

# DESTINATION CHOICE IN GERMAN WINTER SPORT TOURISM: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** Despite the fact that sport tourism plays an important role in upland destinations, as a field of research it is still characterised by a knowledge deficit. **Material and methods.** Active winter sport tourists at two upland destinations were compared in terms of socio-demographic variables, the importance of destination choice criteria, and travel behaviour in order to give recommendations to destination management organisations. **Conclusions.** There were significant differences between tourists at the two destinations. Consequently, advantages may be gained from the development of destination-specific marketing strategies.

**Key words:** winter sport tourism; upland destinations; destination choice

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, sport tourism has gained more and more economic importance. This is why it has become an interesting topic for researchers. Nonetheless, the field is still characterised by a knowledge deficit [1]. While some scientists focus on defining a theoretical framework [2], others work more empirically. The term *sport tourism* may sometimes be replaced by other notions such as *adventure tourism* or *sporty tourism* or more specific terms for a particular branch (e.g. ski tourism). In this paper, however, the term sport tourism shall be used in its broad definition [2]. Due to the heterogeneity of sport tourists and the uniqueness of destinations, a comparison of the results of different studies is almost impossible [3]. As competition between service providers in sport tourism has also increased, not only theorists but also practitioners are interested in new findings in this field. Sport has moved to one of the seven top motivating factors for German tourists [4]. In Germany, uplands are traditional sport tourism destinations. In these regions in particular winter sport tourism plays an important role [5]. When it comes to the literature on this topic, it can be stated that a number of studies have already discussed winter sport tourism. Most of them, however, concentrate on mountains with peaks at an altitude of over 2000 metres [6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Not much research has been carried out regarding winter sport tourism in uplands (peaks between 500 and 2000 metres). Furthermore, the changing competitive situation in the tourism industry seems to be especially challenging for uplands [11], owing to changes in climate [12] and demographics [13]. It is therefore obvious that these destinations in particular must develop new marketing strategies. The main objective of this study is to investigate whether active winter sport tourists travelling to different upland destinations are comparable regarding their socio-demographic data, destination choice criteria, and actual travel behaviour. Additionally, the results of this paper will be a helpful source of information for destination management organisations wanting to develop future marketing strategies. The two destinations that this study focuses on are the Ore Mountains (Erzgebirge) and the Black Forest (Schwarzwald). The two desti-

nations are similar in terms of topography, the services offered (Alpine as well as cross-country skiing), and their traditional status as winter sport destinations. The Ore Mountains are situated in the southeast and the Black Forest Mountains in the southwest of Germany. The hypothesis to be proven by this study is: There are no significant differences between active winter sport tourists of the upland destinations investigated regarding socio-demographic variables and the importance of destination choice criteria in the destination choice process.

## *Destination choice in sport tourism*

In the field of sport tourism different models of the destination choice process can be applied [14, 15, 16]. These models relate to micro-economic theories and to behavioral theory. For this study the destination choice process by Pearce [16] was used, adapted to different sport destinations in one country by Konu et al. [3]. According to the results of the above-mentioned studies, internal as well as external factors influence the destination choice process. Internal factors refer to the personal characteristics or motives of tourists and external factors to characteristics or images of a set of destinations to be chosen. In terms of the destination choice process of active sport tourists, the available information is still insufficient. Only a few studies have been carried out on this topic [3, 11, 14]. Klenosky, Gengler and Mulvey [14] applied the means-end approach. According to this study, variety and the challenging character of the hills and trails meet the tourists' desire for fun and action. Factor analysis was used by Konu et al. [3] in order to determine which aspects are important for tourists' choice of a winter sport destination. This led to the identification of four factors: Alpine skiing services, Nordic skiing services, restaurant variety, and additional services related to social life such as SPA and Wellness offers. Based on these four factors, six segments of winter sport tourists were defined. Even though winter sport tourism is an important economic factor in uplands, only one study has analysed the features of winter sport tourists visiting uplands so far [11, 17, 18]. There is only one study dealing with destination choice in a German upland. Hodeck and Hovemann [11] analysed winter sport tourists in the Erzgebirge (Ore Moun-

tains). They extracted four factors (Nordic skiing, Alpine skiing, additional services, and specific destination characteristics) from 15 destination choice criteria. Based on those factors, six groups of active winter sport tourists could be clustered.

