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Barriers and Facilitators in the Maturity Process for Web Promotion of Italian Tourist Destinations

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the tourism domain, the opportunities offered by the web to promote tourist destinations seem to be not yet fully exploited by destination marketing organizations. This study seeks to extend the eTourism Communication Maturity Model (eTcoMM), which is based on stage models of online communication in tourism. The model focuses on identifying processes involved in tourism web marketing activities, from awareness by tourism boards to implementation. The study aims to contribute to the definition of maturity in online promotion by Italian tourism boards, identifying and discussing factors that aid and limit the transition, from awareness to implementation of strategic web marketing.

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Keywords: eTourism, Maturity, Destination Marketing Organizations, Adoption, Web Marketing, Online Communication and Promotion

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Introduction

Many changes in the tourism industry in recent years are due mainly to increasing adoption of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), which have increased the visibility of destinations by changing and increasing the number of media through which those destinations transmit their image (Hannam, 2004). Although use of the web and Web 2.0 tools have become fundamental to promoting a destination, some studies have shown that tourism destinations have not incorporated these fundamentals fully into their strategic activities (Milwood et al., 2013; Gretzel et al., 2006; Yuan et al., 2003; Palmer & McCole, 2000).

These changes have placed tourism supply and demand at odds: If, on one hand, tourists enthusiastically use online research to meet their needs, on the other hand, tourist destinations and individual operators do not seem fully prepared to take advantage of the web's opportunities, limiting the abilities of "post-modern tourists" (Urry, 1995; Antonioli, Corigliano & Baggio, 2011).

Using this disparity as a starting point, this study aims to investigate and implement the eTourism Communication Maturity Model (eTcoMM) (Marchiori et al., 2012), which is based on stages in the field of online communication and which focuses on identifying the processes involved in tourism web marketing activities, from awareness to implementation.

In spring 2013, an online questionnaire was sent to 318 Italian tourism organizations, national, regional, provincial, and local. One hundred eleven surveys were collected, 34 of which were complete, for a response rate of slightly more than 10%. This study presents survey results on the stage of maturity of web marketing activities carried out by Italian tourist destinations. In addition, the study focuses on barriers and aids to effective implementation of web marketing, and discusses practical steps to improve web marketing.

1. Barriers and facilitators to adopting web marketing activities

Despite the growing importance of online communication in promoting a destination, tourism operators increasingly face two difficulties: lack of economic resources and lack of competent, skilled human resources (Milwood et al., 2013; Gretzel et al., 2006; Yuan et al., 2003; Palmer & McCole, 2000).

In response to these problems, eTcoMM (Marchiori et al., 2012) was developed to gauge adoption of new technologies by the tourism industry (Zach et al., 2010). eTcoMM introduced the concept of "maturity" of a destination, meaning awareness of the utility of web marketing and its development and strategic implementation. The model allows a tourist destination to map its maturity by answering a questionnaire.

eTcoMM aims to identify, from conceptual and empirical viewpoints, positive and negative factors that can influence progress of a tourist destination's web marketing activities.

These elements, identified as "barriers" and "facilitators," are defined in Rao's (2003) study, which investigated elements that facilitated and inhibited development of e-commerce in small and medium-sized enterprises. A facilitator is an element that has a positive effect on business capabilities of an organization, and a barrier is an obstacle or an element that has a negative effect. The more control the organization has over a certain factor, the more that factor is considered a facilitator, since the company can manage it easily. If a factor is beyond the company's control, it is generally classified as a barrier (Rao, 2003).

Tourism sector studies have paid more attention to identifying barriers for small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, rather than facilitators. The most-cited barriers are lack of time and human resources (Werthner & Klein, 1999) and not having adequate financial resources to invest in new technologies (Sigala et al., 2001). Studies of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have identified negative factors, such as lack of time to learn, especially considering constant changes in communication technology; and the financial resources needed to implement new communication technology (Lee & Wicks, 2010). Positive effects include the perception of participating in shaping the image of the destination and its tourism (Govers & Go, 2009).

In identifying barriers and facilitators, this study followed a recent study (Adukaite et al., 2013). The current study's survey, which was based on qualitative interviews with tour operators who had participated in training, sought to identify factors most pertinent to tourism organizations implementing web marketing.

The study identified ten barriers: no interest/no needs; distrust of online communication; lack of financial resources; lack of human resources; lack of skilled human resources; lack of time; not suitable for our business; activities already implemented; bureaucratic issues; and decision making processes.

The study identified several facilitators: career incentives; benefits for company/organization; benefits for the destination's image; more financial resources; more human resources; comparison with competitors; keeping updated/informed; consultations with experts; obligations by superiors; and because it's the main activity of the work position.

