Awareness, use and attitude of tourism companies toward web 2.0: an empirical analysis on the Italian hospitality sector

Giacomo Del Chiappa
University of Sassari – Faculty of Economics
Assistant Professor in Marketing
Via Torre Tonda, 34
07100 Sassari

Office: +39 (079) 20.17.320

mail-to: **gdelchiappa@uniss.it**

Awareness, use and attitude of tourism companies towards Web 2.0: an empirical analysis of the Italian hospitality sector

Abstract

Objectives – Recently, there has been a growing interest in User-Generated Content (UGC) and in particular Web 2.0 as one of the most important sources of information for consumers making a purchasing decision. Their influence is especially important within the hospitality and tourism industry, composed of intangible products that are difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption, because, by their nature, they are largely based upon experience and search qualities. As a consequence, Web 2.0 can potentially become one of the most important and effective marketing channels for operators in this sector. However, the real awareness, use and attitude of tourist operators towards Web 2.0 tools remain in actual fact unclear in existing literature. Moving on from a review of national and international literature on Web 2.0 within the tourism sector, the aim of this study is to contribute towards filling this gap. To achieve this, the study analyses how managers within the Italian hospitality sector a) are aware of the various Web 2.0 tools and use them, b) believe that these tools can affect their business (i.e: awareness, image, occupancy rate, request, etc.) and c) encourage customers to post their reviews on-line and subsequently to check these reviews.

Methods – This study is based on an empirical and quantitative investigation that was carried out by sending a questionnaire by e-mail (on-line survey) to a sample of operators within the Italian hospitality sector.

Results – The study indicates that there is a good level of awareness of the various Web 2.0 tools, although this differs according to the different types of tool. It also shows that the Italian hospitality sector is late regarding its use of Web 2.0 for their marketing and promotion operations, probably because – as our empirical investigation would seem to indicate - they do not yet have a good or clear understanding about the way Web 2.0 can affect their business. It is only necessary to highlight the fact that many managers stated that no one in their company replies to either positive or negative on-line reviews.

Conclusions – This study seems to show that operators within the Italian hospitality sector are late regarding their use of Web 2.0 applications for their marketing and promotion operations. This is because managers do not have as yet either a good or a clear understanding

about the way Web 2.0 can influence tourists' behaviour and consequently their own business, despite the numerous studies that have documented this well.

To sum up, as other studies have highlighted, this research suggests that in Italy most tourism companies are at an early stage in applying Web 2.0 concepts and tools to their business. To conclude, significant work could/should be carried out to increase the use of these tools and to improve the competitiveness of the Italian hospitality sector within international tourist markets.

Key words: Web 2.0, awareness, use, hospitality management attitude, Italian hospitality sector.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, internet has reshaped the way people plan for and consume tourist products and services (Buhalis and Law, 2008). In recent years the most notable development in internet applications has been in the area of user generated content (UGC) and peer-to-peer applications, the so-called Web 2.0.

Social networking applications started in 1997 when SixDegrees.com was launched (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). It was only later, specifically in 2004, that Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dogherty coined the term Web 2.0. Although many definitions exist, they all share the idea that "Web 2.0 is a set of economic, social, technology trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the internet – a more mature, distinctive medium characterised by user participation, openness and network effects" (Musser and O'Reilly, 2006). Karakas (2009) has described Web 2.0 through five C's, that is: creativity, connectivity, collaboration, convergence and community (Karakas, 2009). Web 2.0, or Travel 2.0 as referred to in the tourism sector, includes different applications such as media and content syndication (RSS-feeds), mashups, tagging, wikis, web forum, customer rating and evaluation systems, podcasting, blogs, photo sharing, video sharing, microblogging, etc (Schmalleger and Carson, 2008; O'Connor, 2008; Akehurst, 2009).

Probably the best known Web 2.0 applications are social networks, photo sharing, video sharing, corporate and consumers blogs, Online Travel Agencies with booking and ratings/review functions (Online Travel Agencies - OTAs) and microblogging.

Photo sharing and video sharing applications allow users (both hospitality managers and tourists) to upload and share photos and videos relating respectively to their activities or tourist experiences. The most popular photo sharing platform is Flickr. In 2008 it was accessed by 48 million unique visitors and almost 3.5 million photos are loaded every month

(Camellini, 2009). Other examples include Yahoo, Picasa and Photobucket. The most famous video sharing platform is without doubt Youtube, with almost 100 million videos viewed every day and 20 million visitors a month (Iavazzo, 2009). Others examples of video sharing tools are: Rewer, Clipser, Tv Clips, Google Video, Vimeo, Libero Video, Yahoo Video, Video in Hotel. Blog is a shortened word that originated from "web log" (Chow, 2005) and its format "consists of familiar, frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single web page" (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007). Blogs can be created and developed by managers (corporate blogs) and consumers/tourists. In 2008, Technorati stated that the blog sphere consisted of 184 millions blogs worldwide with 120,000 new blogs every day (www.technorati.com).

OTAs are online portals used by tourist intermediaries to interact with their customers, who can book an hotel and also post a rating/review after their stay. Among these, just a few examples are: Expedia, Booking, HRS, Travallero.

Social networks are on-line communities between people who share experiences, information, interests and way of life. They can be both tourism or non-tourism related. Among the former, the most famous is TripAdvisor. Among the latter, the best known are (in decreasing order) Facebook, Myspace and Badoo.

Finally, microblogging can be defined as virtual communities that enable their users to share information whose content is restricted in size (messages are usually up to 140 characters, short videos and audio files, etc). Among these are, for example, Twitter, Pounce, Jaiku and Hictu. Twitter, by February 2010, was attracting on average 75 million unique visitors per month and sending about 50 million tweets every day (600 per second)[1]. The country with the most users is the United States (47,2 %), followed by Germany (8,4%), India (6,5%) and the United Kingdom (6,2%). In Italy this application is still largely unknown to consumers and only 1.1% of Italian people use it (see Alexa.com).