### Material and methods

The data (n=450) were collected in two German uplands (Ore Mountains and Black Forest) during the 2013/2014 winter season. The sample was selected using a multistep process, and the cluster sampling (or area sampling) method was chosen [19]. In each destination the data were collected during four different time frames of the 2013/14 winter season (once during the Christmas holidays, once at the weekend in January and twice during the German winter holidays). The subjects were randomly selected. Specially trained interviewers, who were all students of sport management programmes, used a standardised questionnaire for the interviews and collected the data in relevant sport tourism places. A similar selection process had already been used in another study [11]. The data were always collected at five different locations: ski slopes (2), ski tracks (2) and hotels (1) (cf. tab. 1).

**Table 1.** General characteristics of the sample

N	450
Gender	Female: 45.6%; Male: 54.4%
Average age	38.49 years
Destination	Ore Mountains: 49.8%; Black Forest: 50.2%

The winter sport tourists staying at the two destinations were compared in terms of socio-demographic variables and travel behaviour. Differences between the active sport tourists were analysed by cross-tabulation (nominal data) and t-test (metric data). The data were analysed for normal distribution and homogeneity of variances before significance was tested. Afterwards the t-test or the Welch test was applied. These tests were chosen as the distribution of the data was normal regarding the variables analysed, and the differences in the number of tourists interviewed in both destinations seemed to be acceptable. In order to evaluate the importance of the factors extracted from the destination choice process, 14 different destination choice criteria from existing studies [3, 11] were used in a factor analysis with varimax rotation. The same method has been applied by Konu et al. [3] and by Hodeck and Hovemann [11]; the results of these studies can thus be compared with the findings presented in this paper.

### Results

First of all, the active sport tourists visiting the two destinations who were interviewed were compared in terms of socio-demographic data. There was no significant correlation (Pearson's Chi-Square: 0.102,  $p > 0.1$ ) between gender and the destination chosen. However, the tourists in the Ore Mountains and those in the Black Forest showed significant differences regarding their age: the individuals visiting the Ore Mountains were on average six years older than the tourists in the Black Forest (cf. tab. 2).

**Table 2.** Gender of the active winter sport tourists interviewed (observed and expected figures)

	Gender	Destination	
		Ore Mountains	Black Forest
	Female	123 (121.3)	80 (81.7)
	Male	146 (147.7)	101 (99.3)

Furthermore, significant differences between the active winter sport tourists staying at the two destinations were found regarding the distance they travelled to reach the destinations and the duration of their stay (cf. tab. 3).

**Table 3.** Average differences in age, distance travelled, and length of stay for the active winter sport tourists interviewed

	Ore Mountains	Black Forest	t value	Significance
Age (mean)	40.72	34.23	4.36	$p < 0.001$
Distance travelled (km)	98.59	278.15	4.93	$p < 0.001$
Length of stay (days)	1.89	5.25	3.51	$p < 0.001$

When it comes to actual travelling behaviour, the active winter sport tourists in the Black Forest clearly did not only spend more time in this region. They also spent significantly more money per day. The average active sport tourist in the Ore Mountains spent 57.54€ per day at their chosen destination, while a tourist in the Black Forest spent 137.82€ per day on average. This difference becomes even more apparent after calculating how much money was spent during the entire stay (expenditure per day multiplied by the number of days). The sport tourists visiting the Black Forest interviewed spent almost seven times as much money during their stay (723.56€) as those in the Ore Mountains (108.75€) (cf. tab. 4).

**Table 4.** Average differences in expenditures per day for the active winter sport tourists interviewed

	Ore Mountains	Black Forest	t value	Significance
expenditures for drinks / meals (€)	20.03	37.92	7.73	$p < 0.001$
expenditures for sleeping (€)	19.36	40.45	5.82	$p < 0.001$
expenditures for sporting activities (€)	12.91	39.88	10.17	$p < 0.001$
expenditures for other activities (€)	5.24	19.57	3.85	$p < 0.001$

With regard to destination choice criteria, the data seemed to be suitable for a factor analysis (KMO-Criteria: 0.831). This was also confirmed by a Chi-square value of 3650.96 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Four factors explaining 71.1 per cent of the variance were extracted. These factors can be described as "cross-country skiing", "Alpine skiing", "additional services", and "basic characteristics".

The final question was whether active sport tourists visiting the two destinations rated the importance of the above-mentioned factors differently in the destination choice process. As could have been expected, the tourists who had chosen the Ore Mountains were more interested in cross-country skiing than those in the Black Forest, who seemed to consider Alpine skiing more interesting (cf. tab. 5).

