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**Interim symposium of the Research Committee on International Tourism (RC 50)
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UNDERSTANDING THE TOURIST PRODUCT

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to propose a marketing-oriented definition of the tourist product as well as a classification system of its components based on an extensive review and analysis of tourism marketing literature. Tourist products satisfy the tourist needs and are the objects of the transactions between tourists and businesses.

Determining the tourist products is most helpful for social scientists interested in understanding the aforementioned transactions and the benefits derived by consuming these products. This proves to be a challenging task, though, due to the lack of a common understanding among the authors who have explored this issue as well as due to the different levels of tourist products and their complex nature.

For instance, tourist products can be determined on two distinct levels:

- The *total tourist product* comprises a combination of all the elements, which a tourist consumes during his/her trip.
- The *specific products* are components of the total tourist product and can be sold as individual offerings such as accommodation, transport, attractions and other facilities for tourists.

This paper focuses on the *total tourist products*, that can be understood as *bundles* of tangible and intangible components, based on an activity at a destination. It is the consumption of such a bundle that allows engaging in specific activities at the destination(s) and that creates the travel experience of each individual. Thus, the tourist product can be equated with the *total travel experience*.

Tourist products are characterised by their complex nature. They consist of numerous components — most of which constitute products themselves — with each one playing a distinct functional role in this “amalgam of tangible and intangible elements”. These components complement each other, i.e. they are functionally interdependent as each one provides only a part of the total sum of benefits sought by tourists.

Introduction

What do tourists consume during their trips? Marketing literature has focused on this issue since the early 1970s as part of the discussion regarding tourist products. These products satisfy the primary and secondary tourist needs (Paul, 1977:18) and are the objects of the transactions between tourists and businesses (Koutoulas, 2001:473).

Determining the tourist product is most helpful for social scientists interested in understanding the aforementioned transactions and the benefits derived by consuming this product. This proves to be a challenging task, though, due to the lack of a common understanding among the authors who have explored this issue as well as due to the different levels of tourist products and their complex nature.

The target of this paper is to propose a marketing-oriented definition of the tourist product as well as a classification system of its distinct components. The *methodology* applied for that purpose comprises (1) the critical and comparative analysis of literature (mostly tourism marketing literature in German, English and Greek), (2) the codification of the scientific discussion regarding the tourist product and (3) the formulation of analytical theoretical principles for the definition of the tourist products and its components. These three steps have been preceded by a systematic and extensive review of the tourism marketing literature spanning several decades.

The need to formulate definitions and other theoretical principles derives from the absence of an established and commonly accepted tourism marketing theory, a situation that can be characterised as the theoretical deficit of tourism marketing (Freyer, 1999:35). The disagreement among authors has been established for practically every meaning crucial to the discussion about the tourist products (Koutoulas, 2001), e.g.:

- tourism
- tourism marketing
- tourist product
- components of the tourist product

The limited space of this paper does not allow to present the whole range of approaches found in the literature. Instead, the paper includes the key findings of the aforementioned analysis as well as the proposed theoretical principles.

Products as Need Satisfiers

Marketing theory views products as fulfilling two distinct tasks (Burkheiser, 1969:106; Scheuch, 1993:315):

- Primarily, each product satisfies a need of its consumer through the benefit(s) it incorporates. Or, to put it in the words of Theodore Levitt, “It is the benefits that are the product” (Levitt, 1969:9).
- Secondly, the products are the means to achieve the targets of the marketing organisation through their sale. Although the primary objective of an enterprise is to make a profit, this is the derived result of selling products that satisfy consumer needs.

Tourist products are the means to satisfy tourist needs (Paul, 1977:18). According to Jovicic (1988:2-3), tourist needs are those that are “satisfied when movement is performed (travel and sojourn) outside the place of residence.” Therefore, “a need is a tourist need only if it requires a departure from one’s place of residence.”

These needs can be grouped into two distinct categories (Paul, 1977:18):

- i. **Primary tourist needs** are those that urge a person to make a tourist trip in order to satisfy them.
- ii. **Secondary or derived tourist needs** are those arising from the decision to make a tourist trip.

For instance, our need to find accommodation in Mytilini is a secondary one, as it has been derived from our decision to take part in this conference.

Tourist products are the means to satisfy these primary and secondary needs, thanks to the benefits offered by their consumption (Koutoulas, 2001:253). Both the needs and the products are objects of the transaction between tourists and businesses (Koutoulas, 2001:473). This transaction is depicted in *Figure 1*.

