a bit more adventurous than the average ones who go to Greece or Spain. And young people who do not get excited anymore by spending the day screaming on an inflatable banana behind a speedboat or drunk on the beach. (Xtreme Gap, accessed 25 August 2014, translated by authors)

Nonetheless, the products offered by the providers also illustrate elements associated with mass tourism. The analysis pointed out several conventional elements of mass tourism that call into question the 'adventourness' of gap year experiences, including a 24-hour emergency number, accommodation, transport, legal issues, volunteer placement and, in some cases, the inclusion of additional historical and social activities.

The websites show that the gapper as consumer can choose from a wide array of options to create specific and/or 'all-inclusive' packages consisting of volunteering activities, travelling and learning a language:

> Our programmes are flexible and are totally custom-made while based on your wishes. Ask us for the possibilities! Are you having a tough time choosing between different countries? Then choose one of our combination packages or put together a combination of different countries yourself! (Het Andere Reizen, accessed 3 September 2014, translated by authors)

As this quote illustrates, undertaking a gap year may not only be represented as doing the right thing or taking care of others; it can also be represented as doing something pleasurable and for one's self.

Indeed, findings suggest that promotional emphasis is placed on the individual experience. Providers place the gapper at the centre of the gap year experience, instead of the host community or environment in which the experience takes places. In doing so, the gap year 'destination' merely seems to facilitate in the gapper's quest for authenticity, a sense of community belonging, spirituality or being closer to nature (Butcher, 2003). We see this, for example, in references made to exploring the real and authentic Thailand/Laos/South America, which suggests that 'real' and 'authentic' (rural) parts in the world

remain discoverable for gappers if only they depart from the beaten tracks used by 'ordinary' tourists and 'egocentric' backpackers.

Additionally, these destination representations contribute simultaneously to preserving the past while denying host communities the capacity to engage in processes of creative change. For example, Kilroy and Xtreme Gap actively promote the preservation of authentic and traditional communities on their websites. Under the rubric of gappers acting morally, host communities are often positioned as sanctuaries in a world devastated by mass tourism development. To overcome concerns of not knowing what 'real life' is like, providers claim to offer potential gappers the opportunity to be part of this 'authentic life'. As Kilroy and Xtreme Gap state:

> This specialized project allows you to experience genuine Cambodian life and culture, well away from the tourist trail, living alongside enthusiastic, passionate and experienced staff and volunteers. (Kilroy, accessed 26 August 2014, translated by authors)

> Umphang is situated in the limestone valleys of the Tak province in North Central Thailand, in the middle of misty rice fields with views on the Burmese horizon. There where the Thai life is still authentic and the locals are still surprised by seeing Westerners. (Xtreme Gap, accessed 25 August 2014, translated by authors)

By advocating authenticity as a source of comfort in an uncertain present and as something that can be gazed upon, providers of gap year packages and activities also construct a feeling of humbleness in a world that is difficult to understand. As a response to technological advances, economic and political changes, cultural transformations and increased communication and travel, the gap year product is represented as an experience that provides a sense of freedom and personal autonomy, which are said to have disappeared from daily life. In addition, the activities are promoted as rewarding as gappers get the opportunity to show their 'good intentions', and 'make a difference' for the people and places they come across. Potential gappers are frequently addressed with 'you', and sentences such as 'you can make a difference' and 'you can help' are repeatedly found. The impact of their presence is, however, not clearly communicated by the providers; just being there seems to be enough. As Asia Backpackers states on its website:

> The local organizations are especially in need of donations and help from abroad regarding volunteer work. Volunteers from Western countries are especially welcome because they bring a lot of knowledge with them where the organizations can profit from. (Asia Backpackers, accessed 27 August 2014, translated by authors)

