

# CONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF HOSTELS WORLDWIDE

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**Abstract:** Present research is inspired to study the conceptions and misconceptions of hostels in eight different countries (Spain, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, Venezuela, China, Australia). The outcome of the research reports that the participants in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and in Hungary define hostels as youth accommodations, Spanish participants as cheap hotels and Venezuelans call them homeless shelters. The majority of the participants of all the above mentioned countries determine that the most important difference between hostels and hotels is the price. Americans, English, Germans, and Hungarians believe that a night would cost between 10 and 30 Euro in an average hostel, while Spaniards and Venezuelans say it would be under 10 Euro. Most respondents agree that hostels are; located in the city center, great places to socialize, offer safe accommodation, staying in there allows guests to save up money, and they are popular choices among travelers. American and English participants think hostels are only for people who like to party. Spaniards and Venezuelans think, hostels are outside of the city center. Spanish and English participants believe that hostels are too cheap to be able to offer a good service. Most participants say, the low price would be the main reason to stay in a hostel. Americans, English and Germans also think that other values are important besides the price: fun, the opportunity to meet people and atmosphere. In spite of all the above, most participants think people would rather stay in a hotel than in a hostel. Stereotypes evolve in different ways, which also explains how misconceptions about hostels developed.

**Keywords:** conceptions and misconceptions, definition of a hostel, price, shared facilities, dormitory, communal areas

## Introduction

The first youth hostel opened in 1912 in Altena Castle in Germany. It was located outside of the city center, had bunk beds, a kitchen and communal areas. The guests were supposed to manage the hostel themselves. They did chores, cleaned, and made their own beds. The first hostels offered free accommodation in exchange for cleaning and maintenance. Since then, only a few changes have been made to this system. They have moved into the city center, guests are charged a small fee for the usage, but the general look and communal atmosphere is still as it was before. Today, most hostels still have bunk beds, although many of them now offer a private room as well. Guests are also supposed to clean up after themselves, at least in the kitchen or in communal areas. The social atmosphere has become one of the most important aspect of hostels, therefore many of them organize events which enable guests to meet each other which creates a friendly, cosmopolitan atmosphere. (Reulecke & Stambolis 2009)

In recent years, hostels have become one of the most popular accommodation types among youth travelers. Student accommodations and hostels have the highest average guest numbers (Tourism Research and Marketing 2014). According

to Diego Saez-Gil, “Youth travel is one of the fastest growing markets of the tourism industry” (Saez-Gil, 2014) which implies the importance of a significant growth of the hostel industry. In 2002, 50% of the young travelers chose to stay in hostels, increasing to 60% in 2007. Forecasts suggest that 500 million overnights will be booked in hostels annually in 2015, which has increased from 300 million in 2007. (Richards, 2008) Bed occupancy increased from 57% in 2010 to 59% in 2013. (Tourism Research and Marketing 2014)

The New Horizons III Survey reports that the number of beds in hostels has nearly doubled since 2011 (Tourism Research and Marketing 2013). In spite of this growth, there are still some misconceptions about what exactly a hostel is. Present research is inspired to study the conceptions and misconceptions of hostels in eight different countries.

## The Psychology of Stereotypes and Misconceptions

There are three guidelines to understand the definition of stereotypes: Stereotypes are aids to explanation, Stereotypes are energy-saving devices and Stereotypes are shared group be-

liefs. (McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears 2002). They are high in relation to a group based on public consensus, and they are permanently maintained.

The cognitive function of stereotypes is the fast, easy but superficial orientation. They evolved to simplify the perception of other people and predict their behavior.

There are four ways how stereotypes develop: Aggrandizement of small, unremarkable details, Over-emphasized differences, False cause and effect, and Overdrawing properties (Csepeli 1997).

These same mechanisms are active not only in the case of perception of groups of people or individuals, stereotypes also can result in misconceptions which always have a small piece of reality but as we saw from the four ways of the evolvement of stereotypes, they are distortion of the reality.

