2016

The Role of Tourists' Feedback in the Enhancement of Religious Tourism Destinations

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The Role of Tourists' Feedback in the Enhancement of Religious Tourism Destinations

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Over the last few decades, tourism has faced several challenges and opportunities mostly related to the tremendous rise of online social networks and tourist platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor, etc.). The revolution brought about by Web 2.0 (or Travel 2.0) has radically changed the behaviour of tourists, who are now able to access information rapidly and to contribute in generating information to share with other users. The advent of the Internet has forced destinations to transform themselves to be more interactive, innovative and efficient as the online consumer is more active, demanding and in control. As a consequence, online reviews are becoming increasingly important, as they represent a significant information source both for the tourists and for the local management of tourism destinations. In this new scenario, religious tourism destinations should make an effort to manage tourists' feedback, in order to adapt their offer to the needs expressed by their visitors. The aim of this research is to assess: how the 'Sacred Mount of Oropa' and 'Sacred Mount of Orta' (Piedmont Region, Italy) are perceived as religious destinations by tourists and; how local management should improve the quality of the offered experience based on this analysis. The methodology consists of a qualitative content analysis of a sample of reviews on TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com) - 237 and 243 reviews respectively. TripAdvisor provides detailed, rich and relevant data which includes information about the visitors of the Sacred Mounts and information about their beliefs and expectations within their comments. In accordance with content analysis methodology, the study selected a manual coding process in order to transform non-structured information into a format that allows analysis, which is possible due to the nature of the reviews. This paper presents empirical findings on the importance of online feedback for a religious destination.

Key Words: religious destinations, destination management, online travel reviews.

Introduction

In recent years, tourism has faced several changes, mostly related to the advent of the Internet and to the development of information and communication technologies (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Fu Tsang, Lai and Law, 2010). This has given rise to an enormous spread of social networks and tourist platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor, etc.), in which tourists can share their travel experiences, post comments, opinions and even pictures and videos. These websites are the epitome of the phenomenon known as Web 2.0 (Miguéns, Baggio and Costa, 2008), a term coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004, who identified the emerging social subsystem as the future Internet. The revolution brought by Web 2.0 (or Travel 2.0) has radically changed the behaviour of tourists, who are now able to access information rapidly and to contribute in generating information to share with other users. According to the UNWTO,

> *today, tourism activity is increasingly being shaped by price comparison and combination technology; new applications for mobiles that offer a wide range of opportunities are being developed; social networks are consolidating themselves within a more transparent market in which citizens are able to provide services together* (UNWTO, 2011).

A survey by PhoCusWright (2009) revealed that nine out of ten tourists read online reviews on tourism products and services (hotels, restaurants and destinations) before making any travel choice. Growing numbers of travellers search and consume travel information created by other travellers for their travel planning and then share their experiences when they return from their trips. Given the experiential

Figure 1 – Piedmont and Lombardy Sacred Mounts

Source: http://whc.unesco.org
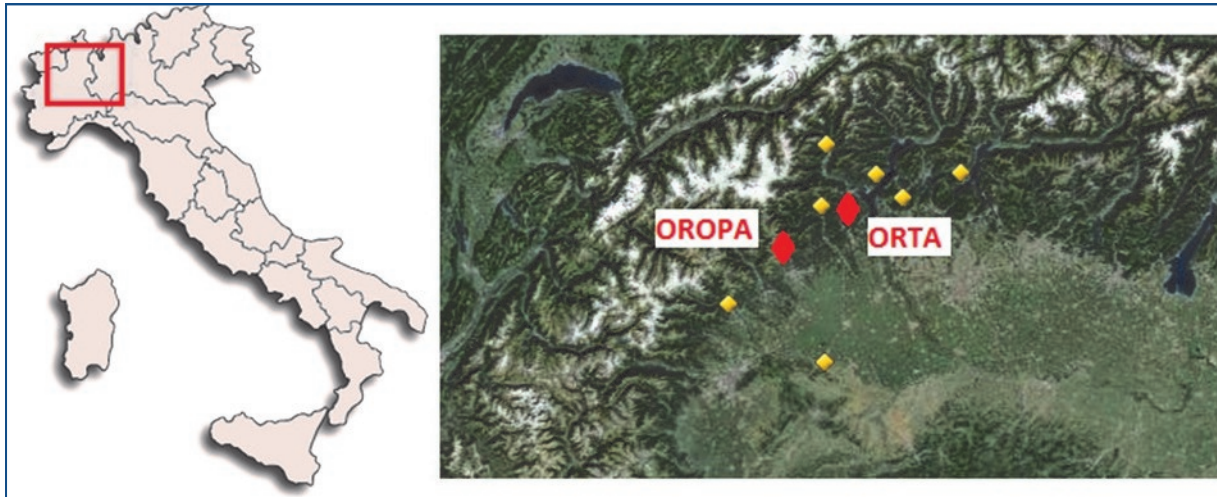
nature of tourism, the information created by other travellers is even more important and influential in the search and decision-making process than when considering other types of purchases (Gretzel, 2011). Planning a trip involves a 'temporal, dynamic, successive, and multistage contingent decision process' (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002:15). Information needs and information search strategies can be assumed to vary for different stages in the travel decision-making process (Gretzel, Fesenmaier and O'Leary, 2006).

