

## INNOVATIONS OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN TOURISM SERVICES FOR SENIORS

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The aim of the article is to analyse the innovative activities of travel agencies in terms of offers for seniors. The presented innovations will cover such aspects as the preparation of programmes of tourist trips, adjusting the offer to seniors' service and marketing communication.

**Design** – The article has been divided into three parts: theoretical approach to innovation in tourism; needs of seniors as a source of innovation in travel agencies; innovative activities of travel agencies in Poland in terms of offers for seniors.

**Methodology** – The critical analysis of literature (theoretical part), the questionnaire survey, desk research, CAWI method (practical part).

**Approach** – The research is associated with the observed trends taking place in today's market and changes in the structure of demand for tourist services. An increasing number of seniors contributes to the growth in demand for the services. Not only does this mean the need to adapt existing services to meet the needs of the consumer groups, but also their diversification and innovation of product and marketing.

**Findings** – Travel agencies in Poland begin to notice the significance of seniors in the tourism market. It should be highlighted that creating offers for seniors requires not only adapting event programmes to the identified needs of seniors but also changing the traditional perception of a senior.

**Originality of the research** – This article discusses the research seldom presented in the literature. It analyses the contemporary, complex problems vital for an ageing society.

**Keywords** innovation, travel agency, seniors, tourism product, marketing

### **INTRODUCTION**

Competition in the market of travel agencies and the diversification of tourist needs are the main factors influencing the necessity of innovations in tourism enterprises. According to the reason for developing innovations, they can be divided into demand-related ones (initiated by the market as a result of consumer needs) and supply-related ones (initiated by science and technology) (Janasz and Kozioł-Nadolna 2011, 31). Innovations in enterprises can result from trends observed in the market. These can include the changing demographic structure of the European society and, consequently, an increasing share of the elderly among consumers of many services, also tourism services. Moreover, changes in the seniors' lifestyle, especially spending their free time in a healthy and increasingly more active way, influence their growing interest in tourism. On the other hand, changes taking place in the structure of offers of some travel agencies can inspire other travel agencies to innovate. Additionally, the increasing number of scientific articles highlighting the significance of seniors as a

prospective target segment of travel agencies indicates the possibilities of searching for development trends in adapting the offer to seniors' needs and expectations.

The objective of the article is to analyse the innovative activities of travel agencies in terms of offers for seniors. The presented innovations concern such aspects as tourist event programmes, adapting the offer to seniors' expectations and marketing communication. The article has been divided into three parts. The first part includes theoretical issues pertaining to innovations in tourism with respect to their significance in providing services to seniors. The second part concerns the needs of seniors as the source of innovations in travel agencies. The third part is empirical and presents the findings of the survey conducted among travel agencies in Poland on the basis of which their innovative activities have been evaluated. Moreover, the third part also includes the examples of innovative solutions.

## **1. INNOVATIONS IN TOURISM - THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In general, innovation issues are a common area of scientific reflection. Nevertheless, scientific discussions on innovation in the tourism sector are fragmentary. As noted by K. Czernek (2014, 56-57), they are most often influenced by tourism innovation (Hjalager 1997; Weiermair 2006), the use of information technology in the tourism sector (Aldbert et al. 2011; Camisón and Monfort-Mir 2012; Jolly and Dimanche 2009), tackle the determinants of innovation, and in particular the impact of tourism market characteristics on different types of innovation and on innovation decisions (Hjalager 2002; Richards and Carson 2006).

For the purposes of these considerations, the following framework of the theoretical part of the article is defined. The selected definitions of innovation are presented, paying attention to the classic definition of this term and to the practical approach. The most common types of innovations found in the literature are listed below and referenced to the tourism sector.