## Materials and methods

### Data collection and sample

The survey questionnaire was created in order to collect data about the conceptions and misconceptions of hostels. Questions were compared with data of Hostelbookers, 2012 and ThatBackpacker 2012.

The survey was available in three different languages: English, Spanish and Hungarian. The term “hostel” was used as an international determination of “Budget-oriented, dormitory accommodation that accepts individual travelers in shared rooms for short-term stays, and that provides common areas and communal facilities” (Hostelmanagement.com, 2008) in the English and Hungarian versions. The translation of the “hostel” word, “albergue” was used in the Spanish version of the survey. There is another, common accommodation type in the Spanish and Latin American culture, it is called “hostal” which refers to “Sleeping accommodation for a night and a meal in the morning” which translated as Bed and Breakfast into English. Linguists call these word pairs false friends. The two words look and sound similar, but their meaning is differ-

ent. (Mark and Janie 2003) To eliminate the confusion caused by false friends, the exact translation, of “hostel”, saying “albergue” was only used in the Spanish surveys.

The survey was created in online and offline format, it was also printed. The questionnaire was created on www.surveymonkey.com which enabled it to be shared on further web pages (www.facebook.com) and to be sent via personal emails. Data of the printed surveys were collected at the Pannon University’s Tourism Faculty in Veszprém, Hungary, at Inhispania – Escuela de Español, Madrid, at Casa España Hostel, Madrid.

The survey forms were available during the period from January to April of 2014 in the three mentioned languages.

The survey was filled out by 473 volunteers from eight countries: 139 persons from Hungary, 96 from Spain, 76 from the United States Of America, 69 from the United Kingdom, 57 from Germany, 25 from Venezuela, 8 from China and 3 from Australia. In the last three countries further data collection is needed. Therefore, most questions are analyzed only in the first five countries.

Responses were analyzed anonymously, only general figures are reported: country and age in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

According to the Youth Traveler Industry Survey the average age of youth travelers is between 25 and 34. (Tourism Research and Marketing, 2014) The aim of this research was to collect data among youth travelers. 59% of the sample are between 21 and 30 years at present survey (1. Figure).

## Data analysis

### Definition of a hostel

There are four questions referring to the definition of a hostel in the survey. At the first question respondents can choose from seven variations of responses: Bed and Breakfast, Homeless Shelter, Youth Accommodation, Cheap Hotel, Student Residency, Other, I don’t know.

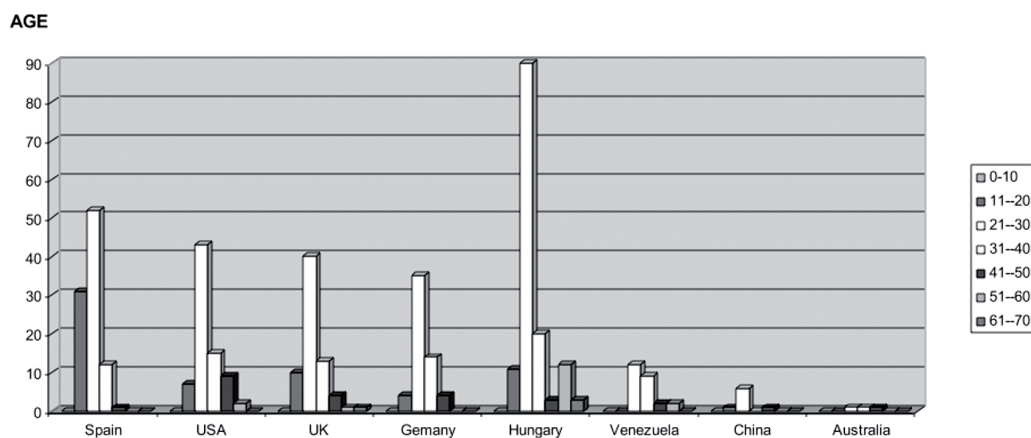


Figure 1. Age of the sample

48% of the total sample responded Youth Accommodation and 35% chose Cheap Hotel, 8% as a Bed and Breakfast, 3% voted for student residency and 2% responded as Homeless Shelter, Other and I don't know.