According to Milano (2010), the travel experience formation process is made of three phases: firstly, pre-experience, built on other people's travel stories before travelling; secondly, experiences during travel (today an increasing number of travellers share real-time experiences through mobile applications) and; thirdly, post-travel experience, which involves the dissemination of comments, evaluations and emotions. It is clear how this continuous flow of information can heavily influence the image and the reputation of a tourist destination. The internet has forced destinations to transform themselves to be more interactive, innovative and efficient as the online consumer is more active, demanding and in control. If unhappy about a service, reputation can be damaged as negative information posted online is instant and public and shared with a large number of potential customers (Russell, 2010). This leads to multiple challenges for tourism destinations: to understand the main trends that are affecting supply and demand; to manage change in the external environment while evolving at the same rate and; to improve the capacity for tourist organizations to respond to demand through policies

that better integrate diverse interests (UNWTO, 2011). Therefore, managing destinations means taking into account the whole range of their tourist potential, perceived image and reputation as well as the changes in tourist behaviour and expectations. Indeed, the proliferation and increasing significance of online reviews for all kinds of consumption decisions imply the need for a better understanding of their influence in the tourism context (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011).

In the light of these considerations, this paper aims to evaluate how the Sacred Mount of Oropa (Biella, Italy) and the Sacred Mount of Orta (Novara, Italy) are perceived by tourists - based on visitor comments on TripAdvisor. These two cases represent two of the nine Sacred Mounts in Piedmont and Lombardy (Figure 1), which have been inscribed within the UNESCO World Heritage Lists since 2003. The inscription was favoured on the basis of two criteria:

- the implantation of architecture and sacred art into a natural landscape for didactic and spiritual purposes achieved its most exceptional expression in the Sacri Monti ('Sacred Mountains') of northern Italy and had a profound influence on subsequent developments elsewhere in Europe.

- the Sacri Monti ('Sacred Mountains') of northern Italy represent the successful integration of architecture and fine art into a landscape of great beauty for spiritual reasons at a critical period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

The series of chapels, which, with statues, paintings and frescos recount episodes and mysteries of sacred life, merge with the welcoming environmental surroundings and contribute to define the features of

each monumental complex. Valuable examples of landscape architecture, the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont (Belmonte, Crea, Domodossola, Ghiffa, Oropa, Orta and Varallo) and the two of Lombardy (Ossuccio and Varese)[1] represent important meeting places for religious tourists and for secular tourists / lovers of art.

Both of these groups of tourists share their experiences on online platforms, and thus, are able to influence other visitors' opinions as well as their future travel decisions. Nowadays, online customer review systems are one of the most powerful channels to generate online word-of-mouth (Dellarocas, 2003; Burgess, Sellitto, Cox and Buultjens, 2009), acting as an important information source both for the tourists as well for the local management of tourism destinations. For this reason, destination managers should improve the quality of the offered experience through the analysis of these reviews. Therefore, this paper intends to enrich the empirical research on the impact of online feedback related to religious destinations.

Methodology

The data analysed in this work were extracted from TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com), the most prominent online travel review platform (Zehrer, Crotts and Magnini, 2011) in terms of use and content available (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). TripAdvisor (TA) is a website based on the idea that travellers rely on other travellers' reviews to plan their trips, or at least can be satisfactorily helped in their decisions by them (Miguéns, Baggio and Costa, 2008). TA is a powerful online platform for interaction between peers (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004), considered the most successful social networking / virtual community in tourism. One of the main strengths of the TA community is the use of user-generated content. It facilitates the reviewing of accommodation and attractions around the world and brings together individuals in discussion forums (Buhalis and Law, 2008).

