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Abstract: In this study we look at those young Europeans who have undertaken more than one Erasmus stay abroad during their higher education to reflect on spaces for youth development. On the basis of 18 qualitative interviews with such Erasmus students, we propose the concept of an ‘oasis of youth’ to highlight the potential for the exploration of the self that occurs through participation in mobilities. We revisit and reassess J.J. Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood to reflect on spaces for exploration for young people in Europe. As the analysis suggests, this ‘oasis of youth’ may symbolise a niche in which young people live out a youthful lifestyle (*being*), while getting prepared for the transitions to adulthood (*becoming*). Beyond this particular case, the concept of an oasis of youth may serve to describe the diverse social spaces that express the social value of youth allowing them to live youth momentum while in education, despite growing uncertainty and harshened structural conditions.

Keywords: youth development, youth mobility, Erasmus students, emerging adulthood, study abroad.

Word count: 8623

1. Introduction

The fact young people who embark on mobility exchanges during higher education face an intensification of their experiences is uncontested in the literature (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Ballatore 2010; Krzaklewska 2013; Cairns et al. 2018; European Commission 2019). In the words of our informants, this is ‘the time of their life’, ‘a life in one year’, or the ‘wow effect’. This overly positive evaluation is rarely put into question and calls for deeper analysis if we wish to understand the glorification of educational mobility and its cultural value (Yoon 2014; Cairns & Clemente 2023). In this article, we add some layers of complexity by exploring how mobility plays a role in the social construction of youth across Europe. We engage in reflections on how this phenomenon fits in with cultural demands towards youth and, contextually, how an institutional framework for the Erasmus

programme creates conditions for experiencing *youth*. Being aware that engagement in mobility privileges those with resources and cultural capital, we look at an exemplary group of mobile young people to reflect on spaces for self-development in youth.

Erasmus has been in place since 1987, promoting educational mobility and international cooperation between higher education institutions internationally (Feyen & Krzaklewska 2013; Cairns et al. 2018). From a user perspective, the programme allows higher education students to spend one or two semesters abroad at an educational institution that has signed a cooperation agreement with their home university.¹ On the basis of 18 interviews we conducted with European students who have participated in multiple stays abroad at higher education institutions within the Erasmus+, we conceptualise the ‘oasis of youth’ as a social space for the realisation of ideals of youthfulness, embodying the youth lifestyle and vocalising cultural norms of youth, such as enthusiasm, experimentation, creativity, instability, and spontaneity, but also the need to prepare for adult transitions. While we planned research questions which aimed at unveiling motivations for intensive mobility, the data collected prompted us to go further, highlighting a more general relevancy of mobility. We propose a framework for capturing the cultural demands of youthfulness for young people reflecting on Erasmus mobility as one potential exemplification of the ‘oasis of youth’ to express both ‘youth’ and ‘youthfulness’ (Blatterer, 2010), aspects which may be otherwise difficult to capture *at the same time*. In fact, this phase of life is also subject to several structural constraints and uncertainty resulting from a changing economic, social, and political situation permeates youth decision making and their imagined futures.

Theoretically, we build on the attention that ‘emerging adulthood’ poses on an exploratory dimension of youth in order to discuss the possibility of seeing mobility across Europe as a moratorium, i.e. as a form of time-taking in youth trajectories, which calls attention to the necessity to find time to enjoy youth and take distance from pressures involved in the transition to adulthood (Antonucci, 2016; Oinonen, 2018). Thus, we reflect on whether engaging in mobility may create a space for young people during education to allow both adulthood-directed transformation (*becoming*) but also allowing them to be young (*being*) – both aspects being critical in conceptualising youth (Tilleczek, 2011). Freedom from pressure is therefore conjugated with preparation for adulthood, with processes

¹ The programme also gives students and recent graduates the opportunity of doing an internship (Erasmus Traineeship). This experience may in fact work a bit differently given the different nature of the activities being done outside of universities.

of being and becoming both located within social spaces of young people: the necessary conditions and/or resources for the enjoyment of youth and culturally-variable values assigned to it therefore appear ‘appropriately’ linked. In our example of study abroad students, an ‘oasis of youth’ offers unique opportunities for youth identity explorations, while not preventing, but rather ensuring, to fulfil normative expectations towards youth.

Indeed, an oasis is what one dreams of, other people talk about enthusiastically, but may never realise because the time allowed to search for it is limited. If and when this ‘dream’ is eventually realised, it is experienced as bringing about what one really strives for: oases are made to restore, refresh, give new energy, as if new beginnings are possible. However, it is sometimes necessary to do more than one mobility experience to really see the oasis realized in full. In fact, the case study of multiple Erasmus users illustrates the transformative potential of mobility: we reflect on the students’ particular perspective in conceptualising the potentialities of the youth oasis that young people search for, and may find in studying abroad for some time.

