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Facebook as a destination marketing tool: Evidence from Italian regional Destination Management Organizations

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explore how Italian regional DMOs employ Facebook, to promote their destinations.
- We advance available metrics to capture Facebook users' engagement.
- Visual content and the average length of posts have a positive impact on engagement.
- Post frequency has a negative impact on engagement.
- Trentino, Tuscany and Sicily have developed the best managerial practices.

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ABSTRACT

This work explores how Italian regional Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) strategically employ Facebook to promote and market their destinations, and improves on the current metrics for capturing user engagement. Based on big data analysis from the regional DMOs' Facebook pages, supplemented with semi-structured interviews conducted with DMO managers, the study sheds light on the factors contributing to superior level of social activity. The findings indicate that the way Facebook is tactically and strategically employed varies significantly across Italian regional DMOs. Visual content (namely photos) and moderately long posts have a statistically-significant positive impact on DMOs' Facebook engagement, whereas high post frequency, and early daily timing (in the morning) of posts have a negative impact on engagement. Last but not least, the study shows that most of the regional DMOs (except for Trentino, Tuscany, and Sicily) deploy Facebook with a top-down approach, allowing for little spontaneous user generated content (UGC).

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1. Introduction

Over the last 30 years the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the global economy has been dramatic, completely changing the way human activities are performed, material and immaterial resources are mobilised, wealth is generated, and business opportunities are created and seized. Among the many industries affected by technological advances, tourism is undoubtedly one where ICT-driven business process re-engineering has engendered a new paradigm shift, because: "not only do ICTs empower consumers to identify, customise and purchase tourism products but they also support the globalisation of the industry by providing effective tools for suppliers to develop, manage and distribute their offerings worldwide" (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

The Internet has deeply transformed the manner in which travellers access information, plan for and book trips, and subsequently share their travel experiences (Bilgihan, Barreda, Okumus, & Nusair, 2016; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In the early 'Web 1.0' days of the Internet, information published online was static, and interaction with other Internet users and/or publishers almost non-existent (Hays et al., 2013). By contrast, the 'Web 2.0' Internet of today is characterised by review sites (e.g., Tripadvisor.com) and

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social media platforms (such as Facebook.com, Twitter.com) that have brought about a social-network revolution of the World Wide Web, leading to what has been termed 'socialnomics', i.e., an economy revolving around social media (Qualman, 2009). In fact, social media websites enable Internet users to form virtual travel communities (VTCs) that make it easier for tourists to obtain information, maintain connections, develop relationships, and eventually make travel-related decisions (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang, 2007; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002).

Social media sites facilitate consumer-generated content (CGC) such as blogs, photos, videos, wikis, or reviews (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012; Wenger, 2008) and are widely used by online travellers (White & White, 2007), thereby marking a shift toward users rather than organisations taking charge of Internet content (Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione, & Ahmad, 2008). Sometimes CGC and online reviews (such as those published by Tripadvisor.com) might even challenge the authority of established Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and conventional advertisements, by undermining their reputation (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015; Gretzel, 2006; Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000). Consequently, DMOs at both the national and local level need to pay attention to how they use social media, as this can play a crucial role in effectively promoting and marketing a tourism destination in a global context, characterised by hyper-competition not only among companies (D'Aveni, 1994) but also among destinations (Baggio, Czakon, & Mariani, 2013; Mariani, Baggio,Buhalis & Longhi, 2014; Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi & Vitouladiti, 2014; Mariani, 2016).

This work contributes to the extant body of 'e-tourism research'—that is, research at the intersection between tourism and ICTs— from a number of perspectives. First, it adds to the currently scant stream of empirically-based studies that investigate DMOs' social media marketing from both a qualitative and a quantitative perspective (Hays et al., 2013). Specifically, it explores how Italian regional DMOs employ Web 2.0—and specifically Facebook—to promote and market their destinations, illustrating their varying degrees of social-media usage. Second, this work advances the currently available quantitative methodologies for capturing Facebook-user engagement: it addresses the potential issues and biases inherent in existing engagement metrics, and employs a novel software tool, specifically developed for this study, to retrieve data from Facebook pages. Third, this investigation innovatively identifies and measures the factors that contribute to increased levels of social activity—also using qualitative data to help interpret the quantitative findings. Finally, by triangulating the quantitative and qualitative methods, several managerial best practices are identified that DMOs can adopt in their use of social media. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 gives a review of relevant literature on e-tourism research and social media. Section 3 describes the methodology that was employed, while Section 4 reports the research findings and the analysis. Finally, Section 5 discusses both the managerial and policy-making implications of this study, sets out its limitations, and maps out avenues for further research.