With regard to the first case study, the 226 reviews were posted on TA by people who visited the Sacred Mount of Oropa. The data were collected on 25th November 2014 and processed in December 2014. For the second case study, the 243 reviews posted by visitors to the Sacred Mount of Orta were collected on 10th April 2015 and processed during May 2015.

The analysis of these data is interpretative (Flick, 2011). The research is based on a qualitative approach (Mayring, 2000; Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Schreier, 2012) which allows the researcher to understand the views, attitudes and behaviours (Lam and Hsu, 2006; Sparks and Pan, 2009) of the Sacred Mount's visitors. Therefore, the methodology consists of qualitative content analysis:

> *a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns* (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005:1278).

Consistent with the content analysis approach (Gibbs 2007; O'Connor, 2010; Capriello, Mason, Davis and Crotts, 2013; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008), the study has used a manual coding process in order to transform non-structured information into a format that allows analysis; this has been possible due to the small-volume of reviews. The process has been designed to extract information on the geographical origin of the visitors, their motivations, the primary elements of description and perception (keywords) used to assess their experiences. In addition to the manual coding process, the research has also made use of a computer-based software (Site Content Analyzer) to count descriptive and perceptive keywords in the reviews.

Research Findings

The Sacred Mount of Oropa (Biella, Italy)

TripAdvisor provides detailed, rich and relevant data, which includes information about the visitors to the Sacred Mount of Oropa (see Photo 1) and information about their beliefs and expectations within their comments. The analysis of the gathered data focuses on the process of deriving quality information from subjective texts. According to Li (2013), web users are likely to express their opinions using subjective opinion words. However, not every word is subjective. Most words in the reviews give objective information. Given these considerations, the research is based on a classification process of reviews, which has separated the information into two categories: descriptive information of the amenities (nouns) and subjective information on their perception (adjectives).

The average rating of Oropa Sacred Mount is 4.2/5. Therefore, in the main, the religious destination 'Sacred Mount of Oropa' has been positively assessed by its visitors. As shown in Figure 1, the origin of the reviewers is mostly domestic (92%). The countries of

1) For additional information: http://www.sacrimonti.net/ User/index.php?PAGE=Sito_en/ sacri_monti_del_piemonte_e_della_lombardia

Photo 1 : The Sacred Mount of Oropa (Biella, Italy)

http://www.santuariodioropa.it/

origin of foreign visitors (8%) are: Switzerland, Brazil, Australia, Portugal, USA, Santo Domingo, Monaco, Argentina, Russia, the Netherlands and Germany.

For this reason, the corpus analysed in this research consists of reviews posted mainly in Italian. Figure 2 shows that 89% of domestic visitors come from the surrounding regions (North-West area). In particular, 18% come from the province of Biella where the site is located and 65% from Piedmont Region itself. This phenomenon can be therefore described as a proximity tourism.

As regards the motivations expressed by the reviewers, 27% of visitors have specifically indicated a motivational push factor for visiting the Sacred Mount of Oropa. Approximately 10% of the reviewers claim to be a repeat visitor, attracted to the site because of its proximity and memories linked to their childhood. 7% refer to a one-day trip (e.g. Sunday trip, family tour,

group excursion, etc.). Only 4 reviews out of 226 contain specific references to religious and devotional motivations.