2. Theoretical frame: ‘emerging adulthood’ in mobility

The recent debate over the importance of mobility within youth trajectories leads to a conclusion that spatial dimension of youth transitions is a central aspect in relation to life course planning – indicating, at times uncritically, for its value or even indispensability in this age period (Cairns, 2014; Yoon, 2014; Robertson et al., 2018). In order to capture these meanings, we employ the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ proposed by the American social psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. For him, emerging adulthood is supposed to aim at ‘identity exploration, of trying out various possibilities’, which may end up being an ‘unparalleled opportunity to transform [young people’s] lives’ (2004, p.8). Being a life stage of self-focus, emerging adulthood is characterised by instability and a feeling-in-between, neither adolescent nor adult (2000, 8). However, Arnett’s work raises doubts in relation to aspects such as developmental assumption, excessive optimism and modest adaptability to contexts outside of the US. Notably, its relevance to describe more general youth experience has been questioned as lacking attention to the structural opportunities that diversify the trajectories of young people (Bynner, 2005; against Bynner’s criticism, 2005, see Arnett, 2007). In particular, it has been opposed to a political economy approach (Côté, 2014). Despite this, we look at the perspectives that it opens in relation to the case study of mobile young people. Indeed, ‘emerging adulthood’ has been useful in previous studies of the Erasmus experience (Krzaklewska 2013; McKay et al., 2020; Mastora et al., 2020), highlighting intensive explorations in regard to cultural experience, social life, academic and employment opportunities.

It is on such aspects as identity exploration made possible by the mobility experience that we wish to reflect on. Identity exploration is, according to Arnett, ‘the time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work’ (2000, p.8). Not too dissimilarly, Erikson had identified a ‘niche’ in which a young person can find his or her place through self-experimentation (1968, p.156), which he called a ‘psychosocial moratorium’. Seen in functionalist terms, this equated to the avoidance of assuming ‘an adult role’ for some time. In his work, this phase is characterised by a ‘selective permissiveness’ which is realised through ‘provoking lightness’ (Erikson, 1968, p.184–185) and ‘playfulness’ (1968, p.157). There is an echo of this in Arnett’s conceptualisation of emerging adulthood. Erikson stressed the societal approval for such a postponement, which permits young people to indulge in their desires and ambitions, although this zone of liminality should not last forever. While Erikson mostly assigned exploration to adolescent period, Arnett extends it into emerging adulthood (2000, 9). Less optimistically, Côté (2000) put more emphasis on young people’s position of economic marginality and their inability to construct identity capital, meaning, that they lack a stable sense of skilful self. This difficulty to manoeuvre the pathways to adulthood is also expressed by the concepts of navigation that underline agency in life course in the context of uncertainty and appearing difficulty to make choices (Heinz, 2009).

We believe that mobility might work as an individualised solution to structural conditions, even a resource in transitions, a way to manage uncertainty, or an escape from a position of marginality (e.g. Salamońska-Czeranowska, 2019). Yet we suggest a broader interpretation. Suggesting the metaphor of the oasis of youth, we are particularly inspired by the concepts of ‘oases of deceleration’ by the German scholar Hartmut Rosa (2003, p.15), who describes ‘niches’ that have not been touched by the dynamics of modernisation and acceleration, allowing to participants to slow down in order to counteract hegemonic societal rhythms. This concept, similarly to the idea of the youth oasis, impinges on the notion of differentiation that supports identity negotiations and reflection on life-orientation. Examples that this author makes are ways of life of groups such as the Amish or habits such as weekends spent in the Black Forest. Others have used ‘oases of deceleration’ to discuss the meaning of pilgrimage (Eckhardt & Huseman, 2017). Additionally, we also rely on Norbert Elias’ (2008) [1987] ‘reserves of youth’, according to which the preparation of a young person to adult life in society takes place in specialised institutions that give young people unprecedented opportunities to experiment. He saw these enclaves or islands of ‘youth cultures’ as separate from adult worlds, being a contradiction to a regularity, conformism and narrowness of the latter.

Taking all these together, we point to further reflection on emerging adulthood as directed at intensive explorations. If the exploration or experimentation is the core of youth, there seem to be needed additional conditions for allowing those explorations that are more likely to have positive

outcomes for youth transitions. The institutionalised setting might be seen as the necessary “reserves” – that grant specific distance but also safety, allowing de-celeration and space for reflexivity. The emotional positivity, joy, and light-heartedness, but also optimism, are strongly connected with youthful lifestyles, even if the emerging adulthood feature of optimism and high hopes (Arnett 2004, p. 16) was criticised as potentially without appropriate basis and providing a false positive vision of the future impossible to be realised in certain structural or political conditions (Côté 2014) – which would still be a valid point in the current European or even global political situation.

