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A Pathmaking Journal



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ON THE CHOICE OF A MOUNTAIN TOURIST DESTINATION. THE EVALUATION OF DRIVERS BY YOUNG PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade the mountains of Cuneo have met difficulties in attracting young tourists. Despite the large literature on drivers considered in the choice of a destination, a few contributions focus on the motivations that account for the choice on the part of young people. This paper, based on the identification of drivers of attractiveness of a tourist destination, investigates how the level of satisfaction of young people influences the quality of the offered services. This objective is achieved by means of a literature review on young-tourist destination and on the measurement of tourist satisfaction, the creation of an adapted SERVQUAL model able to measure the gap between Cuneo's youth priorities and satisfaction. This is possible throughout an explorative study performed by means of a questionnaire submitted to 200 young tourists. Finally, paths of action have been suggested to provincial Bodies throughout a focus group. Results show how young tourists consider very important: safety, hygiene and intact nature. This is only an exploratory study applied to a single case study but could be applied at other levels (urban, national...) and implemented in comparison with benchmarks.

KEYWORDS

Tourist Offer; Mountain Tourist Attractions; Customer Satisfaction; Province of Cuneo.

ECONLIT KEYS

M000; R580; R590.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whereas in the 60s, winter mountain tourism was considered the main type of holiday for families and young people, in the 80s it became a “mass product”. Skiing is the most important sport and this fact results in a development of skiing infrastructures, accommodations, house investments, etc. At the beginning of 2000, however, the mountain tourist product became a “mature product”, not able to attract young people. This phenomenon is evident in the Province of Cuneo – adjoining France, the provinces of Turin and Asti and Liguria – which is surrounded in the West and in the South by Cozie, Maritime and the Liguri Alps. In the last ten years the provincial mountain tourist offer has been higher than the demand although in the last five years the number of tourist arrivals, concentrating mainly on the mountains and the district of “Langhe and Roero”, has increased in 34,1%. From 2011 onwards the net of international tourism expenditure has become positive with an expenditure of 172.00.000 euros (Tardivo, 2012, p. 257), but the number of skiing activities has notably decreased in the young market. This contrast compromises the key product of those tourist destinations of the Alpine Arc which have founded their business model on the winter season (Franch et al., 2007, p. 6).

Some of the reasons to explain this situation are the following ones:

- *A lower interest in skiing activities on the part of young people* due to the disappearance of important local (i.e. Stefania Belmondo) or national (i.e. Alberto Tomba) champions.
- *The minor emphasis* given to this sport by the mass media.
- *The attractiveness* of other types of destinations in winter (i.e. the Caribbeans, the Maldives, etc.).
- *Low generational turnover*, i.e. the number of young skiers is nowadays less than that of adults, with forecasts of a further reduction by 10,7 millions of the active population within 2050 (Viassone, 2012, p. 2).

These are only a few of the numerous motivations that account for the lack of interest in mountain tourism in Cuneo province on the part of young people.

This paper, based on drivers of attractiveness of a tourist destination, tries to contribute with the literature on this topic; it focuses on an unexplored segment of

customers - young people - and investigates how their level of satisfaction influences the quality of the services offered.

The objective of this research consists of providing a reply to this phenomenon comparing the priorities of young tourists with those ones expressed in literature on young-tourist destinations; at the same time, the study tests their level of satisfaction towards the quality of the features and services offered. This will be the first step in order to propose adaptation strategies to satisfy Young people's needs as well as to attract them to these areas. The case study presented here has developed along the following lines:

- a literature review of both the distinctiveness of the young-tourist destination and the measurement of the tourist satisfaction;
- the creation of an adapted SERVQUAL model, able to measure the gap between Cuneo young tourists' priorities and their satisfaction; data are collected by means of a questionnaire submitted to 200 young tourists;
- a focus group composed by exponents of provincial Bodies who propose possible strategies of action in order to improve the mountain tourist offer of the province of Cuneo.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1) *FEATURES OF YOUNG-TOURIST DESTINATION*

Young tourists generally travel more and for longer periods of time than other tourists and young tourism seems to have an important economic impact on tourist destinations; in fact, young tourists are often pioneers in choosing tourist destinations and attractions something that plays an important role in stimulating the development of new tourist products; furthermore, when a young tourist is satisfied, he can be considered not only a potential tourist for the future but a market segment that can be easily conquered (Moisa, 2007, p. 441). Different variables such as income, age, and education influence the cognitive and affective assessment of a destination (Beerli and Martin, 2004); in particular, educational level influences the choice of a tourist destination and the way a destination is booked; in fact, online bookings are often performed by women with high levels of education and income (Moisa, 2010, p. 641).