The first category of the reviews classification process concerns the descriptive information of the amenities. A list of key word topics (nouns) was extracted from the texts and their frequency in the reviews was evaluated using ***Site Content Analyzer***. This analysis has identified the presence of 10 recurring elements (Figure 3). The data reveal that the Sanctuary constitutes the most recurrent element (53% of the reviews), followed by other elements: restaurants (23%), mountains (14%), walks, the Black Madonna and the view (13%), the cable way (12%), the 'Polenta Concia' (traditional local dish - 12%) the trip (12%) and the Nativity Scene (11%).
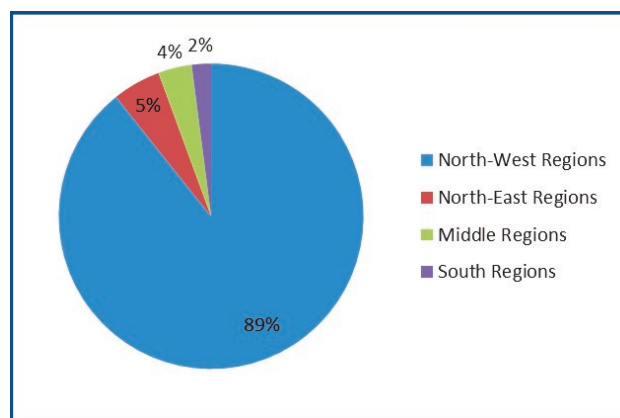
It is therefore noticeable that visitors to the Sacred Mount of Oropa are undeniably attracted by the
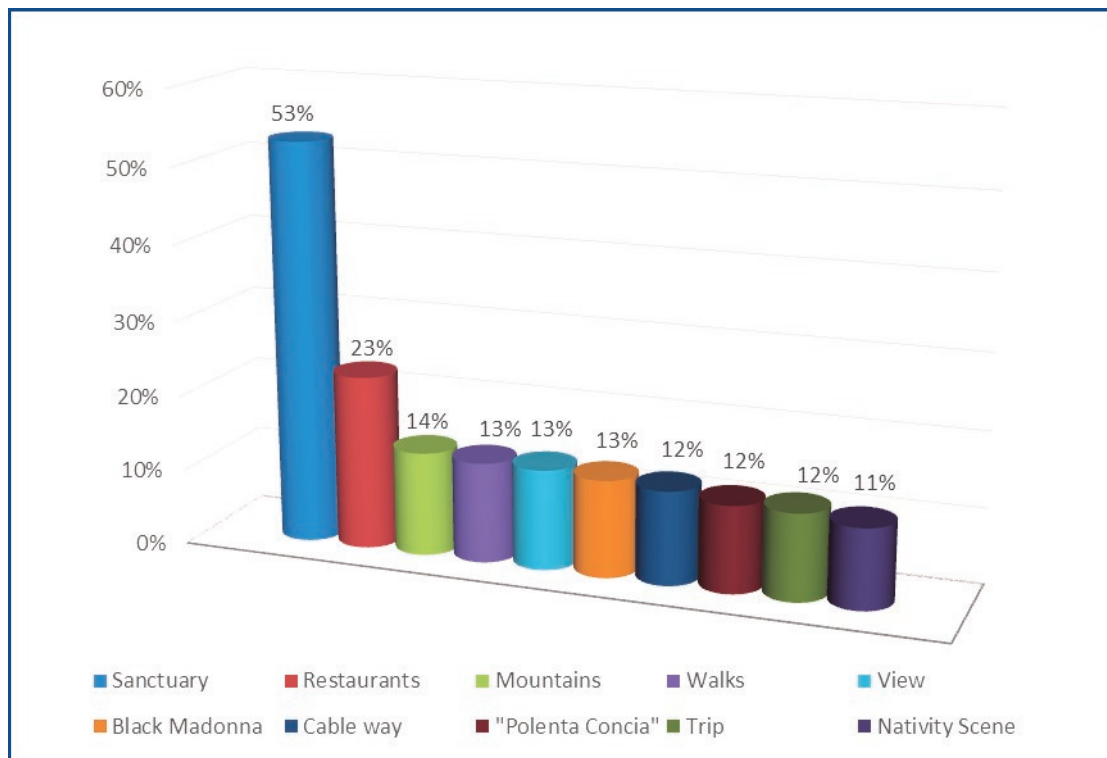
Figure 1 – Oropa Sacred Mount: Origin of Reviewers
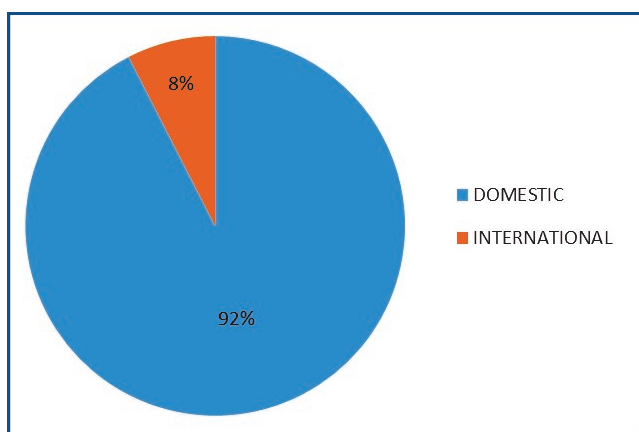
Source: personal elaboration

Figure 2 – Oropa Sacred Mount: Origin of Domestic Reviewers

Source: personal elaboration

Figure 3 – Oropa Sacred Mount: Primary Elements of Description

Source: personal elaboration

religious element of the Marian Sanctuary. On the other hand, their experiences are positively enriched by the local gastronomic heritage, the landscape and the amenities that surround the site.