We believe the idea of a youth oasis suitably develops the discussion further around the transformative potential of youth, highlighting processes of youthful exploration in order to achieve personal growth. Students may want to be mobile to get away from a stressful university environment, an overly protecting family, difficult economic or political conditions. Short term mobility may correspond to a willingness to leave, at least temporarily, the usual social environment (Waters et al., 2011) or a chance to escape the pressure to take employment opportunities that may not correspond to one’s abilities and ambitions. It is not rare to see youth travel as offering some kind of optimisation of opportunities or a transformative potential (Thomson & Taylor, 2005; King, 2011; Frändberg, 2015; Black & Walsh, 2021).

‘Emerging adulthood’ needs to be revisited especially in light of structural changes across European societies, the major of which would be inflation of credentials, difficult labour markets and job precariousness, with further reconsideration of the role of mobility opportunities within that (Cairns & Clemente, 2023). While getting a degree is ‘not enough’, Erasmus students are also expected to perform youthful lifestyles, an aspect not necessarily captured by many studies that underline transitions to adulthood aspects. Last but not least, attention to the experiential dimension of the study abroad experience also needs to be investigated in relation to an eventual reproduction of social inequalities (Lex & Zimmermann, 2012).

3. Methods

Here we present the methodology used, centred on the key role of Erasmus + Programme as a case study of higher education students’ mobility mostly in Europe. In 2019, 233.400 students went abroad to study, while 102.200 did an Erasmus+ traineeship (Erasmus+ Annual Report 2019). Providing a relatively modest scholarship, the programme gives a clear institutional structure to student mobility, guaranteeing recognition of achievements abroad. In its last version, it opened by for intensive mobility, allowing students to use up to 12 months of Erasmus mobility (whether for study or internship) at each level of their studies (BA, MA, PhD). While Erasmus students are amongst the

most studied mobile youth, super-mobile students are seriously overlooked in research (Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska 2023), given that existing studies tend to focus on one departure or do not differentiate between one-time or multiple-time users. In fact, there is no available administrative nor quantitative data on the sequences of opportunities taken under the umbrella of Erasmus+.

Our case study of Erasmus students involves those who participated in more than one stay abroad through this European Union’s Erasmus programme. The study was of explorative character, based on a qualitative methodology approach with semi-structured interviews as a main tool. We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with students or recent graduates who completed more than one stay abroad within the Erasmus + programme. Interviews were conducted in person or through Skype in 2017-2018. Taking advantage of research mobility stays, of contacts with mobility associations, international offices, and the European mobility field, and of subsequent snowballing, both authors conducted interviews in person in a variety of locations or online through Skype, sharing an equal number of interviews and exchanging the relevant material. Informants were advised of the group dimension and signed appropriate consent forms as to the use of data in an anonymised form. This allowed us to have a mix of students within even a small number of interviews, and allowed for greater variety than studies centred on surveys on one university or city. The same interview guide was used, with some flexibility (see Table 1). All interviews except one were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

<p>Interview themes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction, respondent characteristics 2. Erasmus experience: information on each stay, motivations and expectations in each stay, comparisons between the stays, focus of each experience, social networks, support of organisations, outcomes and gains 3. History of family mobility, previous mobility experience before Erasmus 4. Mobility organisation, obstacles and challenges in each stay 5. Future mobility 6. Impact and outcomes, development of Erasmus identity 7. Recommendations to prospective mobile students in regard to multiple mobilities 8. Additional questions: value of Erasmus from the perspective of EU tax payers
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Table 1. Interview themes

We counted as ‘multiple mobilities’ not only study exchanges but also internships, however we required that at least one of the mobility experiences was a ‘study’ one, implying attendance at a university. Some students had had over two mobility experiences, also outside Europe. The participants, 13 females and 5 males, were from diverse faculties, mainly socio-political sciences, economy, literature, psychology, or languages, but also from architecture, physiotherapy, engineering, and mathematics. They were aged between 21-29 years old, from 9 countries, and had visited a variety of destinations (see table 2). The intensity of mobility differed between students,

with a share completing one stay abroad during each level of studies (BA and MA), while some even went on Erasmus twice within one level of studies. We discuss the implications of this intensification elsewhere (Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska 2023).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	From where	To where
Anna	24	F	Poland	Spain (several stays)
Marzena	26	F	Poland	Portugal, Lithuania
Kasia	25*	F	Poland	Spain, Italy
Isana	23*	F	Austria	Belgium, Poland
Agnieszka	23	F	Poland	France, Spain
Maciej	25	M	Poland	Hungary, Brazil, Germany
Magda	24	F	Poland	Czech Republic, Spain
Ozge	27	M	Turkey	Poland, Portugal
Sylwia	23	F	Poland	France, Portugal
Branislava	24*	F	Slovakia	Spain (several stays)
Gaye	23	F	Turkey	Netherlands, Belgium
Laura	29	F	Italy	Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina
Adelina	23*	F	Romania	Germany, Austria
Carla	26*	F	Italy	France, Portugal
Andrei	24	M	Romania	Spain, Germany
Ivan	21	M	Russian Federation	Poland, Netherlands
Hannah	25	F	Luxemburg	Germany, Poland
Hans	25	M	Germany	Hungary, Poland

