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Sent: 03 February 2016 15:19
To: Brechfa Connection
Subject: RE: Brechfa Forest Connection

In response to the request for research on tourism impact, I have put together a document with references to Welsh Government support material and two examples of advice and articles. I have also located other research papers and they are also attached.

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Impact of Social Networking Sites on Hospitality and Tourism Industries

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Keywords: *social networking sites, social media, hospitality industry, tourism industry.*

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Impact of Social Networking Sites on Hospitality and Tourism Industries

Dr. Rashad Yazdanifard ^α & Lim Tzen Yee ^σ

Abstract- This research paper investigates the impact of social networking sites on the hospitality and tourism industries. A social networking site is a type of social media that provides a platform for people to connect with each other. Social networking is so versatile that it can be used for both leisure and business purposes. In the hospitality and tourism industry, social networking sites are one of the essential tools that play an important and beneficial role. Content on social networking sites could affect the marketing in both positive and negative ways. The topic that will be discussed in this research paper are consumer behavior, connection with consumers, effectiveness in terms of time and cost, creating brand awareness and building the image of the company, promoting company, targeting consumers, and finally, the disadvantages.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The rise in popularity of social networking sites has led social networking to become a global phenomenon. After many countries gained Internet access, the increase in the use of Internet started influencing the economy and social life at the beginning of 20th century (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011). Later on, in the era of Web 2.0, as social networking advanced, an increasing number of users on the Internet began to participate in social networking websites and this has resulted in the system of social networking to change (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011; Seth, 2012). According to Clark and Robert (2010), social networking sites are now mainly used for "job networking, targeted marketing, and entertainment". (p. 507).

Social networking is a type of social media; social networking sites allow Internet users to connect with people and create information. Social networking sites are originally used for entertainment purposes however an increase in the use of Internet and information communication technologies has shifted the way people communicate with each other, mainly in the hospitality and tourism industries (Assenov & Khurana, 2012; Clark & Roberts, 2010). For instance, social networking sites like Facebook allow registered users to interact globally and freely with people who share the

same interest by uploading photos, sharing posts, chatting, commenting on the posts and also getting replies, such features allow companies to get quick feedback from consumers whereas consumers are able to receive responses immediately. These software and technology features which are available on social networking sites are also part of the Web 2.0 system (Seth, 2012). "Web 2.0 has also given popularity to user generated content (UGC) where information is gathered from different online sources all of which collaborate to form the final source" (Seth, 2012, p. 9). UGC has replaced traditional marketing in terms of media advertising. The advertisements are often sponsored posts promoted by people on social networking sites and these online advertisements appear to be more trustworthy than advertisements from mass media like televisions, radio, newspaper and magazines (Li & Darban, 2012). Manap and Adzharudin pointed out that consumers were more likely to be convinced to buy a product that is recommended by people who had experienced it (experience good) rather than a search good, the researchers also stated that it is possible to frequently utilize this strategy in the tourism industry. (2013)

The change in consumer behavior is majorly affected by the social networking sites which provide platforms for consumers to connect with the company and other consumers (Bilgihan, Peng & Kandampully, 2014). The explosive growth of the population of Internet user on social networking sites has had a huge impact on hospitality and tourism industry whereby consumers are changing the rule of marketing. In order for a company to be successful in business, it is necessary for marketers to make decisions based on consumer needs, changes in society and also the development of technology. By doing, it not only satisfies consumers but also strengthens the relationship with customers to ensure they make a comeback. In addition, social networking sites also help to record the information of consumers so that it is easy to be obtained whenever needed (Assenov & Khurana, 2012). In addition, social networking sites also provide social communication services which could create brand awareness and build a good image for the brand (Bilgihan, Peng & Kandampully, 2014).

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II. INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER BEHAVIORS

Photo and video sharing have become a norm in the 21st century (R'athonyi, 2013). People are connected with their friends and family through social media, specifically social networking sites. An individual is able to see what is happening around the world by sitting comfortably and with just a swipe on the screen or a click on the mouse. The tourism industry can take the golden opportunity that is social networking sites to attract consumer through photos and videos of breathtaking sceneries. According to Cem (n.d.) more than 20% of US Internet users, who are followers of a specific brand on social networks, follow a travel brand. The followers or visitors of the tourism websites are able to look at the review of their consumers when loyal consumers upload their photos of the hotels, restaurants and destinations on their own personal websites (such as Facebook) which directly link to the tourism's website. Besides that, online reviews – also known as word of mouth (WOM) are also a major factor to attract tourists (Manap & Adzharudin, 2013). As mentioned above, in the introduction, people trust WOM more than traditional marketing. Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012) reported that 82% of US customers who go online looked up online reviews from travel site for travel related decision-making. There are many consumers who see social networking sites as the most trusted source of information due to information provided by people they know or at least have a passing acquaintance with, and are especially going to trust the people that are amongst their relatives and friends. Besides, attracting or detracting an individual, online reviews also provide information to an individual so they can picture their destination (Manap & Adzharudin, 2013). Naturally, travelers often base their expectations on other travelers' experiences to get as much beneficial information as they can to avoid risk and also to boost up travelers' confidence while decide on their travelplans (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012). According to R'athonyi (2013) Trip Advisor is currently the largest travel review website, with 74 million of active users who check the website to get advice on planning their holidays. In addition, social networking sites can be accessed through smartphones, Bredican and Vigar-Ellis (2014) stated that the effectiveness of mobile apps influences more post-purchasing behaviors that is found in consumers.