The second category of analysis provides subjective information on the visitors' perceptions. A list of key word topics (adjectives) was extracted from the texts and their frequency in the reviews was recorded. This analysis has identified the presence of 18 recurring elements (Figure 4). The data shows that most of the reviewers state that they have been fascinated by the beauty (51%) and the majesty (19%) of the site. The Sacred Mount was also defined as imposing (12%), peaceful (11%), a place for praying (8%) and charming (7%).

However, 56% of the reviews contain at least one negative comment linked to the site. While these do not really affect the overall positive opinion they include issues such as: commercial, crowded, neglected, uneasy to access, cold. As an example, the chapels of the Sacred Mount, despite being an important part of this UNESCO site, are negatively assessed due to their poor condition. This has been mentioned in several reviews, emphasizing that there is a lack of care by the local management.

The reviewers also provide practical information to help future visitors in the arrangement of their travels. About 60% of the Oropa Sacred Mount's reviewers include concrete information on the characteristics of the destination and the services that are being offered (e.g. large parking lot, presence of a cable way, opportunity for excursions on several paths, presence of good restaurants at low prices, etc.). Furthermore, 32% of the tourists give useful advice on having a better religious experience (e.g. don't miss the old

Figure 4 – Oropa Sacred Mount: Primary Elements of Perception

Source: personal elaboration

Photo 2 : The Sacred Mount of Orta (Novara, Italy)

church, we recommend a visit to the *ex voto* gallery, etc.) and non-religious experience (e.g. to be visited in the summer, to be avoided in the weekends, don't miss the 'polenta concia', etc.).

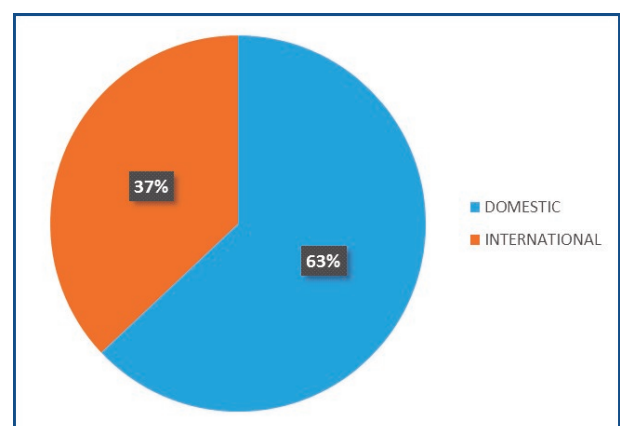### The Sacred Mount of Orta (Novara, Italy)

The same method has been applied to the case of the Sacred Mount of Orta (Photo 2). This religious destination has also had a great deal of positive feedback leading to an average TripAdvisor rating of 4.43/5.

The reviews show (Figure 5) that the majority of the visitors are Italian (63%). In particular, 78 % of the domestic tourists of the Sacred Mount of Orta come from the surrounding Regions (North-West Area). 17% of the reviewers live in the provinces where the site is located - Province of Novara and Verbania - and 70 % live in Piedmont Region or the nearby Lombardy Region. A smaller 10% come from central regions, such as Lazio or Marche, while only 3% of the Sacred Mount's visitors live in the North-East Regions and 1% come from the South of Italy (Figure 6). Therefore, both the Sacred Mount of Oropa and the Sacred Mount of Orta experience the same phenomenon of proximity, where the majority of visitors come from nearby areas.

As regards foreign reviewers, Figure 7 shows their country of origin. The largest international tourist

flows come from France (21%), the UK (19%), the USA and Switzerland (10%). Another significant number of reviewers live in the Netherlands (6%), Australia (6%), Germany (3%), Belgium (3%), Spain (2%) and Ireland (2%).