A very popular and classical definition of innovation is the one formulated by J. Schumpeter. According to this approach, it is a new combination of production means which can occur in such situations as launching a new product (service) onto the market, introducing a new production or sales method previously unknown in a given industry, opening a new market in a given industry, obtaining a new source of raw materials or semi-finished goods and reorganising or developing some industry (Schumpeter, 1960). Although the definition concerns tangible goods, it can also refer to the area of services, including tourism services. It should be stressed, however, that there are authors who have studied the services sector in recent times (Sundbo et al. 2007; Gallouj and Sundbo 2002; Hjalager 2002). In this context, while several authors indicate that innovation in services and in manufacturing are closely related, other authors establish a difference between them (Sundbo et al. 2007; Pires et al., 2008, cit. in: Carvalho and Costa 2011).

On the other hand, according to OECD (2005) the essence of innovation is introducing any novelties (changes) in the activity of enterprises. Implementing a new (changed) product consists in offering it on the market, whereas implementing new processes, organisational methods or marketing in using them by enterprises. In literature, it is also assumed that innovations are changes that are intentionally introduced and should improve the existing reality. Whereas, as emphasises Wszendybył-Skulska (2010, 618) some authors relate this definition to new technological solutions, the others state that innovation is any change concerning values, beliefs and ideas. Some people consider innovation in terms of inventions and radical changes, while others in terms of small and minor improvements or modifications. Therefore, one of the most accurate definitions seems to be the one proposed by E.M. Rogers who considers innovation as everything which is perceived by an individual as new regardless of the objective newness of a given idea or object (Rogers 1983). Therefore, referring to tourism it should be assumed that innovation means any changes in organisation, management, tourism infrastructure, products, demand, supply and preferences which individuals or entities consider as new, that is better than the previous ones (Wszendybył-Skulska 2010, 618). According to Fagerberg (2006, 1), innovations are new and better solutions than those applied so far that have an impact on socio-economic living conditions.

To sum up innovation can be an idea, practice or object perceived by a unit as novelty, and at the same time it does not matter if an idea is objectively new, or only treated as new by a particular environment. Thus, the broad approach may include – among the others – the aspects such as (Zbigniew 2015, 491-492):

- Making use of knowledge in order to create a new one;
- Introduction of something new, a newly introduced thing, novelty, reform;
- An idea, behaviour or thing which is in terms of quality different from existing, well-known forms;
- A new, so far unknown way of meeting human requirements;
- A profitable change resulting from conscious needs or systematic observation of the outside environment.

Innovation in tourism consists in introducing changes in the offered tourism products, developing new products and implementing better solutions in the processes of providing services to clients (Olearnik and Pasek 2014, 91).

In literature among the types of innovation in tourism most often mentioned are product or service, process, managerial, management and institutional innovations (Hjalager 2010, 2-4).

Olearnik and Pasek emphasise that a characteristic feature of the whole sector of tourism services is the merging of specific innovation types. It means that it is not always possible to assign a given innovation to one type only. A modern client expects not only comfort and safety but also adventures and experiences. Due to these new demands, there is a need to combine various innovation types into one unique tourism product which makes a given company stand out in the market. In general, a starting point is product innovation compatible with process, organisational and marketing innovations (Olearnik and Pasek 2014, 92-93).

Product or service innovations refer to changes directly observed by the customer and regarded as new, either in the sense of never seen before or new to the particular enterprise or destination. Product or service innovations are perceptible to tourists to such an extent that they may well become a factor in the purchase decision (Hjalager, 2010, 2). Product innovation is the market introduction of a new or a significantly improved good or service with respect to its characteristics or intended uses. This includes significant improvements in technical specifications, components and materials, incorporated software, users' friendliness or other functional characteristics (Eurostat 2014 as cit. in: Rusu 2016, 167). For travel agencies, product innovations are an additional factor of production or provision of services. As B. Aldebert et al. present, 70.7% of innovations in tourism are product innovations (Aldebert et al. 2011, 1210).

Process innovation is clearly defined as the implementation of a new or significantly improved production process, distribution method or support activity for goods or services. This includes changes in technique, equipment and/or software (Eurostat, 2014, as cit. in: Rusu 2016, 167). It is also stated that process innovations are renewals of the prescriptive procedures for producing and delivering the service and could be divided into two categories: innovation in production processes (back office) or in delivery process (front office) (Carvalho and Costa 2011, 27).