Respondents called hostels Youth Accommodation in The United Kingdom (68%), in Germany (67%), in Hungary (64%) and in the United States (51%).

Among the Spanish participants the tendency of the responses are the opposite. 58% defined hostels as Cheap Hotels while only 12% marked them as Youth Accommodations. Most Venezuelan respondents think of a hostel as a Homeless Shelter (36%) and only 4% chose Youth Accommodation as their answer (2. Figure).

There are more clarified paraphrases in the second question which refer to a definition of a hostel which tends to make the choice easier for the respondents. 72% chose the option of "Budget-oriented, dormitory accommodation that accepts individual travelers in shared rooms for short-term stays, and that provides common areas and communal facilities". 18% identified a hostel as "Sleeping accommodation for a night and a meal in the morning", 8% as "A very cheap accommodation with bugs in the rooms and dirty bathrooms" and 1% as "Construction worker's accommodation. Cheap, basic, located outside of the city center".

While low percentage (0–2%) of the respondents in the

United Kingdom, in Germany and in Hungary think of hostel as unclean accommodations, whereas 10–12% of the respondents in Spain, in the United States and in Venezuela think rooms and bathrooms are dirty in a hostel (3. Figure).

65% of the sample believes that a night would cost between 10 and 30 Euro while 30% think the cost would be under 10 Euro in an average hostel.

Spanish and Venezuelan responses show an opposite tendency. 49% of Spaniards and 76% of Venezuelans consider the cost of one night under 10 Euro (4. Figure).

What is the difference between a hostel and a hotel? In case of this quantitative question, responses were analyzed by using the method of Text Analysis.

26% of the sample answered the price is the biggest difference between hostels and hotels. 20% wrote shared rooms, 11% service, 7% said a hostel is mainly for young people, 5% comfort and quality. The rest of the answers were: I don't know (3%), Privacy, Cleanliness, Luxury, Atmosphere, Communal areas, Safety, Standards, Facilities, Hostels organize more tours, Size, Hostels are mainly located in Europe, Hostels are friendlier, Hostels are more for party people, Shared bathrooms, Hostels are homeless shelters, Personal treatment, Dining option, Hostels are unserious accommodation options, Bunk beds.

Rankings of the first three most important items by countries (5. Figure):

