

From ski to snow: Rethinking package holidays in a winter mountain destination

Chiara Mauri-Università della Valle d'Aosta, Aosta, Italy

Lorenzo Turci- Università della Valle d'Aosta, Aosta, Italy

□ “Authenticity” has become a critical consumer sensibility: consumers increasingly decide whether to buy or not a product depending on its perceived genuineness (Pine and Gilmore, 2008). This concept is central in tourism studies too (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999; Taylor, 2001). In particular, the concept of authenticity in the tourism literature has evolved from “objective” authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), to “constructive” authenticity (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983) and, more recently, to “existential” authenticity (Wang, 2000). While “objective” authenticity has to do with the intrinsic originality of the toured object, “constructive” authenticity is related with the deliberate construction of displayed objects as authentic by tourists or service providers. “Existential” authenticity, instead, is not associated at all with the actual displayed object, but it is connected with the tourists’ inner state of being, a feeling of self-authenticity triggered by the experience lived in a particular setting.

□ If authenticity is so important for tourists, one possible way of increasing the perceived authenticity of a tourism product is to focus on its experiential component (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999). In the current economy, abundance forces suppliers to distinguish themselves from the competition in new ways, and one solution is to sell “experiences” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). People tend to value experiences much more than simple products, as they attach them a high value because they are memorable. The risk in selling experiences is that of creating staged experiences that are perceived as too superficial, commercial or artificial, and therefore not satisfying the customers’ search for authenticity (Boswijk, Thijssen *et al.*, 2007). As Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) argue, the risk of inauthenticity can be avoided through the “co-creation” of tourism experiences. Consumers want to be actively involved in the creation of their particular experience, through personal interaction with the company.

□ In this setting, it would seem that, at least in Europe and North America¹, holiday packages are not in line with modern tourists' desires and expectations. Indeed, the offered packages have been forced to become ever more individualized, flexible and diversified (Räikkönen and Honkanen, 2013). And yet, at least in Italy, holiday packages sales are increasing². Traditionally, package holidays have been considered as a rational choice to maximize and optimize holidays: they enable to travel safely while avoiding transportation or hygiene issues (Enoch, 1996). Other benefits include ex-ante expense planning, pre-defined quality standards and qualified personnel assistance (Morrison, 2013, p. 173). Holiday packages are especially attractive for the growing segment of thematic tourism (e.g.: sport, nature, gastronomic and heritage tourism) (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003).

□ In this paper, we focus our attention on the effectiveness of winter Alpine package holidays. In Italy, up to the Nineties, winter Alpine tourism mainly coincided with ski tourism (Pechlaner and Manente, 2002). New trends in tourist behavior have emerged since then: preference for short and repeated holidays; decrease in holiday planning; diversification of mountain sports and increase of "slow" sports (e.g.: snowshoe walks, dog- or horse-drawn sledge rides, winter trekking); rising interest in health and nature tourism; emergence of alternative extreme sports (e.g.: heli-skiing, ice climbing, freestyle skiing, ski mountaineering); demand for vibrant and entertaining night life (Skipass Panorama Turismo, 2012)³. Overall, ski tourism is declining: skiing is not anymore perceived as a status symbol and young tourists are more attracted towards more entertaining activities (Pechlaner *et al.*, 2002, p.110). Moreover, the non-sport component of mountain tourism is getting more and more important: most tourists are attracted by the "relax" component associated with mountain tourism (47%) and by its "nature" component (43%). Only 30% cite sports as the reason why they choose mountain destinations (Skipass Panorama Turismo, 2012). Given these trends, it is capital for mountain destinations to adapt and expand their visitor attraction portfolio to better suit new tourist expectations.

1The situation is very different in Asian tourism markets, where the package tourism market is on the rise ([Wong and Lee, 2012](#)).

2 In 2013, 36% of international tour operators active in Italy report an increase in package holidays sales, while in 2012 only 26% reported a positive trend ([Istituto Nazionale Ricerche Turistiche, 2013, p. 4](#))

3 Skipass Panorama Turismo is the only Italian Mountain Tourism research center. The latest study (2012) is based on a panel of 28 Italian mountain destinations.

□ Our analysis has three objectives: 1. investigate whether tourists still consider winter mountain tourism mainly as ski tourism; 2. investigate winter mountain tourists' preferences for the different activities available in a tourist destination; 3. segment winter mountain tourists according to their preferences for different bundles of activities. In order to reach these goals, we have chosen to perform an explorative analysis followed by a quantitative one. A reference destination was identified, to avoid subjective biases relative to the particular mountain destination visited by the respondents. The chosen destination was Courmayeur (Aosta Valley, Italy). Aosta Valley was chosen as it has preserved its natural, cultural and artistic heritage, which constitutes an important and still underexploited asset (Macchiavelli, 2004). Within Aosta Valley, Courmayeur was chosen because it was identified as one of the three internationally most renowned Italian mountain destinations (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo, 2008, p. 67) and its altitude of 1224 meters allows for many kinds of alternative activities.

