

# Technological aspects of public tourism communication in Italy

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper aims at evaluating the online presence of Italian destination management organizations (DMOs) by assessing the quality of their websites through a demand-side heuristic approach. Moreover, given the importance of a clear strategic vision for an efficient and effective use of online media, the paper examines the alignment between tourism development plans and practical implementation for what regards ICTs. Finally, the possible impact of the adoption of a strategic approach on the overall quality of the websites under investigation is explored.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A double analysis was conducted. An assessment of the main quality features of the official tourism websites and an evaluation of the statements of Public Authorities concerning strategic intentions and guidelines for developing ICT instruments. The two evaluations are compared in order to examine their relationships. A strategic matrix of the technological performance and attitude of Italian regional authorities is proposed.

**Findings:** The quality of the Italian DMOs' websites is satisfactory, on average. Weaknesses are found in the offer of interactive services and Web 2.0 functions. Moreover, an improvement in the user evaluations with respect to the past demonstrates the attention given to ICTs by the DMOs. As a matter of fact, the strategic plans examined deal, in general, relatively well with ICT issues, while it is also shown that poor strategic vision, as expressed in the promotional plans, is related to poor performance of some websites.

**Originality/value:** The paper assesses the quality of Italian DMOs' websites quality as perceived by visitors and, for the first time, relates the evaluations to how ICT strategic plans deal with the issue.

**Keywords:** Internet, Web, Destination Management, Strategy, Website evaluation, Italian regions.

**Paper type:** Research paper

## 1 Introduction

A tourism destination has today in the Web one of the most powerful set of tools for its marketing and promotional activities. ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) allow to communicate a large number of potential visitors the features of a destination and its products and services, to establish and reinforce brand image, and to instill in travelers' minds the idea of a superior experience thus pushing them to choose the destination as goal of their travels (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2006; McCartney et al., 2008).

A condition for a successful communication is, as well recognized by scholars and practitioners, a high-quality realization of the main instrument available to a destination: the website. A favorable perception of its features by actual and potential visitors is a powerful determinant for the success of the promotional efforts, as the literature has well demonstrated (Law et al., 2010;

Lee and Morrison, 2010; Yang and Bolchini, 2010). However, it is known that today a good web design and implementation project needs a significant effort in terms of resources (Mendes, 2010). Effective projects demand, as fundamental prerequisite, a clear vision of the role and functions of the website, not only per se, as technological artifact, but also, and more importantly, as a crucial element of a wider integrated marketing strategy (Buhalis, 1998, 2000; Varadarajan and Yadav, 2002).

This applies to companies, but also to organizations committed in marketing tourism destinations.

On these premises, the paper has two objectives. The first one is to assess the current situation regarding DMOs' (destination management organizations) presence online and the quality of their websites. If the former is nowadays considered obvious, the latter is not granted and requires the development of tools to provide measures and comparability. The second objective is to gauge the relationship between the strategic planning efforts of the regional DMOs for what concerns the usage of ICTs and the actual realization of the strategic intentions seen through the perception of their websites' quality. The two levels of analysis are applied to Italian regions' DMOs. The paper is organized as follows. Next section briefly discusses DMOs marketing activities and strategies with specific attention to ICTs. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the analysis of both website quality and the assessment of strategic plans. The results are reported and discussed in section 4. Concluding remarks, along with the limitations of this study, and possible future developments close the paper.

## **2 Destination marketing: activities and strategy**

Destination marketing is a key strategic area for tourism development. This is a consequence of the central role of destinations in tourism which is widely recognized both by the academics and practitioners. It is affirmed that, unlike any other economic sector, the peculiar tourism product is not a single commodity or service but a whole destination (Murphy et al., 2000; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). Obviously, if the perspective of the supplier is taken into consideration, the tourist product is simply the commodity supplied – be it a bed space, a meal, or a guided tour. However, visitors buy the different elements in order to compose their vacation experience (Vanhove, 2005), thus the part has a meaning within the whole. As a result, the tourist product is widely defined as an *amalgam*, starting from Medlik and Middleton (1973). It is within the destination that the majority of tourism resources, goods and services are provided and experienced, and the destination collects most of the tourist consumption and of the economic and non economic effects of tourism (Cooper et al., 2005; Gunn and Var, 2002).

The central role of destinations, however, is not just confined to being 'collectors' of tourism products and impacts: destinations have been recognized and highlighted as active agents of the tourism system. This because tourism is undergoing important changes that have created an increasingly challenging environment, where the ability of destinations to be proactive has been considered a key success factor (Go and Govers, 2000). In his seminal work, Butler (1980) explains that a destination is a dynamic entity and follows a life cycle: this shows the fallacy of developers and operators believing that a destination will always attract tourists and that tourist flows will continue to grow. Over the last decade the relevance of planning, marketing, and managing a destination has emerged significantly and has represented a main stream of interest for both practitioners and researchers involved in tourism.

