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Alessandro Inversini
Webatelier.net, Università della Svizzera italiana, alessandro.inversini@lu.unisi.ch

Lorenzo Cantoni
Webatelier.net & NewMinE Lab, Università della Svizzera italiana, lorenzo.cantoni@lu.unisi.ch

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UNDERSTANDING ONLINE REPUTATION OF MEDITERRANEAN DESTINATIONS

Inversini, Alessandro, Webatelier.net, Università della Svizzera italiana, via Buffi 13, 6900 Lugano (CH), alessandro.inversini@lu.unisi.ch

Cantoni, Lorenzo, Webatelier.net & NewMinE Lab, Università della Svizzera italiana, via Buffi 13, 6900 Lugano (CH), lorenzo.cantoni@lu.unisi.ch

Abstract

Destination managers are investing considerable efforts (i.e. time, resources and money) to market their destinations on the internet, often not considering the fact that unofficial information sources are gaining more and more popularity among internet users. Long tail players (such as blogs, wikis, reviews, etc.) are actually appearing in the ranking of search engines, spreading almost the same contents as the official sources, but with very different strategies, goals and styles. Starting from a log files analysis of a given Mediterranean destination, nine keywords have been used to perform search activities on two major search engines (Google and Yahoo!). A content analysis study has been performed on search results in order to examine topics and arguments of the retrieved results, which are shaping the web reputation of the destination. The paper shows that destinations need to manage their brand and online reputation holistically, by listening all players providing information about them, and trying to leverage on their contributions.

Keywords: Web Reputation, Destination Information Competitors, Web2.0

1   INTRODUCTION

User Generated Contents (UGC) are gaining substantial popularity among internet users because they started to be highly ranked – due to their intrinsic characteristics – by search engines (Gretzel and Kyung, 2008) spreading almost the same information (in terms of topic coverage) as official destination websites (Inversini and Buhalis, 2009). Moreover, as tourism is an experience and hence it needs to be communicated, UGC are playing a strong role within the tourism consumption phases (Gretzel et al., 2006) because users have become the information players and creators (Nicholas, et al., 2007), spreading, reviewing and commenting their own experiences about given destinations (which happens in the post-consumption phase: experience recall). This information is more and more used also by prospective travelers to gain insight of the destination they are considering (pre-consumption phase: helping the decision making process). Due to this, destination managers and destination online marketers need to be aware of the contents which is published on their destination, and they also need to constantly monitor the unofficial information sources and the UGC websites in order to find possible problems and to behaving accordingly. The concept of destination online reputation management is becoming crucial: reputation has been widely investigated often in relationship with companies and it has mainly be considered as an economic asset. This study highlights the fact that there is a kind of online reputation also for tourism destinations, and that reputation, as it could be seen as an economic asset, can be created, managed and enhanced. This study proposes to deal with unofficial online tourism information sources not as a black-box, but as reputation indicators analyzing, describing and monitoring the flow of the so called eWord of Mouth.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism has been always recognized as an information intensive domain (Gretzel et al., 2000; Buhalis, 2003). Actually, in few other business areas generation, gathering, processing, application and communication of information are as important for day-to-day operations as for the travel and tourism industry (Poon, 1993). Furthermore, the continuous development of ICT during the last decades has had

profound implications for the whole tourism industry (Buhalis, 2000). On one hand, it is possible to argue that the importance of new technologies in the tourism industry regards the transaction and purchase process (Werthner and Klein, 1999). On the other hand, many studies regarding the communication and promotion of tourism goods are rising. Sheldon (1997) explained that communications and information transmission tools are necessary to get global marketing of the tourism industry (Sheldon, 1997). Besides, as tourism can be generally understood as an experience, it needs to be communicated: in other terms, tourists are more and more using technologies to communicate among them. The new social media (which will be described in the next paragraphs) are enabling tourists to share information on the internet in the so called "read and write web", where the end user has become both information consumer, player (Nicholas, et al., 2007) and provider.