□ The explorative qualitative analysis was needed because of the lack of research in package holiday connected with winter mountain tourism. The technique of focus group was preferred over individual interviews: in focus groups the participants explain themselves to each other and the researcher can evaluate the nature and extent of interviewees' agreement and disagreement. Moreover, participants can be directly asked for comparison of their experiences (Morgan, 1996). Two focus groups have been conducted (15 and 5 participants respectively) at the beginning of the 2013-2014 winter season (end of November). The focus groups were organized in two parts: in the first part, participants shared their personal experiences related to mountain holidays. Images of 8 different kinds of possible activities were projected as a slideshow (including for instance sports, well-being, local events, cultural heritage etc.). Finally, they were asked to plan a 3-day holiday in Courmayeur, choosing from 29 possible activities located within a 90-minute drive from Courmayeur.

□ The quantitative part of the analysis was structured as follows:

1. definition of package holiday components, derived from the focus groups;
2. design of different kinds of package holidays and of their composition through orthogonal array analysis;
3. design and administration of a questionnaire to a sample of 250 winter mountain tourists;

4. identification of preferences through conjoint analysis(Green and Srinivasan, 1978; Green and Srinivasan, 1990);
5. cluster analysis of respondents on the basis of package components preferences;
6. definition of best packages for each identified tourist segment.

Up to the present day, we have completed the first three steps and we are in the process of analyzing data through conjoint and cluster analysis. Preliminary results seem to confirm that winter ski, while still present in the activities of mountain tourists, it is not the core of the holiday. Given that the holiday seems not to be focused on ski, many alternative activities come into play to shape the tourist's experience and compete for his time.

This result has significant implications for all the stakeholders involved in developing and managing the tourist experience of the destination.

References

- Binkhorst, E., and Den Dekker, T. (2009). Agenda for co-creation tourism experience research. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management***18**(2-3): 311-327.
- Boswijk, A., Thijssen, T., and Peelen, E. (2007). *The Experience Economy, a new perspective*. Amsterdam, Pearson Education Benelux.
- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research***15**(3): 371-386.
- Enoch, Y. (1996). Contents of tour packages: a cross-cultural comparison. *Annals of Tourism Research***23**(3): 599-616.
- Green, P. E., and Srinivasan, V. (1978). Conjoint analysis in consumer research: issues and outlook. *Journal of consumer research*: 103-123.
- Green, P. E., and Srinivasan, V. (1990). Conjoint analysis in marketing: new developments with implications for research and practice. *The Journal of Marketing*: 3-19.
- Hobsbawn, E., and Ranger, T. (1983). *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Istituto Nazionale Ricerche Turistiche (2013). Indagine sul turismo organizzato internazionale.
- MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology***79**(3): 589-603.
- Macchiavelli, A. (2004). *Il turismo della neve. Condizioni per operare in un contesto competitivo*. Milan, FrancoAngeli.
- McIntosh, A. J., and Prentice, R. C. (1999). Affirming authenticity: Consuming cultural heritage. *Annals of Tourism Research***26**(3): 589-612.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual review of sociology***22**: 129-152.
- Morrison, A. M. (2013). *Marketing and managing tourism destinations*. London, Routledge.
- Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo (2008). Il turismo montano in Italia. Modelli, strategie e performance. Anno 2008.
- Pechlaner, H., and Manente, M. (2002). *Manuale del turismo montano: prospettive, cambiamenti e strategie di management*. Milan, Touring club italiano.
- Pine, B., and Gilmore, J. (1999). *The Experience Economy: work is theatre and every business a stage*. Boston, Harvard Business School Press.
- Pine, B., and Gilmore, J. (2008). The eight principles of strategic authenticity. *Strategy & Leadership***36**(3): 35-40.

- Räikkönen, J., and Honkanen, A. (2013). Does satisfaction with package tours lead to successful vacation experiences? *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*.
- Skipass Panorama Turismo (2012). Skipass Panorama Turismo Report 2012.
- Stamboulis, Y., and Skayannis, P. (2003). Innovation strategies and technology for experience-based tourism. *Tourism Management***24**(1): 35-43.
- Taylor, J. P. (2001). Authenticity and sincerity in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research***28**(1): 7-26.
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research***26**(2): 349-370.
- Wang, N. (2000). *Tourism and modernity: A sociological analysis*. Oxford, Pergamon Amsterdam.
- Wong, J.-Y., and Lee, W.-H. (2012). Leadership through service: An exploratory study of the leadership styles of tour leaders. *Tourism Management***33**(5): 1112-1121.
-