Several factors determine the importance of an active role of destinations and, thus, of their tourism public authorities. Competition between and within destinations is fierce and there is constant change in the tourism marketplace: new destinations are entering the market and new strategic alliances are being formed, especially by multinational companies that are growing their power through horizontal and vertical integrations (Lafferty and van Fossen, 2001; Mosedale, 2006). Tourism demand is also changing: tourists have higher cultural levels and are more experienced travelers, as a consequence they have higher expectations. Moreover they are better

informed because of the wide diffusion of information and are offered new places to visit, low cost products, and increased quality standards. In general, they have significantly enlarged the number and variety of choices at their disposal and their relative awareness (Smeral, 1998). This has produced important consequences on the supply side of the tourism market because, despite the growing number of tourists, the market share of a destination is not granted. In order to benefit from the economic outcomes of tourism, organizations and firms have had to increase their efforts to promote and sell their products, basically reinforcing marketing activities, striving to enhance their differentiation and image, and focusing on the quality and value of the destination product (Go and Govers, 2000; Murphy et al., 2000). In addition the composite nature of the tourism product calls for public governance, institutional flexibility and cross-institutional cooperation (Thomas and Thomas, 1998).

In particular, growing attention has been given to the role of public authorities in destination marketing. National, regional, and local governments are increasingly involved and committed to promote their territories. This is a consequence of the recognition of the relevant role of localization in competition and of the fact that territories compete, as firms do, in attracting demand, key resources and strategic economic activities (Porter, 1990, 2000). Moreover it has to be considered that the image of a territory is a value for its community and, as such, it is a public good which should be enhanced and at the same time protected by public authorities.

## **2.1 Information Technology: role and strategic alignment**

To a certain extent, the tourism promotion of destinations has always been an institutional role for public agents but we have seen, in the last decade, a sophistication of their activities and the consolidation of the use of a wide range of marketing strategies and tools.

ICTs, when used appropriately, have shown to be one of the most valuable and effective tools to create awareness, promote and market the resources of a destination. Countless examples can be cited of the positive contribution to competitive advantage and profitability of destinations and single operators (Buhalis and Egger, 2008). In turn, scholarly research has often considered the conditions and the requirements needed for obtaining such good outcomes (Buhalis and Law, 2008).

In order to be effective, the adoption of ICTs requires a strategic approach by public authorities which is not always granted. More specifically, the literature has consistently shown the relevance of strategic alignment between business and ICT in order to attain a positive impact on the performance of an organization. Following Henderson and Venkatraman (1993), the literature has emphasized the relevance of aligning ICTs investments to the overall strategic vision of an organization and to its functions.

The significance of a clear strategy for achieving a competitive advantage and sustaining economic growth has been clearly stated by many and has become a sort of paradigm with the work of Porter (1980; 1985). The modern evolutions of ICTs do not change this view. As still Porter notes at the beginning of the wide diffusion of Internet technologies as a support for business (Porter, 2001: 65), ICTs provide: *“better opportunities for companies to establish distinctive strategic positioning than did previous generations of information technology. Gaining such a competitive advantage does not require a radically new approach to business. It requires building on the proven principles of effective strategy.”* therefore *“the Internet actually makes strategy more essential than ever.”*

If this does not happen, technological machineries risk remaining confined to the role of administrative support instead of evolving into a real asset (Campbell et al., 2005; Chan, 2002). As such, this has direct consequences on the level of competitiveness of organizations (Avison et al., 2004; Kearns and Lederer, 2000) and applies, in an extended way, to the whole capabilities of firms, institutions (Beer et al., 2005) and destinations as well (Chang, 2003). Even if DMOs commonly recognize the importance of ICTs in tourism promotion, also feeding what the author critically calls the ‘myth of Internet marketing’, they often fail in exploiting the strategic support function as a real source of competitive advantage. Moreover, what can hinder the advantages of a rational and

effective implementation of ICT instruments, such as a website, is the lack of a full integration into the operations of the organization and its strategies, which is considered critical for the survival of DMOs in their role of marketing the destination and facilitating the exchange of information between suppliers and consumers (Park and Gretzel, 2007).

### 3 Methods

The study investigates the ICTs strategies and online tools adopted by the Italian Regions<sup>1</sup> (*Regioni*) as the key public actors for tourism promotion and development in the Italian context. In the last years, a process of devolution has led to formalization, through a constitutional reform, of the role of the regional governments with regard to a number of matters. Today, all promotional and regulatory activities for what concerns tourism are exclusive competence of the regional institutions. The central government role is limited to the harmonization, through a state-regions negotiating body (the *Conferenza Stato-Regioni*), of those activities that may have a national interest.

The analysis has been conducted in two steps. Firstly, the official tourism websites have been examined and evaluated in their communicational and operational aspects. Secondly, all the tourism strategic development plans have been scrutinized, specifically in the sections where reference to the intended use of ICTs was made.

#### 3.1 Evaluation of websites

Given the importance of a website as virtual representative of an organization and the effects of its quality on the image and the business of its publisher, the question of devising a sound methodology for evaluating these characteristics has long been a hot issue for researchers and practitioners. Unfortunately, as the literature constantly states, there is no universally recognized methodology to assess the quality of a website, and the same concept of quality is difficult to define for its dependence on specific situations, objectives, and target audience of a website (Antonioli Corigliano and Baggio, 2006; Law et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 2004).