III. CONNECT WITH THE CONSUMERS

Another tool that is provided by social networking sites is the communication tool. Hvass and Munar (2012) mentioned that the development of information communication technology (ICT) has improved consumer communication. Smart phones have also allowed consumers easier access to social

networking sites by using mobile applications (Dimitris & Vasiliki, n.d.). With an easier access to social networking sites through mobile apps, it has brought numerous benefits for the industry like building relationships, creating brand awareness and maintaining loyalty with consumers (Bredican & Vigar-Ellis, 2014). Communicating with the consumers helps to make a positive impression of the company and also to build trust and strengthen the relationship with new and loyal customers. Just having a conversation with consumers by using advertising words is not going to help, instead, the conversation has to be trustable so that consumers will be persuaded with those words and so be interested in the product and services of a brand (Dina & Sabou, 2012). The Internet is a virtual place where many consumers search for information for decision-making regarding tourism and hospitality through communication (Popescu, Iancu, Vasile & Popescu, 2013). Consumers are able to interact with other consumers to share their experiences and also express them selves which may attract new consumers and retain the loyal customers or drive away the other consumers. Besides that, gathering the comments written by consumers also helps to improve the company. Apart from this, consumer gets direct access service to the company without travelling for a face to face meeting (Seth, 2012). Seth also stated that social networking sites that appear to be “easily accessible, straightforward, and appealing” find it easier to get consumers to be involved. (2012)

IV. COST AND TIME EFFECTIVE

Many hotels are aware that social networking sites are important for them to gain popularity in order to create brand awareness (Assenov & Khurana, 2012). Hospitality and tourism industries that take part in social networking sites often have to stay active online in order to not miss out any posts. Therefore “hotels are working on investing more in social media in terms of personnel and time as currently for them it is not a very high investment” (Assenov & Khurana, 2012, p. 331). All these investments of time and money on social networking sites are considered inexpensive but allow for effective and efficient use as a marketing tool. Furthermore, social networking sites are convenient as they allow ease of access to customer replies. Besides that, using better communication technologies brings more efficiencies, teamwork and flexibility to suppliers of a company (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). The use of networking sites via mobile apps can also improve social networking strategy due to a faster access compared to mobile websites and it can be accessed off-line which is convenient (Bredican & Vigar-Ellis, 2014). Moreover, search engines have become another essential tool because there is too much information on the Internet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Accessing the

Internet does not take a very long time and searching on the Internet is fast and efficient, so people tend to rely on the Internet as the main source of information (Dina & Sabou, 2012).

V. CREATE BRAND AWARENESS AND BUILD IMAGE

An increasing number of hotels have participated in social networking sites, which has helped to build the image and to promote their hotels as the popularity rises. Convincing the consumers that their money is well spent on the hotel's deals will help to make a comeback to business as well as create brand awareness (Mahmoodet al, 2012). As mentioned, social networking sites can affect the industry in positive and negative ways. It does not matter if it is a small business or a franchise (Mahmoodet al, 2012). Once a company gets involved in social networking sites, the information is out there and there is no way to go back on it so every action has to be taken responsibly. Every reply to reviewers is important to maintain the brand image. More business in the hospitality industries are using social networking sites for their own benefits (Mahmoodet al, 2012). The responses to consumers are to be replied with morality in order to secure their image and brand regardless if the reviews are interpreted in a good or bad way (Mahmoodet al, 2012). Mahmood and others (2012) stated that "with the rapidly changing technology it is impossible for any hospitality operator to ignore the social media" (p. 2).

VI. PROMOTION

Social networking sites are becoming an important way of communication for promoting products (Indian Express, 2014). According to Zeng (2013) a good plan to promote marketing is by utilizing social media to sell tourism goods. Other than that, using social media can also help to announce the latest promotions. For example, a last minute promotion can be posted on social media when time is limited and there is no time to print out leaflets for distribution. Without printing those leaflets, costs are reduced as well. Since there are millions of users on Facebook, it would be a waste if there is no interaction between the consumers and the company. Assenov and Khurana (2012) suggest that it would be prudent to promote special offers that are only available for Facebook users who are a Facebook fan of their Facebook fan page. Such an event can help to promote their brands and retain loyal consumers. It would also be a good way to promote their merchandise on social networking sites.

VII. TARGETING THE CONSUMERS

A company can get to know more information about their consumers' needs and their behaviors. They

can also improve their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) through social networking sites. When a company understands what their consumer wants depending on their income, it is easier to target at their consumers and persuade them to buy their products and services. In order to understand consumers' behavior the main key is to understand their purchasing decision making in details (Twumasi & Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). Social networking sites have potential to spread the words therefore the sites make everything easier for the company to target their consumers and to reach their targeted consumers (Murray & Waller, 2007).

VIII. PROBLEMS

Social networking mostly depends on the general perception of word-of-mouth (WOM) or now called the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) which contents are generated by consumers online. WOM and eWOM share the same purpose that is to "provide information to other consumers", (Ranjha, 2010, p. 17) which will either promote or defame a brand but in eWOM, comments are posted from unknown online users whom reputations are lacking, so consumers who check the site do not trust the sources (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). Studies have shown that social media influences the tourism industry in both positive and negative way (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). In modern times, social networking sites have tremendous growth in user accounts therefore "the marketing trends have now changed and instead of firms communicating to their consumers now consumers can also communicate with other consumers using social media" (Assenov & Khurana, 2012, p. 3). A consumer may give a false statement that is negative by sharing a testimonial or recounting an experience or downloading content based on his or her personal impression towards the company, and others in the network may be affected by the opinion of the consumer (Seth, 2012).

IX. DISCUSSION

The information shared on social networking sites have definitely contributed a lot on influencing consumers' behaviors but there are some limitations throughout this investigation. For example, utilizing social networking sites effectively could also build desire of consumers towards learning more about their products and services to have a better understanding so that consumers would not fuss about searching for more information. On the contrary, consumers are expected to have a higher chance of getting convinced.

Targeting consumers through social networking sites does not necessarily have to base on their income and their behavior. When the market is focused on the income of the consumers, the company is actually limiting themselves to promote their products and

services from more consumers with either lower income or higher income than the targeted income of consumers. As well as observing the behavior of the consumers, it might not be the one affecting the sales or the market as there is a possibility of other sources or factors that may boost up the sales. The result from the observations of the consumers' behaviors may fall into a category which forms the characteristics of a social generation, but not the other generations, so the other people who lie under the other generations are neglected which might be the reason why the targeted consumers are narrowed.

Since people prefer experience goods than search good, company couldn't encourage loyal consumers to share their testimonials and experiences on the products and services with rewards. For example, offering special privilege to the followers on their websites. Consumers feel appreciated by the company as an individual to have the opportunity to share their satisfying experience. Moreover, it is a natural "habit" that many Internet users adapted which is having the eager to share their happiness online to other Internet users around the world. This strategy is beneficial for the company to retain loyal consumers, attract new consumers and create brand awareness.

However, such strategy does not apply to all the people around the world; there are individuals who do not fully trust eWOM as they perceive the Internet post as a scam and they might be at risk of being a victim of social media scams. On top of that, there are also bad reviews on the Internet discussed among other Internet users. The actions of posting negative information affect other consumers' confidence of trying the products and services.

