

TOURISM Today

THE JOURNAL OF THE COLLEGE OF TOURISM AND HOTEL MANAGEMENT

NUMBER 10
AUTUMN 2010

Special Issue

INTEGRATED RELATIONAL TOURISM AND TOURISM
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Guest Editors:

Razaq Raj
Claudio Vignali
Giovanni Ruggieri
Clara S. Petrillo

10th
Anniversary
Issue



College of Tourism
and Hotel Management

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**THE COLLEGE OF
TOURISM AND
HOTEL MANAGEMENT**

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P.O.Box 20281
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ISSN 1450-0906

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Aims & Scope

Tourism Today serves as an international, scholarly, and refereed journal aiming to promote and enhance research in the fields of tourism and hospitality. The journal is published by the College of Tourism and Hotel Management, Cyprus and is intended for readers in the scholarly community who deal with the tourism and hospitality industries, as well as professionals in the industry. *Tourism Today* provides a platform for debate and dissemination of research findings, new research areas and techniques, conceptual developments, and articles with practical application to any tourism or hospitality industry segment. Besides research papers, the journal welcomes book reviews, conference reports, case studies, research notes and commentaries.

Aims & Scope

The scope of the journal is international and all papers submitted are subject to strict double blind peer review by its Editorial Board and by international reviewers. The journal features conceptual and empirical papers, and editorial policy is to invite the submission of manuscripts from academics, researchers and industry practitioners. The Editorial Board will be looking particularly for articles about new trends and developments within the field of tourism and hospitality, and the application of new ideas and developments that are likely to affect tourism and hospitality in the future. The journal also welcomes submission of manuscripts in areas that may not be directly tourism-based but cover a topic that is of interest to researchers, educators and practitioners in the fields of tourism and hospitality.

Decisions regarding publication of submitted manuscripts are based on the recommendations of members of the Editorial Board and other qualified reviewers in an anonymous review process. Submitted articles are evaluated on their appropriateness, significance, clarity of presentation and conceptual adequacy. Negative reviews are made available to authors. The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of the Editorial Board of *Tourism Today* or of the College of Tourism and Hotel Management.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the tenth edition of *Tourism Today*, the journal of the College of Tourism and Hotel Management. As has been the case for years, the journal is available to everyone free of charge from the College of Tourism and Hotel Management website.

This edition is an out of the ordinary for us for *Tourism Today* for two major reasons. The first reason is that this is a celebration of a decade of being in print. Because of the hard work of many people, including the Editorial Board, those who have submitted articles to the journal, and the dedication of the management of the College of Tourism and Hotel Management, the journal has continued to be in print and improve in quality over the years.

The second reason this edition is extraordinary is that this is the first edition in the journal's history that has been a special edition. We have been fortunate to have had the offer to create a special edition and are glad that the topic is one that is of interest and importance to many. We are especially thankful to Razaq Raj for proposing the idea to us, because it resulted in a high quality end product, as I am sure the readers of this edition will agree.

Although this edition is unique for *Tourism Today* in that it focuses upon on a region, the Mediterranean, the focus on a geographical area will definitely be of interest to those who are interested in the Mediterranean region's tourism and will also have implications for those who are not particularly focused upon the Mediterranean region.

We continue encourage the readers to be part of the process of improvement of *Tourism Today* by submitting quality submissions to us. As has been the case for a decade now, constructive comments that could help us improve the journal are appreciated.

We wish you a good reading.

Craig Webster
Editor-in-Chief, *Tourism Today*

NOTE FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

The papers selected in this special issue are reflective and dedicated to specific geographic areas. The main topic is tourism but behind the topic is the importance of research activities necessary to produce the final result.

Integrated Relational Tourism (IRT) has the principal objective to realize statistical studies and documents of research in order to identify current issues of Tourism in European islands.

By analysing IRT provision within tourism, insights can be gained into not only what the European islands want to present to visitors but also what the destination aspires to be. European islands thus serve to provide potential visitors and other tourists with an insight into a European islands vision of their past, present and their future.

European islands can position themselves through events tourism hosting and staging in marketing terms to reach niche as well as mass audiences, not simply through increasing visitor numbers at events but by creating powerful associations of the European islands as a destination in the mind of visitors. These association of European islands may be connected to the nature of events, such as religious festivals, but event associations can also result in an overall perception of a country or locality as ‘dynamic’, ‘youthful’, ‘historic’, ‘sporting’, ‘showbiz’ etc.

The purpose of the collection of papers is not to discuss the importance of primary and secondary data; the use of quantitative or qualitative instruments; to develop positive or phenomenological approaches, but to see that from sincere research, articles and papers can be produced with the emphasis of an end result.