Marketing innovation is considered to be the implementation of a new marketing method involving significant changes in product design or packaging, product placement, product promotion or pricing. These are aimed at better addressing customer needs, opening new markets or newly positioning a firm's product on the market with the objective of increasing the firm's sales. The distinguishing feature is the implementation of a marketing method not previously used by the firm. (Eurostat 2014, as cit. in: Rusu 2016, 167). The best known type of marketing innovation is new media and techniques for promoting tourism products and services.

Organisational innovation is described as the implementation of a new organisational method in the firm's business practices, workplace organisation or external relations. These can be intended to increase a firm's performance by reducing costs (administrative, transaction or supplies), improving workplace satisfaction or gaining the access to non tradable assets (such as non-codified external knowledge). The distinguishing feature is the implementation of an organisational method not previously used by the firm and that is the result of strategic decision taken by management. (Eurostat 2014, as cit. in: Rusu 2016, 167).

Apart from the aforementioned types of innovations, it is important to mention also today's most important social innovations, which may also be related to innovations in the tourism sector. Social innovation, also referred to as user driver innovation, is defined as any activity that is based on the original use of the resources (human, material, financial, informational) and the involvement of partners representing different sectors of the economy in order to solve community-specific problems. Among implemented and disseminated good innovative practices are, inter alia, measures to promote active and healthy ageing (Olejniczuk-Merta 2012, 30-31), a

practical example of which is the Senior Travel Programme introduced in Poland in 2009 under the European Social Calypso Programme.

## **2. NEEDS OF SENIORS AS A SOURCE OF INNOVATIONS IN TRAVEL AGENCIES**

Innovations in travel agencies can be created as a result of internal as well as external factors. Hjalager proposes to divide the sources of innovation into three categories: entrepreneurship, technology/demand impact and innovation systems (Hjalager 2010). Among the types of innovations developed in tourism companies, the greatest number of innovations takes place during cooperation with a client and as a result of collaboration and internal integration as well as collaboration with external partners (Januszewska 2010, 38).

As it was mentioned in the introduction to the study, demographic changes as well as changes in modern seniors' lifestyle can be significant factors stimulating innovations in travel agencies. These changes require constant monitoring of consumer needs and behaviours. Identified needs can be stimulants to product innovations. As Kociszewski (2017, 93) emphasises, recognising the behaviours of seniors as consumers should not be based only on undergoing quantitative changes which, unfortunately, it is often narrowed down to. The key to understanding them is also to notice a qualitative character of the evolution of the senior client model. I. Bondos (2013, 32) aptly observes that "currently, we witness the development of a completely different profile of a senior consumer in the market". According to Ł. Jurek (2012, 32), the traditional type of client, who is very pragmatic, willing to save money, characterised by a dislike to technological novelties and by very limited demands, is disappearing. Their place is being taken by a new (although similar in terms of age) group of consumers who feel comfortable in the market economy, derive satisfaction from a consumerist lifestyle, have many interests and are in a better financial situation (Jurek 2012, 32 as cit. in: Kociszewski 2017, 93).

On the other hand, the research undertaken by J. Kowalczyk-Anioł (2013,146) shows that next generations of Poles value comfort and relaxation more and more. Additionally, the observed trend oriented at health and fitness, that is maintaining vitality, is the next distinctive feature of baby boomer tourism. S. Wei and A. Millman (2002, as cit. in: Patterson 2006) even suggest that the range of activities offered during a tourist stay should be expanded in order to enhance a general level of psychological satisfaction of senior tourists.

The findings of the research conducted by Kociszewski (2017) among 610 seniors also indicate some features concerning the needs of senior tourists which should be taken into consideration when creating product innovations in the form of offers addressed to seniors. Event programmes should take account of needs resulting from aims of seniors' travelling which are most often sightseeing and recreation. During tourist stays seniors are most willing to spend time visiting museums, historic sites and national parks. Therefore historic cities are preferred travel destinations. When selecting a tourist offer at the moment of purchasing, the most decisive aspect is the trip

programme, dates and route and, only then, price. It should be noted that during sightseeing seniors pay most attention to the programme execution and a tour guide, whereas in the case of recreational stays the most important element is accommodation and means of transport. In terms of accommodation, the most significant aspect is the location of a facility and then room and facility equipment as well as the location of a room in the facility. The main barrier they have to overcome during trips is too fast pace of sightseeing and too little free time.

