

**Not only low-cost.
Home swapping as an alternative tourism strategy**

ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies have observed the expansion of alternative, non-institutionalized travel trends, which oppose mainstream tourism by providing consumers with a broader range of alternatives. Between alternative and creative forms of tourism, very few studies have focused on home-exchange and this is in spite of its rapid growth, which has recently been observed even in countries where it has long remained a niche phenomenon. With this formula, tourists have the opportunity to organize custom tailored trips without seeking the services of travel mediators and with the only cost of the loan of their own home.

The paper presents the results of a survey on Italian house-swappers and discusses their socio-economic profile, motivations and lifestyles. As the data analysis points out, home exchange is an emerging form of alternative tourism which requires trust, respect, an open mind, inventiveness, preparation, enthusiasm and flexibility. If the economic aspect is certainly a factor to take into consideration in the explanation of the growth observed by this type of tourism, the possibility to cut the accommodation costs is certainly not the whole story here.

Key words: Tourism, home-exchange, alternative tourism, DIY tourism, Italy

Francesca FORNO
Dept Humanities and Social Sciences
CORES Research Group - University of Bergamo, Italy.
E-mail: francesca.forno@unibg.it

Roberta GARIBALDI
Dept. Economics
CeSTIT Research Group- University of Bergamo, Italy.
E-mail: roberta.garibaldi@unibg.it

INTRODUCTION

If you've seen the movie "The Holiday," you can understand the appeal in trading homes, and lives, with someone else a half a world away. And though there is no guarantee of falling in love with one's exchange partner's brother, for folks who have always wanted to travel to another country and see the local culture from within it, the idea of home exchange can be the perfect way to accomplish this. Sometimes the attraction of a faraway place is dampened by the cost of trying to find accommodation on top of expensive airfare. But for those who participate in home exchange vacations, the expense of staying in costly lodging is eliminated – all it costs is the loan of your own home. For people who are concerned about the environment, a home exchange also eliminates the need for draining the resources of a local culture to accommodate foreign travellers. [Published by Buzzle Staff and Agencies on 10/3/2007]

Tourism is the fastest growing industry in the world. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) tourism in 2009 has generated 9% of the global gross national product and 7.6% of total employment (WTTC 2010). In spite of global recession, in 2008 there were over 922 million international tourist arrivals, with a growth of 1.9% as compared to 2007. It has been estimated that tourism in the 21st century will be the biggest industry of the world and its contribution to global employment will rise to 8.4% by 2019.

Tourism, globally, is not only increasing quantitatively but also qualitatively, with the appearance of new forms. Recent years have been marked by strong differentiation in what has been traditionally called “mass tourism” as well as by the appearance of new ways of travelling (Cohen 1988, 1995; Sharpley 2003).

Scholars in tourism studies tend to divide tourism into mass and alternative tourism. Mass tourism usually refers to large numbers of people seeking to spend their holidays in popular resort destinations. It has been widely criticised for the negative effects brought by its uncontrolled development, with visitors concentrated in very high density over seasonal periods of time, for neglecting participation of the local communities and defined as not being a “genuine” way of travelling and experiencing a place (Fennell 2008). Alternative tourism is instead commonly referred to as “special interest tourism” and it is usually taken to mean alternative forms of tourism which give emphasis on the contact and understanding of inhabitants' way of living and the local natural environment (Smith and Eadington 1992; Douglas and Darrett 2001). Alternative tourism emerged in the 1980s and the term “was conceived to encompass products and activities that were thought to be more appropriate than conventional mass tourism” (Weaver 2006, 38), therefore considered as an early form of sustainable tourism.

Although a distinction largely still in use, dichotomizing tourism into mass and alternative tourism seems today to be fairly incorrect and, on the whole, misleading; this is because mass tourism has differentiated a great deal. In this regard, empirical research has demonstrated that the most recognizable trend in tourism is today *segmentation* (Macchiavelli 2008): almost all tourists search nowadays for “alternative” holidays. For these reasons, in the present context, all tourism can somehow be defined as “alternative”. Furthermore, it is sometimes dangerous and incorrect to represent alternative tourism as a travel pattern which is always beneficial, green and more preferable than mass tourism (Butler, 1992).