2. Literature review

2.1 Web 2.0 and e-WOM influences on tourist choices

The online interpersonal influence exerted by online reviews and recommendations is referred to as e-WOM. This can be defined as "all informal communications directed at consumers

---

[1] TechCrunch.com by Twitter, retrieved from http://techcrunch.com/2010/02/22/twitter-50-million-tweets-day/, last modified 02/22/2010.

through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers" (Livtin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008)[2]. e-WOM is particularly important for tourism and hospitality marketers because tourism and hospitality products/services are, on the one hand, products requiring a high involvement (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008) and, on other one, difficult to evaluate, as are all intangible goods (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). In these circumstances, as previous research carried out in other sectors (Nielsen, 2009), Travel 2.0 caught consumers' attention because the reviews and recommendations posted online by tourists are perceived to have a greater credibility than traditional sources of tourist information (Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991; Weiss, Lurie and Macinnis, 2008; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Chung and Buhalis, 2008). This occurs especially when people interact in these virtual spaces over a long period of time, as they then develop a sense of community and trust the comments posted online (Dwivedi, Shibu and Venkatesh, 2007) almost as if they were interacting face-to-face (Yadav and Varadarajan, 2005).

Adopting a demand-side perspective, Web 2.0 exerts a great influence in generating the idea of travelling, during the real planning process and even after the tourists' decisions have been taken (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Regarding the latter, research has highlighted that, among people who use online reviews when making their hotel booking, a significant number in fact changed their booking after being influenced by reviews posted online by other consumers (eMarketer, 2007). Specifically, in the pre-travel phase tourists can use social media as a supporting system to carry out research and make bookings, during their stay they can publish comments on forum and blogs and, finally, in the post-travel phase they can share experiences by posting reviews or uploading videos and photos about hotels and destination (Chung and Buhalis, 2008).

A survey carried out on a sample of 1,900 of American tourists who usually buy tourist services over the internet underlines the different influences that different Web 2.0 applications have on tourist behaviour (PhoCusWright, 2009). In decreasing order these are: reviews in OTAs (50%), traveller generated photography/virtual tours (43%), online travel reviews from travel expert (41%), professional photography/virtual tours (39%) traveler review Web sites (33%), professional online travel video (29%), traveler generated online travel video (28%), travel blogs (22%), social networks-people you Know (22%), social network-people you do not know (15%) and travel-related podcast (13%). Previous research has divided consumers into six segments, according to how they use social technologies

---

[2] As Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels (2009) highlight e-WOM is affected by the number of new customers.

(Figure 1) which also shows the percentage of each segment in Italy, i.e.: spectators 52%, inactives 36%, joiners 33%, critics 25%, creators 23% and collectors 7%.

Figure 1 – The Social Technographics Ladder

Creators	Publish a blog and own web pages, upload video and audio/music, write articles or stories and post them
Critics	Post ratings/reviews of product and services, comment on someone else's blog, contribute to online forums and to/edit articles in a wiki
Collectors	Use RSS feeds, "vote" for web sites online, add "tags" to web pages or photos
Joiners	Maintain profile on a social networking site, visit social networking site
Spectators	Read blogs, listen to podcasts, watch video from others users, read online forums, read customer rating/reviews
Inactives	Non of the above

Source: Li and Bernoff (2008).

Moreover, the aforementioned research stated that in 2007 almost half of all European internet-users made decisions about their travel plans using Web 2.0 applications and, in particular, found that out of every three European tourists two use the internet to uploaded their blogs and share reviews about their holidays.

2.2 The influence of Travel 2.0 and e-WOM on the hospitality business

As noted above, traveller hotel reviews have became central to the online shopping process for tourist products/services. Therefore, it is increasingly important for hotels to know/use Travel 2.0 applications, to monitor online reviews and to benchmark their own performance against their competitor. Indeed, with the use of Web 2.0 applications "individuals can make their personal thoughts, reactions and opinions easily accessible to the global community" (Dellarocas, 2003) influencing its choices. Among tourist products and services, this is especially true for accommodation (Gretzel, Hyan-Yoo and Purifoy, 2007). For example, previous research highlighted that increasing by 10% the rating that consumers give online can increase hotel sales by 4,4% (Qiang, Law, Gu, 2009).

In this way, it is quite obvious that for tourism and hospitality marketers – and also destination managers (Hamill, Attard and Stevenson, 2009) – Web 2.0 represents an opportunity to enhance information sharing among consumers and between tourist operators and their customers (Pühringer and Taylor, 2008).

Nevertheless, tourism and hospitality marketers often express concern towards online reviews and comments because sometimes they can obviously be negative and, as we know, negative

information tends to be weighted more heavily than positive information (Mizerski, 1982). But, unless these reach a significant level, they do not present any real problem. Indeed, as previous research has indicated, single negative comments, or at least a relatively low number of negative comments compared to the positive ones, are unlikely to create any damage. In fact, they can enhance the credibility of UGC sites and of the other comments posted on them (EyeforTravel, 2007), producing positive responses in their audience (Vermeulen, Seegers, 2009). This means that tourism and hospitality marketers should both check and respond to online reviews and comments (reactive strategy) and encourage visitors to write them (proactive strategy), therefore significantly enhancing their customer relationships and further improving their services. This explains why previous research highlighted the opportunity/necessity to respond to both positive and negative online reviews (Dwuivedi, Shibu and Venkatesh, 2007; Starkovand Mechoso, 2008). This should also be done because it is possible to uphold that consumers' choices are affected by reading the provider's earlier replies to other customers (Weiss, Lurie and Macinnnis, 2008)[3].