Total Vs. Specific Tourist Products

Before defining tourist products, a basic distinction should be made considering that they can be determined on two distinct levels (Freyer, 1993:129; Middleton, 1989:573; Tietz, 1980:10):

- The *total tourist product* comprises the combination of all the elements, which a tourist consumes during his/her trip.
- The *specific products* are components of the total tourist product and can be sold as individual offerings such as accommodation, transport, attractions and other facilities for tourists. In other words, specific products are the offerings of the individual tourist enterprises.

This paper focuses on the *total tourist products* that can be understood as bundles of tangible and intangible components based on an activity at a destination (Middleton, 1988:79). It is the consumption of such a bundle that allows engaging in specific activities at the destination(s) and that creates the travel experience of each individual. Thus, the tourist product can be equated with the total travel experience (Medlik and Middleton, 1973:138).

The marketing approach adopted in this paper makes it imperative to embrace the *total view of the tourist product*, which is how the consumer sees the product. According to Medlik and Middleton (1973:132), “all tourists buy, either separately, or as an inclusive tour, the various components of the tourist product. Either way, the end result of all these purchases is a ‘package.’ This view of the tourist product holds good whether a business trip, a holiday or, indeed, any other form of tourism, international or domestic, is under consideration. Airline seats or hotel beds may be individual products in the eyes of their producers, but they are merely elements or components of a total tourist product, which is a composite product.”

From now on, the term “tourist product” refers in this paper to the total tourist product as determined above.

Defining Tourist Products

The critical and comparative analysis of the literature as well as the codification of dozens of definitions and other approaches to the meaning of the tourist product have resulted in the following theoretical principles (Koutoulas, 2001:258):

- i. The tourist product should not be seen from the point of view of the individual producer (such as the hotelier or the transportation company) but from the **point of view of the consumer**, thus equating the tourist product with his/her total travel experience. The tourist product should be perceived as including all the elements that are part of a trip.
- ii. These elements can be found at the **destination(s)** of the trip, the **transit routes** and the **places of residence** (Leiper, 1990:81). In addition, the consumption of these elements takes place **before, during and after the trip**. For instance, tourists spend part of their travel budget both at their home town (e.g. for buying a map before the trip and developing films after the trip) and en route to their destination (e.g. for buying food or gasoline).
- iii. A tourist product can only be determined **in relation to a specific destination**, a fact that makes each product unique. For instance, the geological tour of the petrified forest in Sigri is a product unique to Lesbos; this particular experience and combination of elements cannot be found anywhere else.
- iv. The tourist product should be distinguished from the destination. **The destination is not the product**. On the contrary, a destination usually offers several products to its visitors, with each distinct travel experience constituting a tourist product (Jeffries, 1971:4). For instance, the island of Lesbos allows for a cosmopolitan beach vacation in Molyvos; a serene beach vacation in a secluded village; a geological tour; a tour of the historic sights; small or medium-sized conferences; culinary experiences related to the local ouzo drink, sardines, olives and olive oil; and the list goes on.
- v. The tourist product should be distinguished from the inclusive tours or package tours. **An inclusive tour is not a total tourist product but a specific tourist product** as discussed above, even though it is a composite one. An inclusive

tour is essentially a selected combination of individual elements of the total tourist product, marketed under a particular product or brand label, and sold at an inclusive price (Middleton, 1988:271).

- vi. The tourist product is a **composite product** consisting of several components (Burkart and Medlik, 1981:195). It is also labelled as a “package” (Jeffries, 1971:4), an “amalgam” (Medlik and Middleton, 1973:132) or a “bundle” (Middleton, 1988:79) of tangible and intangible components. These components complement each other, i.e. they are functionally interdependent as each one provides only a part of the total sum of benefits sought by tourists (Mrnjavac, 1992:122).
- vii. It is not the production but the **consumption of the tourist product** that explains its composite nature. Each component is produced independently by the respective enterprise and it provides only a limited benefit or no benefit at all to its consumer if it is not combined with the other components of the tourist product. It is only the whole bundle of components that fully satisfies the primary and secondary needs of a tourist. In other words, it is the demand side — and not the supply side — that makes it necessary to consume bundles of elements (Menges, 1973:46).
- viii. From the consumer’s point of view, **the tourist product amounts to his/her travel experience**, including everything experienced and consumed as part of the trip. According to Heath and Wall (1992:4), the product is an experience that is achieved through the combination of a diverse array of products and service. Furthermore, the tourist product has the characteristics of a **type A’ service** (Koutoulas, 2001:252), due to the fact that the tourist becomes the external factor of the production process and participates in the provision of services by tourist businesses (Tietz, 1980:8).
- ix. The purpose of a tourist trip is to engage in certain activities that satisfy the primary tourist needs. For instance, the primary need to relax can be satisfied by bathing in the sea and basking in the sun. **The tourist product provides all the means needed to engage in the desired activity** (Koutoulas, 2001:260), i.e. a safe beach, warm seawater and sunshine. Actually, the concept of the