The choice here is to adopt a demand side perspective, considered that the main role of official tourism websites is promotion and the final users are the key target. The assessment was performed by heuristically evaluating the user perception of the website features and mapping contents and services offered online (Baggio, 2003b). Both elements are combined to define a measurement of the visitors' appreciation which can be expressed as a quality index (QI). The first step of the procedure consists of assessing the visitor perception. Combining principles coming from the human machine interfaces evaluation literature (Molich and Nielsen, 1990; Nielsen and Molich, 1990) with a number of features that might characterize a successful e-tourism website, it is possible to define a list of items to be examined and evaluated by a sample of users of a specific website. The full list of features (35) is divided into six main categories:

- first impact (FI): general feeling during a first visit, before an accurate scrutiny of the website;
- design and graphics (DG): quality of graphical elements (pictures, symbols, photographs, etc.) and the balance between texts and images;
- informational contents (IC): completeness and usefulness of information provided and clarity of language;
- structure and navigation (SN): rationality of structure and navigation facilities;
- interactivity and services (IS): number and quality of the interactive services and tested user-friendliness of the functions;
- technical management (TM): degree of updating of the contents, perceived speed in response times and absence of errors or missing links.

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<sup>1</sup> The Italian territory is divided into administrative units called *Regioni* (regions). Bolzano and Trento are autonomous Provinces with the same legislative functions as Regions. As such, the Province of Bolzano and the Province of Trento are considered in the study equivalent to the other Italian Regions.

The visitors express their appreciation of the various features by means of a score from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum) to each item of the list. The overall evaluation (EV) is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the scores.

The second step in the assessment procedure is the mapping of the contents and services offered online. The analysis is conducted by identifying a series of possible informational contents and interactive services that are considered useful or appealing for a user of a tourist website (see for example: Law et al., 2010; Lee and Morrison, 2010; Park and Gretzel, 2007; Perdue, 2002). The items list (40 items) comprises elements such as accurate geographical information, itinerary descriptions, interactive contact forms, e-commerce facilities and Web 2.0 functionalities, and is structured in four main groups:

- informational contents (IN): information and documentation materials;
- customer relationship (CR): contents and services that make relationships with clients and visitors easier and stronger;
- interactive services (SV): general interactive functions and services;
- Web 2.0 functions (W2): social networks, blogs, tagging etc.;
- e-commerce (EB): commercial and e-business functions.

The functional coverage (FC) is expressed as ratio between number of functions found and the total number of items present in the list. The evaluators are asked to check the existence of the items on the website under analysis. An overall quality index (QI) is obtained by multiplying the evaluation score by the functional coverage:  $QI = EV \times FC$ .

The data for the complete assessment were collected in the first months of 2010. The sample evaluators group for both steps of analysis was formed by 35 people with different knowledge of the tourism sector and different backgrounds of Web navigation experience. This sample size gives a 95% confidence interval of about 5% (according to Antonioli Corigliano and Baggio, 2006). The results are also compared with those obtained in a similar study conducted in 2002 (Baggio, 2003a), to highlight the differences.

### **3.2 Evaluation of strategic plans**

All the regional DMOs produce a strategic promotional plan (which is publicly accessible). In the large majority these are three-year plans. The documents have a fairly standard structure; they contain a report of past results (in terms of tourist arrivals and stays), an analysis of their main inbound markets, and some general considerations on the economic and social conditions of the region. In addition to that, the plans provide strategic indications for improving and developing tourism activities and, normally, indications on possible actions to be put in place.

Analyzing and evaluating textual document is a long debated argument. Here, again, no universally accepted methodologies exist; the most used criteria are: readability, clarity of the text, rationality in the organization of the contents, completeness of the background materials and so on. Obviously, most of these assessments are highly subjective and depend on the capacities and expertise of the reader (Coulthard, 1994; Krippendorff, 2004; White and Marsh, 2006). The social and political context plays an important role as well and is subject to interpretation since the language is not a neutral communication medium, but is an intrinsic part of some particular situation (Shapiro, 1984). The plans of the Italian regions were assessed by using the same philosophy used for assessing the websites, in this case loosely following the indications of Mayring (2000), especially for what concerns the communication qualities. The portions dedicated to ICTs and their possible employment as promotional or operational tools for the tourism community were examined by a group of five MSc students. A score (from 1 = minimum to 5 = maximum) was given to the clarity and the extent to which the objectives had been formulated and the detail with which specific actions were proposed. An overall metric (QS) was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the two scores.

The subjectivity of the method used, obviously, prevents from assigning a general validity to the evaluations performed. However, when interested in comparing different situations in a homogeneous environment, as in the present case, and using the same set of reviewers, a technique like the one used here provides a good validity of the outcomes and is fast and inexpensive.

Finally, since different levels of measurement are adopted in this work, for greater clarity Table 1 provides a summary of the metrics used.