In the light of this considerations, alternative segments of tourism can be considered not only a differentiation form conventional tourism, but can be analysed in the wider framework of a

social movement; a sort of rejection of the consumer society undertaken by various social groups (Lanfant and Graburn 1992; Leonini and Sassatelli 2008; Rebughini and Sassatelli 2008).

Behind this shift there are different factors, such as the increase in people's level of wealth and education. The improvement in the means of transport and communication has also played an important role. The western tourist is now mature, he has travelled a great deal and can identify good value for money; he is no longer interested in his destination, but in the different experiences he can have; what is important for the modern tourist is not simply to be in a specific place, but how to experience it in the best possible way. As a matter of fact, behind the development of alternative ways of travelling, there is also a quest for authenticity and more genuine experiences. The modern man/woman, in losing his attachment to the family, the neighbourhood, the workplace, develops a fascination towards the life of the others (MacCannell 1999).

Thanks to the rapid expansion of information technologies, tourists can easily find what they want, choosing between different options even without the intermediation of traditional operators. In this regard, literature sometimes talks of an "empowered tourist", a tourist who is able to independently search and find what he/she wants. Last, but not least, some alternative forms of tourism – such as sustainable or eco tourism - have also emerged as a result of an increase in environmental concerns among the population.

Overall, research on those travelling and visiting places for the purpose of entertainment, knowledge and education often highlights the development of a new type of tourist who is always looking for original and quality solutions. Among studies focusing on new forms of tourism, little attention has been dedicated to those people who decide to take a vacation by exchanging their homes. This paper presents and analyses the first data gathered through a pilot study, which aims to portray the profile of "home swappers" in Italy. The research is a joint project between the University of Bergamo and the Italian branch of HomeLink International, one of the better established and more widespread networks for home exchange.

RELATIONAL TOURISM

A home exchange holiday is a form of "relational tourism", in other words, it is a type of tourism that can be defined as the sector of supply and demand of tourist services and products created and enjoyed through a combination of interpersonal relationships in which the creators/organisers, besides merely focussing on sales, adopt an approach of sincere and shared hospitality that brings back the desire to discover the beauty and unique qualities of one's heritage of history, art, folklore, food and wine and, above all, humanity. The users, as simple end consumers, become the value generators, protagonists who may be required to actively fulfil the same tourist offer.

In this regard, many studies have highlighted how the tourist today searches for opportunities for amusement, leisure and fun, without filters or intermediaries, in direct contact with the local environment, giving value to all that seems genuine and not contrived. A type of tourism that is economically founded on the concept of relational goods (Zamagni, 2007; Ruisi, 2004).

During the last few decades, the reasons that influence a person's decision to plan a holiday have essentially been the desire to visit new places, relax and get away from a daily and working routine. Mass tourism has up until now satisfied this need, offering opportunities for enjoying new experiences as a spectator.

With the passing of the years, the tourist has enjoyed many experiences and has matured, and the reasons for travelling have changed. The desire has become widespread to experience a holiday in a different manner, to visit places that preserve, produce and communicate their original cultural resources while establishing genuine relationships that enhance the human component. Full, true and sincere relationships are sought that give importance to the authenticity of the mutual relationship, of rediscovering an interpersonal relationship, which is often overlooked or at least of little interest in industrial societies that have an entrenched and widespread individualistic mentality.