### **3. INNOVATIVE ACTIVITIES OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN POLAND IN TERMS OF OFFERS FOR SENIORS**

In order to assess the innovative activity of travel agencies in Poland as a method of obtaining primary data, a survey questionnaire was selected based on a standardised questionnaire. A research technique CAWI (Computer Assisted Website Interview) was used which is increasingly popular in the social sciences. The choice of the method was dictated by the low cost of carrying out such studies, the speed of obtaining information and the need for information of a general nature. Bearing in mind the limitations of the CAWI method, the questionnaire was constructed in a way that allowed it to be filled once, and the prepared travel agency database was reliable and corresponded to the structure of travel agencies in Poland. The survey was sent to 2,000 travel agencies entered into the Central Register of Tour Operators and Tourism Retailers/nearly 46% of the travel agencies in Poland in March 2017/. The survey was completed by 8.8% of the respondents, and the return was within the limits 8-9% for research conducted using electronic tools (Pawlicz 2008, Pawlicz 2009).The analysis was based on 177 questionnaires.

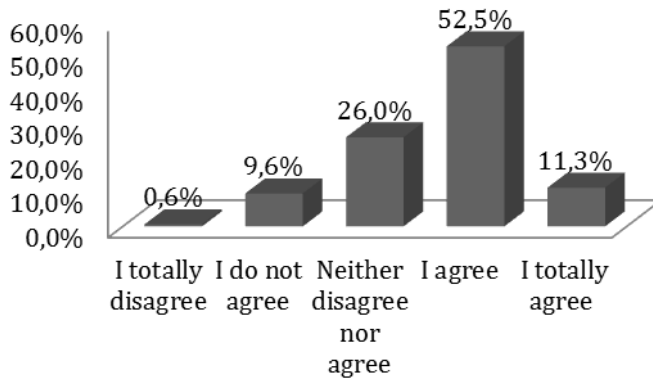
The questions in the questionnaire were aimed at determining whether travel agencies in Poland perceive the increasing share of seniors among consumers of tourist services and whether they therefore introduce product innovations in the form of offers addressed to seniors. Further research questions addressed the ways in which the bureaus used to distinguish seniors' offers and innovations in their offerings, taking into account the needs of this group of consumers. The article hypothesises that the growing role of seniors in society and the changing lifestyle of seniors, influence the introduction of innovation in travel agency deals, in the form of targeted offers tailored to the needs of seniors.

As the survey shows, 74% of travel agencies consider that seniors constitute a significant group of tourism service consumers and over 50% of the respondents have observed an increasing interest of this group of consumers in their offer over the last two years. The majority of surveyed travel agencies also consider that demographic changes force them to develop offers addressed to seniors (Fig 1).

The respondents were also asked if they have tourist events in their offers that cater for the elderly (Fig 2). Nearly 60% answered that they had such offers. Comparing this result with the research conducted by the author in 2015 (Sawińska 2015), which showed that offers of travel agencies in Poland addressed to the elderly were not very

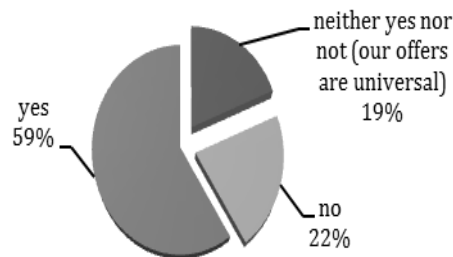
popular, it should be acknowledged that the number of such offers is increasing which means that product innovation in travel agencies is growing.