Furthermore, the purpose of the edition is to provide a practical and theoretical insight into the Mediteranean region’s tourism by providing an opportunity to discuss conceptual frameworks for sustainable events, planning and policy models, economic feasibility, environmental policy and social impacts. The special edition is intended to support practitioners in their operational and administrative duties and educate undergraduates/postgraduates within their industry sectors throughout the Mediteranean region and on an international basis.

Razaq Raj, Claudio Vignali, Giovanni Ruggieri, and Clara S. Petrillo
Guest Editors

Rural development and social network sites: a case study in Marche region (Central Italy)¹

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ABSTRACT

Websites, blogs and SNSs are important tools implemented by “active” web users who are willing to build their own “social network”. Many SMEs are seemingly using some of these tools in a “non active” manner that refers to an “adaptive behaviour” instead of a more favourable “proactive behaviour”. The paper investigates the actual use of web tools by private entrepreneurs acting in the rural tourism sector to strengthen marketing and communication programs. The authors analyze collected data in order to enucleate some “proactive behaviour” among local entrepreneurs to design future common and feasible economic choices. The real acting of SMEs in the web seems to be non active and in danger to loose great opportunities coming from enlargement and deepening of markets. Probably, the future best practice will be the building of durable relations with customers in order to achieve their retention and satisfaction by improving SNSs use in conjunction with others Web2.0 tools.

Keywords: rural tourism, Internet, social network sites, rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet has an increasing diffusion in urban areas both for leisure and business purposes and it is largely studied, while the diffusion and use in rural areas or in agriculture is less studied and we know little about the possibility of use the Internet in rural development programs.

The goal of the paper is to investigate the factual possibility of improving the use of the Internet in rural areas, focusing the Marche region (Central Italy) as a case study. The Internet may be an adequate tool to upgrade the competitiveness of the entire agricultural sector, but in particular of the rural tourism, for improving quality of life in rural areas and encouraging

¹ Contributors: GLC and FC contributed to conception and design. The both authors were involved in analysis and interpretation of the data. GLG drafted the manuscript, which was critically revised by FC. The authors approved the final version.

diversification of rural economy. In the local framework of the Marche region (Central Italy), considering the specific development model based on a large diffusion of SMEs, that use the set of skills, the experience and the know how that results from information, knowledge, learning capabilities of the employees, the authors discuss the possibility of a better and larger diffusion and use of new technologies related to the Internet.

The attention is mainly focused on agriculture and rural development, in order to describe the actual diffusion and the economic potentialities of web tools if used in the marketing management in a rural context, both in the agricultural firms and in the other productive sectors located in rural areas, such as tourism. In 2008, Italy has a turnover of 157.5 million euro from tourism and produced 61.5 billion euro of GDP from travel and tourism sector, while the employees were 2.5 million. Agritourism farms are round 18,000 with a turnover of 880 millions of euros.

In the Marche region, tourism raises to an increasing importance in the economy framework. In 2007, the Added Value of tourism was the 4% of the total; tourism employees near 39,000 people (6% of the total) but following a descending trend. The number of arrivals is today near 2 million people per year. The most notable feature is the great increase in the number of agritourism farms and the development of bed and breakfast (B&B), in which the average lasting of visit is 14-15 days for Italians and 9-10 days for the non-Italians in comparison to the average stay in hotels that is equal to 4-5 days. Rural tourism attracts families and those who spend less money than some other tourists, and different types of people, most notably, those who are environmentalists, those who enjoy wild-life and those with an interest in nature.

Referring to the Marche region (Central Italy), characterized by a specific development model based on the large diffusion of SMEs, the paper discusses the possibility of a larger and deeper diffusion and use of new technologies related to the Internet. Italy, in recent years, faced the very fast diffusion of agritourism and some authors (Casini, 2009) delineate the actual possibility for farmers to implement an innovative model of multifunctional agriculture. Thus, our main attention has been paid to agriculture and rural development, with the aim to describe the actual diffusion and the economic potentialities of web tools if used in the marketing management.

First of all, it is necessary to specify some definitions in order to avoid any ambiguity and misunderstanding as in the Italian context it is possible to distinguish between the definitions of “rural tourism” and “agritourism”. The legal definition of “agritourism” states as an activity legally and strictly pertaining to farms and farmers. On the opposite, “rural” refers to any activity located in a rural area that could not be regulated by agricultural policy and not benefit by public subsidies.

Accordingly to the Marche Region Law, we consider the legal definition of Agritourism and Rural Tourism that includes Agritourism farms and Country Houses so that Rural Tourism could be consider as the presence of travellers and visitors in areas dedicated primarily to

agriculture. The specific object of the research is the Agritourism farms (AFs) and the Country Houses (CHs) of a local economic system and their practice of new technologies based on the use of Internet.

The rural communities traditionally have specific kinds of social networking and would be crucial to investigate if new forms of social networking could be optimized also in rural areas and if they would be used in a different manner than in urban areas.