On one side, internet has become the primary way used by Destination Management Organizations (DMO) to communicate with prospective tourists (Buhalis, 2003); different strategies can be highlighted within the tourism domain (Choi et al., 2007), involving different technologies, the so called DMS – Destination Management Systems (Buhalis, 2003), and different content providers (Inversini and Buhalis, 2009): one example are DMO websites (e.g. visitlondon.com), which are incorporating User Generated Contents (UGC) as part of their site content (Inversini and Buhalis, 2009). Moreover, ICT have had a profound impact also on the operations, structure and strategy of tourism organizations, helping to reengineer the process of the entire industry (Buhalis, 2004). DMO and tourism managers in general, understand that ICT, if managed properly, can generate a tremendous positive value for their organizations (Lee, 2001).

On the other side, it is possible to claim that tourism information is widely spread on the internet (Inversini and Buhalis, 2009, Baggio, et al., 2007). A recent study by Xiang, Wöber and Fesenmaier (Xiang et al., 2009) described the so called "Online Tourism Domain" accessible from search engines, leveraging on the following four perspectives: (i) the industry perspective (Leiper 1979; Smith 1994), (ii) the symbolic representation perspective (Cohen and Cooper 1986; Dann 1997; Leiper 1990), (iii) the travel behavior perspective and (iv) the travel information search perspective. These authors found that among 3,000 search results (i.e. 100 keywords, 3 pages, 10 results per page) only 3% are unique results.

Within this online tourism domain (Xiang et al., 2009), it is actually possible to find official destination and attraction websites (e.g. cultural heritage attraction websites) as well as unofficial blogs (Thevenot, 2007), online communities, social networks, personal websites etc. This means that geographical and cultural boundaries are no longer obstacles for global communication and for global commerce. Information has become available both from official and unofficial sources (Anderson, 2006).

Unofficial websites are competing to reach end users presenting almost the same information as the official websites do. This ever-increasing web2.0 phenomenon (O'Reilly, 2005), which enables individual users to produce so called User Generated Contents (UGC), is contributing significantly to the massive growth of information on the web (be it relevant for the end user or not). One example of such web2.0 applications are web-logs (blogs – Thevenot, 2007), originally born as writing tools for users to keep track of their own records, they quickly turned into a key part of the online culture (Hsu and Lin, 2008). According to David Sirfy (2007), the blogosphere – the vast, dynamic complex network of blogs (Xiaolin et al., 2007) – is now composed of more than seventy million blogs. In addition, 120,000 new blogs are created and 1.5 million posts are published per day (Thevenot, 2007).

Observing the World Wide Web, it is possible to identify two types of websites: (i) web1.0 websites: web pages of services, business etc. presenting their business, selling a product or integrating business processes (Cantoni and Di Blas, 2002), and (ii) web2.0 websites, which are defined as social websites and primarily contain UGC published by end users (Boulos and Wheelert, 2007). Web2.0 sites (also called "social media"), can be generally understood as internet-based applications that encompass "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easier access by other impressionable consumers" (Blackshaw, 2006). Social media are important as they help spread within the web the electronic Word of Mouth (e.g. Litvin, Goldsmith, &

Pan, 2008). Electronic word of mouth is crucially important in the tourism field as it represents "a mixture of facts and opinions, impressions and sentiments, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences, and even rumors" (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). Marketing managers and researchers are exploiting new ways to adopt social media in the marketing and promotion arena in order to take advantage of this "electronic word-of-mouth" (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Schmallegger & Carson (2008) suggested that the strategy of using blogs as an information channel encompasses communication, promotion, product distribution, management, and research. Other authors propose to view UGC websites as an aggregation of online feedback mechanisms, which use internet bidirectional communication to share opinions about a wide range of topics such as: products, services and events (Dellarocas, 2003), creating a network of digitized word-of-mouth (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004). The aggregation of the entire range of online representations creates the web reputation of organizations (Dellarocas, 2001 and 2005; Bolton et al., 2004). Managing the increasingly diverse range of sites and contents that build the web reputation, requires a cross-disciplinary approach, which incorporates ideas from marketing, social psychology, economics and decision making science (Malaga, 2001).