X. CONCLUSION

Social networking sites strategy is getting popular in the hospitality and tourism industry. Many firms started to use social networking sites for the purpose of communication. In the case of the tourism industry, the communication among consumers has a huge impact on the way a consumer makes their destination decision. Social networking has also given the opportunity for the industries to connect with their consumers and employees in a quick and efficient way. The wide connection of social networking is a good way to spread information around the world, especially for business promotion and to build the image of a specific brand. On the other hand, it is convenient for a company to target their consumers by using the data given by the consumers who registered an account on the social networking site. Lastly, social networking sites allow everyone and anyone to write their opinions and post it online, which not only brings advantages to the company but also disadvantages because certain users might defame the brand through word of mouth.

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Sustainable tourism and Sense of place policies.

Tourism, when planned and managed in a sustainable way, can stimulate wider benefits for the community. Visitor spending on accommodation, food and drink, leisure activities and shopping will support tourism and non-tourism businesses through local supply chains that are an intricate web of formal and informal networks that bring benefits to small, indigenous businesses that are the lifeblood of vibrant communities. Tourism touches businesses that other economic sectors cannot reach. A strong tourism industry and visitor economy will support a more prosperous economy overall and will help to sustain existing and create new jobs.

Tourism is an experience product – the product cannot be taken home with you but the experience will be and it will be the least successful element of that experience that will often determine whether the visit was judged a success or failure and whether people return or recommend the destination to others. The surly waiter, the rude car park attendant, the dirty bathroom, the cold meal, visual impact of new developments – there are any number of ways that visitors can be disappointed at each and every stage of the visitor journey. A tourism product is what you buy – a tourism experience is what you remember.

A poor or mediocre experience in one aspect of the visit could have overspill implications for other businesses. So, there is an 'inter-dependence' in delivery of the visitor experience. Businesses do not only have to satisfy those who visit their product or service but are reliant on all other businesses to do likewise. One weak link could reduce the benefits of tourism for individual businesses and for the destination overall.

Welsh and local government support the tourism industry through supporting two aspects, destination management and the involvement of the community within the development of 'sense of place'.

Destination management,

Tourism has been defined as the, 'temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater for their needs.' Tourism includes visitors that stay overnight as well as day visitors. Destination Management is a process that seeks to coordinate all aspects of a destination that contribute to a visitor's experience, taking account the needs of visitors, local businesses, residents and the environment. Destination Management, while seeking to ensure a high quality visitor experience, is also a tried and tested means to maximise the benefits of tourism to the destination.

<https://businesswales.gov.wales/dmwales/destination-management>

Making a destination work effectively from a visitor's perspective is essential to destination management. For a destination to work it needs buy-in from all stakeholders involved, working in partnership to make sure there are no gaps or failures in the provision.

Some of the important pieces that make up the entire destination include:

- Car parking, toilets, leisure centers, parks and visitor information provided by local authorities
- Accommodation, activities and attractions provided by the tourism trade
- Cultural and countryside experiences provided by organisations like National Parks, Cadw, museums and galleries
- Interaction with the host community.

Knowing how all these fit together is key to achieving effective destination management.

Stakeholders and the community need to commit to strategic issues in servicing visitor needs. Using a tool such as the 'tourism value chain' which is invaluable in helping both businesses and organisations to visualise the complete visitor 'journey' can help achieve an effective destination.

What is sense of place?

Human response to natural and built surroundings, geography, history and population seeds sense of place. Over time, that response is woven into a shared consciousness by memory, story and experience ultimately imprinting community with an indelible and phenomenal spirit, unique to itself. Distinct from written history and quantifiable civic data, sense of place captures authentic identity which is sensed more than measured. To the inhabitants of its neighborhoods and streets, its green space and natural environs, this sense of place expresses the collective conviction of undeniable truth by which a community recognizes itself. As with a person, sense of place consists of both quantitative and qualitative features. A person may be six feet tall with blue eyes, a receding hairline, and a slight hitch in one leg when he walks up a flight of stairs. A place may have a population of three thousand, six miles of coastline, a Town Meeting form of government, and an aging pier in need of renovation. These features give us a physical description of a person or place but not the identity. Just as people are shaped by experiences and memories, so is place. Layered onto and absorbed into the physical fabric of place are intangibles, emotional and impressionistic elements generated by human interaction over time. These intangibles, hidden in plain sight, manifest as substantially in the community as do its physical attributes. Always particular and distinct, they define the authentic identity, they define sense of place. Human consciousness responds as powerfully to the identity of a place as it does to the identity of a person.

Why Is Sense of Place Important?

All around the world places are under threat, struggling with the survival and sustainability of their sense of place, their authenticity, and most of all their community. This threat comes from a lack of recognition of sense of place

<https://businesswales.gov.wales/dmwales/about-sense-of-place-2>

Welcome to your Sense of Place online resource

The components of a Sense of Place can be a thousand and one things. It's the sensation you get when visiting somewhere for the first time – the first impression, the look, the feel, the atmosphere, the people.

Sense of Place embraces the distinctive sights, sounds and experiences that are rooted in a country, those unique and memorable qualities that resonate with local people and visitors alike.

This area of the DM Wales site offers guidance, tools and a database of free articles relating to local and regional Sense of Place to help businesses and communities or destinations develop their own unique Sense of Place.

Since 2004, Visit Wales has been supporting tourism businesses and communities across Wales to develop their Sense of Place. From doing that work, we know that visitors to Wales really appreciate your efforts, but that your time is tied up with the matter of running your hospitality business.

To help you therefore, we've created this online resource where you can get help to develop your business' Sense of Place via a set of downloadable Sense of Place toolkits and an interactive map through which you can search our database for articles relating to the Sense of Place of your particular region.

These articles have been created specifically for Visit Wales and are copyright free to tourism businesses in Wales, which means you can download them and print them off, add them to your own business website or use them to generate interest in your business through social network campaigns and add some instant Sense of Place to your hospitality and promotional activity.

Googling research on the importance of social media, community engagement, and tourism produces pages of articles and research papers. The following two extracts are just two examples of the range of coverage of this issue.