In line with Simpson (2004), our findings demonstrate the idea that proclaimed needs of the host community or environment can easily (and only) be solved by those from more developed countries. Paradoxically, most providers emphasise on their website that those interested in undertaking a gap year are not required to hold special knowledge, skills or experiences in order to start at a project; they simply have to be enthusiastic and flexible. Simpson (2004) has argued that the lack of specific qualifications is what makes

undertaking a gap year, often including volunteering activities, so interesting for young people – the freedom to join the projects they want. Some gap providers, however, do mention the need for 'soft' requirements for potential gappers, such as being interested in other cultures, a willingness to live in less luxury for a while and an ability to adjust to different norms and values. Thus, as Butcher and Smith (2010) argue, gap year volunteers can experiment with their identity and can take, and pay for, the role they want within the host community, while no attention is paid to their lack of experience or right qualifications. Illustrative examples of the (un)qualified 'helper' serving 'needy' destination include

> No, this is no requirement! It is an advantage when you would have specific working experience, however it is more important that you have the right attitude and motivation. To do volunteer work you have to be flexible, have a mature and independent mentality, be innovative and have to be able to withstand a primitive environment. (From the website of Travel Active, accessed 26 August 2014, translated by authors)

> Uganda is a country that has a great deal of poverty. The quality of the education and healthcare is – from a Western perspective – low. Travel 4 Change offers a couple of fun, informative, but mostly useful projects in which you as a volunteer or an intern can make a difference in the development of the Ugandans and the Ugandan society. (From the website of Travel For Change, accessed on 3 September 2014, translated by authors)

To conclude, and in line with Butcher and Smith (2015), our findings suggest that Dutch providers frame gap year packages and activities as a product of life politics; the individual who is looking to make a difference 'buys' a product and in this way justifies his or her lifestyle as morally right. The buying of this morally right product can therefore be seen as being part of the wider agenda of ethical consumption. Providers, in this sense, target potential gappers with the notion that 'you can make a difference' and stir the need to have a more justifiable lifestyle.

The gap year as (a tool for) self-development

All Dutch providers of gap year packages and activities emphasise on their websites the relevance of their products in the quest for broadening one's horizons–something that, they argue, would not be possible when staying home. The gap year products are promoted as an investment you make in yourself – making you more aware of yourself and what you want in life. Mirroring Ansell's (2008) study on gap year volunteering, our analysis illustrated that the web content addresses young people in a way that assumes they are under increasing pressure to participate in the right form of identity work. Echoing the results of Sin's (2009) study, it seems Dutch providers operate with the premise that 'many volunteer tourists are typically more interested in fulfilling objectives relating to the "self"' (p. 497). Our findings also show that providers advocate that through their offered (commodified) 'constructive' activities, gappers will not only help the host community but also get the opportunity to develop their personal skills, personality traits and embodied knowledge. Placing self-development, and in some cases the personal desire to travel, over altruistic motivations of 'doing something good', raises

questions about the intrinsic motivations and expected outcomes related to gap year experiences. Indeed, our findings lend support to the argument that gap year experiences are foremost represented as tools for individualised identity work, as expressed vividly in the following website texts:

> The ports will open up new worlds, the programs will enrich you. In essence, on board Gap Year at sea you'll grow a completely new you. (Gap Year At Sea, accessed 27 August 2014, translated by authors)

> Almost graduated and in need for a gap year? Looking for a challenge to develop yourself and make a contribution? Then custom-made volunteer work might be something for you! (SIW, accessed 2 September 2014, translated by authors)

Besides viewing gap years as a tool for individualised identity work, website representations emphasise the gap year as a mechanism for accumulating cultural capital. In line with previous findings, providers do not emphasise the conscious self-creation of cultural capital gained through gap year activities, but stress the improvement of 'soft skill, greater maturity, enhanced self-awareness and increased independence' (cf. Heath, 2007: 100). These skills are communicated as being essential – and unobtainable through formal education – to identity work in a society that requires flexible, charismatic and global citizens. Travelling and participating in new cultures and new places, especially in underdeveloped areas, is deemed to increase gappers' experience and knowledge of the world (see also Butcher and Smith, 2010; Heath, 2005, 2007). This is illustrated in the following website texts:

> What will you achieve with volunteering or interning abroad?
>
> - Acquiring practical and theoretical knowledge.
>
> - Developing of intercultural skills.
>
> - Developing communication skills related to patients and colleagues.
>
> - Enhancing your management and organization skills.
>
> (Stage Nepal, accessed 27 August 2014, translated by authors).