The analysis of the reviews of Orta Sacred Mount reveals that only limited information can be found which concerns the motivation of tourists for their visit. In fact, in only 27 out of 243 reviews is there a trace of an expressed motivation (11%). People tend to share their experiences and perception of the place,

Figure 5 – Orta Sacred Mount: origin of reviewers

Source: personal elaboration

Figure 6 – Orta Sacred Mount: origin of domestic reviewers

- North-West Regions
- North-East Regions
- Middle Regions
- South Regions
- Not specified
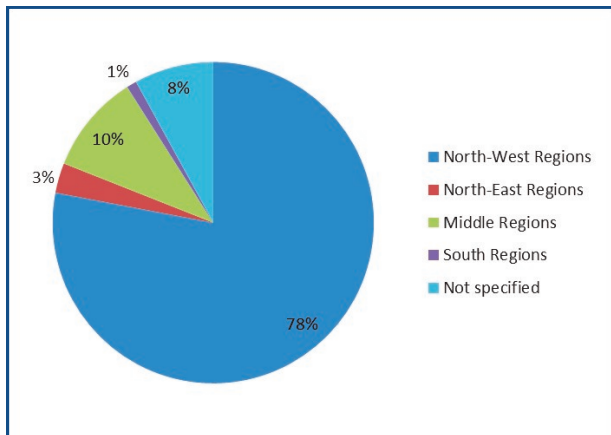
Source: personal elaboration

rather than sharing the reason that has encouraged them to visit. However, it is possible to identify some motivational factors. Some reviewers refer to a Day Trip, to find peace and serenity, to meditate or just for a walk in the countryside. In a review, the Sacred Mount of Orta is chosen as a destination for school trips. Another review indicates the reason for visiting the Sacred Mount was because it was hosting an International Poetry Festival. Furthermore, two reviewers visited the Sacred Mount as they chose it as a location for their wedding or renewal of vows. None
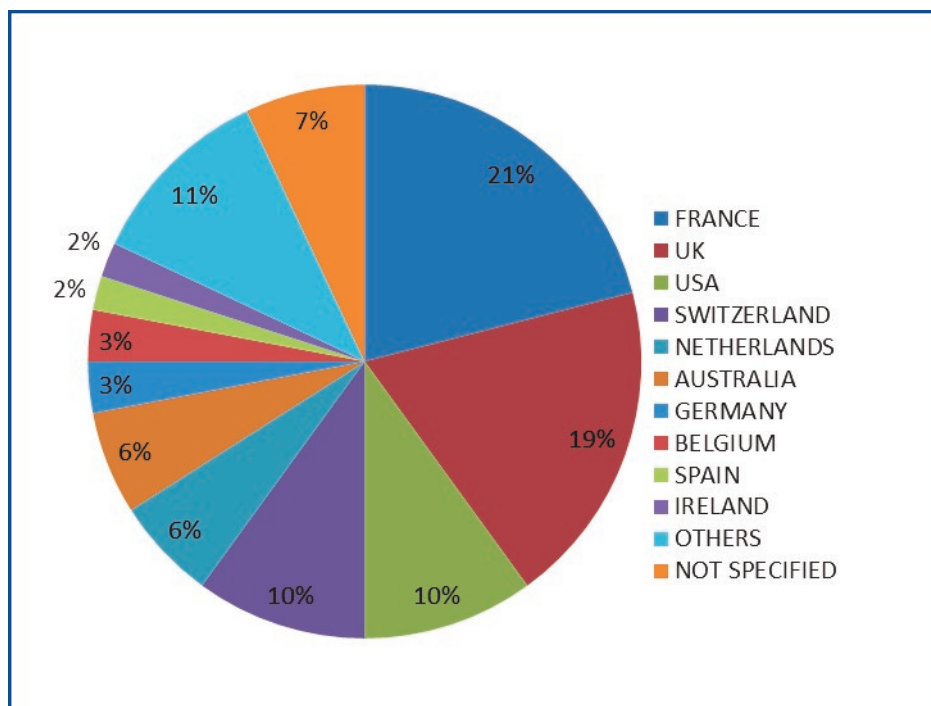
of the 243 reviews contains a specific reference to religious and devotional motivations.

Similar to the previous case, the first category of the reviews classification process concerns the descriptive information of the amenities. A list of key word topics (nouns) was drawn from the texts and their frequency in the reviews was recorded with **Site Content Analyzer**. Analysis of the reviews on the Sacred Mount of Oropa has identified the presence of 14 recurring elements. Figure 8 highlights that the Chapels constitute the most recurrent element (60% of the reviews), followed by other elements: Lake (56%); Views (45%); the Sacred Mount (39%); St. Francis of Assisi (37%); Walking (32%); San Giulio Island (26%); Panorama (25%); Statues (23%); St. Nicolao Church (23%); Frescoes (19%); UNESCO World Heritage (14%); Climb (12%) and; the Natural Park (11%).