The paper reports the first findings on diffusion and use of web-sites, social network sites and other web-tools among the AFs and the CHs in the rural areas of the Marche region. Some comments are added on future opportunities and public intervention to ameliorate the use of SNSs for rural development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The European population lives mostly (over 56%) in rural areas, which cover 91% of the entire territory. Thus, rural development is an important policy area for the EU economic policy. The fundamental rules governing rural development policy for the period 2007 to 2013 are set out in Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005 (EC, 2005) that focuses on “improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; improving the environment and the countryside; improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy”.

The national and regional programs differ from the EU Rural Development Policy primarily for the deep differences in the land use policy due to geographical, historical and political reasons.

Territorial cohesion is an important concern for national and supranational institutions of governance in the European Union, with the consequent enlarging of importance of the Regional Policy in the European political context. One important concern arises from the unexpected growth in spatial imbalance in social and economic terms in the European territory, with no or very scarce results of convergence.

The EU policy general framework encourages a larger diffusion of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) for the enablement of economies of scale, facilitating ICT take-up by farms and rural businesses and the adoption of e-business and e-commerce in agriculture. Nevertheless, some authors refer (Gilbert, Karahalios and Sandvig, 2008) that history repeatedly demonstrates that rural communities have peculiar technological needs, and we do not have sufficient information on how rural communities use modern technologies, such as the web-tools.

The current way of thinking about rural development reflects the *bottom-up (local)* process of development emerging in theories of economic development proposed at the end of the 70's, since several economists realized the failure of traditional theories, based on *exogenous*

development, whose implementation, often increased, instead of reducing, the differences between regions (Nomisma, 2003). The rural EU policy affirms that: "The key to the sustainable development of rural regions lies in the development of an independent perspective and the discovery of indigenous potential." (EC, 1999).

In analyzing local social and economic phenomena in the so called *Third Italy*, that includes the Marche region, sociologists (Bagnasco, 1977) and economists (Becattini 1979, 1987, Garofoli, 1983), signalized an alternative way of intending a development model, not suiting the traditional one. The local paradigm of development considers the rational and sustainable exploitation of local resources being crucial for theory making (Bagarani et alii, 1992) so that the population of SMEs, resulting from local initiative, is the authentic agent of regional economic development and the effective one that can match public goals. In this direction, increasing attention has been paid to external determinants that constitute the firm's environment favourable to innovation, yet traditionally researchers classified determinants of innovation in internal and external to the firms (Davelaar and Nijkamp, 1989). This *innovative environment*, within which firms operate, has been named in many diverse ways: industrial districts (Becattini, 1987), regional innovation systems (Morgan, 1997), network regions (Camagni, 1991), regional innovation milieux (Maillat, 1992), and clusters (Porter, 1998).

Apart of any name differentiation and approaches, our task is to analyze if and how the local agricultural entrepreneurs managed their own web site and other web tools as an innovation and if they take information from the local environment. Empirical findings show that the most part of the farms of the Marche region offering tourism and meal serving services initiated a private web site.

In carrying out a field research, we faced two difficulties: (i) the absence of sound studies on rural use of modern technologies for marketing development and promotion and (ii) the scarcity of information on how design web tools for rural communities.

Official data (Regione Marche PSR, 2007-13) recognize that rural areas are less attractive as a tourist destination in comparison to urban and littoral areas, but in recent years the urban hotel bed stock increased by the 5% while the farm and B&B beds stock increased by the 30%. These findings enlighten the potentialities of the rural areas in future tourism development and in social cohesion.

A RURAL-INDUSTRIAL REGION

The Marche region extends over an area of 9,694 km² of the central Adriatic slope between the regions Emilia-Romagna to the north, Tuscany and Umbria to the west, Lazio and Abruzzo to the south. The entire eastern boundary is formed by the Adriatic Sea. Most of the region is mountainous or hilly, with the Apennine chain along the internal boundary and an extensive system of hills descending towards the sea boundary. The hilly area covers two-thirds of the region and is interrupted by valleys with numerous but very short rivers and by

alluvial plains perpendicular to the principal chain. The region is subdivided into five almost similar-sized provinces: Pesaro-Urbino, Ancona, Macerata, Fermo and Ascoli Piceno. Only the regional capital, Ancona, has over 100,000 inhabitants.

The population density in Marche is below the national average. According to official census in 2001, it was 151.7 inhabitants per km², compared to the national figure of 192. Nowadays migration from abroad of Italy inverts the traditional decreasing rate of population growth.

The best known economic strength of the region is the so-called *Marche model* for economic development. This type of development has its roots in the quality of human capital employed in the manufacturing sector and in the territorial diffusion of many SMEs as in an industrial district. The industry gained undoubted advantages from this form of organization, the entire economy of Marche benefited from a slow economic revolution which is related to strong networking of social relations.