Home swapping, educational farms, couch surfing, and bed & breakfast establishments are all examples of this type of tourism (Ruisi, 2011). In particular, house swapping, as we will see in detail later, is a type of innovative tourism that implies an agreement between house owners to mutually exchange their homes for a period of time – be it long or short – thereby permitting a higher potential for integration and for finding exactly what you are looking for, as well as achieving a considerable level of personalisation of the tourist experience compared to more traditional methods. People who exchange their homes can learn more about the local culture by experiencing the daily life of a resident, something that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. This form of tourism focuses on a holiday target that spurns mass tourism but prefers the authenticity of the offer and the possibility of fully exploiting the opportunities that the area provides, with the added value of establishing close personal relationships with those who decide to share this type of experience.

Even with couch surfing, members signed up to specialised associations offer hospitality, providing the tourist with a part of their home. Compared to home swapping, you are not obliged to offer hospitality in order to receive it, therefore it could be described as offering a “gift” (Sabato and Di Fede, 2011), which involves the accommodation offered but also, and above all, the relationship established between guest and home owner.

Educational farms are agricultural firms or businesses that organise educational and informative holidays for students and consumers of all types. It is an alternative form of tourism compared to traditional offers created, for example, for school pupils, which is distinguished by an interest in rediscovering rural environments, local culture and traditions, and emphasises the educational/cultural/learning aspect of tourism. All these types of tourism are today widely found in many Italian regions.

Bed & breakfast accommodation is the most common form of relational tourism. Since the end of the last century when, just before the Jubilee, the region of Lazio issued the first law regulating their operation, bed & breakfasts they have spread like wildfire. As is widely known, in this case the house owner provides several rooms in his home for tourist accommodation, offering, against payment, a type of hospitality chosen by tourists generally because of the warm, genuine welcome.

In many cases these forms of tourism have led to companies working in the same area getting together to form associations in order to better promote their offer. The intra-company and intra-territorial dimension involves valorising the local context and its identity through the relationship established between the different parties working in the same area. A type of tourism that enhances and expands a tourism context that investigates topics associated to responsible use of local environments (Cassano, 1996; Lo Piccolo et al., 1998). An increasingly more “socially sustainable” method of travelling on holiday even when it becomes a life experience (Zurick, 1995), which is able to identify local resources aware of a tourism that respects the values of the individual (Butcher, 2003).

TRUST AND RECIPROCITY IN HOME SWAPPING

Home swapping is the modern tourist interpretation of the old form of bartering and consists literally of the mutual exchange of one's home for varying periods of time for holiday, work or study reasons. It is a form of tourism without intermediaries, which occurs directly between the house owners – the swappers – who meet through specialised associations and who come from all parts of the world.

The swappers can decide to exchange not only their home, but also their car and even the care of their pets. The methods, times and agreements are at the full discretion of the house owners and their respective needs. The principle behind this type of tourism is essentially "I exchange what I have with what I need". The value of the house does not affect the potential for positively concluding an exchange agreement, even if exchanges normally take place between houses with similar features. Even though home swapping has no geographical limitations since it can occur between anyone in the world who makes their home available, it is particularly popular in Europe, North America and Australia, while it is less practised in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Home swapping is much appreciated since it enables a holiday to be enjoyed without forgoing the comforts of a real home and it also completely eliminates the costs of accommodation. In addition, tourists can enjoy the experience of daily life in a new context: it is a different way of travelling that brings the tourist in direct contact with local residents, allowing them to establish relationships with the house owners and the neighbourhood, and enjoy a "genuine" experience. As we will see later, this latter reason (more so than the savings factor) seems to play an important role in the choice of this type of holiday: house swapping appears to answer the growing need of tourists to enjoy new experiences while abandoning traditional mass tourism holidays.

