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TOURISTIC WEBSITES PERFORMANCE AND GOVERNANCE TYPOLOGIES[1]

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the results of research, still in progress, regarding the influence of website governance for the promotion of tourism and the balance between delivered services and information.
The research aims to test if, according to the common belief, websites owned by private sector organisations focus on the provision of services, compared to public and not-for-profit websites that focus on the provision of information. The relevance of this research topic derives from consideration that the web is a channel for the diffusion, processing, search and storage of tourism information. Therefore, the research can make a contribution to increasing our understanding of how different types of websites (public or private) affect investment in tourism.
The study confirms the absence of evidence to suggest that private sector tourism websites offer more services than public or not-for-profit ones. Moreover, public sector websites offer more and different services, compared to private sector websites.

KEYWORDS
Performance; Governance; Touristic Web Sites.

ECONLIT KEYS
M100; M150.

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[1] Although this paper is the result of a joint collaboration, sections 2 and 3 are attributed to M. Bianchi, and 4 and 5 to L. Tampieri.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper discusses research on websites for the promotion of two Italian tourist cities. The question is if public sites have more or less level of performance than private websites in delivering information and services.

The relevance of websites in promoting tourism is rapidly increasing, in both the public and private sectors, but the novelty of this research is that the results seem to confirm the better performance of public web governance offering services, compared to private ones. This result was obtained by applying the latest trends in the literature concerning the evaluation of website performance. The research is also an attempt to account for the absence of diffused empirical data on the subject, both from the academic and non-academic communities, as highlighted by scholars such as Buhalis and Law (2008) and Hashim et al. (2007).

The research aims to test if, according to common belief, the websites owned by private sector organisations focus on the provision of services, compared to public and not-for-profit websites, which focus on the provision of information The relevance of this research topic derives from the understanding that the web is a channel for the diffusion, processing, search and storage of tourism information. Therefore, the research can make a contribution towards increasing our knowledge of how different types of websites (public or private) affect the governance in tourism. This derives from the increasing resources invested by private and public bodies in publishing and maintaining tourism websites, and are themselves a territory to be explored and enjoyed by web tourists.

To this end, the research will compare the websites of private, public and not-for-profit organisations on the basis of two performance parameters: the offer of information and the offer of services. The first set of parameters comprises multilingualism, the number of images, level of interactivity and up-to-date information, together with ease of navigation. The evaluation of services refers to online services, e-commerce, integration with the territory items and events.

On the basis of this framework, local governments have to enforce this tool to promote services and information whereas private stakeholders have to increase the range of real services offered through the web.

2. THE BACKGROUND

In previous research and theoretical papers, the authors (Bianchi et al., 2012; 2010) analysed the performance evaluation of websites, according to the position in the network and the methodologies that supervise their preparation.

In this field, Holzer and Kim (2005) studied the evaluation system of government websites. They displayed many resources to modify and improve their relationships with users-citizens. In particular, five components: 1) security and privacy of Internet user, 2) website's usability, 3) informational content, 4) services and 5) citizen participation, are used to build a performance index identified as the main criteria for website evaluation.

In this paper the research, still in progress, aims to test the correlation between website ownership and its performance, as it concerns the provision of information and services connected to the promotion of local tourism.

Beyond the more or less sophisticated approaches to software design (Kaklauskas et al., 2006) and search tools (O'Reilly 2007), research on the management of tourism websites recently focused on the governance of these sites and on the boundaries definition of tourism and of tourism information society (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003).

In the field of information management for tourism, some studies reported a significant absence of advanced management instruments for decision support and planning. This scarcity could also be extended to the governance of websites by public bodies, as local governments, or their competent departments, did not pay particular attention to their managerial approach.

Buhalis and Egger (2008) stated that ICTs positively contributed to increasing the competitive advantage for organisations and tourist areas. Meanwhile, issues related to the lack of an agreed evaluation methodology for website quality are well

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recognised in the literature (Antonioli, Corigliano & Baggio, 2011; Law et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 2004).