Table 2. Characteristics of study participants

A strength of the present work is that we do not focus on one sending or receiving country only and included informants from countries that have a long-standing membership in the EU (Italy, Austria, Germany, Luxembourg), ‘new’ member states (Poland, Slovakia, Romania) or candidate country (Turkey), which may regard the EU as a ‘land of opportunities’ (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2021), plus Russian Federation. While the composition has its drawbacks due to self-selection (lack of gender balance, low representation of STEM faculties, large share of Polish students - 7) the resulting set of data provides a unique insight into experiences of the understudied group of Erasmus multiple users, but still allowed us to take into consideration a variety of educational backgrounds. While the diversity of this sample might be considered challenging, it allowed us to see the youth oasis as a condition beyond individual specific situations.

Our original aim was to capture passages towards an identity project that was possible through reflexive mobility (Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska 2023). The interviews provided a space to compare and contrast experiences but also to explore the normative framework of mobility. They lasted

approximately an hour, but interviewees tended to enact their own reflexivity during the interview encounter, therefore we can say that interviews were particularly rich and focused.

The conducted analysis was of an inductive character (Gibbs 2007), encompassing manual coding on interview transcripts and some open coding with the usage of QDAMiner. The process was shared by the two authors and ultimately led to the elaboration of the ‘oasis of youth’ concept which was inspired by both empirical data from the interviews and suggestions from existing literature. In the process, we started from descriptive codes that led to elaboration of two categories of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. ‘Being’ included inter alia such subcodes as ‘adventure’, ‘conviviality’, ‘having fun’, ‘novelty’, ‘gathering memories’, ‘exploration’, ‘freedom’; ‘becoming’ included ‘growing up’, ‘gaining self-confidence’, ‘personal transformation’, ‘shaping professional future’, ‘independence’, ‘empowerment’. The coding categories were the basis to elaborate the youth oasis framework which is summarised in table 1.

We anticipate that the narratives which emerged were mostly positive about the overall mobility experience, similarly to other studies on Erasmus, nonetheless with students being aware that particular exchanges were more difficult or less valuable experiences, but still important in their intensive mobility. This was possibly due to a self-selectiveness of the sample: indeed, we assume that those who engage in mobility at least twice see it as a worthwhile experience in some way. Also, a bias towards more active students could have resulted from support of former Erasmus student networks for recruitment, which typically gather those who believe in the importance of geographical movement in regards to the European project or educational one. Thus, the analysed data indicates a clear normative framework in relation to the value of mobility in youth, namely the basis for the social construction of mobility as a form of youth oasis which we now discuss.

4. Experiencing Erasmus between cliché and lived practice

Within our focus on students undertaking more than one mobility experience, it is possible to untangle the idea of the ‘stereotypical’ representation of Erasmus, even if the experiences of the interviewed students varies and may be distant from it in particular cases. Indeed, ‘The’ Erasmus experience is seen as an imagined and lived oasis of youth, very much in line with the college experience at the centre of Arnett’s conceptualisation. The respondents share an image of the semester abroad as a time reserved for personal development, being surrounded by other European students, with adequate but not too strenuous involvement in academic duties, which allows them to engage in other extracurricular activities. The cultural aspect within this image links most of all to the fact of living in a foreign country and – usually – speaking a foreign language (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The shared vision of the ‘ideal’ way to spend one’s semester abroad present in the interviews usually implies

three elements: studying at a university in a foreign country, socialising within an intercultural group of students, and getting to know Europe through travelling, as in Isana's words:

*I was already in Belgium when I applied for Poland (...) the first [Erasmus] was because I wanted to improve my language skills and the second one was more really because of **the Erasmus experience**, and I thought that nothing's better than having this experience when you go to a place where you've never been before, where the culture's so different from your culture, where you don't know the language. Erasmus experience is everything – academic experience, meeting international students, getting in touch with a culture, not only partying (...). (Isana)*