Reputation nowadays is considered to be a major asset for individuals, firms, organizations and countries. The term has been defined by the Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913) as "the estimation in which one is held; character in public opinion; the character to attribute to a person, thing or action [...]". One of the latest and most complete definitions of reputation was presented by Solove (2007): the author explained it as a core component of the identity, defining reputation as the opinion of the public, which is formed upon the behavior and character of an individual, firm or country. Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (1999) explained that, when the concept of reputation is linked to corporate or business field, there is still disagreement on how to use or define it. They assessed the concept of corporate reputation from several perspectives: (i) from a strategist's perspective, reputation could be defined as an intangible asset, which is difficult to imitate by competitors and could help firms in the creation of competitive advantages; (ii) from a communicator's point of view, reputation are traits, which are developed from the different relations established with stakeholders; (iii) from an economic point of view, reputation can be explained as a way to forecast behaviors. Finally, they defined corporate reputation "as a collective assessment of a company's ability to provide valued outcomes to a representative group of stakeholders" (Fombrun et al., 1999). Dowling (2001) complemented this definition by arguing that the sum of all the activities performed by a firm contributes to the creation of its reputation. Reputation is created or formed based upon information. This information, which might come from different sources (e.g. press releases, word-of-mouth, advertisement, etc.), is the result of all behaviors, actions or activities performed by a firm. From this information each individual then, creates its own personal perception or reputation. This situation limits the ability of organizations to manage their own reputation, due to the fact that it is not possible to restrict people from making judgments (Solove, 2007).

Thus, in order to create a positive reputation, it is important to control the information and actions of the organization, taking into consideration how they will be perceived by current and potential consumers as well as by the general public. Dowling (2008) complemented this idea by stating that the way to achieve "good" reputation is by creating value for stakeholders. The tourism industry, as any other service industry sells intangible products characterized mainly by being inseparable (production and consumption occurring at the same time), perishable (services cannot be stored and consumed at a later point in time) and heterogeneous (substantial differences in the services due to the human factors as production inputs) (Sirakayaa & Woodsideb, 2005). Dowling (2001) argued that firms in the services or experience industry, and tourism is one of them, should invest more in developing their image and reputation. Furthermore, he explained that due to the inseparability and heterogeneity nature of the tourism products, customers are keener to select tourism service providers upon their reputation. For this reasons, tourism destinations definitively need to manage their reputation.

3   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The main objective of this study is to investigate the so called online tourism domain (Xiang et al, 2008), which is actually accessible from search engines. Search engines are here considered as the preferred gateway to access information on the internet (Nielsen Media, 1997) and as the first tourism recommendation system (Ricci, 2002; Gretzel et al., 2006), because they make accessible a given number of websites (Xiang et al., 2008). As stated by Xiang, Woeber and Fesenmaier (2008), the number of web pages really accessible from a search engine result page are less than the one declared by the search engine itself. Besides, recent online marketing studies stated that only the first three result pages (i.e. the first 30 results) are relevant for end users: a recent research from iProspect (iProspect, 2006) showed that only 10% of search engine users look for relevant search results after the first 3 pages.

Tourism information accessible via search engines is often considered as a black box. Different researches have been performed trying to understand how to deal with search engine results: some researches focus on the fact that often tourists cannot locate what they are looking for (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2000) on the internet. Some other focuses on the tourists' behaviour when searching for online information and planning a tourism experience (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Pan and Fesenmaier, 2000; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998; Messmer and Johnson,1993; Woodside, 1990). The issue of locating the needed piece of information remains a crucial research topic for scholars, starting from Schmoll (1977), who in 1977 presented a model for describing tourist behaviours based on Howard-Sheth (1969) and Nicosia (1966). According to Schmoll, the decision to travel is the result of a distinct process involving: (i) travel stimuli, (ii) personal determinants, (iii) external variables and (iv) destination characteristics. In the model, there are some activities that serve as underpinnings of the tourist's behaviour: (i) travel desires, (ii) information search, (iii) assessment/comparison of travel alternatives and (iv) decision (Cooper et al. 2005). Subsequently, Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) argued that the tourist planning process transferred on the internet can be viewed as an interaction among the tourist, the interface and the online space, simplifying, enhancing and adapting to the new technologies the model presented by Schmoll: when it comes to the internet, it is possible to recognize the interaction between tourists, interface and online spaces in each of the four core activities of Schmoll's model.