For this purpose, studies carried out by Antonioli, Corigliano and Baggio (2006) focused on the wider field of information systems and knowledge management in tourism, particularly on the dynamics between tourism and the web. This derives from understanding that tourist destinations enjoy advantages from their presence on the Internet, particularly in terms of major promotional opportunities and marketing.

The literature underlined different aspects of website governance as the channels to communicate the area, products and services; how to promote images of the area; and to anticipate the scenario stimulating the choice process (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006; McCartney et al., 2008).

Other studies (Lee & Morrison, 2010; Yang & Bolchini, 2010) demonstrated that a positive perception of a website's contents is a key determinant of the success of the promotional efforts of organisations, which invest increasing resources (Mendes 2010) into the planning and creation of websites. This orientation derives from the innovative vision of a website, not as "technological artefact" but as an element of a wider and complex strategy of marketing (Buhalis, 1998, 2002; Varadarajan & Yadav, 2002).

In recent years, such technologies have become appropriate platforms to support the management of organisations (Manaresi & Nessi, 1998). The turbulence of the environment (Siggelkow & Rivkin, 2005) pushed toward an increasing diffusion of ICTs that allow to analyse and realize new phenomena of innovation particularly related to e-services. Many organisations implement e-services, defined as "the provision of services by electronic networks such as the internet" (Rust, 2001). In spite of the increasing relevance of e-services to an organisation's success, research studies seem to be slow to investigate these topics (Cooper et al., 2009).

3. THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The managerial approach to the governance of tourism information could be summarised by certain basic dilemmas that each local government has to solve:

1. Exploiting or Exploring: giving value to existing knowledge on territorial opportunities in connection with established data wares and websites, or in creating new ones with dedicated services such as tour scheduling and booking.

2. In- or Out-sourcing: using the resources of local government Structure as External Relations and Information Office or contracting out web design and maintenance, together with giving external organisations responsibilities for tourism promotion.

3. Clustering or Networking: in the management of tourist information the choice is between gathering and using one's own resources, or promoting links with other websites to collaborate with tourism operators and customers to up-to-date tourist information and activities by users Wikipedia like.

Under each of these main topics there is the choice among Public, Private or no Profit Governance that could be evaluated more or less adequate, considering the targets to be fulfilled and the resources to be used. To this concern there is the pragmatical question if Public Governance ensure efficient and effective websites in two basic fields: delivering information and offering services.

The research starts from the hypothesis, derived from a widely held view that websites in the private sector are more oriented to offer services, compared to public or not-for-profit organisations, which are primarily dedicated to delivering information. According to this hypothesis, competition in the marketplace encourages private companies to enrich and differentiate their tools to approach the market orienting them to a more direct action in the delivering and booking of services.

On the other hand there is the idea that territorial resources and their information are something that concerns the social and collective propriety particularly in cultural heritage and area attractiveness. This perspective will make problematic to manage this social good through a private platform of conveniences, tools and interests.

4. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research, which is still in progress, compares 79 tourism websites in the provinces of Ravenna and Rimini and focuses on cities with more than 1,000 inhabitants. The results were derived by typing the name of the city and the word "turismo" into Google, and analysing the links that appeared in the results of the first two pages, which adhered to the chosen criteria. These websites are classified according to their ownership: Private (62), Public (11), and Not-for-Profit (6) organisations, as indicated in Table 1.

The distinction derives from the hypothesis that various typologies of websites (Private, Public and Not-for-Profit) have different governance, which can be more or less addressed as offering information (X), and services (Y). These are calculated on the basis of the methodology detailed in Table 2.

Typology of web sites	Nr	%	Mean (Offer of Information) (X)	Mean (Offer of Services) (Y)	Median (Offer of Information) (X)	Median (Offer of Services) (Y)	SD (Offer of information) (X)	SD (Offer of Services) (Y)
Private	62	78	2,7	3,1	2,4	3,0	1,38	1,34
Public	11	14	2,8	3,6	2,9	4,0	1,18	1,43
Not-for-Profit	6	8	1,7	2,8	1,7	3,5	0,46	1,47
Total	79	100						

Note: X =Level of Information offer Y = Level of Services offer

Table 1: The level of the offer in analysed web sites.