Table 1 Summary of the measurements used

<b>Website evaluations</b>	
1 Website evaluation (EV)	Mean of judgments expressed on: first impact (FI), design and graphics (DG), informational contents (IC), structure and navigation (SN), interactivity and services (IS), technical management (TM).
2 Functional coverage (FC)	Mean of ratio between number of functions found and total number of items present in a list considering the following categories: informational contents (IN), customer relationship (CR), interactive services (SV), Web 2.0 functions (W2), e-commerce (EB).
3 Quality index	$QI = EV \times FC$
<b>Strategic plans assessment</b>	
1 Objectives (OBJ)	Evaluation of clarity and extent of formulation of objectives
2 Action plan (ACT).	Evaluation of details provided for specific actions
3 Quality index (QS)	$QS = (OBJ + ACT) / 2$
NB: all evaluations on scale: 1 = minimum to 5 = maximum	

#### 4 Results and discussion

The results of the evaluations for the visitors' appreciation (EV) and the functional coverage (FC) are shown in Figure 1, and overall quality indices attained in 2002 and 2010 are reported in Figure 2. All scores reported in this section have been normalized (i.e. they lie in the 0%-100% interval) for easing comparisons.

Looking at the 2010 evaluations, it can be seen that, while the high majority (86%) of the websites examined are judged more than sufficient (EV score > 50%), their functional coverage is relatively low, and only 24% can be considered sufficient. Moreover, only 14% show an acceptable use of Web 2.0 functionalities. The picture is that of organizations which invest reasonably in their online image, but are somehow reluctant to engage directly with consumers and still think about promotion as a one way type of communication, giving little weight to the voice of the crowd. Many reasons can be called for justifying this situation (lack of resources, poor skills, limited technological infrastructures etc.), but, as some examples clearly show (Toscana, Friuli or Emilia-Romagna), a good implementation is possible. Probably, the real reason is to be found in a stance towards communication which is still too bound to old visions. This may reduce the overall competitiveness and attractiveness of destinations, which so heavily depend today on what the Web, and particularly its most advanced features, is able to convey to the tourists (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Yang and Bolchini, 2010).

The evolution of the Internet, and mainly of the attitudes of tourists towards its functions, looks to have been in some way appreciated by Italian DMOs. As Figure 3 (left panel) shows, the improvement in the evaluations has been significant, particularly for what concerns the users' perception (EV). In other terms, the Italian DMOs have been able, at least to some extent, to follow the evolution of both the technological environment and the attitudes and preferences of the general public of Internet users. This improvement has concerned the majority of the regions, even if some has considerably lost the favor of the audience for having missed out on the opportunity to renovate their websites (see Figure 2).

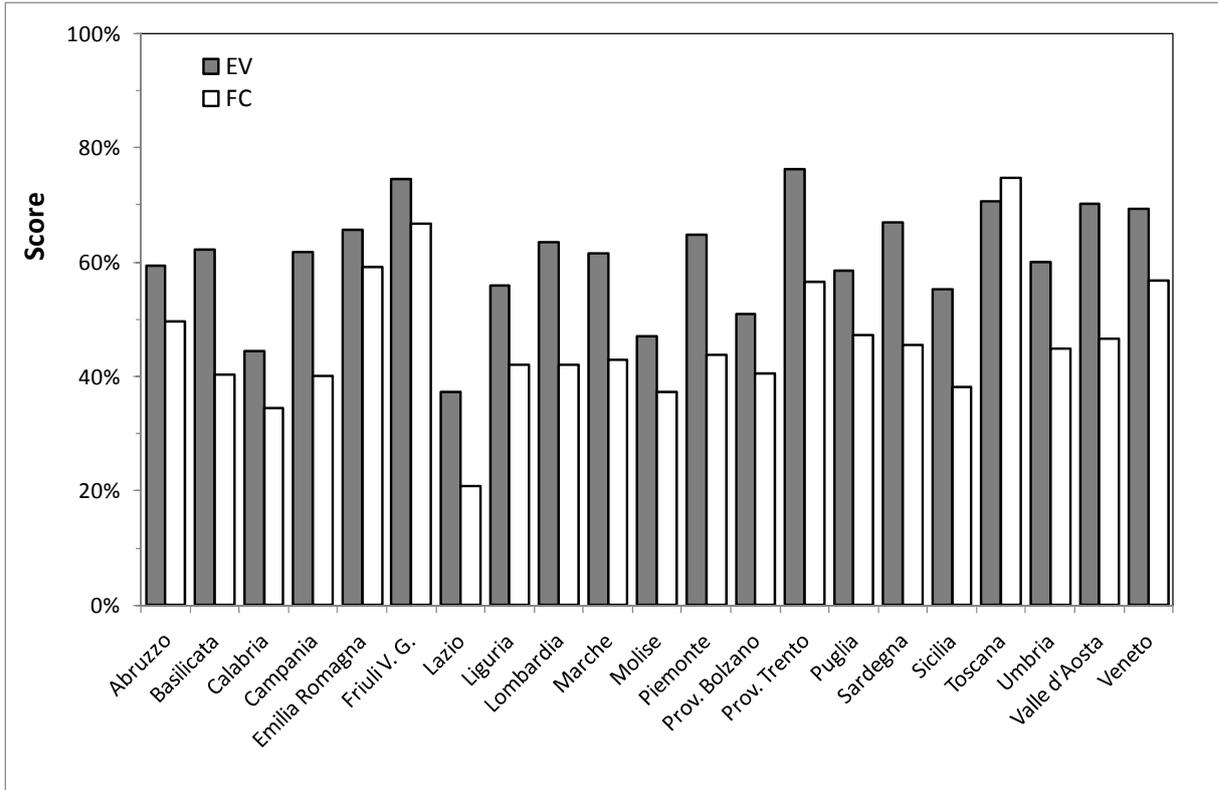


Figure 1 Evaluations of Italian regional tourism websites 2010 (normalized scores for EV = website evaluation, FC = functional coverage)