tourist product cannot be fully understood without determining the particular activities that a tourist wants to engage in.

- x. The tourist product is a **carrier of benefits**, as is the case with every product form. It constitutes **the means to satisfy both primary and secondary tourist needs** as discussed above. Tourist products consist, on the one hand, of the attractions that allow tourists to engage in the desired activities and, on the other hand, of the elements facilitating the tourist's transition to the destination and the social reproduction during his/her stay (Koutoulas, 2001:260).
- xi. Normally, it is the producers of goods and services who decide which benefits to incorporate in their products. In the case of the tourist product, this holds true only for some of its elements. The **benefits of several components are not the result of a management decision**, but of natural, cultural and historic processes. A good example for this is the climate and the beaches of Lesbos.
- xii. It is important to stress that **consumers perceive tourist products in a subjective way**. The perception depends on each tourist's socio-economic and psycho-demographic variables as well as on his/her previous travel experiences, motivation, conceptions and expectations etc. (Mrnjavac, 1992:121).
- xiii. It is very unlikely that two tourists will have *exactly* the same travel experience. On the one hand is the subjective perception of each trip as mentioned above. On the other hand, there is a huge number of goods, services and facilities, from which each tourist makes his/her own combination (Taylor, 1980:56-57). Even when some important items are sold together in packages determined by the tourism producers or intermediaries, each individual trip will still largely consist of a consumer selection of products, which will be necessarily unique (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990:8). Thus, **each tourist experiences his/her own unique tourist product**. According to Cullen (1989:447), "the experiences of each traveller differ from those of every other traveller in some way. These differences are part of the intangible benefits, the sensations of well-being, acquired by each traveller. The extent of the benefits and their value can be even harder to measure, since they vary with the personality and disposition of the recipients." In short, from an individual tourist's point of view, each tourist

engages in a personalised mix of activities, consumes a personalised set of goods, services and facilities and experiences the trip in a subjective manner (Koutoulas, 2001:261). It is impossible to determine each individual's tourist product in advance; the exact combination of experiences and consumed elements can only be established *after* the trip.

- xiv. The tourist product, i.e. the travel experience and the various elements — goods, services and facilities — used and consumed by a tourist as part of his/her trip, has a **total price**. This price is not settled in one payment; on the contrary, **it takes several transactions to obtain all elements of the product**, even in the case of an all-inclusive package tour (Koutoulas, 2001:262).
- xv. Some of the tourist product's components are not produced specifically for the tourist market, with the respective businesses serving other markets, as well. **It is the consumption phase — and not the production phase — that makes some elements part of the tourist product**. For instance, most of the restaurants of Mytilini have tourists among their customers, but their clientele is predominantly the local population. The same holds true for the grocery shops, the pharmacies, the bus lines and many other local businesses. The very same good, service or facility can be a tourist one or not depending not on the way it is produced or provided but on who will consume or use it (Walterspiel, 1956:8).

These principles constitute the specifications of the definition adopted in this paper. In line with the above findings, the following **definition** is proposed (Koutoulas, 2001:474):

The tourist product is defined as the total bundle of functionally interdependent tangible and intangible elements that enables the tourist on the one hand to engage in a specific activity at one or at several consecutive destinations and on the other hand to facilitate the transition to the destination(s) and the social reproduction during the trip. As a carrier of benefits, the tourist product satisfies both the primary and secondary tourist needs. Some of these benefits pre-existed in components of the product, while other benefits were consciously incorporated in the components by the respective producers. The tourist product's components — that include all aforementioned tangible and intangible elements — are found in different

geographical location (the place of residence, the destination(s) and the transit routes) and in different time periods (before, during and after the trip). The tourist product constitutes a type A' service. From the tourist's point of view it is equated with his/her total travel experience that is perceived in a subjective manner; for this experience he/she pays the total travel expenses. The consumption of the tourist product primarily allows for the satisfaction of tourist needs (through the benefits offered) and secondarily promotes the achievement of the organisational targets set by individual tourist enterprises and collective tourism organisations (through the obtained income).