Figure 1: **Demographic changes as a source of innovation**



Source: Own research

Figure 2: **Offers of travel agencies addressed to seniors**

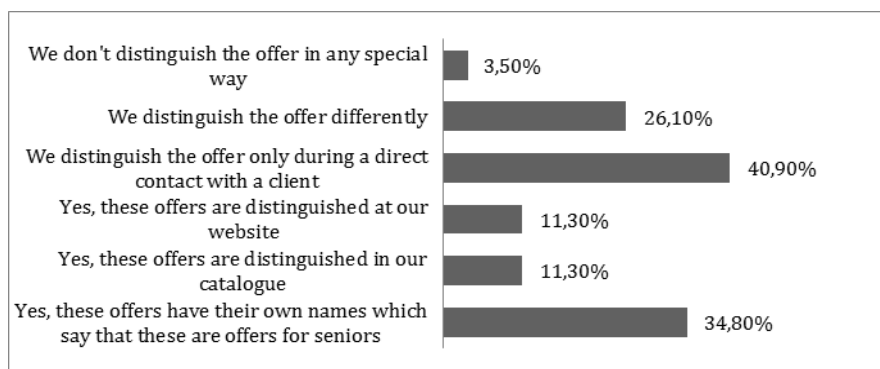


Source: Own research

In order to specify innovative activities of travel agencies in terms of marketing communication, the respondents were asked if in any way they distinguished their offers addressed to seniors. As the responses collected in the Figure 3 show, 40.9 % travel agencies make their offers distinguishable mainly during a direct contact with a client and 34.8% through a name suggesting the offer addressed to seniors. Only 11.3% of travel agencies distinguish such offers at their websites and the same number of the respondents in their catalogues. Due to the fact that it was a multiple-choice question and the respondents could choose more than one answer, the low level of answers indicates that the majority of surveyed travel agencies concentrate on the basic forms of communication. The remaining forms of marketing communication can show potential directions of innovation.

According to the survey, the majority of travel agencies that have in their offers tourist events for seniors takes account of specific needs of this group of consumers (nearly 80%). As many as 11% of entities answered that they were tourism brokers and did not have an influence on the offer itself.

Figure 3: **Featuring the offer for seniors by travel agencies**



Source: Own research

The respondents also emphasised that significant factors taken into consideration by seniors were price, travelling comfort and time, assistance of a guide and attractiveness of a visited place. Less important aspects are departure dates and accommodation standard (Table 1). It should be noted here that the findings of the survey conducted among travel agencies are similar to the previously mentioned findings of the research done among seniors. Therefore, it can be stated that travel agencies have a great awareness of seniors' expectations.

Table1: **Factors considered by seniors when choosing an offer (in %)**

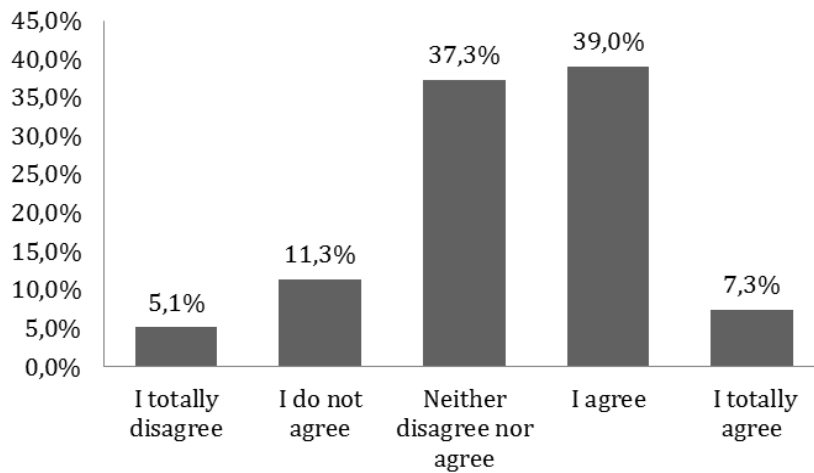
| Scale Factors                         | Not important | A little important | Medium important | Important | Very important | No opinion |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|----------------|------------|
| <b>Price</b>                          | 0,00          | 1,69               | 10,73            | 29,94     | 57,06          | 0,56       |
| <b>Departure dates</b>                | 7,91          | 28,81              | 27,12            | 25,42     | 7,91           | 2,82       |
| <b>Accommodation standard</b>         | 0,56          | 2,26               | 40,68            | 44,07     | 10,73          | 1,69       |
| <b>Facilities for the elderly</b>     | 2,26          | 6,21               | 22,60            | 45,20     | 23,16          | 0,56       |
| <b>Assistance of a guide</b>          | 1,69          | 2,26               | 6,78             | 31,64     | 56,50          | 1,13       |
| <b>Travelling time</b>                | 1,13          | 2,26               | 15,82            | 36,72     | 41,81          | 2,26       |
| <b>Type of transport</b>              | 0,00          | 1,13               | 10,17            | 40,68     | 46,33          | 1,69       |
| <b>Destination attractiveness</b>     | 0,00          | 0,56               | 20,34            | 46,33     | 30,51          | 2,26       |
| <b>Availability of services (Spa)</b> | 5,65          | 24,86              | 27,12            | 27,68     | 10,17          | 4,52       |
| <b>Availability of medical care</b>   | 5,65          | 12,99              | 22,03            | 37,85     | 16,95          | 4,52       |