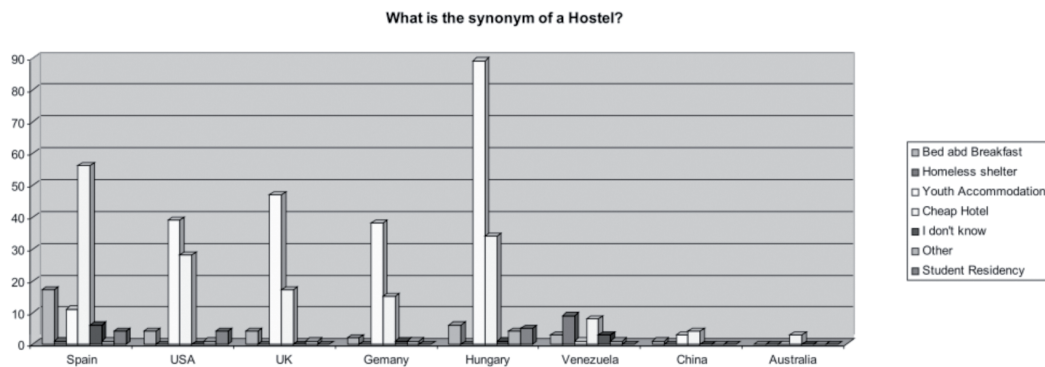


Figure 2. Synonym of a hostel

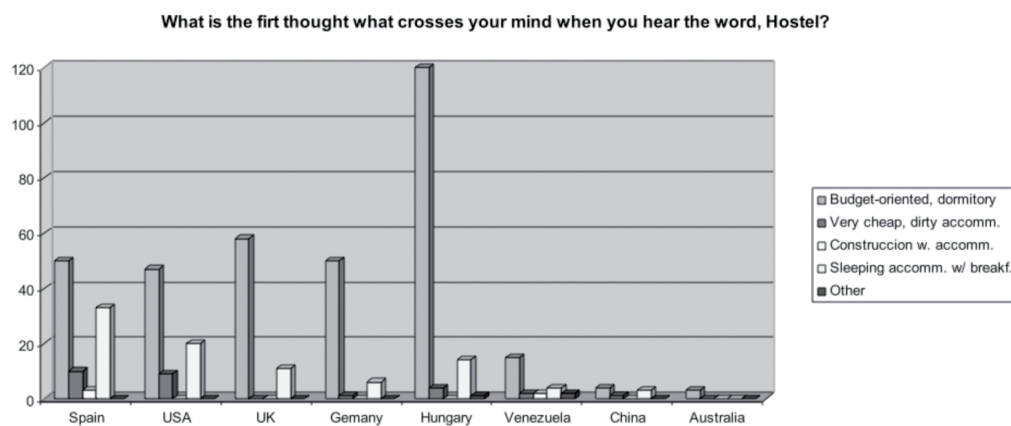


Figure 3. Definition of a hostel

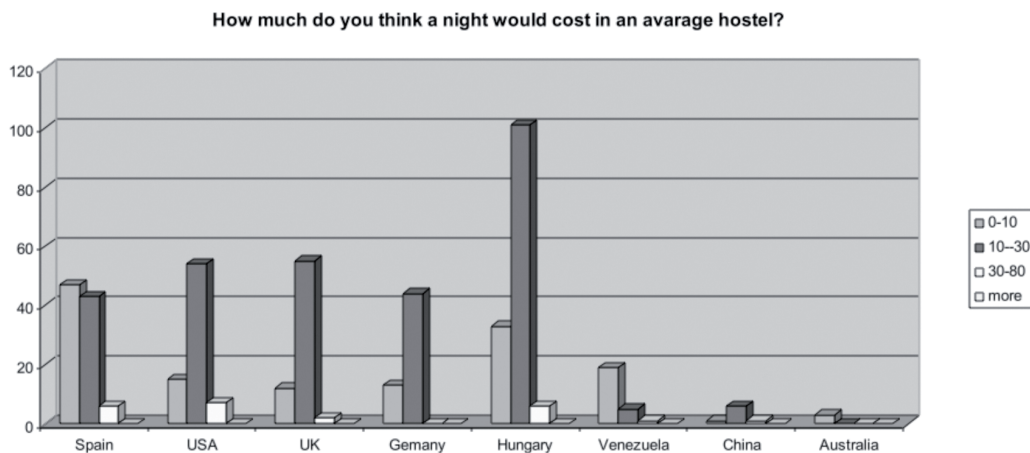


Figure 4. Price of a hostel

Spain: Price (32%), Shared rooms (14%), Quality (11%)

United States: Shared rooms (33%), Hostels are for young people (13%), Price (11%)

United Kingdom: Price (28%), Shared rooms (23%), Service, Privacy and Standard (10%)

Germany: Price (23%), Service and Privacy (12%), Shared rooms (11%)

Hungary: Price (28%), Shared rooms (23%), Service (29%)

Venezuela: Price, I don't know (24%), Shared rooms (13%), Safety (12%)

Price was the most important difference in most countries, except the United States (only 12%), where the most answers say Shared rooms, 33% and Price was only the third biggest difference (11%).