The Components of Tourist Products

Tourist products consist of numerous components due to their complex nature. The analysis of the tourism literature has revealed several approaches to the components, with the respective authors not agreeing (1) on what constitutes a component of the tourist product and (2) on how the components are classified.

These components come in various forms (Koutoulas, 2001:394):

- **Integral products** that can be sold independently on the market (such as hotel accommodation, air transport, admission to visitor attractions etc.)
- **“Free” or “public” goods**, such as the climate and the scenery, that can be used or consumed by tourists free of charge (Scheuch, 1982:87; Leiper, 1990:147)
- **Complementary services** that cannot be sold independently on the market, such as the services provided by a tourist information office or by a tour leader.

In this paper, the following definition is adopted:

Components of the tourist product are those integral products, “free and public goods” and complementary services that perform a specific *functional role* in the framework of the total product and that are part of the product because of their functional characteristics. Components are, therefore, a prerequisite for the total product, so that the latter can provide the expected benefits to the consumers. The functional characteristics have been incorporated into the components either by their respective producers following a conscious managerial decision (in the case of

integral products and complementary services), or by the nature and culture of the destination (in the case of the “free and public goods”). More specifically, it is final products and not intermediate products or inputs of a production process that are considered integral products. In addition, integral products should be produced and/or sold by tourist enterprises that fulfil two characteristics in order to be considered as components of the tourist product: (1) the products — good and services — provided by these enterprises directly satisfy the needs of tourists; (2) these enterprises come in direct contact with tourists when trading their products. ***Components complement each other***, i.e. they are ***functionally interdependent*** as each one provides only a part of the total sum of benefits sought by tourists (Krippendorf, 1971:18 & 34; Zolles et al., 1981:34; Mrnjavac, 1992:122; Koutoulas, 2001:395).

This definition does not accept certain elements as components of the tourist product, such as the *inputs* used by tourist enterprises in their production process and the *infrastructure* (consisting of the material, institutional and personnel-related infrastructure that is usually provided by the government and is a prerequisite for economic development — Spatt, 1975:76), because neither constitutes a final product. The definition also excludes those elements that influence a tourist’s travel experience but that do not have a functional role in satisfying consumer needs (see *Figure 2*). For instance, the climate of the Greek islands is a major draw for tourists from northern Europe and, therefore, can be considered a component of the tourist product. On the other hand, visitors of London also experience the weather, but most don’t gain any satisfaction from the rain and cold typical for this city. Therefore, the climate of London cannot be considered a component of the tourist product.

The literature review and analysis has revealed six different approaches to the classification of the tourist product’s components. Different criteria are used to group the numerous components into separate categories:

- i. *Purpose of creation*: Components created for a purpose not related to tourism are classified as **primary tourist supply** (such as natural attractions and historic sites); components created especially for satisfying tourist needs are classified as **secondary tourist supply** (such as hotels and theme parks — Krippendorf, 1971:19; Kaspar, 1991:64; Mrnjavac, 1992:117).

- ii. *Origin*: **Man-made elements** vs. **natural elements** (Jaenecke, 1955:2; Hanrieder, 1992:399; Mill and Morrison 1992:375).
- iii. *Tangibility*: **Tangible elements** such as hotels and restaurant vs. **intangible elements** such as the history and the climate of the destination (Zolles et al., 1981:44).
- iv. *Variability*: **Invariable elements** such as the climate and the scenery of the destination vs. **variable elements** such as the infrastructure and the transport services of the destination (Paul, 1977:16).
- v. *Time of consumption*: Components are classified according to the **phase of the trip** during which they are consumed: (1) planning or anticipation, (2) travel to the destination, (3) destination activities, (4) travel back home, (5) recollection (Taylor, 1980:57).
- vi. *Functional role*: Components attracting tourists to the destination are classified as **primary tourist supply** or as **attractions** (the “primary causal elements”); components facilitating the travel and stay at the destination are classified as **secondary tourist supply** or as **amenities** or as **facilitators** (among others Medlik and Middleton, 1973:132; Coltman, 1989:80; Gunn, 1993:769).