A core dimension of both the lived and ideal Erasmus experience is the aspect of socializing with other international students (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Beech, 2019). It is this 'being together' within the international community that qualitatively differentiates those experiences from the lives of home-based university students. The free time of Erasmus participants is often organized by student associations supporting incoming students, while accommodation services tend to place international students together. Thus, the constant presence of other international students and a schedule filled with activities conducted within a similar circle of newly acquired friends strengthens the feeling of international companionship (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021). As described by one of the respondents, the Erasmus experience entails a particular way of interacting with other international people, based on openness, a lack of discrimination, mutual support, but also loaded with energy and striving for happiness. Interestingly, one interviewee concludes that 'this is youth':

Interviewee: I think [the Erasmus community] are the people who really care about relationships with different people because during the Erasmus you really have more time and more opportunities to spend time with different people and make very great friendships (...) So they're usually really friendly, happy, outgoing, really outgoing, even though they might be tired, they always know that 'okay, we have to make the best out of every moment, we have to be happy, we live here and now'. And I think this is youth, and people sometimes forget to be young. (Sylwia)

What is interesting here is the equation between Erasmus and youth, and how this equation evolves. Youth for mobile students is a period of life that embodies – in an idealised form – such qualities as energy, happiness, spontaneity, living in the moment, openness to other people, diversity and friendliness (cf. Blatterer, 2010). Within the study participants, the first stay abroad experience was

commonly close to its stereotype; it links very strongly to the idea of youthfulness but also Europeaness. Life within European students' circles is the key to describing the Erasmus experience, but what is pronounced *as well* is the very strong learning dimension of the stay – the fact that Erasmus constitutes a life changing experience – as we discuss in depth in the next section.

The interviewed mobility-users seem to be able to anticipate very well what they could get from the mobility, both in educational/professional terms and on a personal level. As illustrated by the quote below – striving to 'do more' is indicative for young students, wanting to experience more and – considering the spatial dimension – somewhere else. This is an easy option to experience 'other worlds' within Europe. The struggle for novelty – a new country, new friends– is well described within research on Erasmus experiences (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and it is a critical characteristic of an oasis of youth – the oasis is 'somewhere else', and you cannot find it at home:

Another motivation was, I think, just to see how it's like to study abroad (...) I thought that this might be an easy opportunity to see if I've missed something, or at least to see the other side of the experience, not just to be a student in Romania, but also somewhere else. (Adelina)

Notably, the multiple users of mobility know which of their stays was closest to the stereotype of Erasmus – often it was the first stay, but in case of difficulties during it, sometimes the subsequent stays abroad were actually closer to an ideal experience, as in the case of this student:

Surprisingly hard, the first one. And the second one surprisingly positive and extremely, I don't know how to describe it, giving me extreme advantages, when it comes to every aspect of my life which I gained there. [...] my expectations maybe for my first Erasmus were bigger. And when I came there, the reality does hit me in my face, showing that it's not like that, come on. So, the first one wasn't an Erasmus real experience. Then the second one, wow, this was just a blast, you know the real Erasmus experience. (Agnieszka)

We do not exclude the possibility that one stay abroad may be an experience of youth oasis, but within our sample the search for the self and for youth was rather embedded in their mobility trajectory and reflexive narrative around its consecutive steps.

5. 'It really helped me become who I am right now': the Erasmus experience as 'becoming'

The process of self-formation or learning about oneself is a critical outcome of the stay abroad, similarly to the concept of identity formation through exploration in Arnett's work (2004). What is striking is that the stay abroad provides the actual space for personal transformation (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016). The assumption that 'Erasmus changes your life' is shared by our study

participants, and they all further agree that the process of self-learning takes place *in a particular way* over the course of consecutive Erasmus exchanges or internships. It is plausible that such a space can be achieved through the means of international travel and appears to be unachievable through university participation in the home country. This is how Gaye talks about gaining self-confidence that led her towards migrating:

I've always seen this [Erasmus] like a life changing experience (...), it's so strong when you say "life changing" but (...) it is true; because after the first Erasmus, I decided that I would like to have my Master in another country. (...) but after the second one [Erasmus] I was saying: ok, I don't maybe need a Master, because I can directly start working or try to have this chance in another country (...) it really encourages you (...) that the things that you are dreaming right now, it can be all possible (...) This is how I decided to move to another country directly. (Gaye)

While there is a general consensus that one acquires new skills during the stay abroad, it was not actually the skills as such which were the striking outcomes, but rather a general recognition of personal growth and the acquisition of self-awareness of one's potential. Thus, while learning outcomes are mentioned, students in particular show their in-depth reflection on *what* they learned, *how* they have changed and with *what consequences*, all highlighted by the repetition of the experience. The Erasmus experience is described as a special space that allows for personal transformation, emancipation or empowerment – the realisation that does not necessarily appear during the first experience abroad as students learn to utilise the mobility space for their needs. In line with Tran's work (2016), some of the skills are perceived to be important for the labour market and students consider and value that, but the employability rationale is not the dominant one; the human aspect of developing as an individual comes to the fore more pointedly (Frändberg, 2015). Identity work takes place intensively, and increasingly so after each stay abroad – the attention paid to one's development recalls the for emerging adulthood feature of self-focus, leading potentially to self-sufficiency (Arnett, 2004, p.14):