This study proposes a different approach starting from the social media presence in the search engine results. Within the search results, social media websites are becoming more and more important and they are reaching the top positions of the ranking due to their search engine friendliness (Gretzel and Kyung, 2008) given by their intrinsic characteristics (e.g. frequency of updating, back links, etc.). Those websites are spreading almost the same information as the official (destination) websites but with different strategies (Inversini and Buhalis, 2009). Social media, be they online review websites, personal blogs, online diaries, and so on, are re-shaping tourists' perception on the web, enhancing the critical thinking of the end users, finally shaping the reputation of the given destination. In sum, the extreme vitality of social software as well as their diffusion should help destination managers better target their online communication and marketing efforts. Social media can support a variety of activities on the internet tourism domain (e.g. marketing intelligence, travel decision making, travel experiences), and destination managers in the industry as well as marketing researchers in the academy field are looking for different strategies to exploit social media for online promotion. Thus, taking into consideration social media presence and relevance within the online tourism domain, the importance of recent online marketing and promotion strategies and their peculiar characteristics of informal communication, this study investigates how these online resources can shape the reputation of a given destination.

Hence, the main research objectives are: (i) to understand how the social media market is shaped around a given Mediterranean destination, (ii) to understand if social media are creating reputation around specific topics for the destination and finally, (iii) to create a set of recommendation for tourism managers to study online destination reputation and to adapt to the social media vitality.

In order to tackle these research objectives a detailed methodology has been designed: first a Mediterranean destination, namely Ravenna, was taken as case study. Then a detailed log files (one year

timeframe: from October 1st 2007 to October 1st , 2008) analysis was performed on the official destination website (turismo.ravenna.it) in order to understand the most frequent keywords that yielded to the official tourism information. Nine most relevant keywords were found, which generated 55.4% of the whole website traffic; those keywords were used as input to perform nine different searches with the two most popular search engines: Google and Yahoo (the data collection was done in January 2009). The first 3 result pages were considered useful for the study.

Once selected the 540 search results (i.e. 9x2x30), unique results (i.e. single occurrences) were isolated, hence the problem of distinguishing between "official" and "unofficial" websites was evident (Anderson, 2006; Inversini and Buhalis 2009). Although the DMO website could be clearly identified, the other players were indistinguishable making their classification in the two categories quite subjective. The results were thus distinguished into two categories, which could map Anderson's proposal (2006): (i) BMOW – "Brick and mortar" organizations' websites, including all players that are doing business also in the offline world. Most of these organizations were doing business long before the internet was developed. (ii) MOOWAI – Mere online organizations' websites and individual websites, including all individual websites – mainly blogs – and those organizations doing business (almost) exclusively online. These providers couldn't be even conceivable without the info-structure provided by the internet.

BMOW were considered as being "official" websites in Anderson's proposal (2006). Examples of those include official and institutional websites (e.g. official destination websites), traditional tourism related business (e.g. car rental, hotel), traditional travel agents (e.g. Thomas Cook). In contrast, MOOWAI were considered as being the "unofficial" websites, which host User Generated Contents (such as Wikipedia.org, Wikitravel, Facebook, IgoUgo, Tripadvisor) or personal websites (e.g. blogs). A category had to be created: (iii) Not Relevant (NR)/Not Working (NW) websites: websites whose content is irrelevant to the city of Ravenna, or which are not accessible.

Given the high complexity of the domain, and the unique characteristics of the tourism information, in this study it is postulated that BMOW refer to what Anderson (2006) called official websites (i.e. 20% of the tail), while MOOWAI refer to unofficial ones (i.e. 80% of the tail, namely the long tail).

Finally, a codebook for content analysis (Riffe et al., 1998) was designed. The analysis was done only on the official destination website (turismo.ravenna.it) and on the MOOWAI websites. This choice was done on two bases: (i) official websites (BMOW) are selling something that regards the destination, and their judgments hence are to be good, while (ii) MOOWAI websites could have more critical arguments while describing the experience at the destination. The codebook created for analysis was basically composed of two sections: (i) the first section concerned item descriptions such as the medium, the type of website (Xiang and Gretzel, Fothcoming), the item type, its size and topic; (ii) the second section concerned the arguments used as well as the value judgments and feelings expressed.