> While working abroad you will learn totally new skills than the ones you learned in high school. It is the perfect way to develop some practical experience, next to discovering new countries, and to make some extra money. (From the website of Travel Active, accessed 26 August 2014, translated by authors)

Although the Dutch providers claim that gap year experiences offer the opportunity to acquire 'soft' skills in addition to formal education at home, some providers also offer educational courses and certificates, for example, to become a certified dive instructor. Simpson (2004) argues that these types of certificates institutionalise the

idea of the gap year even further – that the year off needs to be filled with activities and experiences that are deemed legitimate and worthwhile. Language providers especially promote the relevance of such certification, arguing that not only being able to communicate in other languages is important, but having a recognisable certificate is vital when applying for jobs or enrolling into certain university programmes (Heath, 2007). Our findings illustrate that learning new skills and languages is represented as a way to gain international work experience and broaden social networks. Especially good knowledge of modern languages is presented as a vital element for a career in an increasingly international context:

> Learning a language is a serious matter. Give a boost to your career with one of our programs that will introduce you to a specific subject or acquire international work experience through one of our internship options. We will always make sure that you will add value to your resume during your experience abroad. (Education First, accessed 28 August 2014, translated by authors)

Ultimately, the acquired soft skills and certified experiences are represented as factors that will make the gapper a more 'interesting' and 'qualified' individual (see also, Butcher and Smith, 2010; Heath, 2007; Lyons et al., 2012; Simpson, 2004).

The emphasis placed on acquiring skills and experiences while making new friends or enhancing 'your' international network is noteworthy. Statements such as 'doing nice things with your new friends' (JoHo) and 'your time abroad will offer you many opportunities to make new friends' (Travel Active) were identified regularly in the websites analysed. This extension of an existing network of relations, or 'field', contributes to what Bourdieu (1994) has called 'feel for the game'. As the gap year experience is created around the gapper as 'helper' and the host community as 'receiver', they reproduce appropriate actions based on predetermined accounts of the gap year constructed by providers of gap year packages and activities. In doing so, these providers tend to strengthen existing individual agency and reflection, and exacerbate existing representations of the world and Others. Engaging in gap year activities is consistently promoted as a way of placing leisure activities in a moral hierarchy of 'good' taste.

Additionally, providers suggest that the cultural capital acquired while undertaking a gap year can ultimately be turned into economic capital and used as a competitive advantage in job markets (Simpson, 2004; Tickell, 2001). Soft skills that gappers learn abroad, for instance, may be used to rank individuals 'in a climate of increased competition' (Heath, 2007: 100). Travel Active captures such sentiments vividly on their website:

> You will also meet people from around the world. Because of this you will enhance your network, something you can use well in your later employment. And of course it is good for your CV. Companies think it is a definite advantage when you possess overseas experiences. This means you are flexible, independent and you can easily adapt to new environments. (Travel Active, accessed 26 August 2014, translated by authors)

Ultimately, our analysis showed that undertaking a gap year experience is simultaneously represented as 'doing something good' and as a way to perfect one's personality package. It is promoted as an experience that builds one's charismatic identity in order to

successfully enter the competitive job market or successfully enrol at a university (Heath, 2007).

Concluding discussion

The contemporary gap year is believed to be a legacy of the so-called 'year out' in the 1960s and 1970s when youth travelled the 'hippie trails' from Europe to Asia (Hermann, 2013). These first travels, undertaken by thousands of young people, were an expression of the urge for adventure, search for new experiences and a means for self-exploration (Heath, 2005). These elements still seem to drive the increasing present-day popularity of the gap year, especially among young people in many Western countries. In this article, we have examined the representation of the gap year product in the Netherlands through a content analysis of Dutch provider websites that link their activities to the gap year experience. Our findings have illustrated that notions of new moral tourism and ethical travel are used in the promotion, representation and construction of the gap year phenomenon (cf. Butcher, 2003; Simpson, 2004). In line with existing literature, these Dutch providers seem to reject the conventional and mass forms of tourism, and promote their products as more adventurous and 'real' experiences, whatever 'real' might be.