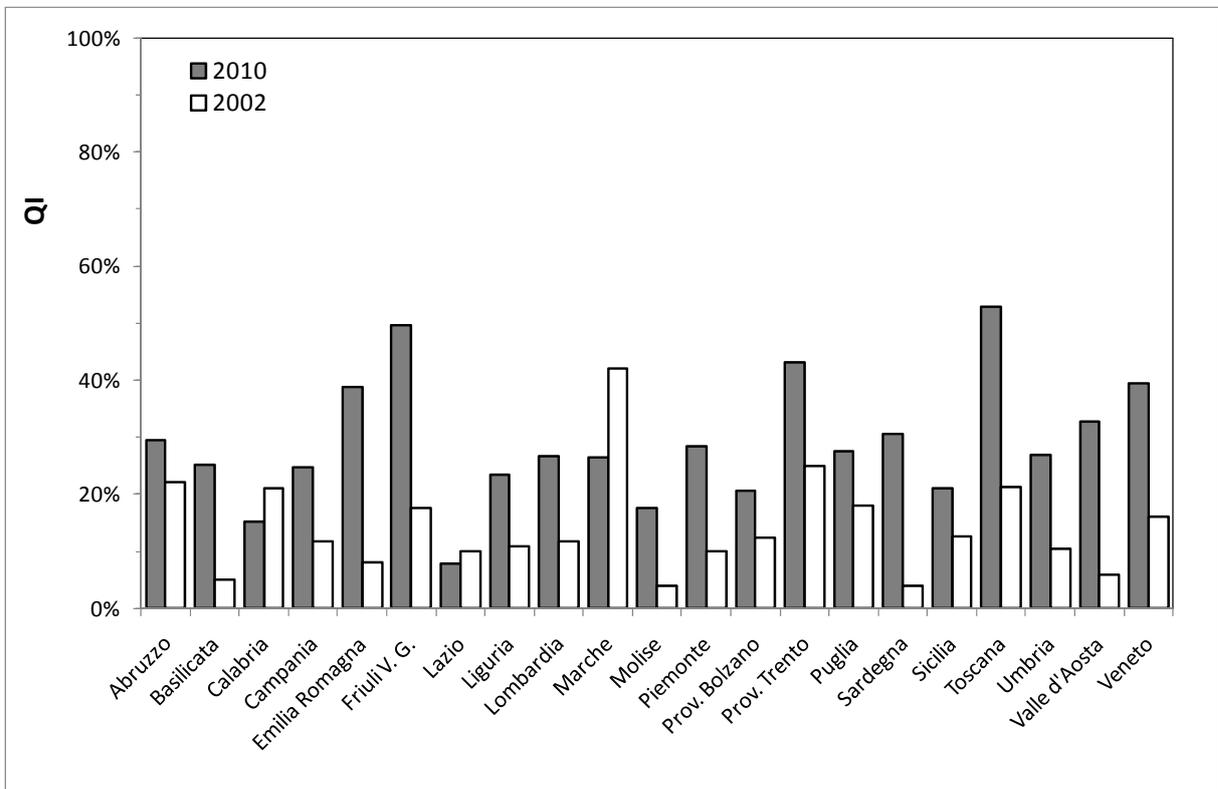


Figure 2 Quality index (QI) for Italian regional tourism websites 2002 and 2010

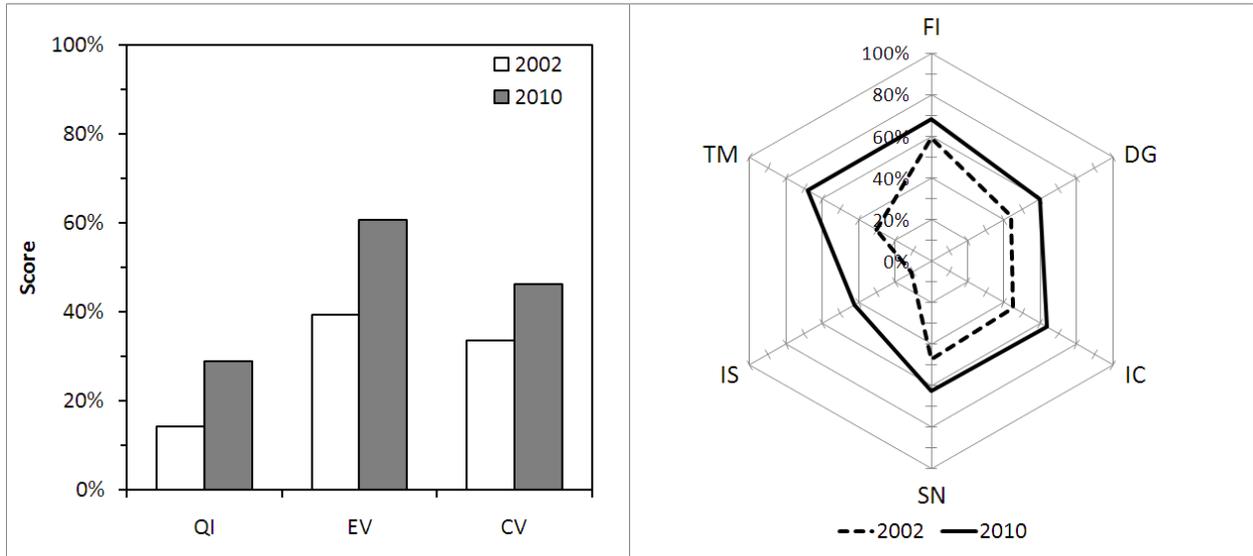


Figure 3 Evaluations of Italian regional tourism websites 2002 and 2010 (left panel: differences in scores for QI (quality index), EV (website evaluation) and FC (functional coverage); right panel: EV components: FI = first impression, DG = design and graphics, IC = informational content, SN = structure and navigation, IS = interactive services, TM = technical management, see section 3)

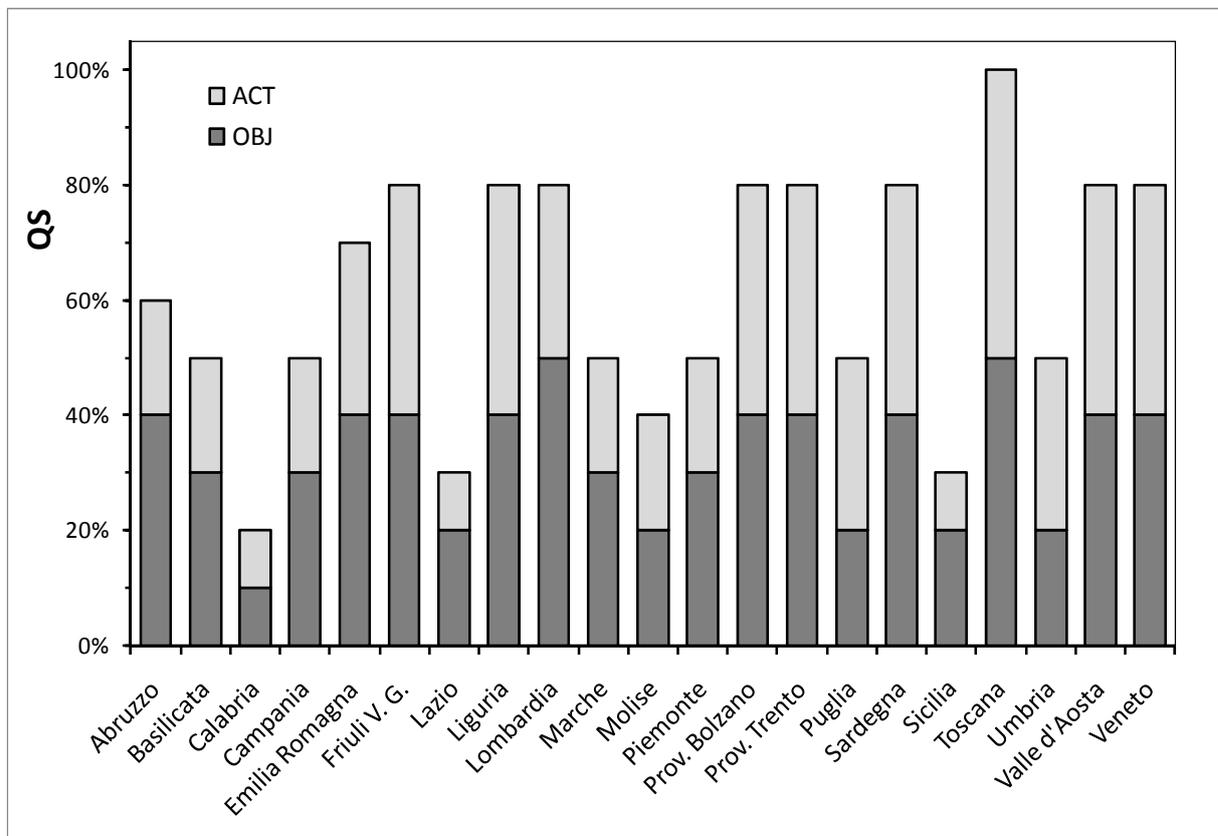


Figure 4 Evaluation of ICT strategic plans. The contributions of the objectives (OBJ) and action plans (ACT) scores are shown

What is more important to notice (Figure , right panel) is that this generalized improvement has not involved all the aspects uniformly, but has led to a more balanced picture. Interactive

services (even with the shortcomings discussed above for what regards Web 2.0) have developed more than other features, as it has the care for technical issues. This fact lets well hope for the future online image of the destinations examined. A deeper discussion on the reasons for the change in the appreciation of the websites examined in the period considered is outside the scope of this work and no further details are available on this issue. Future work, already under way, has the objective to better examine this topic.

The final research step was about the strategic attitude of DMOs with regard to new technologies. The assessment of regional strategic tourism plans for what regards ICTs produces the results depicted in Figure 4.