Source: Own research



Over 46% of surveyed travel agencies agreed with a statement that their agencies modified offers and introduce innovations in terms of the needs of seniors. However, 16% of the researched companies denied such activities and as many as 37% had some doubts (Fig 4).

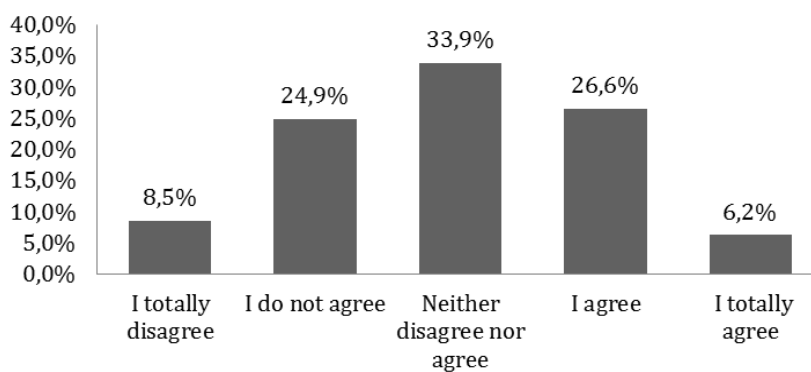
Figure 4: **Innovations of travel agencies for seniors**



Source: Own research

The respondents also referred to promotional activities carried out in their agencies (Figure 5).

Figure 5: **Promotional activity of travel agencies addressed to seniors**



Source: Own research

Narrowing the analysis down to travel agencies which have declared that their offers include tourist events addressed to seniors, it should be emphasised that in this group 63% stated that they introduced product innovations and 50% of them claimed that they conducted promotional activities directed at seniors. In the group of the respondents who described their offers as universal only 26% responded that they modified their offers paying special attention to seniors.

The representatives of travel agencies could also express their opinion on innovations introduced in their companies and addressed to seniors. The respondents mainly indicated that the programmes of events preferred by seniors included travel destinations. They claimed that these were often trips connected with Polish history and culture as well as sentimental journeys, e.g. to Rome, Georgia, Bulgaria. For example, the Travel Senior, which specialises in offers for seniors, emphasised that spring and autumn trips to Spain as well as tourist events of a religious character enjoy great popularity among seniors. The travel agencies also claimed that there are individual clients and groups of seniors who come to them and expect 4- and 5-star hotels as well as, in order to travel comfortably, bigger coaches that they need, and polite and empathetic drivers and guides. An innovative product addressed to seniors is the offer of Pazola travel agency. This agency offers seniors luxurious trips to Japan<sup>1</sup>. Although at the website of the agency it is not explicitly stated that this offer is for seniors, providing an offer including luxurious services for seniors can be considered as an example of product innovation of this agency. Since this offer differs from typical offers for seniors, it can be seen as a new approach to them. The next instance of innovation in providing services to seniors is using the audio guide system during sightseeing. This system enables participants to go sightseeing at their own pace. The example of product innovation can be also introducing three-hour programmes of sightseeing called “baroque Rome - senior-friendly”, “ancient Rome - senior friendly”, “Vatican City - senior friendly” to the offer of the travel agency specialising in the organisations of trips to Rome and Vatican City.