<http://www.tourismandmore.com/tidbits/using-the-social-media-for-tourism/>

Using the Social Media for Tourism

December 2011

The major upheavals that took place across the Arab world this year are once again proof of the power of social media. The social media proved to be a major communication vehicle that spread across the region like wildfire. The social media have not only changed the face of politics but also have a major influence on the world of travel and tourism.

There can be little doubt that the explosion of social media impacts every form of business including the world of tourism. Social media such as facebook and myspace, provide instant ways to reach thousands or millions of people, twitter is a fast way to get a few words out, and social media, such as linkedin connect people interested in business relationships. Social media allows people to speak about great and not so great experiences, to become instant critiques and via youtube to even become instant stars. In the world of tourism there are two major uses of social media. Tourism's and travel's customers have created social media networks in which they share reviews of hotels, restaurants and/or attractions. These people often post stories about their experiences, both good and bad and as these websites become more prevalent they also impact not only a locale's reputation but also the way that we need to market and advertise. To a great extent this is word-of-mouth advertising taken to a new level.

Tourism entities, be they attractions, hotels, transportation systems, restaurants or communities may use social media as a personalized form of advertising. The use of the social media can help your tourism entity to enhance its buzz and create credibility at a low or no cost to the provider. The essential point to remember is that like tourism, social media exist to bring people together. To get some great (or better) results from your social media consider some of these ideas:

- Do not doubt the impact of the social media. The social media present a whole new world of instant communication. To a great extent the social media work in real time situations. That means that there they have no system of checks and balances; both truth and fiction, praise and libel can spread across the world almost instantaneously
- Be aware that the social media can be both an aid and a threat. Not only do good people use the social media, but now misinformation, and plans for criminal behaviour or, as seen in the Middle East, even revolution can be disseminated in mere seconds from one end of the globe to the other.

Tourism Social Media: Transformations in Identity, Community and Culture

By Ana María Munar, Szilvia Gyimóthy, Liping Cai

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=3TCKV1CUKAEC&lpg=PA94&ots=kfX1KcvE5u&dq=residents%20social%20media%20tourism&pg=PA99#v=onepage&q=residents%20social%20media%20tourism&f=false>

One argument that promotes social media is its ability to transform communication and expand access to decision making (Kietzmann et al., 2011) and particularly to democratize political communication (Tambini 1999) by mediating the interaction of civil society with decision makers (destination management organizations, industry, trade associations, etc). As democratic inclusion of all stakeholders in governance processes is an element of utmost importance for successful sustainable development (Duhlberg, 2001) it is pertinent to claim that by empowering individuals and local communities to become more assertive (Johnston & Tyrrell, 2005) social media create opportunities for the sustainable development of tourism. The claim relies on the assumption that if local communities get involved in policy making debates, they will be in a better position to expect a fair share in the allocation of local resources, benefits and responsibilities associated to sustainable tourism (Johnston & Tyrrell, 2005).

In contrast to the subtle attempts to involve people in tourism policy, marketing strategies of destinations are being visibly reshaped to take full advantage of new media applications. Without exception, all organizations reviewed had links to Facebook and Twitter accounts, and about half of them use blogs and links to accounts on LinkedIn, YouTube, Tuenti, Flickr, or Foursquare. Each type of platform uses different media formats ((photo, video, chat), but they are all used in an integrated way, complementing each other and functioning as virtual appetizers for the main marketing web site of the destination. Taking advantage of the high importance that people give to

feedback from peers (the third most trusted source after family and friends), destinations stimulate the sharing of testimonials (Conrad Advertising, 2001) and nearly one third of organizations examined include photo, audio and video testimonies in the marketing materials, with one calling for blogger contributions with personal stories.

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Sometimes (interventions potentially relevant to sustainable development of tourism) gather sufficient critical mass to make a difference in tourism policy, as shown by a recent Twitter campaign promoting the Maldives in July 2012. This effort backfired with a splash of public protests that revealed the hypocrisy of the campaign, mentioning the social realities of the country, human rights violations, corruption, and social unrest. Touching a nerve with "ordinary citizens," the campaign received harsh replies from around the world, accompanied by disturbing stories and audio-visual material, displaying a reflexive and inquisitive character of online debates that challenges values and initiates shifts in attitudes (Travel Mole, 2012a).

The effects of online social media on tourism websites

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Abstract

Web 2.0 and online social networking websites heavily affect today most of the online activities and their effect on tourism is obviously rather important. This paper aims at verifying the impact that online social networks (OSN) have on the popularity of tourism websites. Two OSNs have been considered: Facebook and Twitter. The pattern of visits to a sample of Italian tourism websites was analysed and the relationship between the total visits and those having the OSNs as referrals were measured. The analysis shows a clear correlation and confirms the starting hypothesis. Consequences and implications of these outcomes are discussed.

Keywords: Web 2.0, Travel 2.0, online social networks, tourism websites, Facebook, Twitter.

1 Introduction

At the close of the 20th century – roughly between 1997 and 2000 – a set of hardware and software technologies collectively known as the Internet had an enormous diffusion and radically changed most of our economic and social life. In the last few years a further “revolution” has impacted the way we communicate, work and conduct business. The buzzword for this is Web 2.0.

Not really a technological advancement, since it relies on well developed and known tools, Web 2.0 rather identifies the changes occurred in the ways software developers and people make and use the Web. The applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, collaboration and formation of virtual communities form today a large part of cybernauts' daily activities and may be seen as a natural development of the original Berners-Lee's idea of "*a collaborative medium, a place where we all [could] meet and read and write*" (quoted in Richardson, 2006: 1).

Obviously, as it happened for the first Internet revolution, Web 2.0 could not remain unnoticed in activities genetically bound to the human species such as travel. The impact of Web 2.0 on tourism has been (and is) quite important as numerous publications, scholarly and not, continue to state.

Most of the analyses conducted so far assess the behaviour, the usage and the effects Travel 2.0 (the touristic version of Web 2.0) has as an important set of tools in the hands of a tourist and how it affects the image and the business of destinations, companies and organisations. Moreover, the adoption of such tools is considered to be quite important for improving the status of tourism websites. This generates the hypothesis that the role of OSNs in rising the number of visitors to referenced websites is significant.

Aim of this paper is to verify this impact. Two OSNs have been considered: Facebook and Twitter. The pattern of visits to a sample of Italian tourism websites has been analysed and the relationship between the total visits and those having the two OSNs as referrals have been measured.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly surveys the role of Travel 2.0 and OSNs. Section 3 describes the methods used. Results and discussion are reported in sections 4 and 5. Some concluding remarks close the paper.