2. Italian tourist destinations and the survey

This research aims to contribute to the definition of maturity in online promotion of Italian tourist destinations by identifying specific factors that may inhibit (Rao et al., 2003) or support the transition from awareness to strategic implementation of web

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marketing activities. Research was divided into the following phases: deepening the theoretical model and identifying barriers and facilitators in the literature; creating the questionnaire and a database of Italian tourist destinations; sending out the survey; and monitoring and sending reminders.

Data analysis was conducted with SPSS software. Each survey participant received a free report, with the aim of providing useful information to the tourism boards that had cooperated with the study.

As previously mentioned, a database of Italian tourist destinations was essential. The most common sources of information on Italian tourism are DMOs. These are generally nonprofit organizations responsible for promoting a certain area by developing a unified image, coordinating activities of public and private actors, and managing information on the area, with the goal of increasing the number of visitors (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002; Gretzel et al., 2006).

In Italy, DMOs seem to be more fragmented than those in other European states in relation to the laws that govern them. The 2001 Italian tourism law, L. 29 March 2001 No. 135, which repealed and replaced the previous law, L. 17 May 1983 No. 217, addresses the issue of competitor state-regions, establishing a series of general principles and instruments for coordination that must then refer for specific regulation to the individual regions. However, a few months after the 2001 law took force, it clashed with new elements of federalism introduced in the Italian Constitution through the reform of Title V, Article. 117. This new law does not include the tourism and hospitality industries as subject for of exclusive state legislation, neither between those concurrent legislation state-regions.

In light of this change, regions may enact their own laws on tourism, resulting in substantial differences in allocation of resources and identification of institutions to deal with tourism promotion. For example, there are regional boards (Basilicata, Toscana, & Calabria), local tourist systems (Lombardia & Marche), tourist districts (Sicilia), autonomous companies (Campania), and product unions (Emilia Romagna). All differ not only in name, but also in organizational structure and activities (Fabi, 2013).

These variations, combined with the absence of a national database, resulted in the need to contact every single regional board and verify which DMO is responsible for promotion of its territory. By January 2013, the list included 318 organizations: 2 national, 57 regional, 121 provincial, and 138 local. The study also had the opportunity to expand the survey to the Pro loco, which play an important role in promotion of territories and organization of information services, but this was not possible for privacy reasons: Very often, these organizations use volunteers rather than professionals in pro-tempore representative roles or as presidents of the associations.

The research was conducted in spring 2013 by means of an online survey that involved 318 Italian tourist destinations with various levels of territorial jurisdiction. Tourist destinations were invited via e-mail to complete the questionnaire through LimeSurvey. The questionnaire was divided into four main sections. The first asked for general information on the organization and its cooperation with other agencies and organizations. The second asked questions to determine each destination's stage in the model (Marchiori et al., 2012) regarding the following web marketing activities: website's usability; online promotion via search engines; usage analysis; mobile application and/or a version of the website for smart phones and tablets; online conversation analysis; and social media activities. For each activity, the destination was asked to declare a level of implementation. The third part of the questionnaire was aimed at evaluating the success of web marketing activities. The fourth part addressed barriers and facilitators that might limit or support implementation of strategic web marketing.

3. Results

Characteristics of the sample

As Table 1 shows, from the 318 Italian tourism boards invited to participate in the online survey, 111 responses were collected, 34 of which were complete, for a response rate of slightly more than 10%. Regional tourism organizations account for the largest percentage of responses (31.3%), followed by provincial tourism organizations (28.1%) and local tourism organizations, including local promotional agencies (15.6%) and offices for tourism promotion (9.4%). The majority of participants responded that web marketing activities are part of the responsibilities of their marketing department. However, 23.5% of respondents said they had no resources dedicated to web marketing. Regarding budget devoted to web marketing, 37.9% indicated that they had less than 1,000 € as an annual web marketing budget, 24.3% did not have a dedicated budget, and about 20% had budgets between 1,000 € and 10,000 € per year.

Table 1: Characteristics of Sample

Type of organization	%	Area rapresented	%
Region - Department of	31,3	Province	38,2
Tourism	28,1	Region	32,4
Province - Department of	15,6	Multiple cities	20,6
Tourism	9,4	City	5,9
Local Promotional Agency	6,3	Multiple Province	2,9
Office for Tourism Promotion	3,1		
Local Tourist office	3,1		
National tourism organization	3,1		
Regional tourism organization			