On the other hand, the real problem with social media applications is represented by the fact that UGC platforms allow people to publish comments anonymously or under false identities. This means that tourism and hospitality managers can go online posing as consumers and then post positive comments about their company and/or negative reviews about their competitors (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008) and this could contribute, in some way, to reduce the overall credibility of some Web 2.0 applications[4].

However, the opportunities offered by Travel 2.0 for hospitality businesses go far beyond the aforementioned possibility of enhancing knowledge sharing both between consumers and between hospitality players and their customers. For instance, these could be customer acquisition (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009), customer engagement (Kavasana, Nusair and Teodosic, 2010), customer services, customer profiling, brand awareness and reinforcement, reputation and image building (Xiang, Pan, Zhang and Smith, 2009), monitoring and management, development of new products/services (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier, 2002), quality control, enhancement of visitor/customer satisfaction through improvement of services, analysis of competitive strategies (DellaRocas, 2003; Litvin,

---

[3] As Xiang and Gretzel (2010) stated, recently many tourism and hospitality marketers have also recognised the importance of including UGC on their web-site.

[4] For an analysis about the factors that might indicate a fake review see, for example: Keates (2007); O'Onnor, (2008)

Goldsmith and Pan, 2008), and these tools also mean that tourist operators can respond quickly and more efficiently to the market, they can enhance the creation and synthesis of data and, finally, permit better filtering of information (Kane, Fichman, Gallaugher and Glaser, 2009). Previous research highlighted that online hotel reviews increase consumers' awareness of lesser-known hotels more than of well-known establishments, and improve the average probability that tourists will consider booking a room in the hotel reviewed (Vermeulen, Seegers, 2009). Indeed, an effective development and control of the hotel's online presence on a UGC platform can improve the success rate of SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) procedures, increasing the traffic on the web-site. Regarding this latter point, it is important to highlight that search engines index social media pages more frequently if these social media are updated frequently. Social media also include a number of hyperlinks that can positively influence their ranking within search engines (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

Internet and social media can play a role in the marketing strategies of tourism and hospitality organisations before, during and after the holiday. Before the holiday, social media can be used to inform tourists about the services and get them excited about their choices, and also tell them how they can best experience their holiday. During their stay, they can be used to collect and display comments and questions from the audience. Finally, after their stay, Travel 2.0 applications can be used to stay in touch with customers, share information, videos/ and/or photos and also to gather feedback to improve their services.

Despite social media becoming increasingly important within the online tourism domain, there is still a lack of empirical data to describe the role of Web 2.0 to carry out online travel information searches and, more importantly, about the true awareness, use and attitude of the hospitality sector towards it.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to fill this gap, through an empirical analysis based upon the following research questions:

Research question 1:
> To what extent do Italian hospitality marketers know and use Travel 2.0 applications in their marketing and communication strategies?

Research question 2:
> Do Italian hospitality players encourage tourists to post online reviews and, then, do they manage/reply to them?

Research question 3:
> To what extent do Italian hospitality marketers believe Travel 2.0 applications can affect tourists' choices?

Research question 4:

> To what extent do Italian hospitality marketers believe Travel 2.0 applications can affect their business (awareness, image, occupancy rate, request, etc.)?

In the following paragraphs, an empirical study on a sample of Italian hospitality players is presented and discussed, in order to answer the previous research questions.

3. Method

According to statistical data (Il Sole 24-ore, 2010), the Italian Hospitality sector is composed of 140,000 players. The main categories represented are: hotels (34,000), agritourism (15,000), B&B (18,000) and rental lodgings (66,000). Research was carried out through an on-line survey, sending a questionnaire to a sample of 5,000 Italian hospitality businesses. The data-base was randomly assembled drawing up a list of e-mails from provincial and regional hospitality data-bases (in both paper and electronic formats).

The questionnaire was developed taking into account literature from academic journals, periodicals and other relevant literature to underpin the theory and link it with data and information gathered from online sources, such as blogs and message boards.

In particular, the questionnaire was divided into three parts.

The first part described the objectives of the research and the procedures to follow to fill in the questionnaire and then asked for some general information, such as the type of hospitality business in which the respondents work and the region it is located in.

The second part described different Web 2.0 tools (photo sharing, video sharing, blog, on-line travel agencies with review functions, social networks (both general and tourist-related) and microblogs) and asked respondents to indicate which of these they know and use.

The final part investigated the attitude of Italian hospitality managers towards Web 2.0. Therefore, we asked respondents to assess the degree to which they believe different Web 2.0 tools influence, on the one hand, the tourists' behaviour and the process they follow to select their accommodation and, on the other, the respondents own business. In particular, regarding the latter, participants were asked to assess the degree to which they believe Web 2.0 influences the following areas of their business: awareness, image, occupancy rate, profit, web-site traffic, requests for information (both by mail or phone). The hotel managers answered on a 7-point Liker scale (1 = not at all; 7 = too much). In this part of the questionnaire respondents were also asked to tell us if and how they manage the reviews that tourists post on-line. Specifically, we asked whether there is a specific person responsible for

checking and managing on-line reviews, whether staff encourages customers to post a review at the end of their stay and, finally, whether staff answers the reviews posted.

Before handing out the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with hotel managers to verify its validity, coherence, comprehensiveness and clarity. No concerns were reported in the pilot test.

Five thousand managers were invited to take part in the survey by sending them an e-mail in which the main reasons and objectives of the research were explained. The e-mail also briefly described the different options available to fill in and return the questionnaire (which was also attached to the original e-mail). Answers could be given either by filling in a online questionnaire reached by clicking on a link provided in the e-mail, or by fax/e-mail.