2 Background

The environment called Web 2.0 (or Travel 2.0) is today too well known to be further described here (would it be needed, the paper by Constantinides & Fountain, 2008, is a good summary of the main issues on Web 2.0). A few considerations, however, are in order for better understanding the general framework in which this work has been conducted.

Tourism has long been the one of most important components of the online commerce world, whose impact has profoundly changed the structure of the industry. Online travel has anticipated ever since (and partly continues to do so) the development of new market dynamics and consumer behaviours. (Werthner & Klein, 1999; Werthner & Ricci, 2004).

With the introduction and the diffusion of the interactive Web 2.0 features and applications, tourism markets have become real conversations on one of the most thrilling subject for a human being. This happens in particular with OSNs which seem to have rapidly attracted a considerable attention by Internet users of all ages. They are, almost unanimously, recognised as the busiest environments, and this is valid especially for Facebook which has become in few years by way the largest (in number

of users) and the most widespread (in geographical terms) online social network in the World (Fig. 1 after Cosenza, 2010).

As stated ten years ago by the Cluetrain Manifesto (Locke et al., 2000: xxiii): “*people in networked markets have figured out that they get far better information and support from one another than from vendors.*” In the Web 2.0 era, the boundaries between information producers and users is blurred, and the usual concepts of authority and control are radically changed. Among the other consequences, marketing approaches aiming at improving online reputation are being greatly affected. Brand awareness, one of the objectives of classical marketing practices transforms into brand engagement, purpose of Marketing 2.0. This engagement is created by the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of those with whom the different companies and organisations are communicating. More importantly, especially for tourism, it passes necessarily through the experience (direct or indirect) a customer gains (Weinberger, 2007).

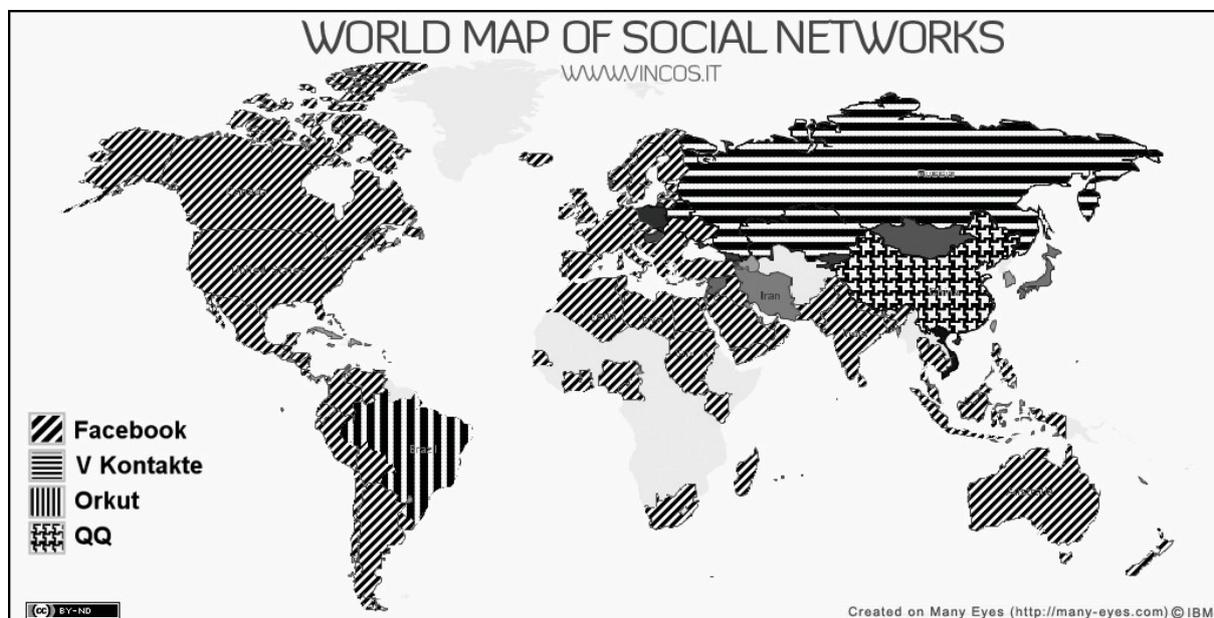


Fig. 1. The World Map of OSNs (adapted from Cosenza, 2010 for better black and white readability). Apart from a few areas (part of Latin America, Russia, China and some others), Facebook shows to be the most widespread OSN.

Contents generated by users (UGCs) have an acknowledged importance in all fields, and in tourism in particular (Akehurst, 2009). Their positive effects have recognised repercussions on quantifiable phenomena such as e-commerce, but also on intangible matters such as those related to the image or the informational side of specific products or services (termed sometimes info-commerce). Already in 2007, the annual Country Brand Index (CBI) measuring attractiveness of countries in several areas, stated that the Web had the highest importance (67%) as channel to collect information about a tourism destination (CBI, 2007). On the other hand, the continuing growth of UGCs' influence, due to their wideness and deepness, makes them perceived as even more reliable than official sources for a tourist. According to PhoCusWright (2009) nine out of ten cybertravellers read (and trust) online reviews

on tourism products and services (hotels, restaurants and destinations). Three phases are influential in this travel experience formation process (Milano, 2010):

- pre-experience, built on other people’s travel stories, before travelling;
- experience during travel or stay, today increasingly shared real-time through mobile applications;
- post-experience, which disseminates comments, evaluations, emotions.

These issues form the foundations on which specialised Travel 2.0 tourism websites (TripAdvisor, WAYN, Tripwolf, Travelblog, Trivago etc.) have built their success. Today, however, we see a new phenomenon that can be interpreted as starting a new trend, especially in some countries: generic OSNs (Facebook first and Twitter) are being progressively more used in travel and tourism.

Italy is surely one of these countries, being at the first places in the World with regard to diffusion and usage of OSNs, Facebook in particular. According to Facebakers (<http://www.facebakers.com/>) there are (as per the month of August, 2010) almost 17 million Italian Facebook users, 56% of the online population, which put Italy at the sixth place in country rankings. Italians seem to like much conversing and debating their travel experiences, tastes, perceptions and attitudes. Recent research reports travels as the second most discussed topic on Italian OSNs (Fabris, 2010), and a Google Insights for Search query shows an incredible growth of Facebook searches in Italy with respect to other technologically developed countries such as USA, UK, France or Germany (see Fig. 2).