Shared rooms were the second most common answers in Spain, United Kingdom, Hungary and Venezuela. In Germany respondents think Service and Privacy are more important in comparison.

The third place is mixed: Quality in Spain, Price in United States, Service-Privacy and Standard in the United Kingdom, Shared rooms in Germany, Service in Hungary and Safety in Venezuela.

### Statements that refer to a hostel

The fourth question which refers to the definition and the general idea of hostels, includes ten statements, all describing a hostel. A Five point Likert scale was used to ascertain to which degree the respondents agree with the statements. The five points are ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

All countries disagree (82%) with the statement "I don't have a clear concept about what exactly a hostel is".

Compared to the first question where respondents needed to choose a synonym for a hostel, the result of this statement affirms what people think about hostels. In other words, respondents from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Hungary define hostels as Youth Accommodations. Spaniards name hostels as Cheap Hotels and Venezuelans determined them to be Homeless Shelters.

Most respondents (66%) agree that "Hostels are great places to socialize". Answers show the same tendency in all countries.

44% of the total sample disagree with the statement "Hostel rooms are packed like a sardine can" Furthermore, 30%

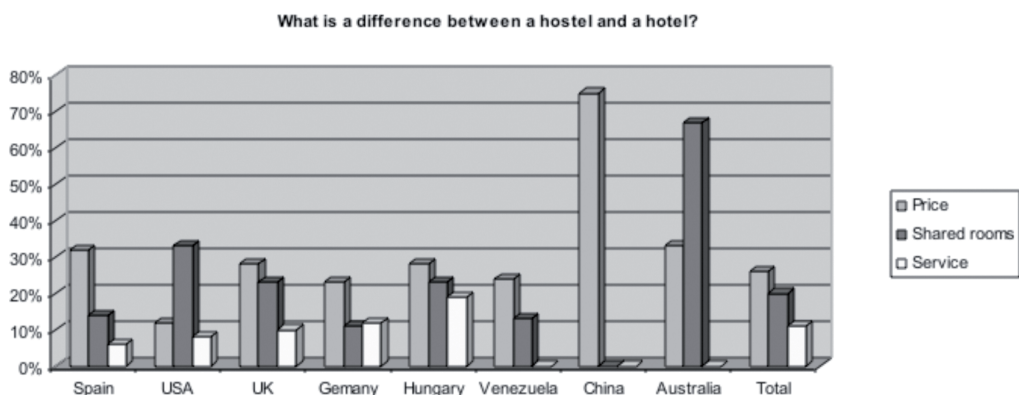


Figure 5. The first three most important difference between a hostel and a hotel

marked Undecided whereas 27% agree. The results are also quite diffuse in several countries. Most Spanish respondents (39%) marked number 3 (Undecided) on the scale but also there are 30% who agree with the statement. In the United States 32% disagrees, 22% are undecided and 31% agree. In the UK, Germany and Hungary, most responses are for Disagree and Undecided.

As a result, opinions about the crowded rooms are divided.

Most of the sample however think that hostels are safe. There are 52% who disagree with the statement “Guests get robbed in hostels”, 31% Undecided and 17% agree.

87% of all participants agree that when staying in a hostel, guests are able to save up money. The responses from all countries show the same tendency.

Spanish, German and Hungarian respondents do not think that hostels are only for people who like to party. (An average of 45% disagrees with the statement). However, 42% of the participants from the UK agree with it. Opinions in the United States show diffusion: 46% disagree, 13% are undecided, and 41% agrees.

Half the respondents (50%) believe hostels are located in the city center rather than rural areas. Spanish participants are unsure: 44% marked their answer as Undecided.

51% however disagree with “Hostels are too cheap therefore they are unable to offer a good service”. However, 64% of Spanish and 59% of UK responders agree with the statement.

68% of the sample believes that hostels are popular choices among travelers. The tendency of the responses correspond with the average in all countries.