The set of elements that attracts tourists towards a destination has been largely debated in literature (McIntyre et al., 1993; Ritchie and Crouch, 2005). Moreover, there are particular attractive elements taken into account by young tourists in order to choose their destinations. This topic is discussed in detail by Richards and Wilson (2003), who deal with features of young travellers in their study *Today's Youth Travellers: Tomorrow's Global Nomads. New Horizons in Independent Youth and Student Travel*. Young tourists are generally oriented towards leisure activities and not towards tourist-specific activities (Roberts, 1983). The destination chosen by young people must have important characteristics:

- wide accessibility (Moisă, 2010, p. 639) to price (young people do not have much money to spend on their holidays) and also to different means of transport;
- safety and security of transport: this aspect is especially important for women since they are often victims of aggressions in tourist destinations; it is worth mentioning here a study by Babin and KuemLim (2001) on a structural model that shows how characteristics such as perceived safety, fun and educational benefits contribute to travel satisfaction through their impact on personal hedonic and utilitarian travel value perception; this last aspect could be considered as a key mediator of satisfaction ratings;
- service quality: young tourists pay too much attention to the quality of additional services (like websites) and, as a consequence, they usually have higher expectations than in their very first travelling experiences (Moisă, 2010, p. 639). They generally look for flexible services that satisfy a complex and heterogeneous tourist offer.

Due to all these needs the number of young-oriented locals is growing quickly in different places. By proposing a new food offer, they allow young people to eat, socialize and amuse themselves at the same time. Many clubs try to offer a different experience, which is characterized by informality, versatility, multifunction, capable of attracting a higher number of young people (Marino et. al., 2011).

Given these considerations, the first research question of this paper is:

Q1: Which are the features of a young-tourist destination?

In order to provide a reply, Viassone (2012, pp. 3, 4) identifies different drivers which are mainly taken into account by young people when choosing a tourist destination. As can be seen, they are widely studied in the literature: safety (Mak,

2007), accessibility (of information, to get to a place, economic accessibility and of use of any tourist structure) (Euforme website), hygiene (essential to ensure tourists' satisfaction) (Van Heerden *et al.*, 2009, pp. 60, 64), natural variables (with particular reference to climate) (Jani *et al.*, 2009, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, 32, 33; Hu and Ritchie, 1993; Shoemaker, 1994), cultural variables (OECD, 2009), accommodation (Della Corte, 2000), transport (within, from and towards a destination) (Prideaux, 2000; Naudee and Saayman, 2004), entertainment and wellness (i.e. the possibility to go shopping, to do sport) (Krešić and Prebežac, 2011, pp. 501, 502, 505), offer of restaurants (Symons, 1999), cultural manifestations (OECD, 2009) and the possibility of organizing conferences (Garibaldi, 2008, pp. 131-161).

2.2) TOURIST SATISFACTION AT A DESTINATION AREA

Tourist satisfaction is considered a very important feature of competitive destinations because it has a significant impact on the tourist's choice of a future destination. Due to its role in the survival of a destination, tourist satisfaction is one of the most investigated topics in this field (Naidoo *et al.*, 2010, pp. 113, 114). After comparing the perceived performance of a product and the expectations of the customer, Kotler (2003) considers satisfaction as a feeling of pleasure or disappointment.

His level of satisfaction can be measured throughout the relation between what the customer receives and what he expects to receive. In this paper satisfaction is considered as the degree of agreement expressed by users towards the quality of the features and the services offered. The role of the destination image is of paramount importance, as supported by Casalegno and Viassone (2012), since the tourists' level of dissatisfaction increases according to the gap between the image and the real conditions of the destination (Avcıkurt, 2003, p. 24). Anyway, this aspect is not going to be measured in this paper because of the high number of features it involves, which would require a different specific analysis. The concept of tourist satisfaction, when applied to a destination, is difficult to define. If tourism goods or services are considered a group of goods and services in general, tourist satisfaction is to defined as "...the result of the interaction between a tourist's experience at the destination area and the expectations he had about that destination" (Pizam *et al.*,

1978, pp. 315, 316). In sum, he will be pleased if the comparison between his experience as a tourist and the expectations he has provides him with a sense of gratification; on the contrary, he will be dissatisfied if such a comparison leaves him with a sense of disappointment. Despite being widely discussed in the literature, the issue of tourist satisfaction at natural environments and destinations has almost gone unnoticed. So, in order to know more about this particular topic, the reader has to resort to literature on leisure recreation and environments.