Those experiences gave me the awareness about my flexibility, adaptability, so I know I could overcome obstacles and I could change my path and my future and I could be able to change country and change professions and so on, so it gives me this awareness, strong awareness, that I'm ready for the future like even it will be different than I imagined. I'm ready. (Carla)

I feel really grateful for all of my Erasmus adventures and all of the people that I met, because it really helped me become who I am right now and I am more aware

of my life, of my choices. I want to live my life fully and do as much as I can. And use all the chances in my life that they have and I think it started with Erasmus and that's why I'm repeating this experience again. (Sylwia)

What we want to add to this self-evident summary is that our respondents suggest that to really become aware of the process of becoming and capitalize on it efficiently, one exchange experience might not be enough. They feel that there is a need for more experiences, as searching for the oasis of youth might not be successful at once and there might be a need to redirect the motivations or destinations – searching for the real youthful experience – in order to fulfil one's needs of being and/or becoming. This significantly adds to previous conceptualizations on what participating in Erasmus entails, pointing to the youth oasis as fleeting. As in the case of the student from Turkey whose first internship abroad was a “point of change” about his life and his vision of the world, which then become very internationalized. Nonetheless, the disappointment during his following Erasmus study, during which he experienced racism, led him to search further for a subsequent experience. Only the third, carefully planned experience was “the best”. The respondent stresses the process of becoming a “global citizen”, where lived experiences add up to his understanding of the world, his knowledge of languages and people:

With the Erasmus + programme. I started to feel [my] vision is improving. Okay. Different rules, different cultures, and in the end, after [mobility] and with [international students'organisation] especially, I felt, I still feel, like a global citizen. I'm not Turkish, Polish, Ukrainian or Japanese. And my perspective of life totally changed. I am looking at people as people. (Ozge)

Beyond the importance of relocation for intensifying the process of becoming, the second determinant is in fact a specific feature of oases, which protects young people in ‘reserves or enclaves of youth’ (Elias, 2008). This relates to the aspect of closed social circles of mobile young Europeans. Such enclaves resemble an ‘Erasmus bubble’ (Cuzzocrea et al. 2021; Earl, 2018), whereby interconnectedness with other mobile young people is at the core of the social experience of mobility. With such an international bubble, the oasis also shares some limits, related for instance to interactions with those who are left outside of this enjoyable circle. Elias’ analysis, in fact, highlights the negative aspect of such enclaves, which cut off young people from the adult world and consequently from the knowledge that is necessary to participate in it. However, in our accounts such reservoirs respond to the function of creating pleasurable spaces of indulgence, where students find themselves comfortable. It is in these daily involvements with diverse young people that self-knowledge increases:

I feel that here in Erasmus, I developed a lot and I grew a lot, I learned so much about myself, and I don't even have to think so much about myself, it's the connections or the interactions that I have with other people and what they're telling me. And when they tell me what they experienced, what they're going through, when they're telling me about their opinions and their perspectives on things. In these discussions I am gaining so much (Isana)

The intercultural dimension of the stay is not to be overlooked, with students seeing the importance of a cosmopolitan habitus for their careers, but also as an identity project. Being young is somehow tied to the need to exploit opportunities offered by the European, in particular for those coming from countries where these opportunities are a recent gain such as Eastern Europe or Turkey (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021). As both dimensions of being and becoming intertwine and overlap, investigating the process of becoming necessarily brings us to look at being, to which we now turn.

6. 'It's the real me'- the Erasmus experience as 'being'

The 'being' aspect underlines the intensity of the lived youth experience when abroad. The passion of participating in everyday student activities becomes a trait of the Erasmus experience and the intensive exploration takes place in different spheres – personal, educational, cultural, or geographical through travelling (Krzaklewska 2013). Indeed, the 'real Erasmus' experience is discursively connected to pleasure and enjoyment. It is compared to the joy of holidays – and this marks an important dissimilarity with the uninspiring life in the home country (described as interlinked with studies and/or work duties), thus further depicting uniqueness:

Sometimes there were trips, or we just met and went to the party – one Spanish guy and Italian played the guitars. (...) We met, each person brought some food and we watched movies. Or you play some games, or organize a grill (...) You are like on holidays, spending time with great people... Sometimes they say: Erasmus is like life in one year. For me, it was all the time something happening, we were doing something every day. I rarely sat at home alone, always with other people. (Anna)