The comparative analysis of these approaches has revealed several methodological problems in their application and has indicated that the most suitable classification criterion from a marketing point of view is the **functional role** of the components (Koutoulas, 2001:396). This criterion can be used (1) to understand *why* an element is a component of the tourist product and (2) to classify components in distinct categories.

Some of the reviewed authors split the two basic categories — attractions and amenities — in several subcategories. The classification adopted in this paper is the most extensive of the ones found in the literature with a total of seven subcategories, as it assigns each function of the tourist product with the corresponding component category (Koutoulas, 2001:397). More specifically, the tourist product performs six distinct **functions** (Koutoulas, 2001:475):

- It enables the tourist to engage in the **main activity** of his/her trip.
- It allows the tourist to engage in this activity and to live the total travel experience **the way he/she wants**.

- It facilitates the **transport** to and from the destination as well as within the destination.
- It facilitates the tourist's **social reproduction** during the trip.
- It facilitates the **preparation and execution of the travel arrangements**.
- It allows the tourist **to remember** and relive the trip and **to share his/her travel experience** with other people.

The *social reproduction* of tourists during their trip means satisfying their daily biological and social needs according to their usual standard of living at their place of residence (Koutoulas, 2001:253). According to Leiper (1990:96), “tourists, as temporary visitors in a region for at least one overnight stay, require life support systems: shelter from the environment, somewhere to sleep, food and drink and, in most cases, require some sort of comfortable amenities corresponding to their individual preferences while at leisure.”

In accordance with the above functions, the following **component categories** are defined (Koutoulas, 2001:476; see also *Figure 3*):

- a. The **Primary Tourist Supply** includes all the *attractions* that draw the tourists to a destination. The benefits offered by the attractions satisfy the *primary tourist needs*, i.e. those needs that urge a person to make a tourist trip in order to satisfy them.
 - a.1. *Means and conditions for engaging in the main activity of the trip at the destination or inside the mode of transportation* (as in the case of cruise ships and luxury overnight trains): natural conditions, natural and cultural heritage, people, socio-economic conditions of the destination, artistic creation, events, facilities, equipment, goods and service related to the main activity.
 - a.2. *Qualitative aspects defining HOW the tourist wants to engage in the main activity and to live the total travel experience*: e.g. familiar or exotic destination; short or long distance between the place of residence and the destination; luxurious or traditional ambience, the particular character of the destination; hospitable attitude of the local population; good weather; protected natural environment, secure environment etc.

- b. The **Secondary Tourist Supply** includes all the *amenities* needed by a tourist to visit a destination and to consume its attractions (Geigant, 1962:114). It also includes souvenirs and gifts of all kind. The benefits offered by the amenities satisfy the *secondary or derived tourist needs*, i.e. those needs arising from the decision to make a tourist trip.
- b.1. *Modes of transportation and other components of the transportation systems*: transition from the place of residence to the destination and back as well as within the destination.
- b.2. *Means for the tourist's social reproduction during the trip*: elements performing *household functions* as well as allowing the tourist to engage in leisure activities, to communicate with other places, to socialise and to stay informed. This category includes accommodation, food and beverage outlets and/or shops selling food, public restrooms (outside the accommodation), cleaners, hairdressers, telecommunication services, postal services, sports and other leisure facilities, cultural events, retail outlets (for recreational shopping) etc.
- b.3. Several aspects regarding the *preparation and execution of the travel arrangements* in regard to making the trip easier, safer and more affordable, to prevent or to heal injuries and sickness, to enter a foreign country, to finance the travel expenses, to make prior payments etc. This category includes all means of tourist information (travel guidebooks, maps, national tourist organisations, travel-related websites, local tourist offices etc.); telecommunications; services provided by tour operators, travel agencies, escorts, translators, certified travel guides and porters; vaccines, sun protection, medicine and healthcare services; passports and visas; travel insurance; credit cards and other financial services; as well as numerous goods such as suitcases, clothes, photo cameras and films etc.
- b.4. *Practical aspects of engaging in the main activity of the trip*. These aspects do not constitute attractions but merely support the tourist in

engaging in the activity (e.g. sale or rental of sports equipment, lessons by sports instructors, sports apparel etc.).