Besides the personal experience a tourist has at a specific destination, there are some other factors such as, for instance, hospitality, cleanliness and safety, among other, that also influence his level of satisfaction. The success of a particular destination is, thus, determined by a set of interrelated components. This fact stresses the need for an integrated approach to manage the quality of tourist destinations on a continuous basis (European Communities, 2003, p. 4). The high competitiveness in the tourist industry, on the one hand, and the increased expectations of customers, on the other, have made service providers recognize the importance of customer service for future repeated business (Harris, 1996). In order to be successful, then, the quality of the services offered must be the rule. Many researchers investigate the causality between satisfaction and quality (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). Some others analyze the relationship between service quality, satisfaction and loyalty (Oliver, 1997). As regards the relation between satisfaction and loyalty, it has to be noticed that, since in the sector of tourism it is not linear due to its high level of competitiveness, the tourist, having many other alternatives available, will not choose the same destination if he is not completely satisfied. The relationship among these three elements (quality of tourist services, satisfaction and loyalty) could be represented as in Figure 1.

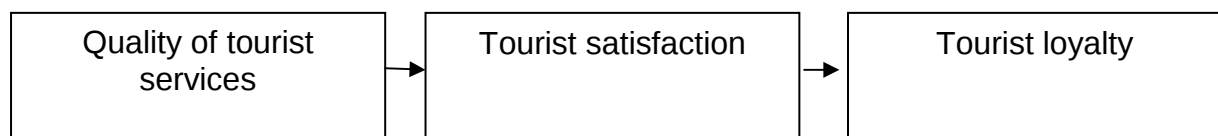


Figure 1: Relationship among quality of tourist services, satisfaction and loyalty.
Source: personal elaboration.

Whereas Cassidy (2002) and Chon & Olsen (1991) study destinations as a way to measure out the satisfaction of tourists, Parasuraman *et al.* (1991, p. 40) maintain that “customers expect service companies to do what they are supposed to do. They

expect fundamentals, not fanciness; performance, not empty promises.” Given all the previous considerations, this paper tries to find the motivations underlying the loss of appeal of mountain tourism in the Province of Cuneo, in which, as will be seen, the issue of tourist satisfaction plays an essential part.

3. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUE

3.1) *RESEARCH FRAMEWORK*

The main objective of this study is to account for the motivations underlying the decline of skiing activities in the Alps on the part of young people (French et al., 2007, p. 5). Its first phase was carried out in May 2011 and is explained in Viassone (2012).

I have chosen the Province of Cuneo as the object of my analysis for two main reasons: first, because of its low rate of young people (there are 14 young people out of 100 inhabitants); and second, due to the low interest in this area the youth have.

In order to understand this situation, two important factors must be highlighted: on the one hand, the crisis the skiing activities are undergoing in the last years; and on the other, the new name of “mountains of relax” given to this area, which is making them especially attractive to other type of population.

The number of hotels has decreased from 261 to 229 in the Cuneo ATL (Azienda Turistica Locale) in the period 1998-2010 while the number of other types of accommodations has increased from 184 to 494 in the same period (Vercellotti, 2012). Some other factors that justify my choice of this area as the object of my analysis are the following ones: (i) the existence of important local ski champions, like Stefania Belmondo, in the past; (ii) the extremely high level of marginality appreciated in the mountain villages of this province; (iii) and the easy accessibility to the data. As for the relationship among service quality, satisfaction and loyalty, this paper is going to research, on the one hand, which features of the Province of Cuneo are considered priorities by the young tourists of this mountain destination, and on the other, their overall level of satisfaction. By doing so, this paper will put forward the real causes that account for the decline of skiing activities in this province; In order to achieve this purpose, I will focus on the following questions:

Q1: Which are the features of a young-tourist destination?

Q2: What is the level of satisfaction towards the offer of the tourist destination on the part of young people?

