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Travel communities, innovative tools to support decisions for local tourism development

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Abstract

In tourism, the web 2.0 and in particular the online reviews collected in travel communities are tools that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), policy makers and operators can increasingly use for searching information, learning consumer behavior, making decisions and planning cultural offers and tourism of territories. The paper presents some results of an empirical analysis carried on the TripAdvisor database in order to assess the level of attractiveness of the cultural and tourist resources of the Campania Region. The results confirm that the travel communities provide useful information for marketing and cultural and tourist planning; thus constitute a valuable, innovative tool for analysis and evaluation to support decision making.

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1. Introduction

In the tourism market, social networks and travel communities have now assumed a central role (Gretzel, Fesenmaier & O'Leary, 2006; Ricci & Wietsma, 2006).

From the point of view of demand, the online reviews disseminated in communities and social networks now influence all phases of the travel planning process, including pre-, during- and post-trips (Leung, Law, van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013). The online reviews allow the potential visitor to get advice and tips, make decisions related to travel, share on the web opinions on visited destination (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009).

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Until a few decades ago, the image of a tourist destination or of individual cultural attractions was conveyed almost exclusively by the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) through traditional promotional material (tourist guides, booklets, brochures, commercial videos, web sites). Currently, instead, tourists disseminate their opinions in traveler communities and social networks through online reviews, influencing the image of the destination to a greater extent than the messages directly promoted from the supply system (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Nowadays, more and more users surf the web in order to seek information on the destination to visit. In particular, they prefer to follow the opinions of other visitors rather than the information provided by tourist companies and local institutions, since the information by other users are believed not influenced by commercial motivations, more truthful and, therefore, more credible (Park & Gretzel, 2007; Dickinger, 2011).

From the point of view of supply, the travel communities are tools that enable Destination Managers (DMs) and operators of the area to capture, analyze, interpret, and manage the opinions of visitors, and thus to acquire information to promote and plan the tourist and cultural offers.

The aim of the paper is to highlight, through an empirical evidence, the value and potentialities of travel communities in supporting DMs, policy makers and practitioners in decision-making. In this framework, the paper primarily examines the role and the increasing popularity of web 2.0 tools and in particular the travel communities in tourism; subsequently, it presents an empirical evidence carried on TripAdvisor (TA)- one of the largest travel communities worldwide - aimed at assessing the attractiveness of the cultural and tourist resources in the Campania Region. The results of the analysis confirm that travel communities provide useful information for marketing and cultural and touristic planning; thus constitute a valuable, innovative analysis and evaluation tool to support decision making.

2. Social Network and Travel Community

The tendencies of visitors to browse online, to aggregate in communities based on shared interests, to interact and participate, and the possibility to connect with smartphones and tablets, have greatly enriched the travel experience in all phases of the visit: from research for information, to experiential consumption, to involvement after the visit (Buhalis & Law, 2008). About a third of potential visitors makes a research on forums or websites, social networks, or travel communities, and considers the online reviews as the most appropriate tools to assess a destination or an offer to buy. Over 70% of potential visitors consider the reviews online the greatest resource to get information before deciding (Gretzel & Yooh, 2008). Therefore, tools like social networks and travel community currently play a key role for operators and policy-makers of a territory, as they allow them to acquire, with cost and time reduced, a large amount of information on needs, behaviors and perceptions of visitors (Schmallenger & Carson, 2008). Indeed, the operators, analyzing online content, have the possibility to: (i) know the tourists' profile and needs, and the seasonality of tourism flows, which allow them to offer initiatives, discounts and deals; (ii) monitor and manage visitors' satisfaction, responding to criticism and eliminating inefficiencies in the service. Since the operators are aware of strengths and weaknesses of the services offered, they have the possibility to improve, customize and co-produce their content. Thus, they can improve the quality of the territorial offer and all the factors that influence the visitor's satisfaction and his/her choice to come back to visit the places and to disseminate positive information in the Community. This has a positive and lasting impact on the competitive advantage of the area (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

3. Empirical evidence carried out on TripAdvisor database

TripAdvisor, established in 2000, is one of the largest travel community in the world; in Italy, it represents 31% of the online Travel market with 5 million users each month and an annual growth of 81% (comScore Media Metrix, 2014). The main service that the site offers is to write and browse reviews on over 800,000 hotels, 2 million of restaurants and 400,000 attractions worldwide. Other services provided by the website regard: the inclusion of amateur photographs of hotels, restaurants and attractions of a destination; the function of search and comparison of hotel prices; the opportunity of searching flights from multiple airlines; the possibility to save in a personalized way the results of their research; the activation of an alert service to receive e-mail related to requested information.