People living in the Marche meet very low crime, while unemployment rates are lower than the national average. On the opposite side, the local development is somewhat weak for using low technologies that exposes it to strong competition from developing countries, for an aging population and for a transport system which preferred the north-south axis along the coast to the communications with the interior.

Marche's contribution to Italy's GDP is 2.6% (2001) and its population represents a share of 2.6% of the national total (Census 2001). Per capita GDP is about the same as for Italy as a whole, and is 2% above the EU average. Many SMEs are active in the region. Footwear and leather goods are produced in a large area straddling the provinces of Macerata and Ascoli Piceno, furniture in the Pesaro area and Fabriano, household appliances and textiles in the province of Ancona, in which the main engineering companies are also located, including ship building, petrochemicals and paper, as well as consumer durables.

According to the OCSE classification Marche is to be considered a predominantly rural (PR) territory. The density of resident population in the five Provinces is ranged between 15% and 50% of the value benchmark, that is 150 inhabitants per squared kilometre. This method is too simple and does not reflect the Italian local complexity. Indeed, at the Italian national level a specific method has been proposed by the National Rural Development Program (NRDP), firstly excluding the provincial capital cities with more than 150 persons/km², then adopting the OCSE classification in the rest of the municipalities, avoiding the provincial borders, but considering altimetric zoning.

According to this classification in the Marche, seemingly, there are no areas with "specialized" agriculture (adopting intensive and specialized technologies) but the land may be classified in three areas: Capital Cities, Apennine Mountain Municipalities, while the rest of the territory is classified as Predominantly Rural in Hillside, that faces a large diffusion of industrial SMEs in Intermediate Rural Industrialized Areas (Regione Marche, 2007).

WHAT IS A TOURISM DESTINATION?

A tourism destination is to be considered as a constellation of specialized companies, organizations and communities gathered into a confined geographical location, even if its boundaries are often poorly defined and it can be also seen as a form of industrial cluster or district (Baggio, 2008). This statement is consistent with the definition adopted by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2002) as: “A physical space in which a visitor spends at least one overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions, and tourism resources within one day’s return travel time. It has physical and administrative boundaries defining its management, and images and perceptions defining its market competitiveness. Local destinations incorporate various stakeholders often including a host community, and can nest and network to form larger destinations”.

Thus, it is arguable that the *innovative environment* of a constellation or cluster or of a district may be linked to the concept of social networking as in the *milieu innovateur* (Maillat, 1992) or in the *network region* (Camagni, 1991). In the *milieu innovateur* the economic contiguity is paired to a specific socio-cultural contiguity, the latter depending on shared behaviours, reciprocal trust, common languages, cognitive model diffusion and specific relations. This type of relationship is named as *relational capital* and constituted by cooperation attitude, trust, and social cohesion that expresses the *sense of affiliation* to the local territory (Camagni, 1991) so that the social environment they form is highly homogeneous. Geographical proximity joined to socio-cultural proximity determines high probability of interactions among economic agents, informal and trusted agreements, punishment and subsequent lacks of opportunistic behaviours, labour division and cooperation. The milieu then builds and accumulates a *relational capital* based on social cohesion, sense of belonging, identification and membership (Camagni 1991).

Development itself stems largely from the combination of different individual local systems growth. If the local systems in turn stem from the interacting and the feedback of original local forces in a continuous circuit that creates new forces of development, then, the definition of a valid theory of local development could be the reconstruction of the socio-economic change in its local pattern and in the basic unit; this pattern being embodied by the evolving mechanisms and processes of transformation of local systems (Becattini and Rullani, 1997).

The terms *cluster* and *district* have not the same meaning as the two concepts fundamentally have been clearly differentiated by two main scholars. Industrial clusters are “geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field” (Porter, 1998) and their basic feature is the belonging to a specific sector and the participating firms are connected by horizontal or vertical relationships and concentrated in a geographic area. They are complemented by some “external” entities such as the public institutions even if the central focus remains the entrepreneurial and business dimensions. On the contrary, a “district” is an extension of the specialized spatial concentration idea, adding the importance of the social environment, including regional governments and trade associations of the area in