Allowing for a five week survey period which included significant follow up actions, a total of 847 questionnaires were returned, of which 614 could be used for statistical analysis. Therefore the overall response rate was 12.28%. Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the sample. Data was entered into a SPSS database for manipulation and analysis.

Table 1 – Composition of the sample: general information

General information (N = 614)			
Type of accomodation	**%**	**Type of accomodation**	**%**
Hotel *	1.60	Residence	2.80
Hotel **	8.90	B&B	11.40
Hotel ***	38.20	Camping	1.80
Hotel ****	21.30	Agritourism	1,50
Hotel *****	7,20	Other	4,10
Hotel *****s	1.20		
Region	**%**	**Region**	**%**
Abruzzo	1.60	Molise	1.60
Basilicata	0.70	Piedmont	7.60
Calabria	0.50	Puglia	16.20
Campania	2.00	Sardinia	9.40
Emilia-Romagna	1.60	Sicily	2.90
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	3.40	Tuscany	11.50
Lazio	5.40	Trentino Alto-Adige	9.00
Liguria	9.90	Umbria	1.60
Lombardy	8.50	Valle d'Aosta	3.10
Marche	-	Veneto	3,50

4. Findings

Findings underline two main points. Firstly, they highlight if and how Italian hospitality managers know Web 2.0 applications and use them in their marketing and communication strategies (paragraph 4.1). Secondly, they highlight the attitude of hospitality marketers towards Web 2.0 in term of their views regarding the way these applications can influence both tourism demand choices and several aspects of their own business (awareness, image, occupancy rate, request, etc.) (paragraph 4.2).

4.1 Awareness and use of Web 2.0 applications

Table 2 shows whether Italian hospitality marketers are aware of and use Web 2.0 applications.

Table 2 – Awareness and use of Web 2.0 applications in the Italian hospitality sector*

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social media	"I use it" (%)
Photo Sharing	77.5	Photo Sharing	28.3
Video Sharing	89.6	Video Sharing	34.9
Consumer tourism-related blogs	16.1	Consumer tourism-related blogs	3.4
OTA with reviewing and rating functions	88.9	OTA with reviewing and rating functions	63.5
Tourism-related social networks	72.8	Tourism-related social networks	51. 6
Non tourism-related social networks	88.9	Non tourism-related social networks	49.3
Microblogging	57.3	Microblogging	10.7

*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

The clearest resulting data is the wide gap between the level of awareness of Web 2.0 and its use. Except for consumer tourism-related blogs, the level of awareness is quite good, with the highest values for non tourism-related social networks (88,9%), OTAs with reviewing and rating functions (88,9%), video sharing (89,6%) and photo sharing (77,5%). On the other hand, use is very low compared to level of awareness and it is above 50% only for OTAs with reviewing and rating functions (63,5%) and tourism-related social networks (51,6%). Therefore, it could be argued that respondents are aware of Web 2.0 application, but still only use them minimally in their marketing and communication strategy. This occurs especially for consumer tourism-related blogs (3,4%) and microblogging (10,7%). Findings also allow to

indicate which are the best known and most used social media for each of the Web 2.0 application categories studied (Table 6-12 in appendix). The best known and most used social media are:

- ❏ Photo sharing: Yahoo, Picasa and Flickr;

- ❏ Video sharing: Youtube, Google Video and Yahoo Video;

- ❏ Consumer tourism-related blogs: Traveljournal, Mytripjournal;

- ❏ OTAs with reviewing and rating functions: Expedia, Booking.com, Last minute, HRS, InItalia;

- ❏ Tourism-related social networks: Tripadvisor, Trivago, Wikitravel and Zoover;

- ❏ Non tourism-related social networks: Facebook, Myspace and Yahoo Answer;

- ❏ Microblogging: Twitter;

It is interesting to note that microblogging social media, particularly Twitter, is the application with the highest gap between knowledge and use, respectively, 56,2% and 9,8%. This evidence would seem to indicate a possible competitive disadvantage for the Italian hospitality sector when promoting itself internationally because abroad Twitter, and more in general all the other social media, are widely used by consumers/tourists (see paragraph 1).

4.2 Attitude of the Italian hospitality managers towards Travel 2.0

Although previous research has highlighted that tourism and hospitality marketers should both encourage customers to post online review after their stay and answer/manage them subsequently, the situation within the Italian hospitality sector does not seem to reflect this. Often hotels do not have a specific person responsible for managing and answering online reviews. When managers were asked if there was a specific person responsible for managing and answering online reviews, answer was: no (39,40%), yes (60,60%).

Table 3 – "Proactivity" and reactivity of the Italian hospitality marketers toward the online reviews

	Never (%)	Almost never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Almost always (%)	Always (%)
Does the staff of your company encourage clients to post a review at the end of their stay?	25.1	11.4	24.8	14.5	8.8
Does the staff of your company reply to the reviews posted on-line?	21.2	12.2	23.5	12.5	11.1

Moreover, as Table 3 shows, staff in hospitality rarely encourage customers to post online reviews (only 23.3%), with ratings and comments, after their stay and they also rarely reply to them (only 23.6%)[5].

In this way our findings seem to suggest that hospitality managers have a quite poor level of awareness of the power of social media over tourists' behaviour. This idea also seems to be indicated by the mean values of the respondents' answers when assessing how social media influence hotel selection and booking processes. Apart from tourism OTAs with reviewing and rating functions and tourism-related social networks, the mean values are quite low especially for non tourism-related social networks, corporate blogs and microblogging (Table 4).