As shown in Table 1, public websites, although limited in number (11), have an upper mean in both performance parameters X (2.8) and Y (3.6), followed by private and not-for-profit websites. The median value is highest for public websites, both for X and Y.

Regarding the standard deviation (SD), the highest value is in private websites for the offer of information (1.38), while not-for-profit websites display the highest value in the offer of services (1.47). These values derive from the variability of data in the

range: referring to X in private websites the range is 0.6 (minimum) to 6 (maximum), while for Y in not-for-profit websites it is 1 to 4. This level has to be considered when the hypothesis connected to these website typologies is analysed.

The research asks the following question: does the governance of websites that promote tourism influence the criteria through which these communication channels are designed?

To this purpose, the research will compare the three typologies of website governance on the basis of two groups of performance parameters: the offer of information and the offer of services (Tampieri, 2010) (Table 2).

Parameters		Score				
Category	Specifications	0	1	2	3	4
Offer of information	Multilingual	No other language	One more language	Two more languages	Three more languages	Four more languages
	Number of images or graphs, pictures in the home page of the web site	No images, or graphs, pictures in the home page of the web site	One images, or graphs, pictures in the home page of the web site	Two images, or graphs, pictures in the home page of the web site	Three images, or graphs, pictures in the home page of the web site	Four images, or graphs, pictures in the home page of the web site
	Level of interactivity	No interactivity	E-mail	Newsletter	Blog	Chat
	Level of update information	Last Year	Last Month	Last Three weeks	Last week	Week in progress
	Ease of navigation	Not easily understandable	Understandable	Easily understandable		
Offer of services	Booking and online service	No booking and online services	Online booking	Booking and online services (guides, excursions)		
	E-Commerce	No E-commerce	Gadget	Web shop	Merchandising	
	Integrated offers with the territory	No links with the territory	Link with the hotels of territory	Link with other offices and structures of the territory	Link with the hotel and with other offices and structures of the territory	
	Events of the offered territory	No presence of events	Presence of events			

Table 2: The performance parameters and specifications of websites applied in the research.

In particular, the score is set with an increasing order (0-4) on the basis of the presence of items in both parameters X and Y.

Referring to the offer of information, this is measured by the following specifications:

- Multilingualism. This is the number of languages used, and begins from a score of "0" if the website uses no other languages.

- Number of images, graphs and pictures in the home page of the website. This begins from a score of "0" if there are no images, graphs or pictures.

- Level of interactivity. This is based on a score of "0" for no interactivity, "1" for e-mail, "2" for newsletter, "3" for blog, and "4" for chat.

- Level of up-to-date information. This ranges from "0" if updating was done in last year, "1" in the last month, "2" in the last three weeks, "3" last week, and "4" in the current week.

- Ease of navigation. This ranges from "0" if the website's contents are not easily understood, "1" if they are understood, and "2" if they are easily understood.

The evaluation of services offer, refers to the following performance parameters:

- Booking and online service. This ranges from a score of 0" that means no booking and online service option, "1" for online booking, and "2" is for the presence of both a booking and online service option.

- E-Commerce (gadget, web shop, merchandising). This varies from a score of "0" that means no E-commerce, "1" gadget, "2" web shop, and "3" merchandising.

- The integrated offer with the territory. The score ranges from "0" that indicates no links with the territory, "1" for a link with the hotels of the territory, "2" refers to a link with other offices and structures of the territory and, "3" to a link with the hotels and with other offices and structures of the territory.

- Events of the offered territory. The score is "0" if there are no events, and "1" if there are events linked to the territory.

To test the hypothesis we determined four performance areas: A, B, C and D, characterised by the combination of a low and/or high score in parameters X and Y, as indicated in Table 3. In particular, the value of each website derives from the sum of the single score achieved and normalised in X and Y (Figure 1).