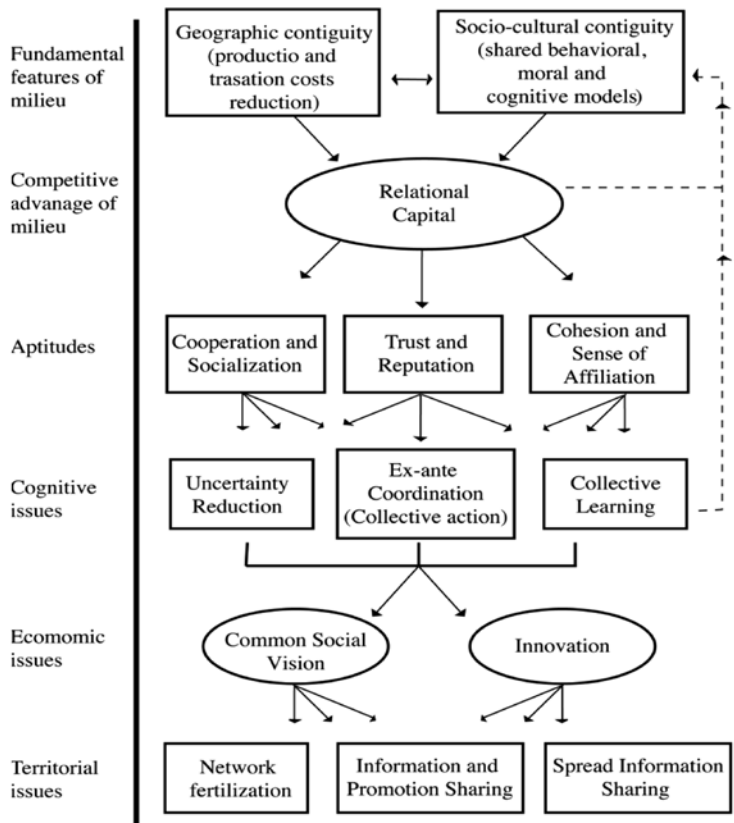
which the district is individuated (Becattini, 1987). The feature to be understood with more accuracy is the role of the linkages with the “external” world.

Becattini’s approach appears closer to the reality in rural areas and it is also more suitable as a theoretical framework for the study of a tourism destination. Considering recent studies on tourism (Baggio, 2008) and on system’s general connectivity properties (Boccaletti et al., 2006), a tourism destination is to be considered as such a system.

Thus, this paper tends to consider a rural tourist destination as a *milieu innovateur* in the perspective to understand if the introduction of tourism in farms is to be considered as an innovation and if the adoption of modern types of social networking would be an opportunity for the local development in a selected territory.

The main determinants and the fundamental features of *milieu innovateur* with some networking linkages are described in the Fig. 1 that follows.

Figure 1: – Main determinants and feature of Local Milieu (adapted form Camagni, 1991)



THE RELATIONSHIP PERSPECTIVE IN MARKETING

For decades, the “quality movement” placed customer satisfaction as the ultimate goal of marketing programs, till the marketing thought had a changing evolution in the last ten years. In realizing that satisfied customers could defect to alternative brands or sellers at relatively high rates, marketing strategists looked to the actual possibilities of creating a greater commitment with the customer. In order to sustain customer commitment it is possible: (i) to build brand equity, for consumer products; (ii) to build relationships, for industrial products.

Brand equity used mass media advertising, corporate citizenship and public events sponsorship to build a brand image. On the contrary, relationship marketing sought to build interdependence between partners and relied on “one-to-one” communications, historically delivered through the sales force (Sorce, 2002).

As marketing databases use spreads and the Internet is becoming friendly, the capacity to reach individual customers became a viable strategy for a wide range of firms, including consumer products companies and in general for SMEs or even for farms, traditionally insulated in local economic relations. In preceding case study carried out in the Marche region it has been pointed out that local agritourism entrepreneurs (Corinto, 2009) declared to prefer a word-of-mouth communication practice as it is considered the best efficient for business improvements. This is a partial validation of the above mentioned increasing attention to relationship marketing, but the interesting point is if the Internet will unfold the development of agritourism farms economy my means of more active pattern of relationship.

Some empirical experiences suggested more attention to one-to-one communication (Bottinelli, 2004) oriented to “share of customer” rather than “share of market.” The suggested perspective is to consider soundly the company’s information on single customer’s interests so that the “one-to-one” interaction will lead to improve the life-time value, through the building of customer’s commitment and enforcing their loyalty (Hallberg, 1999). Small improvements in customer retention can as much as double company profits (Reichheld, 1996) and this is because (Sorce, 2002):

1. it costs less to serve long-term customers;
2. loyal customers will pay a price premium;
3. loyal customers will generate word-of-mouth referrals to other prospective customers.

These are actual targets for any firm, and with much evidence for tourism firms, agritourism farms and B&B. The hypothesis to be validated is that if farmers managing a tourist service do implement the Internet or any other web-tool to improve businesses in a one-to-one marketing perspective.

METHOD AND DATA

To carry out the task of the paper, quantitative data at local level on a tourism sub-sector such as agritourism and B&B have been gathered in Marche region, collecting official statistics data and adding original ones by a direct survey. According to official source (PSR, 2007-13) in the Marche region there are near 400 agritourism farms, that is near the 3% of the national total number. The 83% offer lodging accommodation, the 53% only food serving, and the 30% offer free-time and cultural services, though the services types are gradually changing.