The average of all countries (58%) think that people would rather stay in a hotel than in a hostel.

Comparing the last three statements, there is an interesting paradox. Although, 68% of the respondents believe hostels are popular choices among travelers, 58% of the total sample think that people would rather stay in a hotel than in a hostel.

*Would you stay in a hostel?*

60% of the sample answered they would stay in a hostel, 21% answered maybe and 18% said they would not stay there. There are different reasons for the answers (6. Figure).

Out of the 120 participants who responded yes to this question, the majority (42%) said the main reason they would choose a hostel would be its low price. The highest rate of this answer was in Spain (64%). In the United States (33%), United Kingdom (25%), Germany (27%) and Hungary (44%). There is also a high amount of responses which refer to the price but there are other reasons to stay in a hostel which were chosen by high rates as well. 23% of respondents would choose a hostel because of “Fun”: 21% in Spain, 26% in the United States, 23% in Germany, and 35% in Hungary. This was followed by 9% of respondents, the reason, “To meet people”. Higher rates were matured in the Germany (25%), in the United Kingdom (20%) and in the United States (13%). 23% of English respondents said they like hostels and good atmosphere and (18%) think that these are good reasons to stay in a hostel.

Other responses with small rates are as follows: Depends on the trip, the city the room types and the quality of the hostel, only on backpacking tours, adventure, because of parties, to try them, good location, hostels are friendly places, staying at a hostels gives flexibility, only when I work in an other city, I am a backpacker.

21% of the sample answered they would maybe stay in a hostel. The main reason would also be its price: 41% in Hungary, 33% in Spain, 30% in Germany, 15% in the United Kingdom and 13% in the USA. The answers “To try it” also ranked high in the United States (31%) and in Spain (27%). “Only in small rooms”: 18% in Hungary, 14% in United Kingdom and 13% in United States. 20% of Germans and 13% of Americans answered “Depends on the cleanliness”. 27% of Spaniards answered “Depends on the quality of the hostel”. The rest of the answers were the following: Depends on the city, type of the hostel, service they offer, rating, location, trip. Only if they have a locker and only if they have small rooms. I prefer hotels or apartments or couch surfing. Only when I am in transit, only when I travel with young people or only when I travel alone or only when I have no other option. For adventure.

18% of the total participants say they would not stay in a hostel. Out of the 87 people who answered no, the main reasons are “I prefer hotels” (66% in Germany, 53% in Spain and 25% in Hungary) and “I can afford a hotel” (50% in UK, 38% in USA and 11% in Hungary) Other reasons were: “Safety”

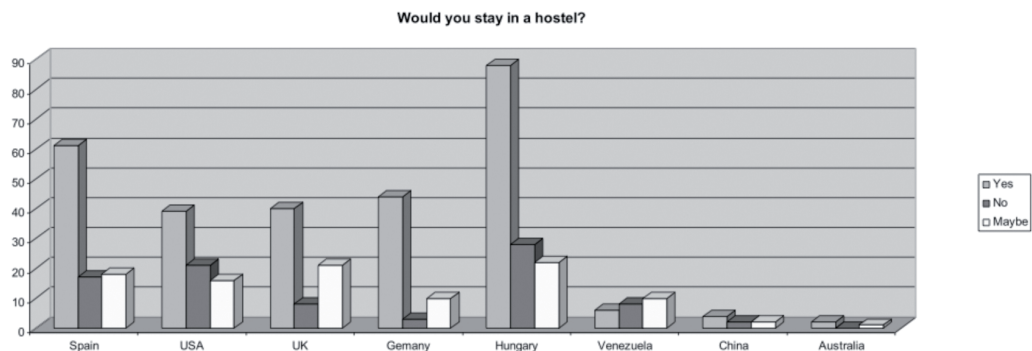


Figure 6. Would you stay in a hostel?