- b.5. *Souvenirs and gifts*, usually bearing sentimental and symbolic values for the tourists. They allow tourists to remember and relive their experiences, thus prolonging the pleasure of the trip. They are also used for sharing the travel experience and for strengthening the ties with other people (both at the place of origin and at the destination). Souvenirs and gifts include a vast range of goods — such as typical products of the destination or the place of origin — as well as items found or made by the tourist or received as a gift.

It should be noted that the same component may have two or even more functional roles. For instance, a famous hotel may be an attraction in itself and not just a substitute for the tourist's household. In addition, the very same component can have a different functional role for different people as shown in the following example: Theatre buffs may come to Greece just for attending a performance of ancient drama, whereas people visiting Greece for another purpose — let's say for attending a conference — may see this performance just as a way to spend the evening.

Epilogue

Understanding the tourist product is a prerequisite for effectively marketing a destination or a tourist business. It is also a useful tool for every social scientist analysing the phenomenon of tourism.

Unfortunately, the discussion carried out during the last decades has not resulted in a broader agreement among scientists in regard to the meaning of the tourist product and its components. There are many incompatible approaches that cover only some of the aspects related to the product. With this in mind, the definitions and principles formulated in this paper after an extensive review and analysis of tourism literature attempt to bridge the theoretical deficit of tourism marketing (Freyer, 1999:35) on this particular issue.

The proposed definition of the tourist product represents a benefit-oriented approach as required by marketing theory. It is based on the distinction of the primary from the secondary tourist needs that also explains the complex nature of the product. The definition also stresses the

experiential nature of the tourist product and highlights some peculiarities relevant to tourism, such as the temporal and spatial dimension of the product.

The approach to this complex product form would not be complete without determining its components. Therefore, a classification system is proposed that allows to characterise an item as a component of the product and to assign it to the appropriate category according to its functional role.

The classification covers everything a tourist spends money for. It also includes those elements that do not result in any expenditure for the tourist — such as beaches and freely accessible heritage sites as well as tourist information services — but that may create costs for authorities at the destination.