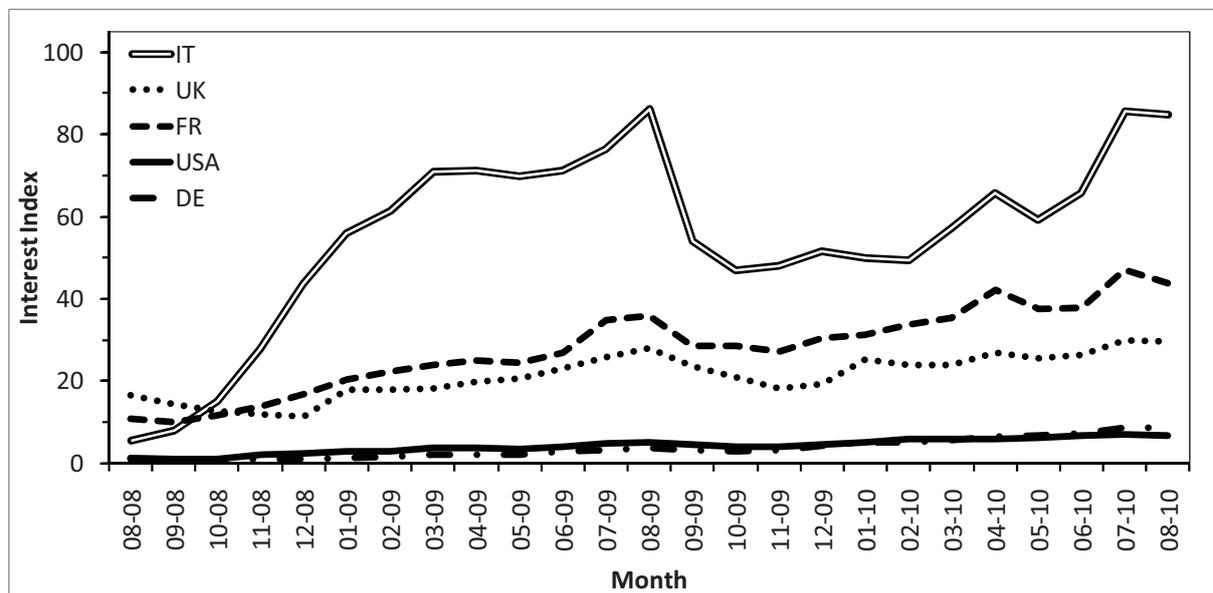


Fig. 2. Growth of interest in Facebook for travel in different countries (source: <http://www.google.com/insights/search/#cat=67&geo=&q=facebook&cmpt=geo>)

The phenomenon is a social convergence trend: specialised travel websites increase their sociality by adopting applications which enable real-time sharing of contents among the visitors, while giants such as Facebook try to occupy vertical markets through dedicated services or acquisitions of specialised companies as the social

travel recommendation site Nextstop (see: <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2010/07/08/facebook-acquires-social-travel-startup-nextstop/>).

There are little doubts that the importance of Travel 2.0 features and tools, and specifically of social media environments, is growing fast. Many tourism businesses are, in one way or another, changing their approach to the manners of presenting themselves online (Au, 2010; Jones & Yu, 2010; Schegg et al., 2008). However, most of the studies have assessed so far mainly the social and psychological effects, and have well confirmed the role played as sources of information and areas in which discussing various issues related to travels or stays (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Inversini & Buhalis, 2009; Kasavana et al., 2010; Parra-Lopez et al., 2010; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Some works have also discussed the effects of these tools on the image and the popularity of destinations or other tourism operators, mainly in the hospitality sector, in which the direct contact, real or virtual, with the customer and their crucial role for the good health of the companies (Burgess et al., 2009; Inversini et al., 2009; Matloka & Buhalis, 2010; Sigala, 2010).

The general conclusion to-date in this field is that, beside the repeated statements on importance and role, tourism operators have not yet fully understood the new technological world by and still many concerns are brought forward. Credibility of the information online, possibility to forge for particular interests by unscrupulous competitors, privacy, overload of useless information, in addition to the usual (in the technology arena) lack of resources or skill shortage are the most reported issues (see all the literature cited so far).

These positions, however create a tension between demand (tourists, travellers, visitors) and supply (tourism businesses and organisations). As well reported by Xiang and Gretzel (2010: 186):

“social media Websites are “ubiquitous” in online travel information search in that they occur everywhere [...] no matter what search keywords a traveler uses. Certain social media Websites [...], which can be considered more comprehensive and travel-specific sites, are becoming increasingly popular and are likely to evolve into primary online travel information sources. [...]. The results confirm that tourism marketers can no longer ignore the role of social media in distributing travel-related information without risking to become irrelevant.”

The rest of this paper gives further quantitative support to this stated importance of the role played by OSNs by directly assessing their effects and influence on tourism website visits. This is a topic which has not been discussed in the literature so far, but has an important value in trying to establish the real role of OSNs in supporting the efforts of tourism operators to attract visitors to their websites and influence their attitudes and memories.

3 Materials and methods

The data analysed in this work were provided by Shiny through their Shinystat service (<http://www.shinystat.com/>), an online platform specialised in Internet audience analysis and website statistics. The company is well known mainly in Italy, its

country of origin and well diffused. More than 275,000 Italian websites use it. Cumulative data were collected concerning the visits to 19,902 websites in the categories: Travel and tourism and hospitality and restaurants. The timeframe spans a little more than two years (26 observations from August 2008 to August 2010 included). To all extent the sample can be considered quite significant, even if a single source of data was used. The data collected consisted of the series of total visits to Italian websites (TOT) and the contributions to these visits having Facebook (FB) and Twitter (TW) as referrals.

Shinystat uses a 30 minutes time window to define a visit; that is: all connections to a website coming from the same IP address in a 30 min period are considered as a single visit. This follows the proposals of the Web Analytics Association (WAA, 2008). Although not particularly meaningful per se, for the arbitrariness in the definition, when measured consistently over a period of time, visits are a good indicator of the behaviour of website with respect to its popularity (Dhyani et al., 2002; Polanco, 2003).