The meal serving is becoming the main businesses in comparison to accommodation, while cultural supply is losing its preceding importance. In the 498 agritourism farms detected by an official study carried out by Marche Regional Administration in the 2005 (pair to the 0.8% of total farms) the total turnover evaluated is up to 27.5 million euros and is equivalent to the 3% of the national turnover of the sector. The same sources update the total number in the 2006 to 700 agritourism farms, considering also the number of country houses.

The specific aim of our study is to investigate the actual use and the potential growth of the Internet, i.e. websites and other web-tools, also in the rural areas for the development of tourism. The first problem we faced is the reliability of sources in order to set out a useful data-base. Indeed, the Region Marche Administration issues an extended data-base on regional tourism supply, named "I.ST.RICE", according to the regional law on rural tourism (Regione Marche, 2002) that differs from the Italian national rules while it considers both Agritourism Farms and Country Houses within the same law framework.

Furthermore, the official data-base is not annually updated and the phenomenon could be underestimated or overestimated at all. Furthermore, many of farms registered in the official White Page of phone directory is not inventoried the Istrice's data-base. The contrary occurrence is detectable too. In order to avoid the most possible causes of mistakes, the statistical data used are a cross results from the both sources by considering the actual existence of an economic enterprise. Thus, we inventoried the main features of use of web tools by Agritourism Farms and Country Houses located in Marche region and the method applied follows these steps:

1. inventory of total number of the agritourism farms located in Marche region using both the official online Italian White-Pages (<http://www.paginebianche.it/index.html>) and the Istrice regional data-base (<http://istrice.turismo.marche.it/>);
2. use of search engines to inventory if the above selected farms did activate web-sites, e-mail address, blog sites and social network site (SNSs) by means of:
 - a. Google (<http://www.google.it>);
 - b. Bing (<http://www.bing.com>);
 - c. Ask (<http://www.ask.com>);
3. set out of a data base on WSs use and actual features:
 - date of registration;
 - used languages (I - Italian, EN - English, D - German, O - Others).

For the aim of the present paper, the method adopted ensure to set out a reliable and up-to-date data base in front to plural official data, issued by Italian public Statistical Bureau, by regional and provincial offices or by tourism or farming syndications.

The registration on the White Pages directory is an indicator of the factual existence of the firm; indeed it is a sound indicator of the willingness of each agritourism farm to be found and located by customers. For this particular purpose, official data do not ensure enough information. The choice to manage agritourism services in a farm is an available indicator of the innovation ability of farmers, and the registration of WSs and SNSs is an indicator of the adoption of modern communication techs in agriculture.

RESULTS

The results of the field research are collected in the following tables or graphs and commented upon.

Figure 2: Marche region 2009. Total Nr. of Agritourism Farms (AF) and Country Houses (CH), AF and CH with Web Site (WS), with E-mail (E-m), with Corporate Blog, with Face book account, with You tube and Flickr; per Province. Source, Istrice (Marche Region), White Pages online, Web engines.

Province	AF+CH	with WS	with E-m	Blog	FB	YT	FL
Ancona	181	130	133	0	6	0	0
Ascoli Piceno	150	97	100	4	4	0	0
Fermo	120	89	93	1	2	0	0
Macerata	252	157	165	3	7	0	0
Pesaro Urbino	329	214	221	1	8	1	1
Marche region	1032	687	712	9	27	1	1

Figure 3: Marche region 1998-2009. Nr. of WS registrations per year and per Province by Agritourism Farms (AF) and Country Houses (CH). Source, Istrice (Marche Region), White Pages online, Web engines.

Province	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Ancona	2	2	4	6	7	14	19	25	16	19	11	1
Ascoli Piceno	0	2	3	4	4	11	8	18	14	19	5	5
Fermo	0	0	4	5	5	7	10	4	22	13	9	4
Macerata	2	0	5	10	8	6	15	23	28	32	16	7
Pesaro Urbino	0	1	8	18	20	23	28	20	40	29	17	4
Marche region	4	5	24	43	44	61	80	90	120	112	58	21

The province of Pesaro-Urbino locates most of the AFs and CHs, while Macerata, Ancona, Ascoli Piceno e Fermo are followers.

It is important to observe that near the 50% of the total sum of AFs and CHs did register a firm Web Site during the observed period. In the same manner, it is important to notice that greater is the number of firms which have an e-mail address and that very few are those with a Blog or a Face book account.

Obviously, the first language used in the WSS is Italian, but near the 75% use English, 30% German and near 30% Other languages, first of all French.