'Being' is an element that makes an Erasmus stay abroad a youthful experience. Students feel that the experience they are making is the embodiment of youth, designed to fit young people's needs and to express their own social values. This set of characteristics is strongly connected to viewing youth as a lifestyle – a way of living associated with travel, consumption, social contacts and availability of free time, similarly as for the gap-year travellers lifestyles were the basis for their identity (Bennett

& Johan 2018). In fact, it is during the stay abroad that they feel their true self can flourish, where they can really see who they are (and, consequently, where they are heading):

I arrived in Poland and one of my mentors took me from there and it was like a dream basically. (...) I felt just unlimited freedom and different cultures, like my brain started to try to learn everything. Okay. What is this? What is this building? What is this way? Oh my God. Look at the board, it's written something but I'm not understanding. Oh, the weather's totally different and foods are different. Thinking types of people are different. (...) I don't know. I cannot explain why this freedom feeling, this self-confidence. It is like looking at your soul and it's me, it's the real me. (Ozge, our emphasis)

This unique being while in mobility is pivotal to understand the concept of oases of youth. The oases allow one to find resources not available and enjoy what the “desert” cannot offer, even if for a short time. Our research shows that despite difficulties, going on Erasmus may be used as an escape – from a difficult job, from a harsh study programme or a stressful university atmosphere (Waters et al., 2011). One of our female respondents tells a story of how going on Erasmus was a chance to free herself up from a stressful job in a corporation. Therefore, this moment of deceleration in transitions (Rosa 2013) allowed her time to rethink her professional choices:

Interviewee: Well, it's not like a dream job for someone who just finishes university. It's a bit too much. The requirements are very high for a person who has no experience for example, and the pressure is quite high. (...)

Interviewer: So this Erasmus was kind of a break?

Interviewee: (...) Well, it was a reason for me to quit, let's say. And after going back I decided, well, I'm not coming back to this kind of job. (Kasia)

Erasmus stays offer relief for some period of time, but may also lead to life changing decisions that free individuals, for instance quitting a job that one does not want, and increasingly so in repeated experiences. This framing sheds light on possibly stressful periods of life, seen as coupled with harsh obligations and subject to high expectations and social control, while deprived of energy, joy, spontaneity. This ‘unwanted youth’ is then described with adjectives that are stereotypically assigned to adulthood: dullness, routine, tiredness, isolation/solitude, a lack of fun and parties. As suggested by Rosa (2013), the moment of pause is necessary to distance oneself from a stressful and busy framework of school to work transition demanding constant acquisition of competences and self-directedness. As suggested by Oinonen (2018), university students attempt to challenge the neoliberal framework of their education, thus mobility might be seen as an escape from the rat race, as the respondent below suggests:

I studied economics and I was always surrounded with people who are really racing, who really wanted to work in big companies, and they are so young and they still have their whole lives to work and they already want to work, they want to work on their career without dreaming, without knowing how good, how nice life can be, that they can travel, they can do their lives the way they want. (Sylwia)

In this sense, oases also offer – or allow one to reconquer - a space for personal freedom. They allow oneself to be liberated from parental control, but also from moral spaces, experienced as against open-mindedness, and perhaps even discriminatory. On the contrary, students cherished the opportunity to live in a multicultural environment, depicted as open to diversity, or tolerant. In this way, the Erasmus oasis provides an escape from adulthood – as a stage of life in contrast to youth (Nilsen, 2021) – whenever the former is seen as deprived of joy, emotions, energy, love, spontaneity, lightness, and light-heartedness. Living in the present, rather than the extended-present characteristic of youth, is a trait of the oases and becomes a normalised element of youth. We could therefore say that students choose to use their chance to put adult obligations on hold and exploit Erasmus opportunities before finishing their studies and embark on the labour market (Ravert, 2009) - the Erasmus experience creates a chance to gather memories that become a form of biographical capital. Some will continue their adventures with mobility for extended periods of time, downplaying the becoming' element and concentrating on exploiting the 'being' elements of the youth oasis while deferring 'adult' commitments (Frändberg, 2015).

7. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have disentangled how youth is composed of both 'being' and 'becoming' elements, exploring these two concepts in parallel in the narratives of young people who undertake more than one mobility experience. Both aspects play an important role in conceptualising youth. Becoming is directed at the exploration of opportunities and self, which is directed towards the future. Such transformations experienced during the Erasmus are directed and capitalised in the light of the vision of the "ideal adulthood". This part of the experience is individualised and often linked to personal struggles that lead to change and growth. Being, instead, expresses the values of youthfulness and aims at realisation of "ideal youth". Biographically it results in deceleration, a potential delay in youth transitions and exploiting on the present. The present is lived in companionship and linked to positive emotions of fun and joyfulness. The youth oasis provides a social (or even institutional) space for both becoming (an adult) and being (a young person), based on the understanding that both elements strengthen each other. For example, deceleration actually

fosters a transformation directed towards the future and personal growth that happens through being with others.