Throughout this article, we have implied that the extent to which these experiences are adventurous and 'authentic' remains ambiguous. Travelling to unknown and (often) underdeveloped remote areas promises to be exciting at first, yet the content analysis also showed that much of the trip is prepared and packaged well ahead of time. In line with Lyons et al. (2012), our findings support the notion that the gap year experience is produced as a commodified, mass-market, packaged experience, which combines the desire to see the 'real' world with the comfort of organised travelling. In other words, as Simpson (2004) comments, 'the gap year has evolved from an alternative activity inspired by tales from the hippie trail and dominated by the charity sector, into an industry of commercial companies' (p. 143).

By stating that their programmes combine exciting packages with empowering experiences, providers of gap year packages and activities promote the gap year as a meaningful way to act ethically, to make a difference in the world. By emphasising young people's responsibility for creating a better world (or self?), providers claim that taking a gap year will not only help to acquire important life skills but also that the experience will act as a means to become an ethical, global citizen. Additionally, the gap year experience is often promoted by stressing that the gapper 'can make a difference', assuming they are needed to help the underdeveloped host community. We agree with Sin (2009) who states that this strengthens dichotomies between the 'helper' and 'receiver'. In doing so, providers place an emphasis on the idea that an 'individual', communicated by the word 'you', apparently can make all the difference. In line with the notion of life politics (Giddens, 1991) and ethical consumption (Butcher, 2003), this, however, merely enforces the representation of the gapper as superior to the local community, as well as their peers. Taking a gap year involves physical mobility to a periphery destination, which will lead to social mobility after returning to the gapper's centre. Therefore, although the gap year is promoted as a way of 'doing good' while exploring the world, it is foremost communicated as a means to discover one's self. Indeed, Dutch providers of gap year packages

and activities focus on positive benefits of doing a gap year in terms of broadening horizons and discovering new worlds, which fosters self-development, learning about other cultures, more mature and responsible citizens, and global awareness (Simpson, 2004). As such, cultural capital is seen as an aspect of the strategic deployment of agency and can be used to enhance personal development (cf. Bourdieu, 1986).

Butcher and Smith (2010) and Lyons et al. (2012) argue that the gap year products are promoted as an experience that benefits both the local community and the gapper. The representation of such 'reciprocal altruism' was not clearly found in this study. Results showed that providers place personal benefits over reciprocity in their promotion of gap year programmes and activities. As such, the promotion of gap years as 'helping others, to enrich yourself' raises questions about the altruistic character of the experience. In line with Sin (2009), this study has illustrated that the providers foremost promote the impact on self-development, but also simply the desire to travel, rather than helping others and doing something good. This can also be related to the role of parents in the decision-making process. Parents, being able to influence the choices of the gappers, might be addressed by gap year providers assuming that they are interested in the 'risks' of taking a gap year which will benefit the future career of their children.

Nonetheless, as this research only examined the representation, promotion and construction of the gap year phenomenon and discourse from a provider's perspective, future research is necessary to explore the gap year experience and (perceived) benefits from the perspective of the gapper, as well as their parents. In this regard, future research is required to explore the role of parents in the decision-making process and how providers influence parents' understandings of the gap year phenomenon and its (perceived) benefits. It is also equally important to get an understanding of 'the Other' in the gap year experience and what is happening in the receiving space: the local, the host, the help-receiver. We have already noticed a mental shift of gap year experiences in both the public and academic discourse (Butcher and Smith, 2015; Söderman and Snead, 2008; Sin, 2009; Zavitz and Butz, 2011), as these types of holidays are increasingly questioned for their impact on host communities. Additional research must further unpack claims of the gap experience as moral tourism, and how different providers (within the Netherlands and beyond) continue to promote, represent and construct so-called ethical products.

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