Table 4 – Influence of Web 2.0 on the accommodation selection process: the perception of Italian hospitality managers

Web 2.0 application	Response rate for each value of the 7-point Likert scale (%)							M.	S. D.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Corporate blogs	13.4	14.2	18.7	13.0	10.1	4.6	2.6	3.21	1.619
Photo Sharing	5.0	6.4	12.9	16.4	15.3	11.9	10.7	4.39	1.717
Video Sharing	6.2	6.0	12.5	16.3	15.3	11.9	9.0	4.30	1.724
Consumer tourism-related blogs	6.0	4.1	11.2	13.5	18.1	15.1	10.1	4.53	1.715
OTA with reviewing and rating functions	2.3	1.5	4.1	8.6	9.4	23.6	32.1	5.70	1.511
Tourism-related social networks	5.2	4.2	7.2	13.4	15.3	19.5	14.7	4.84	1.739
Non tourism-related social networks	9.1	11.2	13.5	15.6	13.8	9.4	4.7	3.79	1.729
Microblogging	15.1	11.7	18.1	11.7	9.8	3.7	1.8	3.11	1.604

$F = 125.914$ Sig. $= .000$

Indeed, it is possible to observe that respondents think that tourist choices are most influenced by OTAs with reviewing and rating functions and that this influence differs significantly from the pressure exerted by all another social media (Bonferroni test: Table 13 in appendix). Nowadays it seems that a high percentage of respondents still believe that social media, and more specifically some types, do not significantly influence hotel site selection or booking process. In a decreasing order, the percentages are: corporate blogs: 59,3%; microblogging:

---

[5] These percentages were calculated by summing "Almost always" and "Always" answers.

56,6%; non tourism-related social networks: 49,4%; video sharing: 41%; photo sharing: 40,7%; consumer tourism-related social networks: 34,8%; tourism-related social networks: 30%; OTAs with reviewing and rating functions: 16,5% (Table 4)[6].

Table 5 shows the mean values that Italian hospitality managers gave when assessing how social media influence certain types of business results, i.e.: image, awareness, occupancy rate, sales, traffic on the web-site and request for information by both e-mail and phone.

Table 5 - Influence of Web 2.0 on the hospitality business: the view of hospitality managers

Items	Response rate for each value of the 7-point Likert scale (%)							M.	S.D.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Image	1.1	1.6	2.6	5.2	14.5	24.4	35.5	5.89	1.320
Awareness	1.1	1.3	2.4	7.3	14.0	24.4	33.7	5.84	1.318
Occupancy rate	6.0	6.4	9.9	17.6	17.8	14.5	9.0	4.41	1.695
Sales	7.7	7.2	12.1	15.6	19.1	11.1	8.1	4.20	1.736
Traffic on the web-site	2.1	1.3	7.7	11.6	17.8	25.6	17.8	5.26	1.462
Requests for information by e-mail	1.1	1.6	7.5	9.9	16.8	28.7	19.2	5.39	1.399
Requests for information by phone	3.4	6.0	7.7	11.7	18.6	20.5	15.5	4.91	1.673

F = 95.068 Sig. = .000

Overall, our findings highlight that hospitality managers believe that social media exert a relatively high influence over several areas of their business. The highest values relate to the influence exerted over image, awareness, request for information by e-mail, traffic on the web-site and requests for information by phone. The lowest relate to sales and occupancy rates. In particular, no statistically significant differences could be find in the way hospitality managers believe social media affect image and level of awareness. On the other hand, these difference become statistically significant when we compare the influence exerted by Web 2.0 on image and level of awareness with that exerted over all the other areas of the hospitality business that were considered (Bonferroni test: Table 14 in appendix). Finally, it is interesting to show the percentage of hospitality managers who do not believe that social media exert

---

[6] These percentages were calculated by summing the percentage of people that give an assessment of 1,2,3 or 4.

influence over these areas of their business. For the different areas, these percentages are: sales: 42,6%; occupancy rate: 39,9%; requests for information by phone: 28,8%; traffic on the web-site: 28,2%; requests for information by e-mail: 20,1%; awareness: 12,1; image: 10,5%. These findings indicate that a significant number of hospitality players still do not believe that social media are able to exert influence over their business, especially in some areas such as sales or occupancy rates.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Faced with the continually challenging and evolving world of the internet, we must keep questioning ourselves about the future of the hospitality sector and, in particular, about the way it deals with, and take advantages of, the Web 2.0 revolution. The aim of this paper was to focus on this point by carrying out an empirical investigation on a sample of Italian hospitality players.

Findings draw attention to two main points. Firstly, they showed if and how Italian hospitality managers know Web 2.0 applications and apply them in their marketing and communication strategies. Secondly, they shed light on the attitude of hospitality marketers towards Web 2.0 in terms of their views regarding the way these applications can affect tourism demand choices and also several aspects of their own business (awareness, image, occupancy rate, request, etc.). Regarding the latter point, our study also considered the way hospitality personnel encourage consumers to post their reviews on-line and then subsequently check these reviews.

The most evident data is a significant inconsistency between the level of awareness that hospitality managers have of Travel 2.0 applications compared to the use they make of them in their marketing and communication strategy. Awareness is quite good with the highest values being for non tourism-related social networks, OTAs with reviewing and rating functions, video sharing and photo sharing. However, the use of Travel 2.0 applications is very low compared to awareness and it is only higher than 50% for tourism OTAs with reviewing and rating functions and tourism-related social networks.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that managers believe that only OTAs with reviewing and rating functions and tourism-related social networks have the power to strongly influence tourist choices. Other applications, especially non tourism-related social networks, microblogging and corporate blogs, are perceived to have much less influence. Whilst this finding is obvious for corporate blogs, as they are created and managed by the companies themselves, our findings give, on the whole, cause for concern. Indeed, they seem to highlight

that hospitality players have not fully acknowledged the power of social media in affecting tourist's behaviour. This is also confirmed also by the fact that hospitality companies often do not yet have a specific person responsible for managing and answering online reviews and they rarely encourage customers to post online reviews, ratings and comments after their stay and furthermore they rarely reply to them. On the whole, hospitality players believe social media exert quite a high influence over several areas of their business. The highest values are related to the influence exerted by Web 2.0 applications over image and awareness. The lowest are for sales and occupancy rates. However the percentage of hospitality managers who do not believe social media exert a significant influence over their business was high; again, a cause for concern that some managers are still apparently unaware of the possibilities offered by UGC applications.