Table 3. Conceptualising youth oasis

BEING	BECOMING
“ideal youth”	“ideal adulthood”
Deceleration	Transformation
living in the present	orientation towards the future
in companionship (youth social bubble)	individual
light-heartedness, happiness, joy	struggling, hardship, effort

Indeed, the careful consideration of both aspects brings further reflection on youth as emerging adulthood. Within this conceptualisation, exploration happens for the purpose of identity formation in regards to adult roles and focuses on work and the sphere of intimate relationships. In our analysis, both being and becoming are central, and indeed the lack of opportunity to realise either of those becomes frustrating or devalues the overall experience. Youth oasis as a concept elicits the identification of places that allow the realisation of both being and becoming, and in this sense constitutes an idealised condition for contemporary youth transitions.

However, the oasis of youth, which we propose as a core contribution of this article, not only expresses the value of global youth, but also difficulties in actually capturing the experience of youth in full, whilst in the middle of pressures for realising one’s transition. The youth oasis, institutionally constructed through the Erasmus programme, remains a fleeting condition. Multiple experiences abroad confirm the young people’s desire to search for it notwithstanding the difficulties to achieve the actual oasis. Our analysis suggests that there emerges a need to reflect on the concept of emerging adulthood as a space-time of intense exploration also in light of the most recent political instability across Europe and other global circumstances (such as the pandemic). While students today often experience the pressure to excel and progress, the Erasmus experience allows them to ‘pause’ and enjoy the youthful experience, which is the most distant condition from the worries that the current political scenario entails. In our empirical material, which was collected in a time characterised by economic instability but less profound political instability, this is especially visible as informants are self-aware that within their educational mobility trajectory there is a possibility to fit experiences of diverse character, responding to the needs of their age. Those needs embrace both the necessity to develop skills useful for adulthood, develop competences and mature, but also to enjoy the present with international peers and seize the moment while in a foreign country.

In general, the reflexive perspective of the participants explicates the uniqueness of the social space abroad for self-development and identity construction, even if this narrative may be seen as a tool for distinction making of those capable to engage in super-mobility. This emerges clearly in the narratives of those who did not manage to discover a youth oasis during their first stay abroad but only later, or whose experience of the oasis was ‘destroyed’ by particular events, making the focus on multiple users especially interesting: not every stay abroad guaranteed ‘ideal’ experience, thus the importance of the possibility of a subsequent search for particular features of the stay abroad – for the oasis of a sort. These dynamics allow the reconstruction of one’s expectations towards a stay abroad every time, where the diverse features of mobility feed into one’s process of identity formation. The oasis of youth metaphor does not aim at homogenising the experiences of those studying abroad: the actual space of exploration and development may be of a different character for different students. It is nevertheless the case that a stay abroad offers these plural opportunities and may become an institutionalised oasis for young people. Indeed, the long-lasting success of Erasmus programme allows to see the fitness of the European Union’s proposal for young people to their actual developmental needs, creating a space for learning and maturing, gaining professional experiences through internships, but also for expressing the cultural values of the young generation (Krzaklewska 2013). This educational setting fits well to the concept of “youth reserves” by Elias (2008) allowing experimentation in an institutional bubble, gathering competences for the future and expression of youth cultures. And, as Elias suggests, the exceptionality of those spaces and a contrast with dull “adult”-, or otherwise for mobile students, home country-, reality might be indeed a factor pushing students for further search of youth oasis in consecutive and diverse mobility opportunities.

In light of our analyses, it seems that the opportunities described by Arnett to transform one’s life through intensive exploration are rare and not widely accessible, also constituting an oasis in the sense of exceptional circumstance rather than generalised framework for young people. Alongside the previously mentioned authors, Heinz also disagreed with the assumption that emerging adulthood itself might ‘characterise the entire population of this age group, regardless of country, social class, gender and ethnicity’ (2009, p. 7). Similarly to Bynner (2005), he stressed the importance of structural conditions and social inequalities that impact strongly on youth transitions. The oasis of youth in the form of Erasmus mobility might in fact provide precisely those opportunities for such explorations and open up a more optimistic outlook on one’s future to limited groups of young people in higher education who possess the requisite resources to study abroad.

Nonetheless, we believe that beyond this case study it is possible to capture other oases where diverse groups of young people may find space of being and becoming e.g. in youth work, in migration, in engagement in local or online communities; and spaces not exclusively open to

somehow privileged higher education students. The mobility element possibly supports this mechanism (not only Erasmus, but also gap years, summer camps, voluntary service projects etc.) and its value has been reaffirmed by the pandemic crisis, during which the opportunities for discovering an oasis of youth has been under threat.

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