Consortium				
Total	**100,0**	**Total**		**100,0**
Approach to web marketing	**%**	**Annual Web Marketing Budget**		**%**
Il web marketing è una delle	50,0	1000 € or less		37.9
attività del nostro		1.001 € - 2.500 €		10.3
dipartimento marketing	23,5	2.501 € - 5.000 €		3.4
Non abbiamo risorse dedicate	17,6	5.001 € - 10.000 €		6.9
Lavoriamo con agenzie (web)		20.001 € - 30.000 €		6.9
esterne	8,8	150.001 € - 200.000 €		3.4
Abbiamo un dipartimento		200.001 € or more		6.9
web marketing dedicato		No budget		24.3
Total	**100,0**	**Total**		**100,0**

Implementation of web marketing activities by Italian DMOs

Table 2 presents web marketing implementation levels. The most common web marketing activity is usage analysis of their website (76.7%). The least common activity is social media: More than 40% of respondents said they did not conduct activities related to participation of or interaction with users. Interestingly, paid activities, such as positioning on search engines, are not common among tourism organizations (26.7%). However, there is an increase in adoption of mobile applications (44.1%).

Table 2: Implementation of web marketing activities by Italian DMOs

Web marketing activities	Absolutely no (%)	Mostly no (%)	Mostly yes (%)	Absolutely yes (%)	Total (%)
Usability analysis	-	16,7	36,7	46,7	100,0
Promotion via search engines	36,7	20,0	16,7	26,7	100,0
Links exchange	6,7	23,3	23,3	46,7	100,0
Usages analysis	3,3	6,7	13,3	76,7	100,0
Social media monitoring	29,4	23,5	11,8	35,3	100,0
Social media participation	41,2	8,8	8,8	41,2	100,0
Mobile app	32,4	11,8	11,8	44,1	100,0

Barriers and Facilitators to implement web marketing activities

Regarding barriers to web marketing activities, Figure 1 shows that the most common is lack of economic resources, followed by bureaucracy, lack of human resources, and lack of technical skills. Other barriers emerging from the survey mostly are related to the administrative sphere of web management.

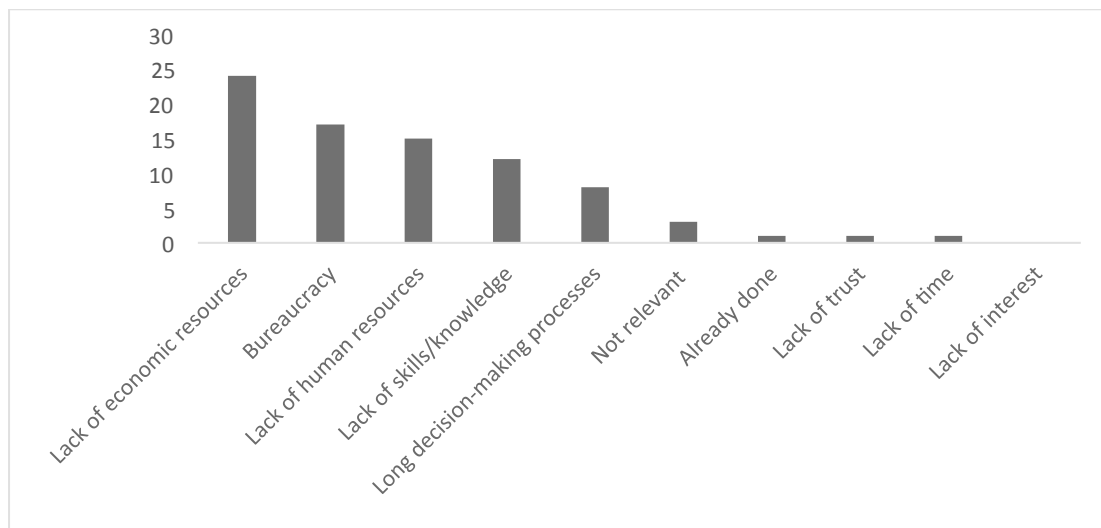**Figure 1:** Barriers to implement web marketing activities

Figure 2 shows the factors favoring web marketing activities by tourism organizations. The most important are awareness by tourism organizations that their web marketing efforts can benefit the area economically, followed by the presence of employees trained to do web marketing and comparison with industry experts. The role of education in raising awareness of web opportunities and, consequently, in adoption of web marketing, has been underlined. Other facilitators that emerged from the study are: knowledge of best practices on web marketing; active, conscious participation of various tourism actors in web marketing activities; recognition of the strategic importance of the tourism sector for a territory; and the destination's e-commerce solutions for tourism-related products and services.