To sum up it would appear that, in the Italian hospitality sector, Web 2.0 uptake is slow and not fully understood. Italian hospitality marketers have been slow to respond to the global opportunities and threats presented by Travel 2.0 and are losing opportunities and control over what gets written about their companies. Therefore, it could be argued that Italian hospitality managers appear to show a bandwagon effect, whereby they seem to adopt Web 2.0 through some sort of social pressure rather than to address strategic objectives (Murphy, Olaru and Schegg, 2003).

6. Limitations

Although our findings contribute to examine the awareness, use and attitude of Italian hospitality managers towards Travel 2.0 applications, the research does have some limitations.

Firstly, sample size could be considered small compared to the overall size of the Italian hospitality sector and, furthermore, not perfectly representative of the population. Indeed it could be argued that the composition of our sample does not match the real percentages represented by each category of hospitality companies within the Italian hospitality sector. Thus, findings cannot be generalised.

Secondly, this study did not take into consideration in the least the awareness, use and attitude shown by the Italian tourism demand towards Travel 2.0 applications and, therefore, it is not possible to fully investigated the measure in which the hospitality offer is able to keep up with the way the Italian tourism demand is aware of, uses and behaves towards Web 2.0 when making their tourist choices.

7. Future research

Moving away from its limitations, the present study does highlight several possible future research paths.

Firstly, this study could be repeated internationally in order to verify how international hospitality players from different countries are aware of, use and behave towards Travel 2.0. Secondly, future research could be carried out on a sample of the Italian tourism demand to deeply study its behaviour towards Travel 2.0 and thus evaluate how the Italian offer is able to emulate it and keep up with these opportunities.

8. Managerial implications

On the whole, as noted above, hospitality managers know about Travel 2.0 applications, but they do not use them appropriately, and they have not fully recognised the power that social media have in influencing both their business and tourists' behaviour. Therefore, it would appear that hospitality managers are missing out on market intelligence and on other information about behaviour and trends that are pertinent and relevant to their marketing strategies, which is freely available.

These conclusions are significant for both researchers and hospitality managers.

On the one hand, they contribute to the deepening of the scientific debate on the role of Travel 2.0 applications within the tourism sector, suggesting that researchers should carry out an in-depth analysis as to what the restrictions are to making a wider and more knowledgeable use of them.

On the other hand, findings highlight some interesting managerial implications and suggestions for the hospitality sector. In the first place, they suggest that hospitality managers should appoint a person to be specifically responsible for monitoring the online brand reputation of their companies and replying to the reviews that tourists post online. In particular, hospitality marketers, in running their marketing and communication activities, should split their time and financial resources between the different Travel 2.0 applications differently, and they should also pay attention to other differences, such as the gender and age of their customers. Indeed, as prior research highlighted, both the degree of trustworthiness that tourists feel towards the different types of Travel 2.0 applications and the influence that these applications exert over the way tourists perceive a company image and make their choices, change according to which type of Travel 2.0 application is considered (Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, and Fesenmaier, 2009; Del Chiappa, 2010).

At the same time, hospitality managers should invest more time in training their front-line staff, so that they encourage customers to post online reviews.

Finally, public tourism organisations, destination management organisations, associations within the hospitality sector and universities should provide hospitality players with more training on Travel 2.0 applications and on the opportunities that these can offer. Indeed, this could/should increase the use of these tools, and consequently improve the competitiveness of the Italian hospitality sector within international tourist markets.

References

Akehurst G. (2009). User generated content: the use of blogs for tourism organizations and tourism consumers, *Service Business, 3* (1), 51-61.

Arsal I., Backman S., & Baldwin E. (2008). Influence of an Online Travel Community on Travel Decisions. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 82-93), Wien: Springer.

Boyd D.M. and Ellison N.B. (2007). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Conputer-Mediated Communication,* 13 (1): pp 210-230.

Buhalis D., & Law R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet – The state of eTourism research, *Tourism Management*, *29* (4), 609-623.

Camellini M. (2009). *Idea: promuoviamo il Turismo con Flickr*, Retrieved from http://www.comunicazioneitaliana.it/int.php?id=1545, last modified 02/11/2009.

Carrera P., et al. (2008). MySpace, My Friends, My Customers. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 94-105), Wien: Springer.

Chow, J. (2005). The New Frontier. *National Post Business Magazine*, p.40.

Chung J.Y., & Buhalis D. (2008). Web 2.0: A study of online travel community. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 70-81), Wien: Springer.

Del Chiappa, G. (2011). Trustworthiness of Travel 2.0 applications and their influence on tourist behaviour: an empirical investigation in Italy. Forthcoming in R. Law, M. Fuchis and F. Ricci (Eds), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2011*. Vienna, Austria: Springer.

Dellarocas, C. (2003). The Digitization of Word of Mouth: Promise and Challenges of Online Feedback Mechanisms. *Management Science,* 49 (10): 1407-1424.

Dwivedi M., Shibu T.P., & Venkatesh U. (2007). Social software practices on the internet. Implications for the hotel industry, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 19* (5), 415-426.

eMarketer (2007). Niche Sites invigorate Online Travel. Retrieved from http://www.eMarketer.com (last modified April/11/2007).

