



Heritage as an Alternative Driver for Sustainable Development and Economic Recovery in South East Europe

Conveying tourist ratings into an overall destination evaluation

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Abstract

The decision-making process concerning tourism destination choices is nowadays strictly related to the information gathered online and social media are the new form of tourist information offices. Viral diffusion of information through social communities influences and promotes the image and reputation of a tourist destination. New media are therefore crucial in discovering and enhancing notoriety of natural and cultural heritage of small or less known areas. We present, by means of a multicriteria methodology, a way to summarize customer (tourist) evaluations of a destination and to compare them with the DMO (Destination Management Organization) evaluation in terms of, e.g., cultural heritage, attractions and natural resources. The results are expressed as inductive rules representing how multiple ratings and reviews posted by tourists could be conveyed into single scores useful for travel destination selection and benchmarking.

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1. On-line evaluations of tourism products

Information on travel destinations flow abundantly on the web, Internet, and social media in particular, are currently used to gather information on tourism products and to purchase them. The intrinsic characteristics of tourism products, requiring high levels of information, has been recognized since a long time as a reason for making them an area of extensive use of Information and Communication Technologies, ICTs (Poon, 1993; Garcia-Gonzalez and Mugica, 2012). Therefore ICTs play a fundamental role in determining the competitiveness of tourism destinations (Buhalis and Law, 2008).

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Products and services of the tourism industry are intangibles that are bought far away from the place of consumption and much time before their usage. Consumers require therefore detailed and reliable information about tourism products and, accordingly, consumption decisions are strictly related to the information gathered on-line. This is a reason why the features of the Web 2.0 became so important for the tourism industry in recent years. As reported in the ITB World Travel Trends Report 2013/14 (ITB, 2013), Internet as a booking channel raised a market share of 65%, which, by the way, ITB considers as to be close to a saturation level, and mobile bookings are growing fast. In particular traffic on tourism websites that allow consumer evaluations is very intensive (traffic data as reported by www.alexacom.com on 17 February, 2014, assign to booking.com place 139 in the ranking of world sites, while tripadvisor.com and expedia.com remarkably reach places 221 and 541, respectively).

The Web 2.0 involves higher transparency of pricing policies and offers to the consumer a better understanding of the quality of a tourism product, thus redefining power positions in the market (Berne et al., 2012). As a matter of fact, social media, and virally diffused advices, are often decisive for the final choice of hotels (Christou and Nella, 2011); positive or negative word of mouth, so as high or low evaluations, can have an important impact on sales (Spark and Browning, 2011).

On the other hand, the huge amount of data on customer satisfaction that can be collected are exploited also using advanced techniques like text mining and content analysis in order to understand customers' satisfaction and choice determinants (Li et al., 2013). But we argue that those data actually are *under-exploited*. Consider for example cultural or natural heritage: they definitely enhance the use of local resources and assets by visitors but cultural heritage or even fresh air alone are not sufficient for the development of the tourism industry in a territory (Román et al., 2000). Among more traditional push and pull market factors, the subjective experience of customers spread throughout the web by means of social networks, strongly motivates (or demotivates) new tourist to visit small towns or rural areas (Madden and Shipley, 2012). Tourists love to share information, photos, comments and travel suggestions on a hotel, a restaurant or a destination and success of a tourism product is strongly supported by the positive marketing effect of a favorable "word-of-net" (Lee et al., 2011; Moutinho et al., 2011; Sotiriadis and van Zyl, 2013).

In this paper we use data collected on a travel website, featuring an interactive travel forum, that aims to promote the image and the reputation of tourism destinations. We focus on data concerning the natural and cultural heritage of a less known area of Italy, namely Molise and Basilicata, two regions located in south-central Italy. Data consist of online assessments released by tourists for destinations in those regions. Tourists visiting a destination reach a satisfaction level that depends on their evaluation of the features of the destination that are more closely related to their personal motivations and tastes. We propose a way to study the links between the evaluations of single features of a destination (like transports, cultural or rural heritage, safety) and the overall assessment of the destination given by each tourist. Being aware of the structure of those ties is a tool for stakeholders since it allows a segmentation of the market with respect to motivations and needs of visitors, and diversification is a valuable tool for the expansion of emerging tourism products, like rural tourism (Román et al., 2000). The present study is part of the research *Development of a Web marketing tool for assessing and positioning tourist-cultural destinations* jointly supported by the Department of Management and Ciset-International Centre for Studies on Tourism Economics, both of the University Ca' Foscari, Venezia.

2. Dominance-based Rough Set Approach

By means of Dominance-based Rough Set Approach (DRSA), a recent multicriteria methodology, we illustrate how the evaluations of tourists on that destination can be summarized allowing a straightforward comparison with the evaluations of the DMO (Destination Management Organization) concerning cultural heritage, attractions and natural resources. The results obtained by means of Rough Set Theory, which has been applied to tourism studies several times (see, e.g., Goh and Law, 2003; Law et al., 2004; Liou et al., 2010), are inductive rules representing how multiple ratings and reviews posted by tourists could be conveyed into single scores, suitable both for travel destination selection and destination performance monitoring.

Pawlak (Pawlak, 1982) introduced Rough Sets Theory as a new mathematical tool for imperfect data analysis where decision rules represent a method to express properties of data: this is due to the definition of a decision rule:
 conditions → decision

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