Three coders were involved in the study. The inter-coder reliability (Riffe et al., 1998) was checked after an extensive training with the coders (4 hours coaching), using the Fleiss Kappa method (Fleiss, 1971; Sim and Wright, 2005) and the reliability result was 0.92. The training was important for two reasons: (i) the different background of the coders and (ii) the emotions-based codebook, which gave a lot of interpretation freedom to the coders. The information unit used for analysis is the landing page, i.e.: the page one reaches being referred by the search engine. Hence, the content analysis study did not consider all statements, which appear in the websites, but only the content of the landing page.

4   RESULTS

4.1   General Results

Starting from the nine most relevant keywords (Table 1, left column), a positioning analysis was performed in order to understand the ranking of the official Ravenna website within the result pages of Google and Yahoo search engines (Table 1 - The positioning analysis was performed with the help of WebCeo - www.webceo.com - free version). The positioning analysis was very important to understand

the level of information competition (Inversini and Buhalis, 2009) around the official tourism website for its relevant keywords in the first three pages within Google and Yahoo. Table 1 shows that (i) the input keywords are almost in Italian (outlining an Italian tourism market), (ii) keywords 2, 3 and 8 are very well positioned (i.e. searchers find turismo.ravenna.it high ranked in the first results page), but (iii) the website positioning is quite poor for keywords 4 and 7. Finally (iv) Google ranking for keyword 1, 5 and 6 is quite high, while no results in the firsts three pages are retrieved in Yahoo. Furthermore, as the keyword were all in Italian and they reached all together the 55.4% of the whole traffic on the website, it seemed useful to add also the ranking for the local Italian search engine where the ranking on the search engine results pages increases.

	Keywords	Google.com Ranking	Yahoo.com Ranking	Google.it Ranking	Yahoo.it Ranking
1	ravenna	3	NL	2	1
2	ravenna turismo	1	1	1	2
3	turismo ravenna	1	1	1	1
4	marina di ravenna	NL	NL	10	NL
5	apt ravenna	1	NL	1	NL
6	comune di ravenna	3	NL	3	2
7	lido di savio	NL	NL	7	NL
8	ravenna eventi	3	1	4	1
9	ravenna monumenti	9	14	10	1

Table 1. Positioning analysis for the nine most relevant keywords of turismo.ravenna.it

Then, as described in the previous section, nine search activities were performed on each search engine in a given moment in time: January, 17th , 2009. The searches considered only the first three pages of results and the 540 retrieved results were organized as follows (Table 2).

	Uniqiue results	BMOW	*Ravenna*	MOOWAI	*UGC*	NW/NR
Google	246	74	*9*	113	*34*	59
Yahoo	228	47	*6*	110	*34*	71

Table 2.   Unique results classification

Google (Table 2, first row) retrieved 246 unique results; among them, 74 were "Brick and mortar" websites (BMOW), while 113 Mere online organizations' websites and individual websites" (MOOWAI). Among the BMOW, 9 were from the official website of Ravenna (turismo.ravenna.it); among the MOOWAI, 34 were hosting User Generated Contents (UGC).

Yahoo, (Table 2, second row) retrieved 228 unique results, 47 BMOW websites and 110 MOOWAI websites. The official Ravenna tourism website appeared 6 times, while the number of UGC websites among the MOOWAI is the same as in Google. The last column of the table shows not working (NW) or not relevant (NR) websites.

How social media market is shaped around a given Mediterranean destination.