Feed Company (2008). Video Viral Marketing Survey: The Agency Perspective, retrieved from http://www.feedcompany.com/wp-content/uploads/Feed_Company_Viral_Video_Marketing_Survey.pdf (last modified 30/07/2010).

Gretzel U., & Yoo K.H. (2008). Use and Impact of Online travel Reviews. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 35-46), Wien: Springer.

Gretzel, U., Hyan-Yoo, K. and Purifoy, M. (2007). Online Travel Review Study: The role and impact of online travel reviews. *Laboratory for Intelligent System in Tourism*, College Station.

Hamill J., Attard D., & Stevenson A. (2009). National Destination marketing organizations and Web 2.0. *Mercati e competitività, 1,* 71-94.

Herr, P.M., Kardes F.R. and Kim, J. (1991). Effect of Word-of-Mouth and Product-Attribute Information on Persuasion: An Accessibility-Diagnostics Perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research,* 17 (March): pp. 454-462.

Huang C.Y., Chou C.J., & Lin P.C. (2010). Involvement theory in constructing bloggers' intention to purchase travel products, *Tourism Management, 31* (4), 513-526.

Iavazzo V. (2009). *I segreti del video marketing*, Bruno Editore: Roma.

Il Sole 24-ore (2010). L'hotel soffre in redditività. 8 maggio 2010, p. 53.

Illum S.F., Ivanov S.H., & Liang Y. (2010). Using virtual communities in tourism research, *Tourism Management*, *31* (3), 335-340.

Kane G.C., Fichman R.G., Gallaugher J., & Glaser J. (2009). Community Relations 2.0, *Harvard Business Review, 87* (11), 45-50.

Karakas F. (2009). Welcome to World 2.0: the new digital ecosystem, *Journal of Business Strategy, 30* (4), 23-30.

Kasavana M.L., Nusair K., & Teodosic K. (2010). Online social networking: redefining the human web. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology, 1* (1), 68-82.

Keates, N., (2007). Deconstructing TripAdvisor. *Wall Street Journal*, 1, June, p. 4.

Lee W., Gretzel U., & Law R. (2009). Quasi-Trial Experiences trough Sensory Information on Destination Web Sites, *Journal of Travel Research OnlineFirst,* doi: 10.1177/0047287509346991, 1-14.

Lewis , R.C., and Chambers, R. E. (2000). Marketing leadership in hospitality, foundations and practices (3rd ed). Wiley: New York.

Li C., Bernoff J. (2008). *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, Harvard Business Press: New York.

Li X., Pan B., Zhang L., & Smith W.W. (2009). The Effect of Online Information Search on Image Development: Insights from a Mixed-Methods Study, *Journal of Travel Research*, *48* (1), 45-57.

Litvin S.W., Goldsmith R.E., & Pan B. (2008). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management, *Tourism Management, 29* (3), 458-468.

Messinger P.R. et al. (2009). Virtual worlds-past, present, and future: New directions in a social compunting, *Decision Support Systems, 47* (3), 204-228.

Mizerski, R. W. (1982). An Attribution Explanation of the Disproportionate Influence of Unfavorable Information. *Journal of Consumer Research, 9* (3): pp. 301-310.

Musser, J. and O'Reilly, T. (2006). Web 2.0 principles and best practices, O'Really Radar.

Nielsen. (2009). *Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey. Trust, Value and Engagement in Advertising.* Retrieved from http://hk.acnielsen.com.

O'Connor P. (2008). User-Generated Content and Travel: A Case Study on Tripadvisor.com. in P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 35-46), Wien: Springer.

O'Connor P. (2008). User-Generated Content and Travel: A Case Study on Tripadvisor.com. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 47-58), Wien: Springer.

Pan B., MacLaurin T., & Crotts J.C. (2007). Travel blog and the Implication for Destination Marketing, *Journal of Travel Research, 46* (1), 34-45.

PhoCusWright. (2009). Consumer Travel Report.

Poria Y., & Oppewal H. (2003), A new medium for data collection: online news discussion, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 15* (4), 232-236.

Pühringer S., & Taylor A. (2008). A practitioner's report on blogs as a potential source of destination marketing intelligence, *Journal of Vacation Marketing, 14* (2), 177-187.

Qiang, Y., Law, R. and Gu B. (2009). The impact of online user reviews on hotel rooms sales. *International Journal of Hospitality Management,* 28 (1): pp. 180-182.

Schegg R., Liebrich A., Scaglione M., & Syed Ahmad S.F. (2008). An Exploratory Field Study of Web 2.0 in Tourism. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken & U. Gretzel (Ed.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2008, Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria,* (pp. 152-163), Wien: Springer.

Schmalleger D., & Carson D. (2008). Blogs in tourism: Changing approaches to information exchange, *Journal of Vacation Marketing, 14* (2), 99-110.

Senecal, S., and Nantel, J. (2004). The influence of on-line product recommendations on consumers' online choices. *Journal of Retailing*, 80 (2): pp.159-169.

Starkov, M. and Mechoso, M (2008). *Best practices on Monitoring Hotel Review Sites.* Hospitality eBusiness Strategies: New York.

Susskind A.M., & Stefanone M.A. (2010). Internet apprehensiveness. An examination of on-line informetion seeking and purchasing behavior, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, *1* (1), 5-29.

Thevenot G. (2007). Blogging as a social media, *Tourism and Hospitality Research, 7* (3/4), 282-289.

Trusov M., Bucklin R.E., & Pauwels K. (2009). Effects of Word-of-Mouth Versus Traditional Marketing: Findings from an Internet Social Networking Site, *Journal of Marketing, 73* (9), 90-102.

Vermeulen I.E., & Seegers D. (2009). Tried and tested: The impact of online hotel reviews on consumer consideration, *Tourism Management, 30* (1), 123-127.