As can be noticed in figure 8, visitors focus their reviews on the major attraction, the Chapels. However, the Sacred Mount of Orta is particularly appreciated for the beautiful environment (figure 9) in which is located (Orta Lake and its panorama / views).

The second category of analysis provides subjective information on the visitors' perception. A list of key word topics (adjectives) was searched in the texts and

Figure 7 – Orta Sacred Mount: origin of international reviewers

- FRANCE
- UK
- USA
- SWITZERLAND
- NETHERLANDS
- AUSTRALIA
- GERMANY
- BELGIUM
- SPAIN
- IRELAND
- OTHERS
- NOT SPECIFIED

Source: personal elaboration.

Figure 8 – Orta Sacred Mount: Primary Elements of Description.
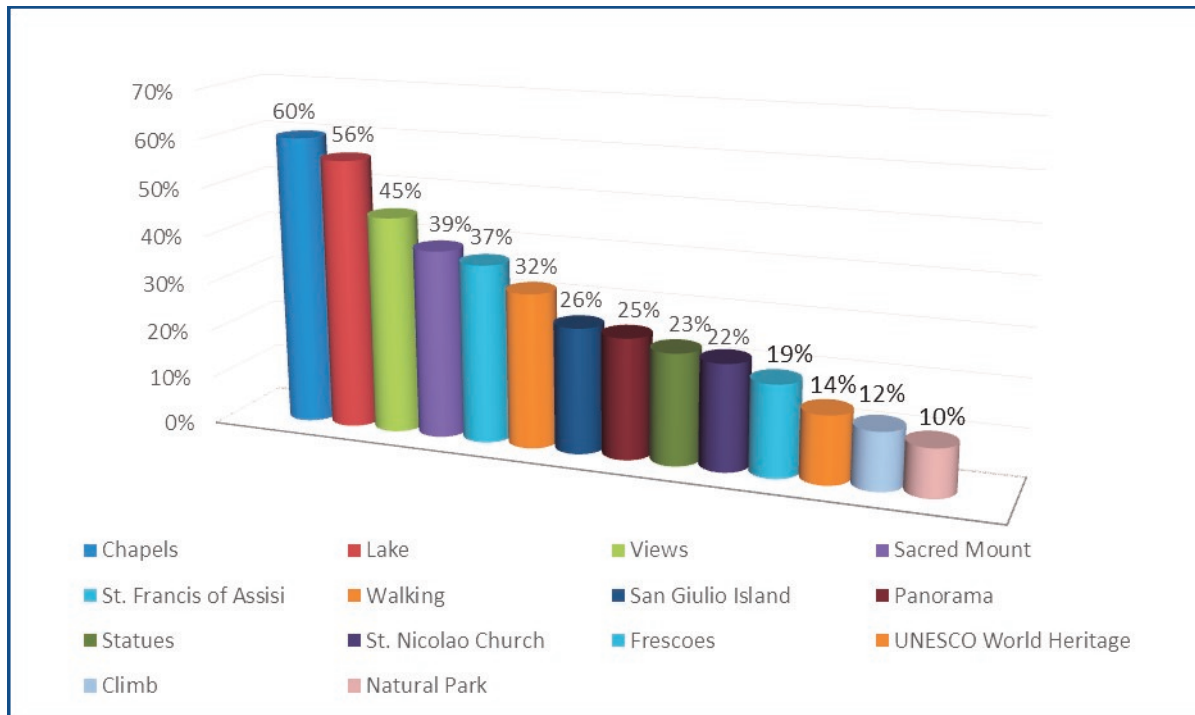
Source: personal elaboration

Photo 3– Scenic view of Lake Orta and the island of San Giulio

Source: www.storiedipiazza.it

Figure 9 – Orta Sacred Mount: Primary Elements of Perception

Source: personal elaboration.

their frequency on the reviews were recorded. The analysis of the Orta Sacred Mount's reviews has identified the presence of 19 recurring elements (Figure 9). Data reveals that most of the reviewers state that they have been fascinated by its beauty (53%). The Sacred Mount of Orta was also described as wonderful (22%), quiet (18%), peaceful (13%), religious (11%), suggestive (7%), stunning (7%), charming (7%), interesting (6%), mystic (6%), pleasant (6%), devotional (5%), unbelievable (5%), peculiar (5%), spiritual (4%), praying (3%), fascinating (2%), relaxing (2%) and outstanding (2%).