The possibility of saving for tourists that are increasingly attracted to and searching for new experiences also allows "cultural resistances" to be overcome, which are linked, for example, to a way of living in one's house as something that is fundamentally private and personal. This is particularly the case with Italians, for whom becoming open to this type of holiday means overcoming their fear of entrusting strangers with their home, memories and possessions, and of being robbed or suffering the consequences of damage. This fear, which we will have the opportunity to highlight later, is usually diminished since the agreement between the two swappers follows a close interaction that takes the form of exchanges of e-mails, photos and travel information. The possibility of establishing digital ties before personal links, by means of new communication systems, allows for the development of a relationship of trust without which this type of tourism would be impossible. As we will see later, through websites that receive offers and requests for home swapping throughout the world, swappers transmit and control information by means of "digital word-of-mouth". Those who are registered – generally tourists with a strong passion for travel and this type of tourism – do not wish to ruin their reputation so that they can repeat the experience again. It shouldn't be forgotten that the principle of reciprocity governs this type of agreement: you are leaving your belongings to a person who will do the same to you.

THE BIRTH OF HOME EXCHANGE

The modern phenomenon of home exchange originated in the Fifties between Great Britain and the United States, even if this practice was quite popular during the Middle Ages. In 1953 David Ostroff, a New York teacher and Jan Ryder, a young woman from Great Britain, unaware of each other, had the same idea: they decided to exchange their homes among friends during the summer vacation; David Ostroff asked a group of colleagues, while Jan Ryder proposed the exchange to members of the armed forces, who her husband worked for. A short time later, after they got to know of each other, Ostroff and Ryder understood that their idea could have spread worldwide. Together they gave birth to one of the most important organization for home exchange, today known as HomeLink International.

From the Fifties until now, HomeLink and other international organizations specialized in home exchange, such as Intervac – also founded in 1953 -, rapidly grew, reaching numerous countries and thousands of members all around the world. During the Nineties these companies improved their services thanks to the growth in popularity of the World Wide Web and the Internet, which allow *swappers* to communicate easier than in the past decades.

Free Hospitality Main Networks

One of the main tools that has fostered the spread of the home exchange phenomenon is the Internet, which currently offers many websites specifically created to promote this kind of vacation. Everyone can enter these sites, even if most of them require the payment of a fee for membership, which allows people to view and, eventually, exchange homes. This fee varies between the different websites. Websites for home exchange clearly explain that their aim is to propose a new and cheaper way of travelling. Swappers can decide to exchange not only their home but also their cars and even their pets, who live for a period of time with new owners.

There are many benefits for those who take a vacation in this unusual way: first of all it is cheaper than other accommodation and allows swappers to enjoy all the comforts of a real home; moreover people find themselves involved in the local context, they can have relationships with neighbours and can experience ordinary life in an extraordinary place. This is the most important element that induces people to exchange their home, because it meets the increasing need to have true experience and to forget traditional standardized holidays.

Once they come back home, swappers have the possibility to evaluate their experience on the official websites through which they have exchanged homes: they can judge home care, express their satisfaction and also any negative aspects of their holiday; very often these suggestions can be seen and read by all the members of the network, which is very helpful in order to have an objective opinion about the organization. Some example of home exchange websites are:

- Home Link International (www.homelink-usa.com), founded in 1953, is a site that is easy to find your way around, has many listings both in the continental U.S. and worldwide, and many photos. Their membership cost is \$90 for one year, the second year is free if no exchange is found.
- Intervac (www.intervac.com), founded in 1953, is one of the oldest organizations for home exchange in the world. The cost for a one-year membership depends on the country in which you live (e.g. U.S.A. \$99.99, Spain €145, that is about \$208)
- Green Theme International (www.gti-home-exchange.com), established in 1989. This site has an emphasis on environmentally conscious travel, it also offers many related articles

about home exchange and links to other green travel websites. A one-year membership costs £25 (about 51 US dollars) and includes all member benefits.