Performance Area	Performance Parameters			
	Offer of Information		Offer of Services	
	Low (< / = 3)	High (> 3)	Low (< / = 3)	High (> 3)
A	X		X	
B	X			X
C		X		X
D		X	X	

Table 3: The performance area A, B, C and D.

In particular, the performance of area A is based on a low level of information and services offered; B is characterised by a low level of information offered and a high level of services offered; C is both a high level of information and services offered, while D indicates a high level of information offered and a low level of services offered.

According to this framework, the analysis distinguished the websites in each performance area (Figure 1).
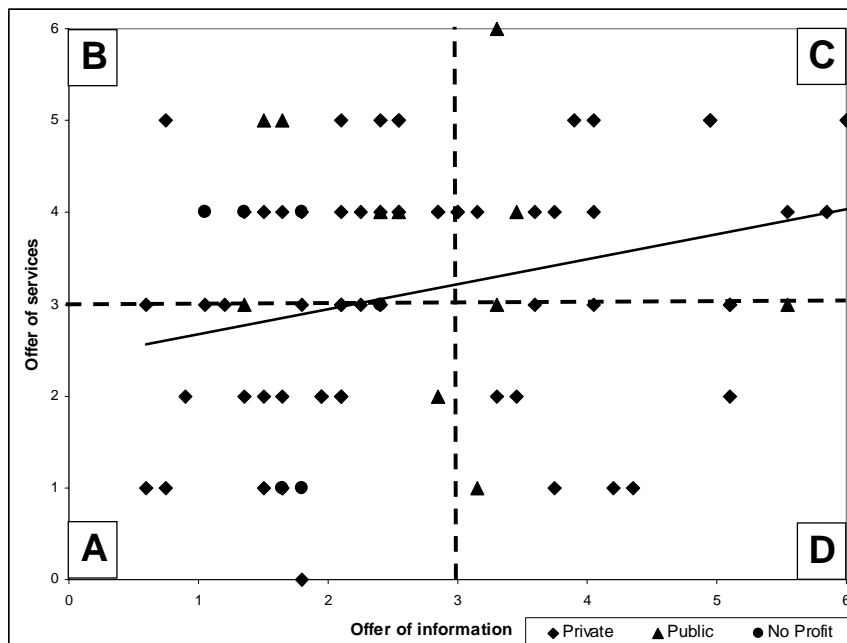

Figure 1: The comparison between private, public and not-for-profit websites according to the parameters: offer of information and of services.

The assignment of scores to these parameters allows us to evaluate website performance on the delivery of information and services offered (Figure 1), according to the following research hypothesis:

Websites of private sector organisations primarily offer services over information, when compared to public and not-for-profit websites

Figure 1 summarises this trend, although a more in-depth survey would confirm this limited orientation, that there is a positive correlation between the delivery of information and the offer of services.

5. THE RESULTS

The results of the research are shown in Table 4. This shows the percentage of each website type (private, public, not-for-profit) in each performance area.

Thirty seven per cent of private websites are in performance area A, followed by area B (29%), area C (18%) and area D (16%). For public websites a higher value (36%) emerged for area B, then area D (27%), A (18%) and finally area B (18%). Not-for-profit websites are divided equally between areas A (50%) and B (50%).

Typology of web site		A		B		C		D		Total
	Nr	Nr	%	Nr	%	Nr	%	Nr	%	%
Private	62	23	37	18	29	11	18	10	16	100
Public	11	2	18	4	36	2	18	3	27	100
No Profit	6	3	50	3	50	0	0	0	0	100
Total	79	28		25		13		13		

Table 4: The research results on the basis of percentage of website typology.

The partial result of the research, still in progress, seems to show that private websites offer fewer services than public ones, while the offer of information is more

diffused compared to public websites. From this interpretation it could be considered that the hypothesis is not supported, which opens up new perspectives into the research of tourism information management.