Rural Tourism in a relatively young sector in Italy and the Marche Region Administration demonstrated some delay in implementing the national law (1985) and supporting the farmers' initiative. Yet, in recent years, the local entrepreneurship caught the new businesses and the great subsequent opportunities. Just in this direction, it is notable the total amount of new registrations per year during the 1998-2009 years. The higher rate of growth of registration number has been reached on the year 2006.

The following graphs expose the data at regional and provincial level.

Figure 4: Marche region, 2009. Total Nr of Agritourism Farms (AF) and Country Houses (CH) and AF-CHs with Web Site and E-mail.

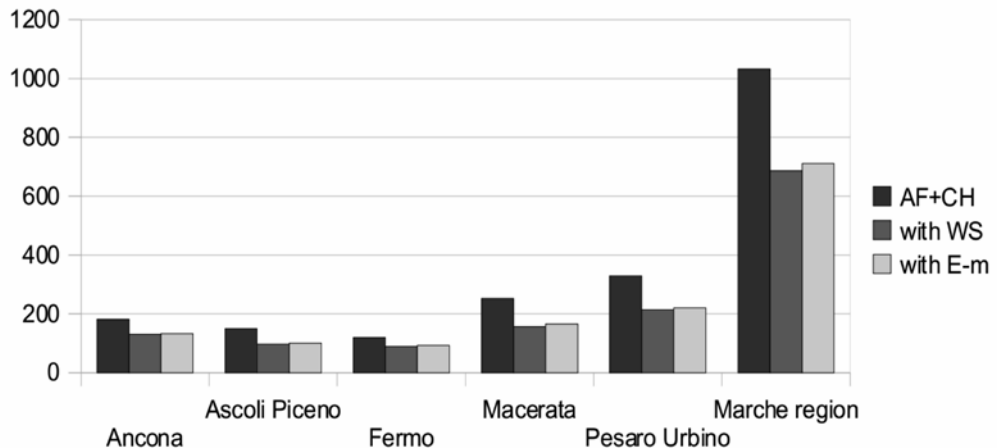
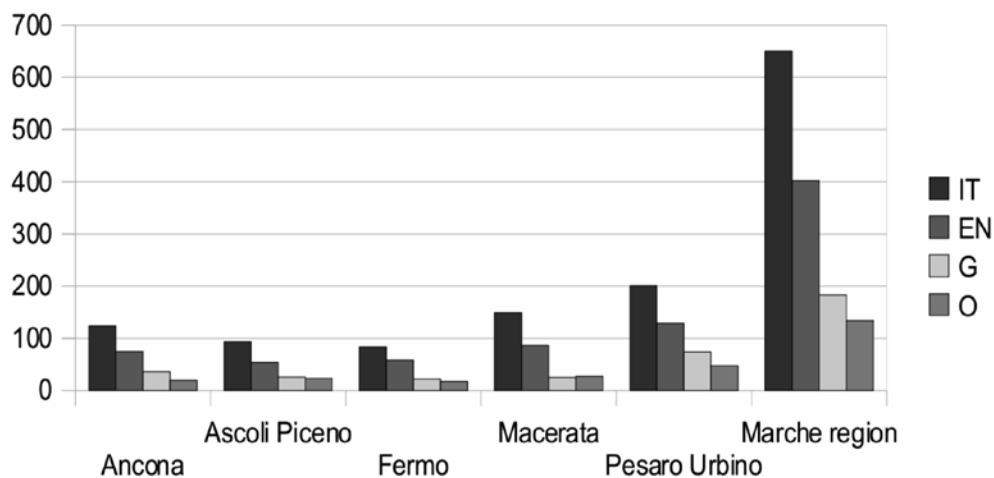


Figure 5: Marche region, 1998-2009. Index Nr (Y 2000 = 100) of WS Registrations per year and per Province.

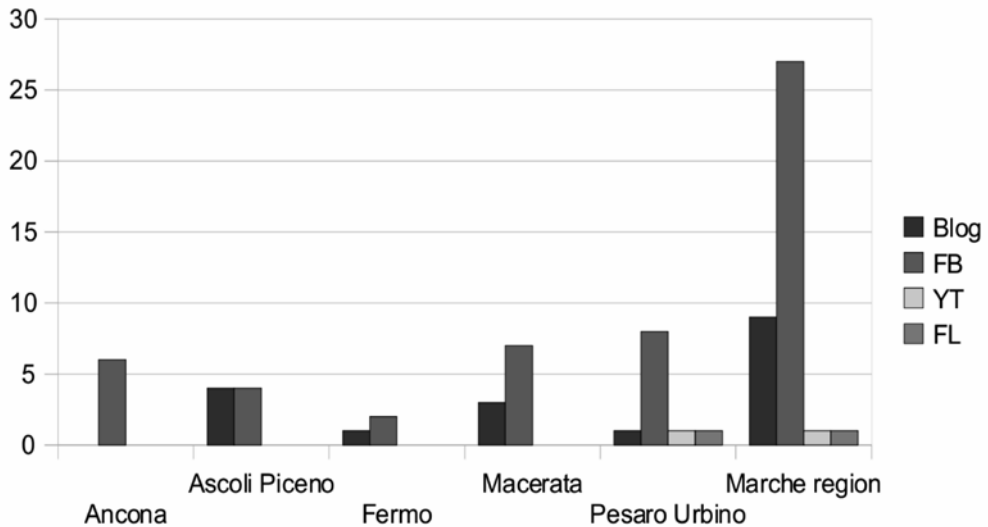
Province	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Ancona	100	150	175	350	475	625	400	475	275	25
Ascoli Piceno	100	133	133	367	267	600	467	633	167	167
Fermo	100	125	125	175	250	100	550	325	225	100
Macerata	100	200	160	120	300	460	560	640	320	140
Pesaro Urbino	100	225	250	288	350	250	500	363	213	50
Marche region	100	179	183	254	333	375	500	467	242	88