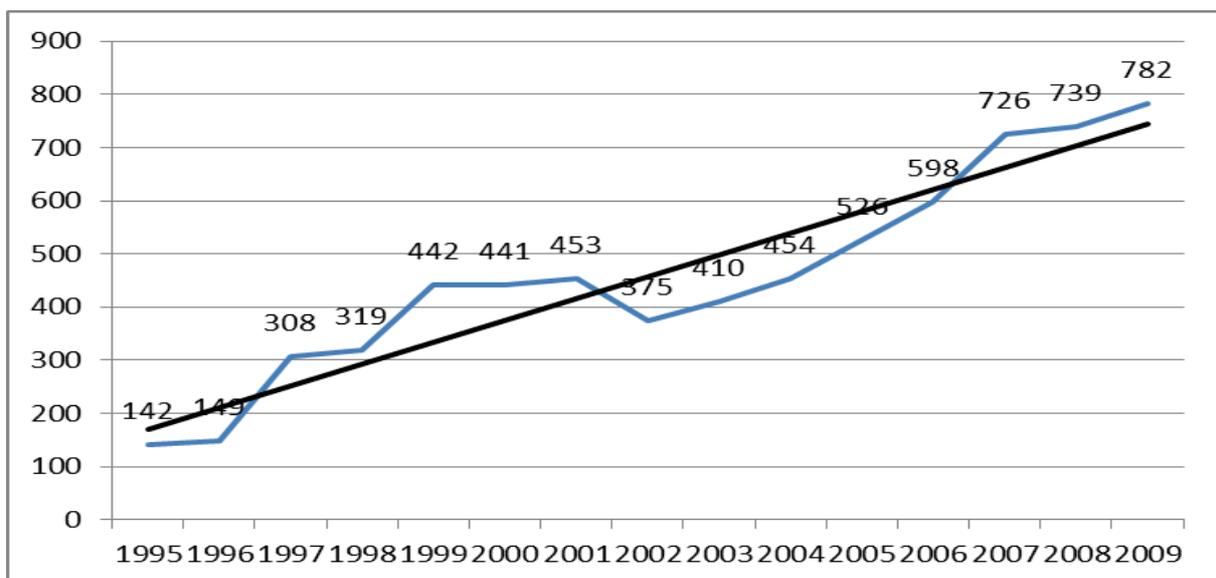
- HomeExchange.com (www.homeexchange.com), founded in 1992. This website has a large number of listings, even for somewhat small, obscure locations (i.e. small towns in Michigan), and the site is easy to navigate– which not all of them are. There are several pictures of each available home. The cost for an unlimited one-year membership is \$99.95. The site offers a guarantee that if you don't find an exchange within that first year, a second year is free.

THE GROWTH OF HOME EXCHANGE IN ITALY: THE HOMELINK CASE

HomeLink International was founded in order to create "possibilities for low budget holiday and cultural exchanges in an effort to improve mutual understanding among peoples of the world". The organisation has grown steadily with this mission for over 50 years, largely – as also our data confirm - by “word of mouth”.

The Italian branch of Home Link was established in 1985, since then the Italian network has observed a consistent growth in its membership, rising from 142 members in 1995 to 789 in 2009 (Tab. 1). As in all other countries, HomeLink Italia offers itself as a mediator in the home exchange holiday and it does this mainly through its website www.homelink.it. The person responsible for Italy is Annalisa Rossi Pujatti who manages the Italian portal of Homelink and responds personally to questions posed by people who want to start exchanging their homes for the first time or to questions posed by already registered members. The annual cost of registration is €120 for both new members and those who want to renew their registration. The cost of the registration rises to about €150 when it includes the Homelink book, which lists all houses offered by the HomeLink exchange system. The Italian regions with the highest number of members are Veneto, Lazio and Tuscany, while those with less members are Abruzzo and Molise. When compared with other nations, Italy is placed eighth in the Homelink ranking, after the United States, France, England, Australia, Germany, Canada and Holland.