TripAdvisor users who actively participate in the platform by writing reviews, are of medium-high socio-cultural level, travel frequently and are active in the planning and organization of the trip; moreover, they are very open to listening advice and information and are able to use proficiently technological tools (Gretzel, Purifoy & Yoo, 2007). A study conducted by PhoCusWright in 2014 on a sample of 2.739 users of TripAdvisor confirms the profile of user-type of this website: more than half of users said that they do not engage in a reservation of a hotel, restaurant or attraction unless they first have read the reviews of those who have already been there. More than 80% said that the reviews on the site help you to feel more confident on travel decisions and to have a better experience. 60% focuses exclusively on reading exclusively totally positive and completely negative reviews, and only 5% is concentrated solely on the negative reviews. Furthermore, the study revealed that users are more interested in the newest reviews, which provide an updated opinion.

The website contains a wealth of information either on users or on destinations and on individual tourism-cultural resources. These data are used by the site also to draw up different rankings. The most important is the Traveller's Choice, which allows to know the position of hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, beaches, amusement parks, nature parks, holiday villages, resorts, museums, and whole destinations.

Thus, TripAdvisor.com contains comments not only on restaurants and hotels, but also on cultural attractions, such as museums, archaeological sites, churches, etc. With the aim of providing decision support tools, the attractiveness of the cultural and tourist resources of the Campania Region has been evaluated through an analysis carried out using the Italian TripAdvisor®Travelers'Choice®2013 database. The analysis has examined the universe of online reviews related to the tourist and cultural attractions of the region during the period 1 January 2011 - 15 March 2014¹. Since the cultural attractors in Italy are actually mainly public or clergy owned, they are far from the typical commercial and competitive forms of management that conduct to false reviews manipulated by private companies. For this reason, the analysis, carried out on this type of resource, limits the risks of poor credibility associated with online reviews as highlighted in academic debates and literature (Jin, Bloch & Cameron, 2002; Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005; Dellarocas, 2006 Chua & Banerjee, 2013).

The database originally included 25.207 reviews, referred to 602 cultural attractions and 101 categories of attractions. Through a process of aggregation and removal, the analysis has selected 24.030 reviews, 10.586 reviewers and 500 cultural attractions; furthermore, 10 categories of cultural attractions and 10 territorial clusters were identified, as specified in the following.

Categories of cultural attractors

- Handicrafts, theaters and art galleries (Craft);
- Castles (Castles);
- Cultural Itineraries, Historical Centres (CulPaths);
- Buildings, Squares and Monuments (Monuments);
- Archaeological sites (Archaeo);
- Historical and architectural sites, gardens and fountains (Sites);
- Beaches, waterfront, ports (Beaches);
- Museums (Museums);
- Nature itineraries (Nature);
- Churches and Cathedrals (Churchs).

Regional geographical clusters

- ANAP = Around Naples: Surroundings of Naples;
- BNAV: Provinces of Benevento and Avellino;

¹ The survey was conducted by IRAT and CoopCulture within the project *Activity: Cultural Attractions and Information Technology for the Interactive Enhancement and Innovative Tourism*, POR Campania ERDF 2007-2013. On the methodology and results, see OR 1 of the Project: "Strategic analysis of the territorial attractors" and in particular the Deliverable 1.3.2: "Thematic supporting and characterization of attraction systems: qualitative assessments."

- Capri: Capri and Sorrento;
- Caserta: Caserta and the Province;
- Cilento: Cilento coast and the inland areas;
- Coast: Amalfi Coast and Salerno;
- Flegrei: Baia, Bacoli, Monte di Procida, Pozzuoli;
- Ischia: Ischia and Procida;
- Naples: Naples and Old Town centre;
- Pompeii: Pompeii and Vesuvius area.

The analysis and evaluation of cultural attractions in Campania have also taken into account the score assigned by users, since TA website allows to post an overall quantitative judgment (1 to 5 score).

Then, the empirical analysis used statistical methods of multivariate analysis and text mining analysis. The results of the analyses conducted have allowed to identify, among other things:

- the rank of the regional attractors and behavior of visit (e.g., number of performed visits);
- the seasonality of the attractors;
- the feedback that these attractors generate in visitors (perceptions/emotions associated with attractors);
- the reviewer's profile (e.g., age, origin, degree of activity on the TA website).

As an example, Figure 1 shows the seasonality² of the three attractions that, according to the analysis results, are positioned in first places in the territorial clusters of Naples, Caserta and Pompeii: Sansevero Chapel, Royal Palace of Caserta, Ancient Pompeii. These attractors are placed respectively in the first, third and sixth place in the general ranking of 20 major regional attractors³ of Campania Region, drawn up considering the score given by users and the number of reviews.

Looking at fig.1 a significant increase during the years of the reviews emerges for the attractors San Severo Chapel and Royal Palace of Caserta, while for the ruins of Pompeii the growth is smaller. The peak of reviews is different for the three attractors: they concentrate in July for Cappella San Severo, in August and September for the Royal Palace of Caserta, and in August for Pompeii. The reviews are numerous also in December and April for Cappella San Severo, April for the Royal Palace, and January for Pompeii. The remaining months, both for the Royal Palace of Caserta and for the ruins of Pompeii are very weak, while the reviews of the Chapel of San Severo are quite distributed throughout the year, since the Naples Cluster presents a less seasonal turnout of visit.