The chart shows the contributions of the two elements examined: clarity of objectives (OBJ) and indications for an action plan (ACT). The first point to note is that in almost half of the cases (48%) the score obtained by OBJ is higher than ACT; in no case the opposite happens, at most they are equal. In other words, in many cases well stated and semantically clear strategic objectives for the usage and the development of ICTs are followed by only generic indications on how to pursue these objectives. A little more than one half (52%) are considered to have expressed a sufficient or good ICT strategic plan (score  $\geq 50\%$ ).

Figure maps the relationship between the evaluations obtained by the websites (QI) and the assessment of the ICT strategic plans (QS). Several interesting observations can be made on this chart. First of all, a positive significant correlation between QI and QS seems to exist: the Spearman rank correlation ( $\rho$ ) and the Pearson ( $r$ ) correlation coefficients are:  $\rho = 0.702$  and  $r = 0.751$ ; both with  $p < 0.0001$ . This seems to reinforce the role of a definite strategic vision in conducting business online (if we see promotion as a part of business) and the importance of clear ideas on how to implement such a strategy adding a further confirmation to what literature on this subject has stated (see section 2).

The second consideration is that three relatively well defined groups appear. With some modifications, these groups can well represent those described by Machauer and Morgner (2001) in a different context:

- group 1: *technology lukewarm*, having a weak technological attitude (ICTs are not a strategic asset; poor implementation; poor ICT performance);
- group 2: *generally interested*, with a positive attitude (ICTs are considered a strategic asset, but implementation and performance are poor);
- group 3: *ICT oriented*, exhibiting a strong technological attitude (clear technological strategic vision; strong online settlement and performance).

The first one (lower left in Figure 5) comprises regions that score poorly on both strategy and website quality. As stated above, this is a clear example of how difficult obtaining a sufficient appreciation can be when no clear guidelines exist for the development of an Internet presence and of how a poor conviction of the effectiveness of these media can prevent from realizing an effective implementation.

The second group (lower right in Figure 5) is formed by DMOs which have preformed a good job in stating objectives and guidelines but have failed (at least so far) to achieve good results in the perception of the users. It is difficult to understand why. During the study a series of questions were asked to policy makers on the possible difficulties in the practical implementation of what had been stated in the plans.

Unfortunately, besides some generic answer, it has been impossible to come to a clear conclusion. The reasons quoted were the usual motivations based on lack of resources, time and appropriate skills, but these justifications are somehow unsatisfactory. This is a limitation of the present study which can be overcome with a new and deeper investigation.