In order to described the MOOWAI market around the destination, coders were asked to classify the websites according to the following types (elaborated from Xiang and Gretzel, forthcoming): (i) Virtual Community (e.g. Lonely Planet, IgoUgo , Yahoo Travel), (ii) Consumer Review (e.g. Tripadvisor), (ii) Blogs and blog aggregators (e.g. personal blog, blogspot), (iv) Social Networks (e.g. Facebook, Myspace), (v) Media Sharing (Photo/Video sharing – e.g. Flickr, YouTube) (vi) Other (eg. Wikipedia, Wikitravel) and (vii) Web1.0 web sites (not social media or web2.0). MOOWAI information market around Ravenna online tourism domain have been represented in figure 2.
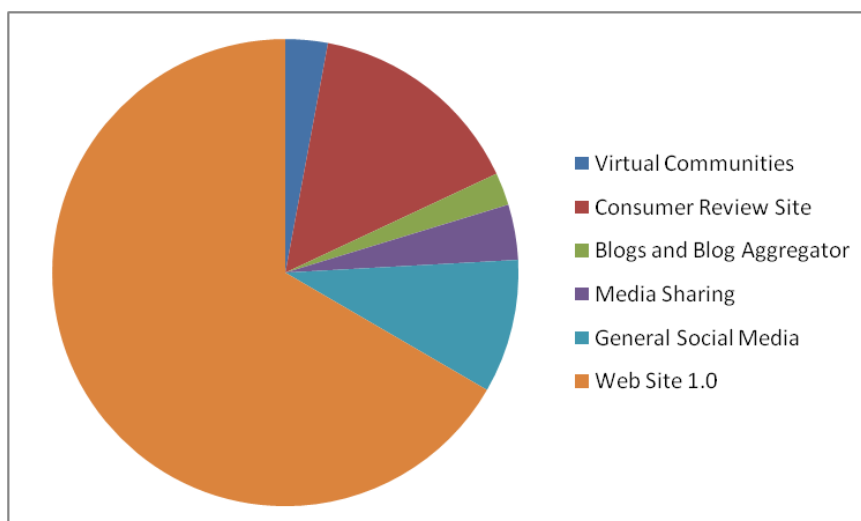
Figure 2.   MOOWAI information market around Ravenna online tourism domain

The majority of websites were web1.0 websites (66.7%), then consumer review websites (15.1%), general social media (9.2%) then virtual communities, blogs and media sharing websites (2.9%, 2.3% and 3.8% respectively). Within these different websites the most discussed topic was accommodation (52.8%), then attractions (18.3%), events (11.4) and destination (9.5%). Few mentions were counted for travel experience (2.7%), restaurant/pub/social life (1.2%) and news (0.3%).

Social media reputation

The information presented by MOOWAI websites (Table 3) is mostly factual (or without arguments). The interesting data is that 46.23% presented somehow emotional arguments (fully emotional or factual and emotional). And the value judgments (where it was possible to analyze them) were mainly positive (69.3%).

MOOWAI Arguments	
No arguments	30.7%
Factual Arguments	23.1%
Factual and Emotional Arguments	34.7%
Emotional Arguments	11.5%
MOOWAI Arguments	
No value judgment	30.7%
Positive value judgments	69.3%

Table 3.   Information presented by MOOWAI websites

The overall picture shows that the destination is perceived and described with positive value judgments.

Recommendation for tourism managers

So far the study demonstrated that it is possible to make sense out of the huge amount of documents and websites listed in the search engine results. But tourism managers need more detailed indication to make ad hoc intervention on the online communication or in the offline tourism market.

In order to do this and try to shape some recommendation for the destinations' managers, a more detailed analysis was conducted: figure 4 shows the distribution of the topics within MOOWAI websites.
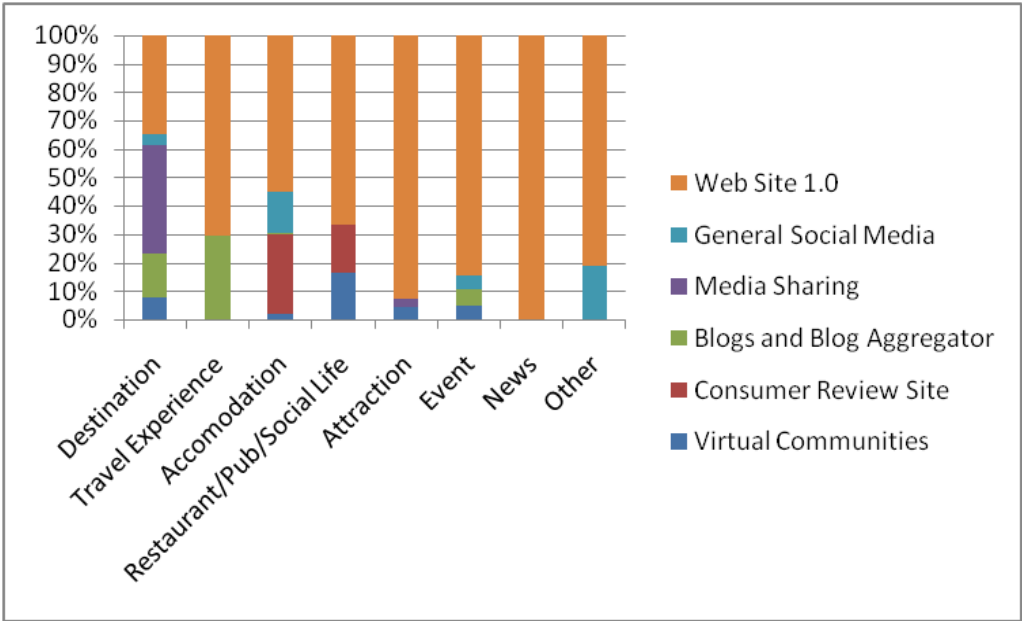
Figure 4.   Distribution of the topics within MOOWAI websites