Q3: How can tourist organizations/bodies exploit these results in order to develop better services to attract and satisfy young tourists?

The comparison between young tourists' expectations and their level of satisfaction is going to be carried out according to the most recurrent parameters in the literature: safety, accessibility of the place/destination, hygiene, natural and cultural variables, accommodation capacity, transport and entertainment and wellness. Their level of expectations and satisfaction is going to be measured out by means a questionnaire which is structured in three main sections: (i) general data about the tourist; (ii) importance given to the previous features by young tourists; (iii) level of satisfaction of the tourists at each of the afore mentioned features. To measure out issues (ii) and (iii) the five-point likert scale (Likert, 1932) has been used. As can be seen in table 2, there are 5 different degrees, ranging from "not important" to "very important", to evaluate the importance the previous elements have for young tourists. The five degrees that evaluate the tourist's level of satisfaction at each of them varies from "very low" to "very high".

The responses to the questionnaire have been analyzed with the SPSS software, which has turned out to be suitable for this purpose (AMOS has not been used because this paper doesn't require the modelling of any structural equation). It is worth mentioning here that the 200 questionnaires have been valid for statistical analysis, so all the data collected have been quite useful.

Replie	N.	%
Valid	200	100
Non valid	-	0

Table 1: Summary of the validity of replies.
Source: Personal elaboration.

	Importance of the element					Level of quality/satisfaction				
	not important very important					very low very high				
Feature 1	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Table 2: Degrees to evaluate both the importance of the features analyses and the tourist's level of satisfaction at them.

Source: Personal elaboration.

3.2) *SAMPLE*

The sample analyzed consists of 200 young tourists who replied to the questionnaire in May 2012 in different areas of the province of Cuneo. The demographic characteristics of the sample are based on gender, age, provenience and education, since they are going to be extremely helpful to explain the real motivations underlying the scarce interest young people have in mountain tourism in the Province of Cuneo.

As regards gender, the sample is quite balanced: 45.5% of the respondents is male and the remaining 55.5% is female; As regards age, it has to be highlighted that almost all the sample concerns young people between 18 and 30 years old.

In relation to the origin of the population included in the sample, 63% concerns Italian young tourists while the remaining 37% have different origins (most of them coming from Germany and Switzerland).

3.3) *KEY FINDINGS*

The results derived from the questionnaires show a quite different classification of the tourist's expectations and their level of satisfaction.

Tables 3 and 4 show the different features ordered according to the percentages they have received at level 5; that is from the highest to the lowest ones. Safety and hygiene seem to be two clear priorities for young tourists. Notice here that they are considered to be very important for 56.8%, 56.6% and 55,3% respectively, of the young people addressed to.

It is worth mentioning here that only 1.7% of the interviewees do not consider safety an important factor.

As regards natural resources, intact nature is the best evaluated sub-driver, not being assigned to level 1 in any case.

There are some other variables, such as, for instance, quality and type of accommodation that are located in the middle since the highest percentage they have obtained is at level 3 (40.7%).

Finally, within the parameters that have received the worst punctuation, three parameters associated with the concept of “entertainment and wellness” stand out: the possibility to organize conferences (45.8%), to go shopping (15.3%) and the wellness offer (15.5%).

The data obtained can be easily explained since the main interest of those young tourists that choose the Province of Cuneo as their destination is no other than the practice of winter or summer sports. That is, they are mainly interested in the natural resources the area offers, and not in services that like, the organization of conferences or shopping, for example, are more typical of big and comfortable cities.

Elements of tourist offer	Importance of the element (%)					I don't know
	Not important			Very important		
	1	2	3	4	5	
Safety	1,7	1,6	11,7	28,2	56,8	-
Hygiene	-	1,6	11,8	30	56,6	-
Natural variables- <i>Intact nature</i>	-	1,7	13	30	55,3	-
Accessibility of the destination	-	1,7	20	30,3	48	-
Entertainment and wellness- <i>Chance of relief</i>	-	6,8	20,3	28,8	44,1	-
Entertainment and wellness- <i>Presence of sport infrastructures and possibility to do sport</i>	5	5	25,6	27,4	37	-
Entertainment and wellness- <i>Food offer of the destination</i>	-	2	32	32,2	33,8	-
Natural	3,4	10,3	31	27,6	27,6	-