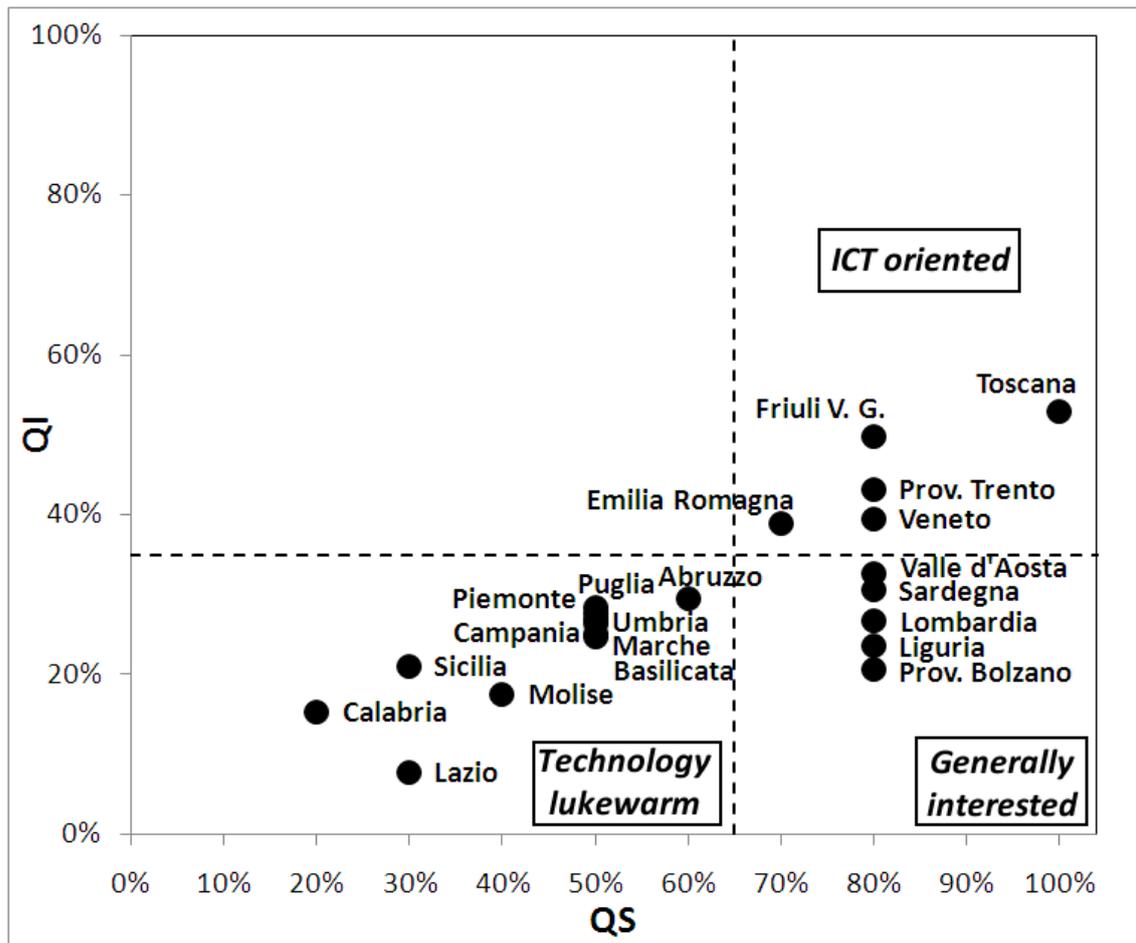


Figure 5 Relationship between ICT strategic plan assessment (QS) and website quality index (QI) showing the groups identified

The third group (upper right in Figure 5) includes the most advanced regional organizations in Italy. They have long understood the importance and the role of ICTs in promoting a good image and in attracting tourists by engaging them. The websites are not only simple electronic brochures, but offer a reasonable ensemble of useful and usable functions intended to establish a good relationship with the tourist which goes beyond the actual decisional phase. These regions, as it turns out, have also dedicated a good deal of work in rationalizing many different indications coming from the market and have been able to frame them into harmonic and fairly clear strategic and operational indications. They have also been able, in the last couple of years, to contrast the generalized crisis by at least maintaining their performance in terms of tourist arrivals. It is very difficult to prove a direct relationship between good levels of ICTs usage and performance, but it must be acknowledged that Internet plays a crucial role in determining the success of a destination. As additional proof, the upper left quadrant has no plots: there is no region which reached a good evaluation by users without having a coherent strategic approach on ICTs.

## 5 Concluding remarks

The importance of a good implementation for DMOs websites is widely accepted. Favorable reception by actual or potential tourists has been shown to be an important determinant for the success of a destination on the market. The Italian regional governments put a considerable effort in promoting their territories on the national and international tourism market. A regional tourism website is one of the means they use. The work presented here has assessed the perception of the quality of these websites by the general public. In addition, the alignment between the strategic

intentions and the actual implementations has been evaluated. Moreover, a comparison with a similar evaluation conducted in the past has allowed determining the evolution.

The Italian DMOs perform relatively well in the appreciation by the users although a vision too oriented towards promotional aspects leaves the interactive functionalities somehow neglected. What is more important, the rich Web 2.0 world is little explored and a substantial lack of presence in this area is clearly found. This may be an issue in a period in which, beside any actual value and usefulness of these functions, Web 2.0 is so widely praised and so many cybernauts are attracted by it.

The comparison with the assessments conducted in 2002 shows a general improvement (with some exceptions). This testifies the efforts of the Italian DMOs to keep up with the developments in ICTs and with the changing attitudes towards the Internet by the users.

Although the formulation of the strategic plans reserves, generally, a space to technological media, and the statements are reputed to be, on the average, clear and appropriately expressed, a certain weakness is seen in the formulation of implementation guidelines.

As a result, when compared with the user evaluations, these satisfactory statements find little correlation with the actual realizations. Only a handful of regional organizations show to be able to put fully in practice what they assert. Despite the declarations contained in most regional tourism plans, centered on the creation of a strong brand awareness and image through the online channels, the regional tourism websites, in too many cases, do not return the expected outcomes. On the contrary, the image perceived by the visitors is compromised by the lack of some important feature. This leads to recognize different ways of approaching ICTs by destination management organizations. A group of institutions under investigation do not seem to consider ICTs relevant for their activities and the implementation of technological tools is weak; as a result the overall quality of their websites is not satisfactory. A second group consists of organizations which seem to be just followers: ICTs are widely utilized and they assert the need to follow the trend, however they are not able to transform technologies into strategic assets; this is perceived also by the users which do not rate these websites particularly well. Finally, a third group of organizations recognize the relevance of ICTs to pursue their promotional objectives and are able to align strategic vision and implementation. Their websites are the most appreciated by users both in terms of overall impression and functionality. These results suggest that many organizations, beyond the intentions, are still not able to really exploit the potential of ICTs.

The limitations of the methodologies used have been highlighted in the description. However, for the purpose of this work the results can be considered reliable. Furthermore, the reasons behind the discrepancy between statements and realizations has been only little explored. This suggests a future investigation effort. Obviously, what reported in this paper is valid for the DMOs examined and cannot be widely generalized, apart from the observation that the importance of the relationship between strategic visions and outcomes has been verified once more.

A final consideration concerns the general image of Italian destinations and their competitive advantage. The general quality of the websites examined is relatively good, but is not sufficient in today's competitive market. Much need to be done to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these tools in order to support the future development of tourism in Italy. It is difficult to demonstrate, as said previously, but the decline in the recent history may find a significant component in this situation. More focused attention should be given to the formulation of reasonable strategic uses of ICTs, not only as useful tools, but as integral part of the promotional and operational activities of the destinations.

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