The global series (TOT) is an example of pooled (or cross-sectional) series (Sayers, 1989): a series consisting of the linear composition of a number of different contributions. In order to assess the significance of these contributions to the global series a multiple linear regression can be used. This technique is well known and has been widely used in many other studies (Beck, 2008). In addition to the usual requirements of a regression analysis, the critical point in our case is to make sure that the independent variables do not suffer from multicollinearity (i.e. predictor variables are not highly correlated with each other) which may hinder the estimation of the effects of individual predictors.

The significance of the contributions due to FB and TW as referrals were assessed with a multiple regression where the time period is the dependent variable and the FB and TW contributions are the predictors. Tests for multicollinearity and normality of residuals were performed. The time series was also examined by using a standard simple decomposition method (Chatfield, 1996) to derive its main characteristics, seasonality in particular. All analyses have been carried out with SPSS version 17 (SPSS, 2008).

4 Results

The time series for total visits to Italian tourism websites (TOT) and the FB component are shown in Fig. 3. It must be noticed that, for space limitations, the figure uses two scale axes (the right one is for the visits from FB) in order to better show the series' behaviour (measurement scales differ of almost two orders of magnitude, for the same reason TW is omitted due to its very low values).

The maximum values for the contributions of FB and TW visits are recorded in the month of August 2010: FB = 0.329%; TW = 0.002%. When examining the series transformed into an index with the starting observation taken as base, TOT gets to 120 at the end of the period examined, while FB reaches 9438 and TW achieves 2280. The multiple regression uses the following model (Time is the time period number):

$$\text{TOT} = \beta_1 \text{Time} + \beta_2 \text{FB} + \beta_3 \text{TW} + \text{Constant} + \varepsilon.$$

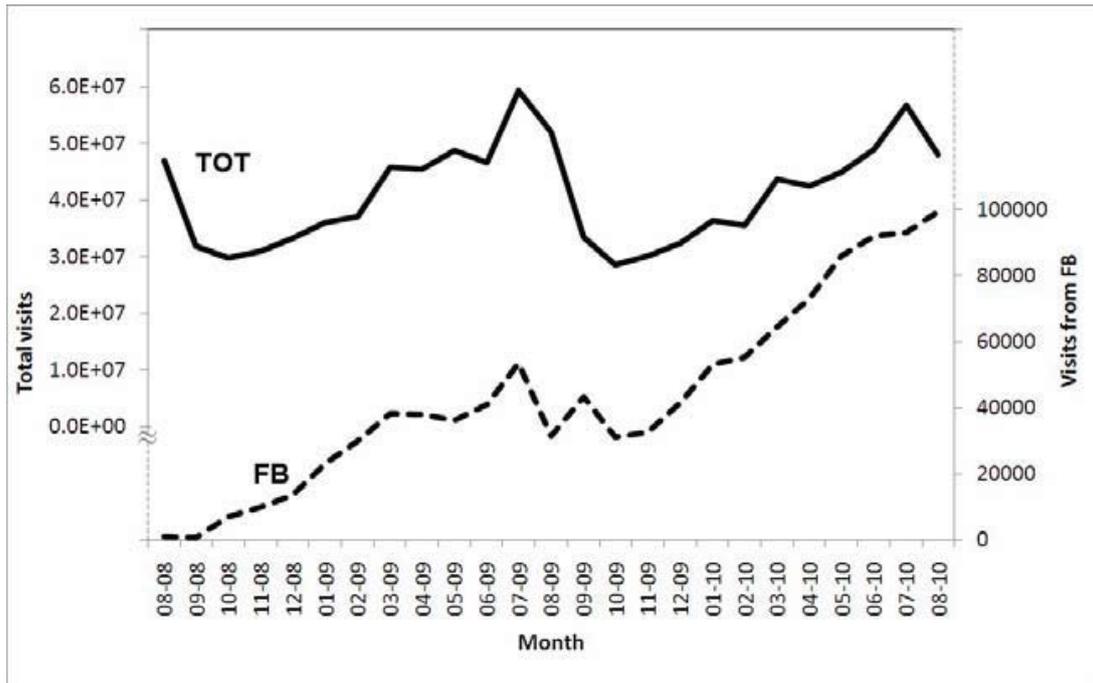


Fig. 3. Total visits to Italian tourism websites (TOT) and contribution to the visits from Facebook (FB). TW contributions are not reported for their very low values

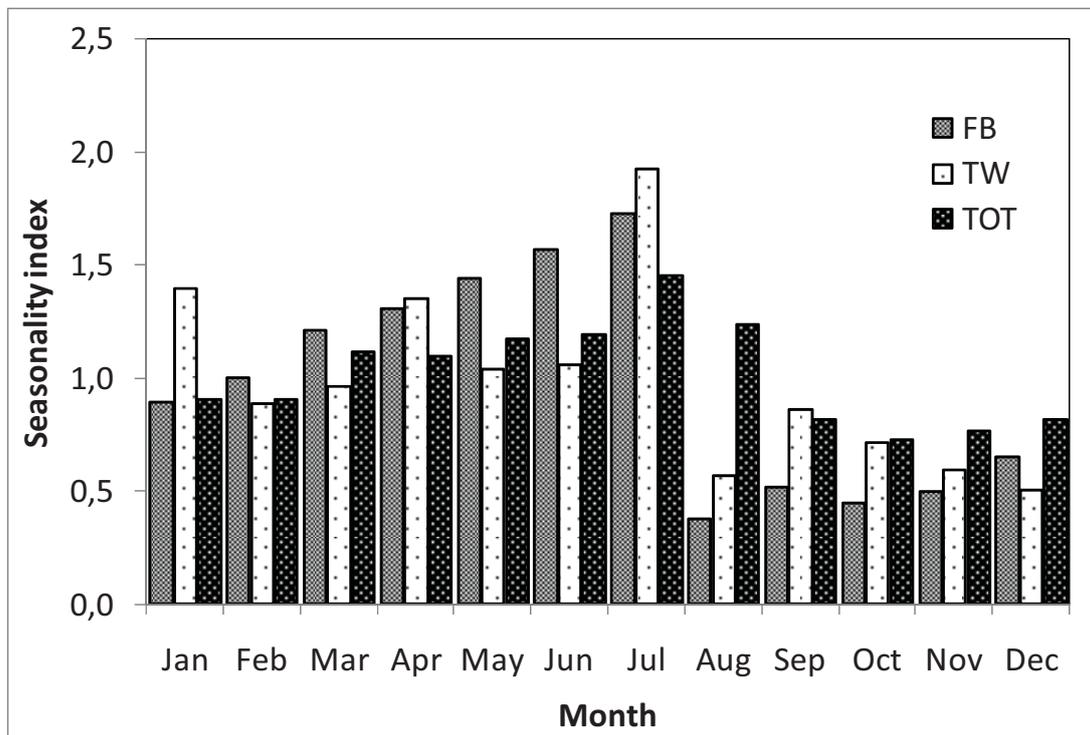


Fig. 4. Seasonality indices of the visits to websites for total visits (TOT) and Facebook (FB) and Twitter (TW) contributions

All the series show a marked seasonality (Fig. 4) with a peak in the summer months. This is typical of the Italian vacation patterns.