(25% in UK, 17% in Spain and 14% In USA), “Privacy” (14% in Hungary, 13% in UK, 10% in USA), Cleanliness, quality, I heard bad stories, I don’t know hostels, I don’t like hostels, hostels are uncomfortable, I prefer Couch surfing, I have bad experience, hostels are for homeless people.

#### *The Psychology of Stereotypes and Misconceptions – explanation and examples*

Consequently, stereotypes evolve four different ways, which can also explain how misconceptions are developed in relation to hostels. All stereotypes are based on reality, but reality gets deformed by the four mentioned mechanism.

There was no agreement or disagreement if hostel rooms are crowded. The majority of responders marked “Undecided”, which implies uncertainty. The reality of this statement is that there are shared rooms in hostels, the aggrandizement of a detail is that many beds in a room results in crowded rooms. According to the statistical data, hostels tend to create rooms with less beds, also en-suite facilities were presented in two out of three establishments in 2012, which means this misconception will most likely be refuted in the next few years. (The Youth Travel Accommodation Industry Survey, 2014)

As an answer to the question about the difference between a hostel and a hotel, there are many over-emphasized differences: a hostel is cheap, while a hotel is expensive. A hostel is unclean, a hotel is clean. A hostel doesn’t offer any facilities while hotels do. These harsh opposite pairs are the results of over-emphasizing. As a result of the growth of the popularity of hostels, not only are the structure of the rooms changing, also many of them are improving their facilities by opening a bar or a restaurant. In addition, by offering communal facilities like rooms, bathrooms, kitchen, they are used more often, therefore they require more regular cleaning, which indicates that hostels are not as unclean accommodations as misconceptions of Spanish and English participants mention.

Although, the majority of the participants say that guests do not get robbed in hostels. A great percentage also responded that they would not stay in a hostel because they are unsafe because of the shared rooms. There might be a chance that some items disappear but this can not be blamed on the shared rooms. In fact, most hostels offer a personal locker in shared rooms. This mechanism is the false cause and effect.

It is a fact that there is a higher occurrence of meeting people who like to party in a hostel, but it does not mean that hostels are only for people, who like to party as most American and English responses implicate overdrawing properties.

## Conclusions

All in all, there are some differences in how people perceive hostels in the examined countries.

The majority of respondents in all countries define hostels as Youth Accommodations except of Spain, where most of responders believe hostels are Cheap Hotels and in Venezuela,

where hostels are identified as Homeless Shelters. The answers got affirmed when 82% of the total sample disagreed with the statement “I don’t have a clear concept about what exactly a hostel is”

As it was mentioned, the confusion between the words of “hostel” and “hostal” was eliminated by using only the term “albergue” in the Spanish surveys. Consequently, hostels as the classical accommodation types are still not in mind of Spanish youth travelers.

Most participants think hostels are Budget-oriented accommodations with shared facilities.

In the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and in Hungary most answers participate that a night would cost between 10 and 30 Euro in an average hostel.

All countries participants said the price is the main difference between a hostel and a hotel.

Although, some responses in the different countries vary from the average. Most respondents rather think “Hostels are for people who like to party” in the United Kingdom and in the United States. These answers get affirmed in the last question, where participants in the same countries replied they would choose to stay in a hostel because of the parties.

None the less the average answers describe hostels as great places to stay and they are popular choices among travelers. Furthermore, most respondents would stay in a hostel because of its price. Those who answered, they would not stay in hostels, the main reason was also financially based (I can afford better).

By reviewing all answers, responders gave great importance to money: price is the most important difference between hostels and hotels, staying in a hostel gives the opportunity to save up money.

In summary, the outcome of present research points out some misconceptions about hostels, which implies the need for more publicity, marketing and advertisement in the sector of Youth Travel. Comparing the misconceptions with the result of the latest statistical reports, there is a tendency of growth and development in the youth travel sector which can result in the disappearance of the misconceptions in the following few years.

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