According to the hypothesis, websites in the public sector primarily focus on the provision of services, when compared to websites in the private sector. A particular position concerns the not-for-profit websites, which has an upper value of 50% in areas A and B, although the significance of this data is limited to the restricted number of analysed cases.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Although a link has been established between the information and services that websites provide, there is no evidence that private sector websites in the tourism industry focus more on services than on information. This could be a trend not completely demonstrated or connected to a more specialized orientation of private governance that offers a limited number of services according to the specialization of single owners. This research has proved useful, results as it provides a methodology on which to base further research on private, public and not-for-profit websites and particularly on how information and services delivered by web sites are linked to the governance.

The usefulness of this analysis is linked to the relevance of web as a primary channel for the diffusion, processing, search and storage of information about tourism.

The hypothesis, which has emerged from the research, may be linked to the "destination approach" of private tourism organisations that leads to the restriction of information and the specialisation of services. Websites in the public sector have other aims not directly linked to the need for profit

The research outlines as main limitations the restrict number of cities Ravenna and Rimini together with the limited composition of variables that measure the offer of information and services.

The further step of the research could be the comparison of these results with other Italian and foreign cities, the usage of other variables and the more analytical

identification of single private operators and their way of managing the web site as a tool of promotion and merchandising.

Moreover we have to consider the networking carried out by public and private organizations in managing web sites that could open new research perspectives particularly as it regards the effects of the structure and behaviour of stakeholders network on the promotion of tourism through the web and on its results.

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Appendix

List of analyzed Web Sites:

www.zoover.it; www.abcrimini.com; www.riccione.net; www.cattolica.net;

www.abcvacanze.it; www.misano.com; www.adria.net; www.lidoadriano.com;

www.minicity.it; www.hotelsinromagna.it; www.ravennablu.it; www.visitriccione.com;

www.guidahotel.com; www.info-alberghi.com; www.trivago.it; www.italiaabc.it;

www.milanomarittimalife.it; www.visititaly.it; www.turismo.comunecervia.it;

www.cervia.com; www.riviera.rimini.it; www.agriturismiebedandbreakfast.com;

www.hotelbenessere.it; www.rimini-it.it; www.misano.org; www.hotelriccione.travel;

www.emiliaromagnaturismo.it; www.ricercahotel.com; www.turismorimini.net;

www.entrainhotel.com; www.pesaroturismo.com; www.promozionealberghiera.it;

www.hotelrimini.biz; www.misanoturismo.com; www.cattolica.info;

www.prolocomarinaromea.it; www.lidoadriano.net; www.lidoadriano.it;

www.cerviaturismo.it; www.agendaonline.it; www.cattolicaturismo.com; www.visitcattolica.com; www.paesionline.it; www.turismo.eu; www.torrepedrera.org; www.riccione.it; www.rimini.com; www.comune.bellaria-igea-marina.it; www.marinadiravenna.org; www.turismorimini.it; www.misanoadriatico.rn.paginevacanze.it; www.lidiravenna.com; www.milanomarittima.com; www.riminiturismo.com; www.riminiturismo.it; www.cervia-turismo.com; www.hotel-cattolica.net; www.riminirimini.com; www.sangiulianomare.it www.iperhotel.com; www.romagnaturismo.com; www.adriacoast.com; www.turismo.sangiulianoterme.eu; www.turismohotel.com; www.hotelbellaria.net; www.rivieraromagna.it; www.bellaria-igea-marina.riccione.net/; www.turismoviaggivacanze.com; www.turismo.ravenna.it; www.invia.it; www.viserbella.info; www.emmeti.it; www.milano-marittima.tv; www.viserba.com; www.portocorsini.info; www.specialehotel.com; www.marinadiravenna.com; www.zerodelta.net; www.turismoriccione.com.

The selection has been realized considering the cities with more than 1000 inhabitants in Ravenna and Rimini provinces. The results derive from putting the name of the city with the word "turismo" in *google* and analyzing the links, appeared in the 1-2 pages, that stick to the used criteria.

The survey has been undertaken on October 2011 in collaboration with Jessica Guardigni, Forlì Faculty of Economics.

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