Table 1. Results of the multiple regression analysis

Predictor	Coefficients		t	p-value	Condition Index
	β	Std. Error			
(Constant)	3.827E7	2.767E6	13.83	.000	1.000
Time	-1.868E6	5.947E5	-3.14	.005	4.143
FB	538.2	129.7	4.15	.000	8.155
TW	11143.6	12044.1	.93	.365	15.809

The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 1. The predictor coefficients are reported along with their standard errors and statistical significance (indicated by a *t* statistic and its associated p-value). The last column contains the condition index for which gauges the presence and the extent of multicollinearity (as known when its value is higher than 15 multicollinearity is a concern, when higher than 30 multicollinearity is a serious problem).

The coefficient of determination is $R^2 = 0.523$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.455$) which can be considered providing a good fit. Residuals are normally distributed, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test produces $Z = 0.833$ which has a (asymptotic) p-value = 0.492 (the K-S test has a null hypothesis of normality). The multicollinearity diagnostic does not show significant problems. The only slight effect found is for the TW component which has a condition index = 15.809, indicating a limited problem which can be ignored (see Friendly & Kwan, 2009).

5 Discussion

The results of the analysis lead to a number of interesting considerations. First of all the contribution of the two social media websites examined are of a low level. A higher proportion would have been expected, but this result is in agreement with other investigations, conducted on different bases, that show a limited usage of all Web 2.0 functionalities by tourism websites practically in every country (see for example Hamill et al., 2009; Schegg et al., 2008).

Little research has been conducted on this issue for what concerns Italy and, besides some popular press articles, no reliable data exist on how much OSNs are employed by the Italian tourism industry. In general, however, operators have seldom shown in the past highly favourable attitudes towards ICTs and, still today, make poor usage of them (Antonioli Corigliano & Baggio, 2004; Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). Hence the advanced Web 2.0 features, OSNs in particular in this case, have a limited diffusion, at least at the present time.

Despite that, the growth of the FB and TW components is quite remarkable (some thousand times), mainly if we compare with the limited increase in total visits (a little more than one). This is an expected outcome and is in agreement with the many publications, scholarly and not, stating the quick growth in the usage of these virtual

social environments. Also the seasonality effect is an expected result. The growth in usage in the first part of the year, peaking in July, is a clear indication of the role FB and TW play as important and reputed sources for travellers and tourists planning their summer travels, the most intense vacation period in Italy. This is in good agreement with other studies on the role of online social networks as information sources (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Inversini & Buhalis, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The regression analysis shows the positive importance and the significance of the FB contributions to the total number of visits to a tourism website. It must be noted here that no information has been analysed in this work regarding the ownership of these Facebook resources (a study on this topic is ongoing). Very probably these contributions come from pages not directly connected with the websites, a further confirmation of the weight and the value of online social environments for the popularity and the success of tourist operators.

The usual disclaimers apply when it come to the limitations of this work. A single country has been considered, Italy, and a peculiar one for its very large proportion of Facebook-dependent online population. More studies will have the task of falsifying the outcomes presented here or adding further confirmations to the effects described.

The results presented here have an obvious importance for practitioners. From an academic point of view this work clarifies, for the first time, the role and the influence of OSNs on the popularity and traffic of tourism operators websites. In addition, it provides simple and effective methodological indications for gauging the significance of different contributions to a temporal phenomenon such as the one discussed here.

One final consideration is in order. The mere fact that there are many visits to a website does not necessarily imply a good image of the website owner. Many bad realisations exist and, for example, they are used sometimes to show how not to present an organisation online. In cases like these the websites may be visited by many. As already widely known, only good projects, well designed and carefully implemented, have a positive effect on the health of the actors presenting them online (Baggio, 2005; Bai et al., 2008; Jeong et al., 2003; Lee & Kozar, 2006). This good consideration of the brand, then, produces a more favourable acceptance of the website which, in turn, reinforces the brand image, creating a virtuous cycle of appreciation (Perdue, 2002). Also, many studies argue that a solid, rich and appreciated website is a necessary foundation for the design of an effective and worthy online social media strategy (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Miller et al., 2009; Murray, 2009). In this preliminary analysis these aspects have been neglected, the only aim has been to show the effects an OSN may have. Further investigations, already ongoing, will take care of these issues.

6 Concluding remarks

The main objective of this work was to show the effects of Web 2.0 features, and in particular of online social networks, on the popularity of tourism websites. The survey, conducted on data collected on a significant sample of Italian websites confirms this hypothesis. At the same time the outcomes also confirm the low presence of these features on the sites examined.

Lack of resources, poor technical competence and sluggish management are usually claimed to explain the modest adoption of any type of information technology by tourism enterprises, for the most part very small. To these, in the case of social media, it would be possible to add also a certain level of suspicion, distrust and reluctance to share information, comments or suggestions with others.

However, the demonstrated (not only by this work) impact of modern ICTs and Web 2.0 poses a big challenge to any business or organisation (private or public) working in today's tourism arena. The tourist (traveller, visitor etc.) makes extensive use of these technologies and shows to appreciate quite much the possibilities offered by the Internet today. Difficult (if not impossible) to demonstrate scientifically, most of the declining performance of the Italian tourism in the last years might find a strong component in this poor employment of modern technologies.

Small and medium tourism enterprises are thus urged to rapidly move to a more favourable technological stance. Most, if not all, the adoption issues commonly quoted may find a solution in a firm increase in collaborative and cooperative attitudes which, as long shown, may overcome the weaknesses and deficiencies of single organisations.

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