In general, the results illustrate how the information collected through TA travel community allows to assess the attractiveness of the cultural cluster as well as the individual cultural resources. The investigation allowed not only to identify the tourist and cultural attractions of Campania that are most appreciated by users, but also to highlight what resources are most visited, and to "capture" the perception and emotions that the individual cultural resources cause to users' target.

As for practical implications, the information collected in TA travel community makes suggestions for policy makers and operators involved in cultural tourism, in order to develop the planning, management and marketing of destination.

²It should be pointed out that for the year 2014 the analysis considered only the first three months.

³Cf. Results of project Activity, Deliverable 1.3.2:" Thematic supporting and characterization of attraction systems: qualitative assessments.", cit.

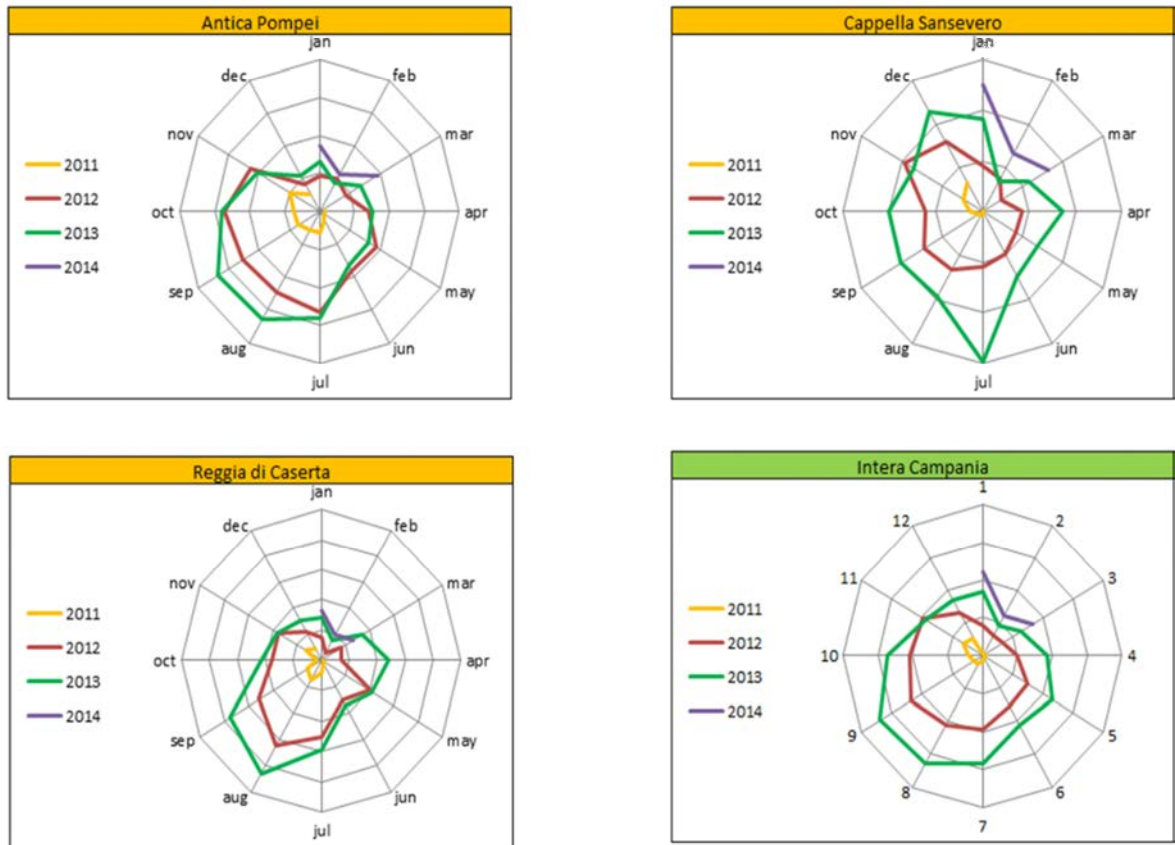


Fig. 1. Seasonality of the reviews/comments to three cultural attractors 2011 - 2014.

4. Conclusions and implications

The findings of the carried out analysis confirm that the information collected in the travel community provides valuable insights to plan and promote the offer of the territories, to support decision-making and to prepare policies. In tourism, the social tools of web 2.0 are able to support strategies and policies of operators, firms, policy makers and DMs.

Indeed, the analysis and evaluation of online reviews can allow the enhancement of services and products; the monitoring of the reputation and image of the destination as a whole or individual attractions; the development of competitive strategies to increase the satisfaction of the tourist.

The travel communities, thus, provide a contribution on both the design and the tourist-cultural marketing, and in general constitute an innovative tool to support decision-making processes aimed at local development.

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