**Table 5.** Results of the factor analysis

	1 Cross- country skiing	2 Alpine skiing	3 Additional services	4 Basic character- istics
Quality of ski tracks	0.947			
Variety of ski tracks	0.951			
Number of ski track kilometres	0.937			
Multi-destination ski tracks	0.829			
Variety of ski slopes		0.910		
Number of ski slopes		0.901		
Length of ski slopes		0.894		
Variety of restaurants			0.803	
Active nightlife			0.756	
Spa- & Wellness-Services			0.641	
Value for money				0.689
Short distance from home				0.600
Snow conditions				0.568
Family friendly services				0.549
KMO measure of sampling adequacy = 0.831 / $p < 0.001$ / Cumulative percentage of variance explained: 71.1				

Additional services and the basic characteristics of the destination were more important to the active sport tourists in the Ore Mountains. Snow conditions and value for money were the top destination choice characteristics in general. Good snow conditions were the basis for every kind of active winter sport tourism. It is worth emphasising that the “price” factor has been defined as very important in almost every study dealing with (sport) tourism (cf. tab. 6).

**Table 6.** Average differences in the importance of destination choice criteria for the active winter sport tourists interviewed

	Ore Mountains	Black Forest	t value	Significance
Cross-country skiing	1.70	0.73	7.73	$p < 0.001$
Alpine skiing	2.09	2.45	3.16	$p < 0.05$
Additional services	1.79	1.20	6.13	$p < 0.001$
Basic characteristics	3.14	2.67	6.30	$p < 0.001$

0 – not important at all; 4 – very important.

## Discussion

Regarding the destination choice criteria, the factor analysis helped identify four factors, which are similar to those in existing research focusing on German uplands [11] or upland destinations in the north of Europe [3]. However, the results of these studies differ from those dealing with destinations in mountains with peaks at an altitude of over 2000 metres [6, 7, 9]. Only in some uplands (such as the Ore Mountains) does cross-country skiing seem to be important for active winter sport tourists, while Alpine skiing is preferred by winter sport tourists in high mountains [3, 6] as well as in uplands. There are significant differences between several upland destinations. This study showed that while the Black Forest Mountains attracted tourists especially interested in Alpine skiing, the Ore Mountains were primarily attractive for those interested in cross-country skiing. It must be mentioned that some results of this investigation do not correspond with the findings of Hodeck and Hovemann [11]. These differences may stem from the different environmental condi-

tions (weather and snow) during the time when data were collected. Upland destinations in general attract tourists living between 120 and 275 kilometres away. This is less than the distance travelled by tourists visiting high mountains [6].

There are significant differences regarding socio-demographic variables, travel behaviour, and destination choice criteria between active sport tourists travelling to different upland destinations. Due to some destination-specific peculiarities, the features of active sport tourists visiting different upland destinations cannot be generalised. It is very surprising that the active winter sport tourists interviewed at both destinations differed significantly regarding their tourist behaviour, despite the fact that the two destinations are very similar in topography and the services offered. It can only be hypothesised why the Black Forest Mountains attracted especially Alpine skiers and the Ore Mountains were chosen by cross-country skiers: this might have been due to the development of sport tourism in these destinations, actual marketing strategies, or both. More research should be done to explain these differences. Further studies should also be carried out in order to help destination management organisations develop future destination-specific marketing strategies. The results of this research should be discussed critically, as they cannot be seen as representative for sport tourism at the two chosen destinations in general. Only data collected during one season was described. In addition, only tourists who had already chosen their destination were interviewed, thus the study did not determine whether tourists who did not choose this destination were different from those who did choose it. As a consequence, this study can only give first ideas for the development of new strategies. Its results should be confirmed by further studies carried out during different seasons and in other destinations. However, one preliminary conclusion is that Alpine skiers seem to be a more attractive target group for winter sport destinations than cross-country skiers. More research should be done regarding the differences between summer and winter sport tourists, as the development of destinations should not be reduced to the winter season only. In upland destinations in particular it is necessary to introduce year-round strategies to counter the effects of global warming.

## Conclusions

The aim of this research was achieved, although this study has some limitations. The initial hypothesis must be rejected due to significant differences between active winter sport tourists visiting to the two destinations investigated. The main findings of the research can be summarised as follows:

1. There were significant differences between active winter sport tourists in different upland destinations regarding socio-demographic variables and tourist behaviour.
2. There were significant differences between active winter sport tourists of different upland destinations regarding the significance of destination choice criteria in the destination choice process.
3. It is necessary to develop destination-specific marketing strategies for upland sport destinations.

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