Wang, Y., Yu, Q. and Fesenmaier, D. (2002). Defining the virtual tourist community: implications for tourism marketing. *Tourism Management,* 23 (4): pp. 407-417.

Weiss A.M., Lurie N.H., & Macinnis D.J. (2008). Listening to Strangers: Whose Responses Are Valuable, How Valuable Are They, and Why?. *Journal of Marketing Research, 45* (4), 425-436.

Xiang Z., & Gretzel U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search, *Tourism Management, 31* (2) 179-188.

Yadav M.S., & Varadarajan R. (2005). Interactivity in the Electronic Marketplace: An Exposition of the Concept and Implications for Research. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 33* (4), 585-603.

Yoo, K.H., Lee, Y., Gretzel U. & Fesenmaier D.R. (2009). Trust in Travel-Related Consumer Generated Media. In W. Höpken, U. Gretzel and R. Law (Eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2009*, 49-59. Vienna, Austria: Springer.

Appendix

Table 6 – Awareness and use of photo sharing

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social Media	"I use it" (%)
Yahoo	70.4	Yahoo	17.9
Picasa	39.4	Picasa	12.1
Flickr	35.3	Flickr	8.3
Photobucket	13.2	Photobucket	1.0

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 7 – Awareness and use of video sharing

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social media	"I use it" (%)
Youtube	87.8	Youtube	29.3
Google Video	62.9	Google Video	10.9
Yahoo Video	43.5	Yahoo Video	5.4
Libero Video	31.4	Video in Hotel	5.0
Video in Hotel	16.6	Libero Video	4.1
Tv Trip	14.2	Tv Trip	3.6
Vimeo	9.0	Vimeo	1.1
Revver	6.7	Revver	0.7
Clipser	5.9	Clipser	0.5

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 8 – Awareness and use of consumers tourism-related blog

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social Media	"I use it" (%)
Traveljournal	12.4	Traveljournal	2.3
Mytripjournal	11.2	Mytripjournal	2.1

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 9 – Awareness and use of OTAs with review and ratings functionality

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social media	"I use it" (%)
Expedia	84.0	Booking.com	54.7
Booking.com	82.6	Expedia	45.4
Last Minute	70.5	HRS	33.4
HRS	47.4	Last Minute	26.9
InItalia	44.0	InItalia	23.6
Travellero	28.0	UniTravel	9.4
UniTravel	22.3	Travellero	6.2
MarteHotels	16.1	MarteHotels	8.6
Splendia	14.7	Splendia	5.0

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 10 – Awareness and use of tourism-related social network

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social media	"I use it" (%)
Tripadvisor	71.7	Tripadvisor	49.7
Trivago	43.6	Trivago	24.6
Wikitravel	16.1	Zoover	5.2
Zoover	14.0	Frommer's	3.6
Frommer's	9.8	Wikitravel	3.3
Fodor's	9.3	Fodor's	2.6
Openfeedback	4.1	Nextstop	1.1
Nextstop	4.1	Thorn Tree	0.8
Drifter	4.1	Openfeedback	0.8
Where I have been	3.1	Tripsay	0.7
Tripsay	3.1	Where I have been	0.7
Thorn Tree	1.6	Drifter	0.7
Dopplr	1.6	Dopplr	0.7

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 11 – Awareness and use of non tourism-related social network

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social media	"I use it" (%)
Facebook	88.8	Facebook	47.6
My Space	62.7	My Space	9.0
Yahoo Answer	40.2	Yahoo Answer	6.8
Netlog	23.8	Netlog	2.1
Orkut	9.6	Orkut	1.3

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 12 – Awareness and use of microblogging

Social media	"I Know it" (%)	Social media	"I use it" (%)
Twitter	56.2	Twitter	9.8
Jaiku	3.6	Pownce	0.5
Mysay	3.4	Hictu	0.3
Memy	1.8	Memy	0.3
Pownce	1.1	Jaiku	0.2
Hictu	1.1	Mysay	0.0

Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 13 – How hospitality manager think social media influence the tourists choices?: Bonferroni test

I \ J	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1		1.174*	1.080*	1.312*	2.490*	1.629*	.573*	-.109
2	1.174*		.094	.138	1.315*	455*	-.601*	-1.283*
3	1.080*	.094		.232	1.409*	.549*	-.508*	-1.189
4	1.312*	.138	.232		1.178*	.317	-.739*	-1.421*
5	2.490*	1.315*	1.409*	1.178*		-.860*	-1.197*	-2.598*
6	1.629*	.455*	.549*	.317	-.860*		1.056*	-1.739*
7	.573*	-.601*	-.508*	-.739*	-1.197*	1.056*		-.681*
8	-.109	-1.283*	-1.189	-1.421*	-2.598*	-1.739*	-.681*	

1 = corporate blogs   2 = photo sharing   3 = video sharing   4 = consumer tourism-related blogs
5 = OTA with reviewing and rating functions   6 = tourism-related social networks
7 = non tourism-related social networks 8 = microblogging

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 14 – How hospitality managers think social media affect their business?: Bonferroni test

I \ J	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	.	.045	1.483*	1.687*	.628*	.503*	.977*
2	-.045		1.438*	1.642*	.583*	.458*	.932*
3	-1.483*	-1.438*		.204	-.855*	-.980*	-.506*
4	-1,687*	-1.642*	-.204		-1.059*	-1.184*	-.710*
5	-.628*	-.583*	.855*	1.059*		-.125	.349*
6	-.503	-.458*	.980*	1.184*	.125		.474
7	-.977*	-.932*	.506*	.710*	-.349*	-.474*	

1 = image 2 = awareness 3 = occupancy rate 4 = sales 5 = traffic on the web-site
6 = requests for information by e-mail 7 = requests for information by phone

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level