Figure 2: Number of members



Source: Homelink Italia

Given the dimension that this phenomenon has assumed, also in our country, in 2009 we decided to conduct an in-depth investigation aimed at studying the characteristics of *homelinkers* in Italy in greater detail. We did this by means of an online survey which was published on the University of Bergamo website. In agreement with Homelink Italia, the survey was announced at the beginning of September 2009 in the newsletter sent to all members by the HomeLink coordinator every month. By 1st October 2009 the number of respondents was 156, equal to almost the 20% of the total number of subscribers (the online survey is still on-going). The issues covered by the survey were several, and the questionnaire included questions on members' socio-economic characteristics (level of education, work, type of family, etc.), motivations, travelling and consumption styles, as well as a final part on the evaluation of the services offered by HomeLink Italia. In the following paragraphs of this paper we will concentrate mainly on two aspects, which are: the tourist profile of homelinkers and the motives of the home exchange tourist.

HOME EXCHANGE TOURIST PROFILE

As we already mentioned, the data discussed here refer to 156 Italian exchange families. The data collected evidence that swappers are generally well educated, not necessarily young, more often coming from bigger towns and metropolitan areas. With regard to their jobs, our research confirms what has already emerged in studies conducted in countries other than Italy (De Groote and Nicasi 1994): most of our respondents are teachers or people working in related fields. As argued by Groote and Nicasi (1994), one reason for this is the fact that teachers can be very flexible regarding the period in which they want to travel. However, if this is certainly true, it is also necessary to note that, generally, people with a higher level of education are also usually more open-minded and therefore more willing to try out new ways and alternatives.

Another characteristic that emerged from our study is that families who opt for this type of tourism are usually quite large in number. The majority of our respondents have a family with four members. Swappers are also more discerning in their demands, more conscious about their health and generally interested in "green" issues. About 70% of our sample replied positively to our question about whether they usually buy or consume environmentally friendly products. More than 60% also stated that they often buy organic food and/or fair trade goods.

One element that emerged as particularly significant among these tourists is their level of "trust" in unknown people. Compared with the general Italian population, the level of "trust" among swappers is in fact considerably higher. This is certainly not a surprising finding as one person should "trust" a "generalized other" to agree on swapping his/her own house. We should also consider that for Italians the house is very important, a factor that may also explain why home exchange began spreading in Italy relatively later than in other countries. In this regard, our findings reveal that home exchange is also more common among people who possess an holiday house, which is usually the house swap initially.

Our data on the spread of home exchange seem to confirm how this phenomenon is linked to what has been called "consumer empowerment", a phenomenon that scholars believe is connected with the evolution of the Web 2.0, therefore of a new communication system that is able to "digitize word of mouth". Organizations such as TripAdvisor, whose website features the reviews and opinions of over 30 millions tourists, which influence the choices of tens of thousands of travellers all around the world, provide evidence of the growth of the power of the consumer, which has occurred in no other sector as it has in tourism.

Directly knowing a person who has already experienced a home exchange vacation greatly increases the possibility of choosing this alternative way of travelling (46,8% of our respondents knew someone who did an home exchange before swapping their house); the percentage of respondents who replied that they knew HomeLink through the web is also high (19,9%) especially if compared with newspapers (8,3%) or advertisements (0,6%). Knowing that other travellers from all parts of the world have had the same experience of staying in the same home gives people peace of mind when making a choice as delicate as this. Relationship marketing (Gronroos 1994) focuses on the importance of interpersonal communication in the current socioeconomic context. If this is true generally for all sectors, it is even more important in tourism because the satisfaction of the traveller strongly depends on the relationships that he/she creates with other travellers, with people working in accommodation facilities, with local inhabitants and with the environment.

MOTIVES OF THE HOME EXCHANGE TOURIST

Home exchange is clearly a "low cost" way of travelling. The growth of "low cost tourism" is usually seen as a consequence of two interconnected phenomena: the increase in the number and availability of low cost airlines - which allows tourists to travel at lower prices without sacrificing basic services or security - and the rise of an *empowered consumer* (Campbell 1995; Kozinets 2002), therefore of a consumer more aware of the many different alternatives out there, who has started to opt for services without "frills" (unnecessary expenditure, e.g. the coffee on board an aircraft), and who is willing to try different formula (e.g. accommodation) and is capable of optimizing his/her time of purchase (e.g. in order to receive advanced booking or through auction on line).