Despite the overall positive perception, 25% of the reviews contain at least one negative comment. In several reviews, the visitors mentioned the steep climb to reach the Sacred Mount from the town of Orta San Giulio, usually, however, adding that it is worthwhile. Others claim that the site is undervalued and its major issues are:

- difficulties in finding a parking space

- absence of guards

- the path between the various chapels is not clearly indicated

- some chapels are degraded and require substantial restoration.

- poor cleaning of green areas and common areas

- poor lighting of the chapels

- poor tourist reception in terms of information materials, opening hours, and other services.

Practical information and advice is provided by 55% of the visitors within their comments (e.g. 'don't forget to bring your own water', 'there is a track straight up from the old town, 15 minutes walk', 'there are toilets but no other facilities, so make sure you are self-sufficient', 'the path is uphill and cobbled so be prepared for that', 'make sure you are covered up or you will be unable to enter the church', 'I would advise a visit by car or the little train service which may take you to the venue', etc.).

Discussion and Conclusions

User-generated content, or Web 2.0 sites as they are also known (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox and Buultjens, 2009), is rapidly gaining traction as an input into the consumer purchase decision making process (O'Connor, 2010) as well as a driver for destination management strategies (Carvão, 2010). This technology can help to inform tourism and marketing managers, educate tourism consumers and facilitate tourism transactions (O'Connor, 2010). Tourism organisations cannot afford to ignore the development of user-generated content, peer-to-peer web applications and virtual communities (Akehurst, 2009). The user-generated content on TripAdvisor.com, is a main tool for rating hotels (Miguéns, Baggio and Costa, 2008), accommodation and amenities. The information provided on TA is free and accessible and, in general, easily usable; it helps the reader to understand tourists' point of views, behaviour and experiences. Therefore, tourists' reviews could represent a significant source of information for religious tourism destinations, in order to evaluate their reputation and performance. These reviews allow us to identify the demands and the needs of current visitors. They could also help destinations to profile segments of potential tourists.

The research findings show that the Sacred Mounts of Oropa and Orta are positively evaluated by their visitors. Visitors to the Sacred Mount of Oropa come mostly from the provinces and regions close to Biella and Piedmont, where the religious site is located. The Sacred Mount of Orta, however, receives a greater number of foreign tourists. However, as regards domestic flows, both case studies represent a type of tourism that is predominantly proximate, or local (Soria and Llurdés, 2013). For this reason, the Sacred Mount's visitors are mainly excursionists and day visitors.

Travellers' motivations are multiple and not principally related to a religious quest. The Sacred Mounts act as devotional centres and as religious tourism attractions because of their combinations of historical, artistic and scenic characteristics. As suggested by many visitors, the natural and cultural elements of the whole territory around the Sacred Mounts are part of their positive experience. A recent study (Fedele, De Ascaniis and Cantoni, 2011) revealed that the reasons why tourists appreciate a certain destination are only partially in line with the arguments used by the local management to promote it. In future, it would be very important that the local management takes into consideration visitors' feedback to improve its tourist offer. Regarding the Sacred Mount of Oropa, this purpose could be achieved through: higher maintenance and care of the ancient buildings and the outdoor paths of the Sacred Mount; wider integration between the religious elements and other proposals of the territory (e.g. gastronomy, culture, sport, etc.); greater range of promotion and communication activities to attract foreign markets.

On the other hand, analysis of the Sacred Mount of Orta showed the need to: increase the availability of parking spaces on site and in the town of Orta, where parking lots are currently few and expensive; placing guards in the park, especially to limit the disfigurement of the chapels by vandals; indicate the path that leads to the various chapels more clearly; provide for greater illumination inside the chapels; plan for restoration interventions, especially for those chapels that present a serious state of deterioration; better care and cleaning of common areas and pathways and; establish a proper tourist information service in order to provide information and materials that enhance the experience of the visit.

The various data and information that were adduced through the analysis of the Sacred Mount reviews on TripAdvisor allow the local management, firstly, to recognise the real needs expressed by the visitors, and secondly, to plan concrete actions to solve these issues and / or to improve the quality of the visit.

It is, therefore, clear that these online reviews represent a precious source of information, which can no longer be overlooked by the local management of a tourist destination. Indeed, online reviews should be considered as a fundamental tool to improve the quality of the experience for future visitors.

This study presents a validation of the importance that online reviews may have in the enhancement and promotion of religious tourism destinations. Religious destinations need to acknowledge this role and should intensify their efforts to develop and expand their usage of today's online interactive technologies in order to improve their position on the tourist market.

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