variables- Climate						
Cultural	5,2	8,6	34,5	30	20	1,7
variables- Variety of the cultural patrimony						
Accommodation- Quality and type of accommodation	3,4	3,4	40,7	30,5	20,3	1,7
Cultural	1,7	6,8	32,2	44,1	15,3	-
variables- Hospitality of inhabitants						
Organization of local transport	7	8,8	21,3	35	28	-
Entertainment and wellness - Chance of entertainment	6,9	14	27,4	26	24	1,7
Entertainment and wellness - Beauty centers	13,5	13,5	39	18	16	-
Entertainment and wellness - Wellness offer	10,5	21	24,5	28,5	12	3,5
Entertainment and wellness - Possibility to go shopping	15,3	23,7	37,3	11,9	11,9	-
Entertainment and wellness - Opportunity to assist to cultural manif.	6,8	23,7	31	30	8,5	-
Possibility of organizing conferences	45,8	28,8	16,9	8,5	-	-

Table 3: Evaluation according to the tourist's level of expectancy.
Source: Personal elaboration.

The evaluation of these same features, but from the point of view of the tourist's degree of satisfaction, does not always match their evaluation from the perspective of the tourist's expectancy.

The best evaluated feature of them all (top level) is without any doubt that of chance of comfort (32%), which is followed by the three features which were the best

evaluated from the perspective of the tourist's expectancy: intact nature (25%), hygiene (13.6%) and safety (11.9%).

Cultural variables, in particular those of hospitality of inhabitants (45%) and variety of cultural patrimony (44.1%), are in the middle since the highest percentage they have obtained is located at level 3.

Similar results are obtained for the variables of accommodation, organization of local transportation, climate and most of the parameters associated with entertainment. It is worth mentioning here that no tourist has expressed a complete level of dissatisfaction (level 1) at the following parameters: intact nature, hygiene, safety, food offer and accessibility of the destination.

Elements of tourist offer	In this tourist destination the element is excellent (%)					
	I don't agree I completely agree					I don't know
	1	2	3	4	5	
Entertainment and wellness- Chance of relief	3,3	1,7	13,3	48	32	1,7
Natural variables-Intact nature	-	6,8	22	44,5	25	1,7
Hygiene	-	9,5	38	39	13,6	-
Safety	-	5,1	30,5	50,8	11,9	1,7
Entertainment and wellness- Presence of sport infrastructures and possibility to do sport	1,7	11,7	30,7	36	16,7	3,3
Entertainment and wellness - Food offer of the destination	-	6,7	27	48	15	3,3
Accessibility of the destination	-	10,2	28,8	50,8	10,2	-
Cultural variables- Variety of the cultural patrimony	5,4	15	44,1	22	8,5	5,1
Entertainment	15	21	28	19,3	8,8	8

and wellness - Wellness offer						
Cultural variables- Hospitality of inhabitants	5	5	45	30	8,3	6,7
Accommodation- Quality and type of accommodation	5	10	38,3	28	7	11,7
Organization of local transport	10,3	20,7	33	24,1	5	6,9
Entertainment and wellness - Chance of entertainment	8,3	30	38,3	15	5	3,4
Entertainment and wellness - Beauty centers	20	16,7	30	21,7	5	6,7
Entertainment and wellness - Possibility to go shopping	11,7	28,3	35	17	5	3
Entertainment and wellness - Opportunity to assist to cultural manif.	8,3	26	36	18	5	6,7
Possibility of organizing conferences	39	23,7	18,6	3,4	3,4	11,9
Natural variables- Climate	1,7	10,3	34,5	50	3,4	-

Table 4: Evaluation according to the tourist's level of satisfaction.
Source: Personal elaboration.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this research provide a reply to each of the questions previously described.

In sum, this analysis shows, on the one hand, that the best evaluated features of a young tourist are safety, hygiene and intact nature, and on the other, that those concerning the potential organization of conferences, shopping and the offer of wellness are not evaluated in a very positive way.

This analysis makes clear that young tourists choose the Cuneo mountains as their destination for two main reasons: to do sports and to be in contact with intact nature in a safe environment.

In most of the cases the level of satisfaction of young tourists at the different variables examined matches that of their expectations. That is, the parameters that are considered important or very important from the perspective of the tourists' satisfaction are also the best evaluated from the point of view of the expectations, and viceversa.