Websites 1.0 were hosting the major number of information: the only exception was the destination topic in which the distribution of the information was more homogenous. On the travel experience side, blogs and blog aggregators are really important while for the accommodation review websites played an important role. Virtual communities and review websites were important also for the restaurant /pub and social life topic. MOOWAI websites were also analyzed in terms of value judgments carried by the information (Figure 5).
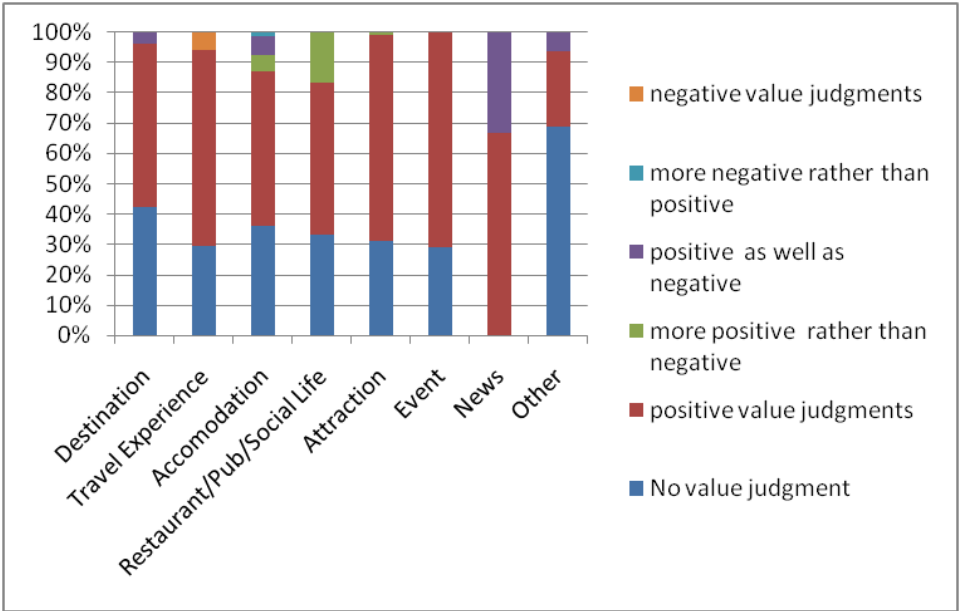

Figure 5.   MOOWAI websites value judgments

A total negative value judgment was found only for the travel experience topic, while some negative judgments were analyzed in the other categories except for the events. The overall judgments are anyway positive. Tourism managers should be aware of the fact that the majority of the comments were expressing positive feelings, at the same time paying attention also the negative ones.

5   CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that it is possible to deal with unofficial online information sources reputation indicators. Destination managers who are investing considerable time, effort and money in marketing their destinations online, should be aware that unofficial sources are (i) spreading almost the same information, and (ii) they are giving quality value judgments about the destination itself. In other words, destinations need to manage their online reputation holistically. Unfortunately at this stage it is not possible to give detailed guidelines to destination managers in order to improve online reputation. Results highlight that in some cases there could be a reputation management issue but they do not indicate which are the websites that are mentioning these shortcomings.

Finally, this study has some limitation: (i) it considers a limited period of time (the analysis is like a picture of the situation) and due to the social media characteristics (i.e. the frequency of update) it should be performed several times; (ii) it is time consuming. Coders should be trained each time and they should go through each website analyzing and cataloguing it. Nevertheless, indications about social media discussions on the internet would be really useful in order to plan online marketing campaigns and to behave when unexpected events occur.

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