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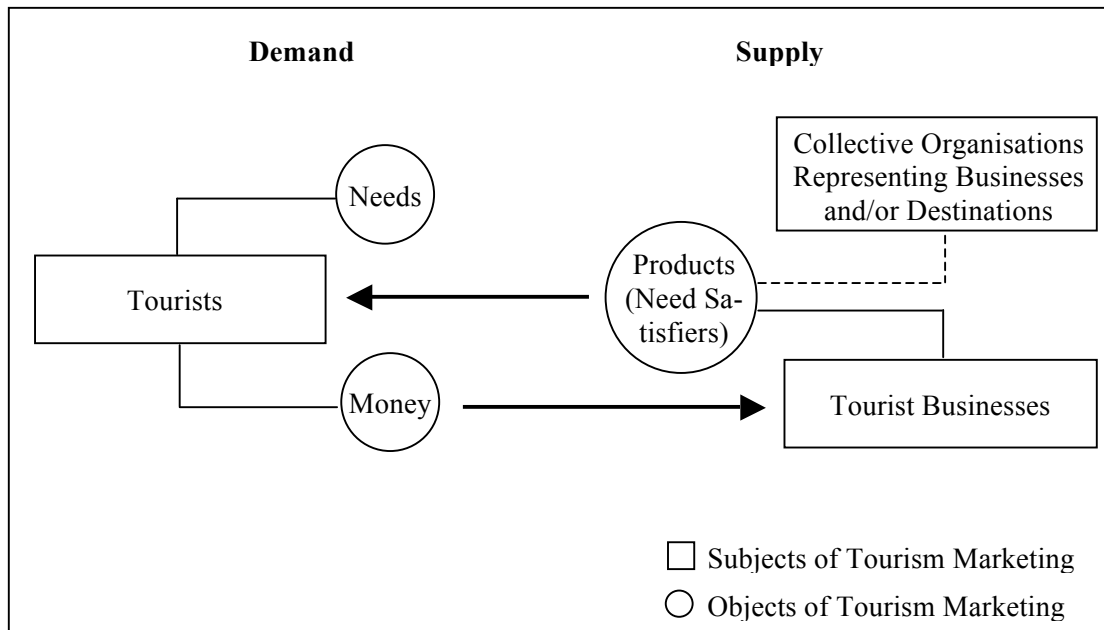
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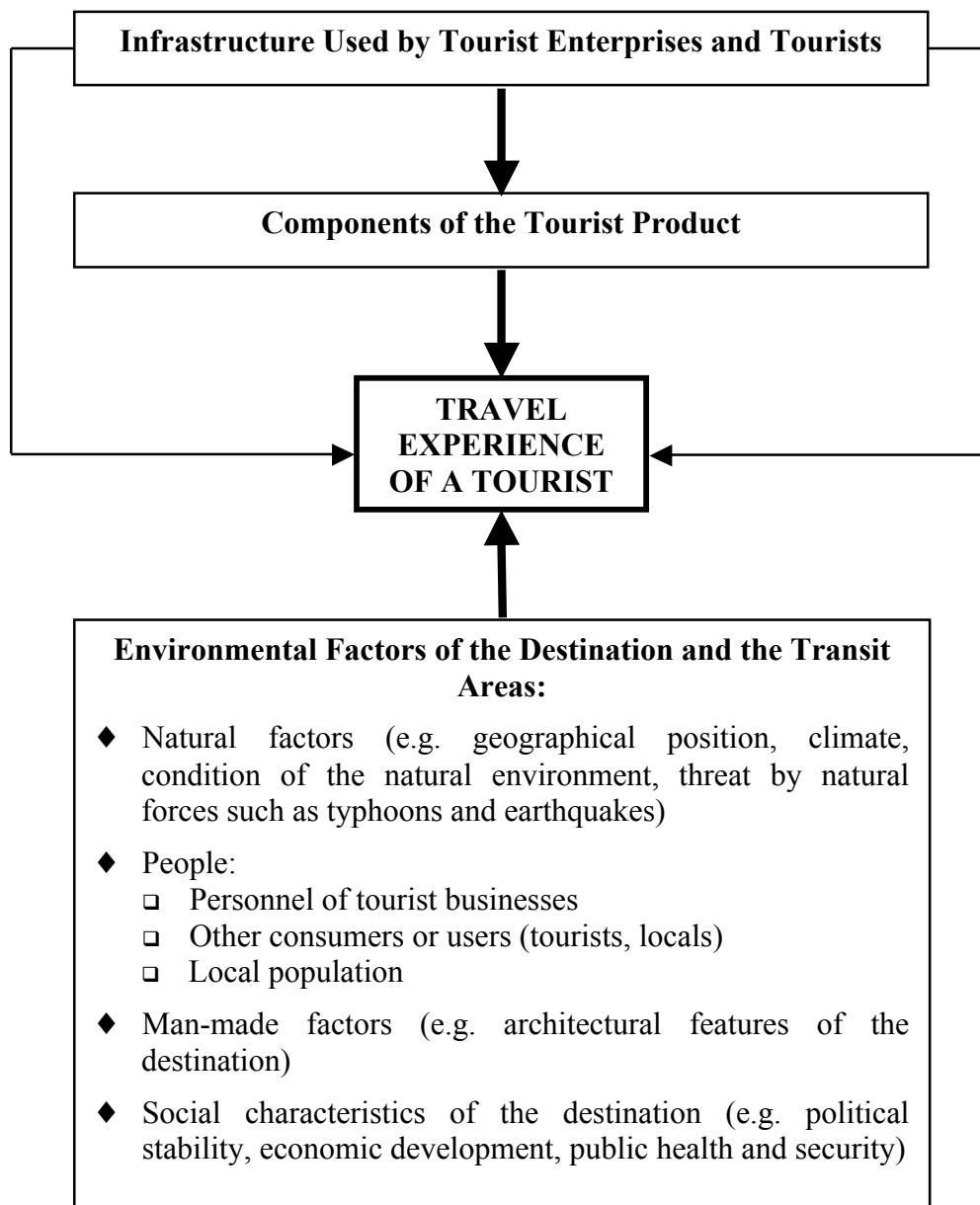
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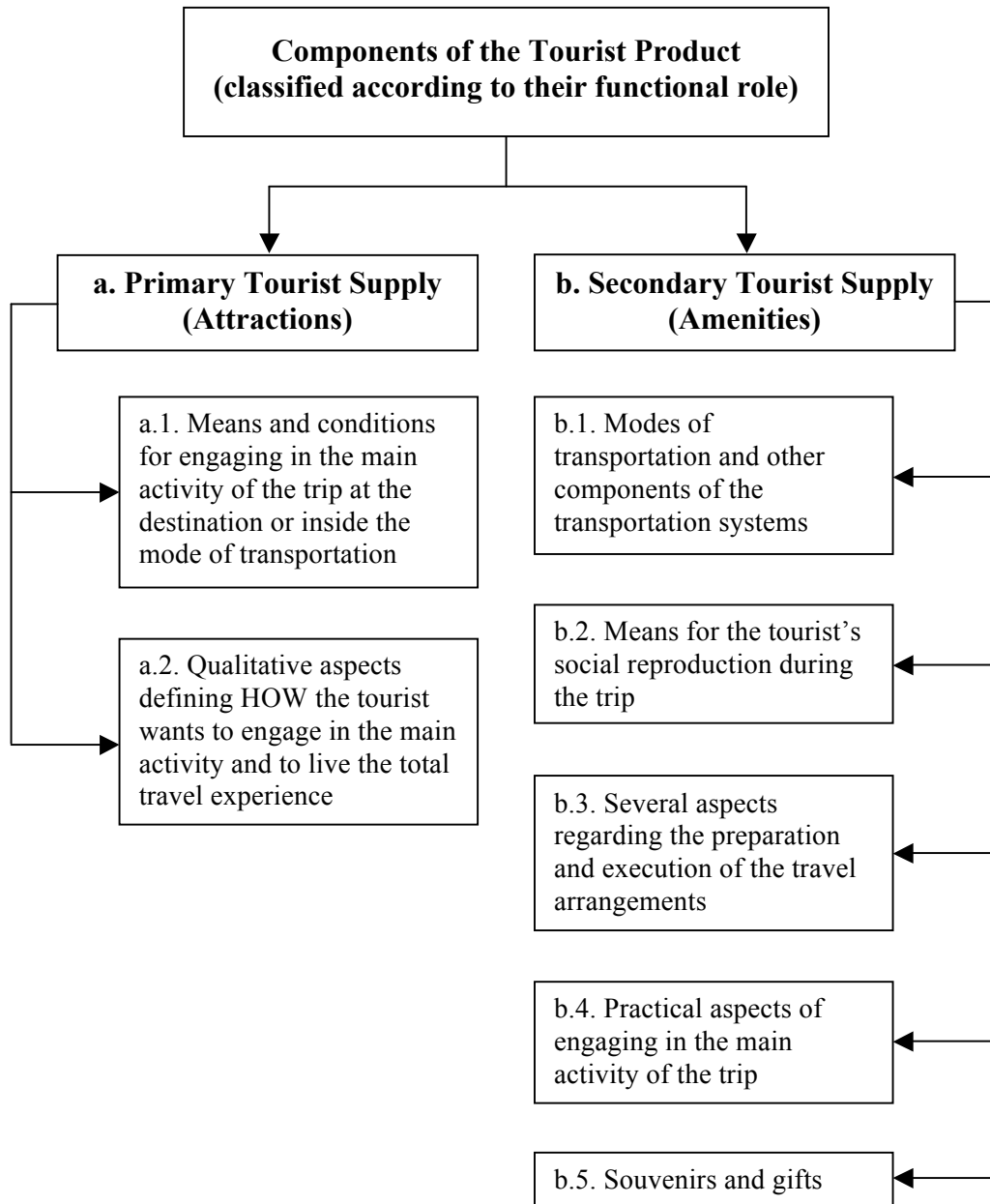
Figure 1: Relations between the Subjects and the Objects of Tourism Marketing (simplified depiction)



Source: Koutoulas, Dimitris (2001), “The Theoretical Determination of the Tourist Product as a Presupposition for Tourism Marketing”, doctoral dissertation, University of the Aegean, Chios, p. 474 [in Greek]

Figure 2: External Factors Influencing A Tourist's Travel Experience

Source: Koutoulas, Dimitris (2001), "The Theoretical Determination of the Tourist Product as a Presupposition for Tourism Marketing", doctoral dissertation, University of the Aegean, Chios, p. 479 [in Greek]

Figure 3: Components of the Tourist Product Classified According to their Functional Role

Source: Koutoulas, Dimitris (2001), “The Theoretical Determination of the Tourist Product as a Presupposition for Tourism Marketing”, doctoral dissertation, University of the Aegean, Chios, p. 429 [in Greek]