These results confirm those put forward by Viassone in her exploratory study conducted in May 2011 and discussed in the WOA Conference 2012 in the paper titled "The Role of the Evaluation of Tourist Attractions by Young People as a Tool to Develop Provincial Public Strategies: the Case of Cuneo's Mountains".

Notwithstanding, the features that do not follow this alignment are:

- the *possibility of entertainment*: This feature has been evaluated over level 3 from the point of view of the tourist's expectation, whereas from the perspective of his level of satisfaction its evaluation has been lower. This contrast emphasizes that there is a strong need to develop evening animation and entertaining activities in order to attract the young tourists' attention.
- the *organization of local transport*, for which the same situation of the previous factor holds. This fact causes important phenomena of isolation that often force women and men to choose between their adaptation to the situation or their desire to escape from it. It should be noticed here that this province is only partially built around main axes of regional infrastructure and around urban road junctions of under-provincial importance (Regione Piemonte, 2012, p. 94)

Mountain attractions able to attract young people in the province of Cuneo consists of wonderful natural landscapes, a very rich enogastronomic as well as sportive offer. However, there are still important obstacles/difficulties that impede the revitalization of the mountain tourism in these areas: for example, the high price of the skiing facilities, the scarce facilitations for the youth, the poor infrastructures and the lack of night entertainment.

In fact, this mountain area is perceived by young people as a quiet (40%), wonderful (18%) and homely (15%) place. Since these adjectives are not the

prototypical ones to describe a young tourist destination, it can be inferred that this particular destination needs to be updated.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PATHS OF ACTION FOR PUBLIC GOVERNMENT

From the results of this study some important paths of actions can be inferred to increase the young tourists' level of satisfaction at different tourist attractions offered by the mountains of Cuneo.

The drastic decrease registered in the skiing activities in this province in the last 15 years has only been partially replaced by snowboarders and carving supporters as well as by new tourist coming from the East countries. This could be partially explained by the Young tourists' level of satisfaction only at three of the different features considered important for their choice. Cuneo is perceived by our sample as a clean, safe and naturalistic area, but unfortunately not a young-oriented destination. It appears as the perfect area for leisure, for doing sport activities in contact with nature but unable to offer entertainment after 6 p.m. and to satisfy the needs of young tourists. Its prices are too high and its facilities for this kind of population are quite short.

In addition, the awful conditions of transportation which are unable to link the most important skiing localities with urban centres, do not improve the situation. Due to all these facts, it will be very difficult to wait for a generational turnover of people interested in winter and snow holidays.

In the light of these considerations, possible strategies of action in order to improve the mountain tourist offer in the province of Cuneo could be the following ones:

- the development and differentiation of public transportation and the creation of new infrastructures with low environmental impact;
- the strengthening of the entertainment offer and the creation of new sport activities, which, besides attracting Young tourists, will diversify the tourist offer;
- the reinforcement of the awareness towards energetic saving and a better management of garbage;
- a suitable path of personnel training capable of creating qualified figures who can satisfy the needs of young tourists;

- the development of a new entrepreneurial culture, open to innovation and focusing on hospitality;
- the planning of a higher number of facilitations especially devoted to young people who are often characterized by scarce financial resources;
- given the importance of tourist participation in creating a tourist product, it is important to improve the promotion of a destination also throughout modern channels like websites or social networks (i.e. Facebook, Twitter).

In conclusion, if the Province of Cuneo aims to attract again young people, its tourist offer and its tourist image require have to be changed and improved. This needs a major coordination between the activities of urban planning and those of tourist promotion.

Despite these important considerations, this paper must be viewed as a preliminary study due to two main reasons: first, because of the restricted scope of the sample studied, suitable only for an exploratory research as this one and second, because the study is limited , on the one hand, to a specific mountain destination, the Province of Cuneo, and on the other, to the analysis of those features considered in the literature to be relevant for the choice of a young tourist destination.

Notwithstanding, with suitable changes, the results obtained and the system of evaluation employed could be applied in the future to other level of analysis (regional, national, urban) and/or to other kinds of tourism (i.e. enogastronomical, cultural). As a consequence, new studies could be carried out to research some other interrelated aspects, such as, for instance, the effect a particular destination image has on the young tourist's choice of a specific mountain area.

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Article info:

Received 20/06/2012. Accepted 05/10/2012. Refereed anonymously.