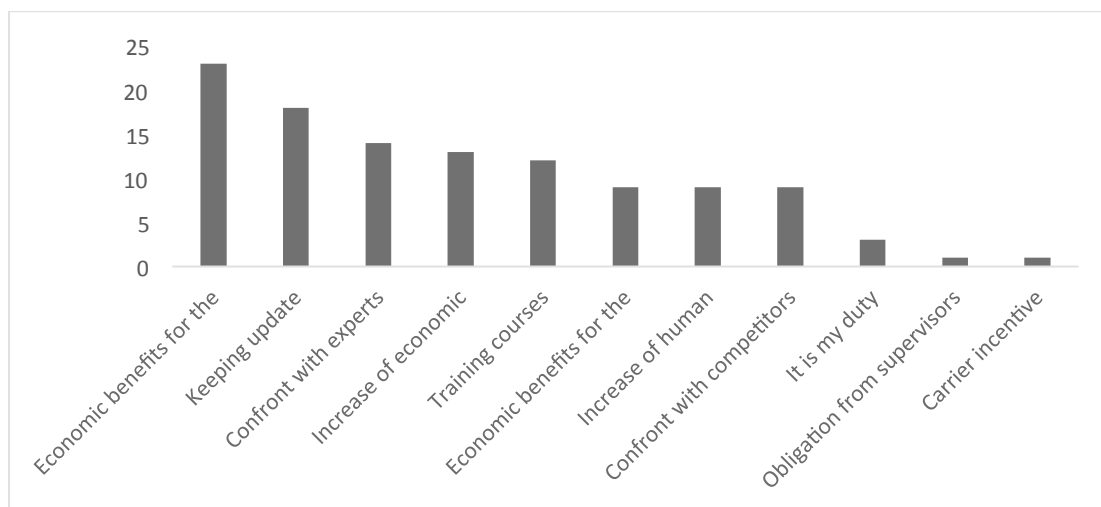**Figure 2:** Facilitators to implement web marketing activities

Table 3 shows distribution of barriers by area. Regarding the first barrier, lack of economic resources, results show an almost homogeneous distribution in the sample. However, a comparison of budget and territory shows that tourism organizations with less than a 1,000 € annual budget are the most sensitive to this first barrier. Interestingly, barriers arising from bureaucracy and long decision-making processes are cited mainly by provinces and regions. Finally, lack of skills appears to be a barrier mainly for provinces and regions, suggesting that in medium-sized organizations, human resources dedicated to the digital context are scarce.

Table 3: Distribution of barriers by area

	City	Multiple cities	Province	Multiple Province	Region
Lack of economic resources	1	6	8	1	7
Bureaucracy		1	9		7
Lack of human resources		3	4	1	6
Lack of skills/knowledge			5	1	6
Long decision-making processes			3		5
Not relevant		1	2		
Already done					1
Lack of trust				1	
Lack of time				1	
Lack of interest					

Table 4 shows distribution of facilitators by area. The first facilitator, economic benefits for the region, appears to be relevant mainly for regions. It is followed by comparison with experts in the field. Interestingly, increased economic resources and the strategic aspects of human resources appear to be critical issues mostly in the provinces.

Table 4: Distribution of facilitators by area

	City	Multiple cities	Province	Multiple Province	Region
Economic benefits for the region	1	4	6	1	10
Keeping update		6	6		6
Confront with experts		2	4		8
Increase of economic resources	1	2	6	1	2
Training courses		2	6		4
Economic benefits for the organization			4		4
Increase of human resources		1	5		2
Confront with competitors		2	3		4
It is my duty			2		1
Obligation from supervisors					1
Carrier incentive			1		

Conclusions:

The results of this study extend the eTcoMM model, highlighting the need for understanding the role of marketing tourist destinations on the web and highlighting the presence of barriers and facilitators to web marketing. The main web marketing activity adopted by Italian tourism organizations is usage analysis of their websites. Through usage analysis, tourism organizations can better understand what site sections are more attractive to users, where users spend more time on their websites, users' countries of origin, and seasonal trends. Activities that require expenditures by tourism organizations, such as positioning on search engines, have a lower level of adoption. Results regarding social media activities show varied adoption, suggesting that future research is needed to better understand which social media activities are being used.

Results on barriers to web marketing activities show that a lack of economic and human resources, complex processes, and lack of competence are the main hindrances to successful web marketing implementation.

Among facilitators, economic resources and presence of more human resources are not among the top results. Education/training of employees and comparison with experts in the field increase the knowledge of staff already present in a tourism organization.

Indeed, most web marketing activities, such as monitoring online conversations, fulfilling requests to exchange links/back linking strategy, and more interaction with users, can be carried out effectively without extra financial or human resources.

Future research should focus on more in-depth investigation of the effects of barriers and facilitators on the maturity level of tourism organizations' web marketing activities, including understanding the importance of web marketing to the business and the importance of process implementation to successful adoption. In addition, future research could investigate the emergence of substantial differences between private tour operators and DMOs.

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