The success of low cost airlines has also forced companies in other sectors to reduce their tariffs. As a consequence the "low cost revolution" has started to spread from airlines to other types of businesses: from cruise ships to hotels. A trend that has recently been reinforced by the economic crisis. Over the last ten years, the low cost way of travelling has become a sort of "style of travel", a conscious choice that cuts across different social classes, from students to professionals¹.

Exchanging homes is clearly located within this trend and for several aspects it could be assimilated to budget hotels, holiday homes, youth hostels, convents, bed and breakfasts and so on. However, as our data also demonstrated, *swappers* have some special characteristics when compared with the usual "low-cost travellers". Behind this choice there is the desire to know the other, to fit into a different cultural context with a more direct approach.

As our research has demonstrated, saving money is only of secondary importance for people that opt for this kind of vacation. For people who replied to our online survey, the most important reason for swapping home is the possibility to go on a truly different holiday (36.5% vs. 14.7% who replied underlined the economic aspect), a fact that clearly differentiates swappers from mass tourists.

¹ With regards to these trends, the University of Bergamo recently carried out some quantitative studies regarding low-cost tourists at the Milano-Orio al Serio Airport, the first low-cost airport in Italy, which confirm these tendencies.

Table 3: Motivation for joining HomeLink

	First motivation	Second motivation
Savings	14.7	24.4
Exploitation second home	14.7	10.3
Convenience of staying in a house during the holiday	17.9	8.3
Cultural experience	36.5	25.6
To see less known places	1.9	2.6
Making an environmental friendly holiday	0.6	4.5
Meet new people	5.1	13.5
Making unusual holiday	1.3	5.8
Other	3.8	0

Home exchanging means creating a relationship that often results in a true friendship with people from other cities and/or countries. In this regard, some scholars have stressed the “intimate” aspects that characterise this type of experience: exchanging homes allows tourists to experience the customs and habits of an area, and become integrated into all aspects of the social fabric of the visited area. Another important element that seems to induce people to choose home exchange is greater environmental concern, because home exchanging is considered a green way to travel. In reality, swappers don't consider this green concern as a strong motivation for their holiday (0.6% as first choice, 4.5% as second choice), but as we have discussed above it appears to be an *implicit* belief in their way to travel, in the choices that they do in what they buy.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented and discussed the data of a pilot study which aims to portray the profile of home-swappers in Italy. Home-swapping is a form of alternative travel which still falls within the category of niche market, as opposed to traditional forms of tourism which are still the most popular; nevertheless numbers show a relentless growth of this phenomenon.

When discussing the rise of home-exchange members, the mass media generally emphasize the fact that the people who decide to spend their holiday by experiencing this alternative way of travelling are principally driven by economic reasons. However, even if the economic aspect is certainly a factor that must be taken into consideration, the possibility to save on the accommodation expenses is not the only motivation to be accounted for. In fact, in recent years, also due to the economic downturn, people have rethought their values, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and this has brought to the emergence of alternative ways of travelling, such as homexchange.

As discussed, the increase of people undertaking home swappings in recent years has been dramatically expedited by the Internet, which has enabled users to get familiar with networks of shared interests and trust, as well as to join non-conventional travel platforms. These platforms lead to the demise of intermediaries, since they allow users to exchange what they have in a logic of reciprocity and of collaborative consumption, thus requiring a certain degree of open-mindedness, trust, enthusiasm, respect and inventiveness.

This alternative form of tourism allows travellers to autonomously organize their tailor-made holiday in a relational and green way; while providing them with the possibility to get immersed in local culture. The future challenge for home exchange is to reach an always wider audience by conveying the idea that swapping homes is not only a safe, cheap and implicitly sustainable way of travelling; it should also carry the belief that people who benefit from it will also find a major means to overcome cultural barriers, to acquire trust in the other, and live a fulfilling, personalised and exciting travel experience.

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