2. E-tourism research and social media

Research on the role of ICTs in the tourism sector (commonly referred to as e-tourism research) has consolidated significantly over the last three decades, mirroring the growing number of ICT applications in the sector and the acknowledgement of the tourism industry as a leading e-commerce application (Werthner & Ricci, 2004).

Buhalis and Law (2008), in a survey of the academic articles published in top-impact academic journals, identify three major axes within e-tourism research: (1) technological innovation; (2) industry functions; (3) consumer and demand dimension. With respect to technological innovation (the first axis), in recent years a number of technologies have been identified as critical for further innovation in the tourism industry. They are related mainly to interoperability and ontology-building (Baggio, 2014; Jakkilinki, Georgievski, & Sharda, 2007; Stabb & Werthner, 2002), multimedia (Fiore, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Raggam & Almer, 2005), mobile and wireless technologies (Alfaro, Nardon, Pianesi, Stock, & Zancanaro, 2005; Flouri & Buhalis, 2004), wireless local area networks (WLANs) and the worldwide interoperability for microwave access (WiMax) (Odinma, Oborkhale, & Kah, 2007), location-based services (LBS) (Berger, Lehmann, & Lehner, 2003), web design in both functionality and usability (Hashim, Murphy, & Law, 2007; Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006), accessibility (Michopoulou, Buhalis, Michailidis, & Ambrose, 2007), and ambient intelligence (AI) (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005; Yovcheva, Buhalis, & Gatzidis, 2012).

The industry functions (second axis of e-tourism research) most strongly impacted by the aforementioned technologies are marketing and distribution (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Go & Williams, 1993; O'Connor & Frew, 2002), because by helping to promote mass-customisation, these technologies have made it possible to target niche markets of significant size in different geographical locations.

Finally, the customer and demand dimension (third axis of e-tourism research) has to do with markets and customers. This axis covers the idea that ICTs offer a range of tools to facilitate and improve the entire process, starting from information search, through to destination/product consumption, and post-experience engagement, (Borges, 2009; Frías, Rodríguez, Alberto Castañeda, Sabiote, & Buhalis, 2012; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004; Parra-Lopez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Tano, & Diaz-Armas, 2011). Such tools comprise pricing devices (Clemons, Hann, & Hitt, 2002), recommender systems (Fesenmaier, Gretzel, Hwang, & Wang, 2003; Ricci & Werthner, 2006), profiling methods (Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, & Tsai, 2004; Tufte & Rasmussen, 2003; Matloka & Buhalis, 2010), mechanisms for dealing with complaints and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Gelb & Sundaram, 2002; Shea, Enghagen, & Khullar, 2004), customer-centric marketing (CCM) systems (Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007), social media and VTCs (Brás, Costa, & Buhalis, 2010; Stepchenkova et al., 2007; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998; Wang et al., 2002; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

With the emergence of Web 2.0, the concept of social networking/virtual communities applied to the tourism sector has resulted in 'Travel 2.0'—considered to be one of the "mega trends" to most significantly impact the tourism system (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). More specifically, a "virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks'' (Rheingold, 1993: p. 58). A VTC is simply a tourism-themed virtual community, in which tourism-related CGC is created (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com) is one of the most successful examples of a virtual community in tourism: it facilitates the reviewing of hotels, restaurants, and destinations around the world and brings together individuals in discussion forums. The system provides users with independent travel reviews and comments written by TripAdvisor members and expert advisors, and represents a powerful platform for interaction among peers (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).

The recent tourism and hospitality literature has addressed the role and use of social media in travellers' decision-making, as well as in tourism operations and management (Sigala et al., 2012). While consumer-centric studies have generally focused on the use

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