## CONCLUSION

Innovations are of great significance for the competitiveness of tourism enterprises and although they are connected with risk and require investment, they are an indispensable element of operations of all enterprises.

Travel agencies do not only have to observe changes undergoing in tourism demand, but also react to them. Consequently, many travel agencies should see an opportunity to develop in the potential of senior consumers whose participation in the society will not only increase but also lead to a great variety and diversification of needs.

Providing tourism services to consumers having additional needs can be an opportunity to gain new markets or acquire new sources of profit. The offer for seniors, that is a group of consumers previously undervalued by travel agencies, can become an innovative product of travel agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pazola.com/60-japonia-kwitnienie-wisni>

The considerations and findings presented in this article enable claiming that travel agencies in Poland begin to notice significance of seniors in the tourism market. It is mainly proved by the fact that nearly 60% of surveyed companies declared that they have tourist events addressed to seniors in their offers. Such offers should be considered as product innovations of travel agencies in Poland.

Respondents' responses, in spite of their subjective character, confirm the thesis that demographic change, referred to as aging population, is now a source of product innovation and necessitates the creation of tourism offers for the elderly.

By making generalisations on the basis of the considerations, it should be noted that product innovation in travel agencies should include changes at all stages of the service process for senior citizens. First of all, these innovations involve the preparation of a tourism event programme that addresses the identified needs of seniors, the provision of high-comfort travel benefits (elderly facilities, comfortable means of transport, travel time) while calculating the price at an acceptable level. It is worth stressing that the price of a tourist event is for many seniors just as important as the care of a tour operator. Therefore, at the stage of the tour it is necessary to innovate in the service of the group, such as pilot care for elderly people and services to provide better access to care.

Nevertheless, it should be also emphasised that introducing product innovations in travel agencies is connected with introducing marketing, organisational and process innovations.

Process and organisational innovations can address these changes in seniors care or changes in client communication (seniors) and changes in delivery methods. Nowadays, the marketing innovations accompanying the introduction of new offers dedicated to seniors can play an important role. It is necessary to introduce innovative forms of marketing communication, using modern information technologies, the Internet or social networking, and introduce loyalty programs for seniors as long as the seniors' way of communicating with the travel agency is direct contact. Such innovations in travel agencies in Poland are rarely introduced.

It should be highlighted that creating offers for seniors requires not only adapting event programmes to the identified needs of seniors but also changing the traditional perception of a senior. Product innovation should not only focus on the stereotypical needs of seniors, but should also take account of needs arising from sex, interests, mobility or being a member of senior segments identified according to age<sup>2</sup>. Seniors do not constitute a uniform group of consumers and when introducing product innovations travel agencies should take it into consideration.

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<sup>2</sup> One of modern divisions of seniors distinguishes three groups of the elderly: "young old" - individuals aged 60/65-74, "old old" - individuals aged 75-84, "the oldest old" - individuals aged 85 or over. <http://transgenerational.org/aging/demographics.htm>, (accessed on 21 November 2015)

In summary, it should be added that product and process innovation should help to increase the comfort of travelling for seniors, while marketing innovations for travel agencies should contribute to tourism activation for seniors while meeting social goals.

The main limitation of the research is the difficulty of acquiring information on specific innovative solutions introduced to assist seniors by travel agencies and separating the types of innovation in tourism services. The research carried out for this study is of a general nature and mainly allows us to indicate the direction of change in the offer of Polish travel agencies related to the ageing of European society. The study carried out did not take into account the profile of the operations of the surveyed offices, which was due to the difficulty of identifying these entities. Consequently, continuing research into the innovation of travel agencies in the field of senior care requires further, in-depth analyses, using qualitative research methods to identify and evaluate innovations.

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