During the first three years of the considered period, the rate of growth of the number of WSs registrations strongly increased, due to the novelty of the phenomenon. Considering the annual Index Number of WS registrations (Tab. 3), both at regional and province level, it is possible to see that the couple of years, 2005-2006, are crucial. Before and after this turning point the IN is lower, yet the total number is increasing long the entire decade. Seemingly the actual number of AFs with a WS is reaching the total potential willingness of the entrepreneurs.

Figure 6: Marche region, 2009. Languages used in AF-CH Web Sites.

About languages used in the WSs, besides Italian, with any evidence the foreign preferred language is English, followed by German, as expected. The French is losing its appeal among tourism suppliers.

Figure 7: Marche region, 2009. Nr of Blog, FB account, You tube and Flick used by AG+CHs.



As the specific purpose of the paper is to investigate on the actual and potential use of modern web-tools for marketing, it must be pointed out that 67% of existing and operating AFs registered a Web Site, but very few entrepreneurs are using a blog. In the all region, 27 agritourism farms manage a Facebook account, corresponding to the 3% of total AFs and to the 4% of AFs with WS. The use of an e-mail address is very large, greater than the use of a WS. Only a singular case indicates the use of Youtube and Flicker in the province of Pesaro Urbino.

These findings are to be interpreted as a general willingness to adopt “modern” innovation induced by the Internet, but also of a sound delay in catching the “very modern” capabilities by the rural society.

DISCUSSION

The present research has at least three limitations. First, the absolute lack of previous similar research both in the general field of SNSs and with specific respect to the use of the Internet in rural areas in Italy. The same observation is more valid with respect to the use of web-tools by rural tourism firms.

Second, the specific official survey on agriculture and rural society are not always reliable. Frequently, alternative sources often differ in data collecting method and the unclear distinction between “rural tourism” and “agritourism” due to legal constraints is a further uncertainty.

Third, the analysis do not consider the economic behaviour of non “rural”, i. e. industrial or commercial entrepreneurs located in rural areas but considers only Agriturismo Farms and Country Houses.

Notwithstanding, the research validates the hypothesis that local farmers, as firms pertaining to other production sectors, are willing to manage the Internet to improve businesses, although they do not yet use all the disposable web-tool and only few entrepreneurs implement blog and SNSs in their relationship marketing program.

The hypothesis that the Internet is capable to unfold the rural tourism (AFs and CHs) possibilities to perform a modern pattern of relationship is validated only by the large diffusion of firm WSs. But, if only very few and scattered entrepreneurs have registered a FB account or manage relations with their network of actual and potential clients by the Internet, it is very clear that relationship marketing in rural tourism of the Marche region still prefers traditional forms of communication.

It is to be investigated if the high entrepreneurship of the Marchigian people, historically proved, will be applied also to rural tourism and to a more modern pattern of marketing. A further a deeper study is the necessary and will be carried out a dedicated case study on the few farms located in the Marche region which usually use a blog and a SNS as a relationship marketing tool.

CONCLUSION

Commencing from the early ‘80s in Italy *agritourism* (rural tourism in agricultural firms) demonstrates developing capabilities, performing an increasing annual rate of development, both in terms of number of specialized firms and in number of tourists visiting rural areas spending their leisure time there. In this sense, the Marche region is facing a big trend of development and new economic features pertain to farm management also in the managing of ICT tools. Websites, blogs and SNSs are the most important tools implemented by “active” web users who are willing to build their own “social network”. For an entrepreneur it is a positive marketing tool in the perspective of the building of a relation network.

A tourist destination is to be considered a network of actors, businesses, and social aims, and economic goals, environmental and cultural assets. In rural areas the agritourism business is spreading out rapidly in few recent years also in the Marche region, for years its development was delayed in comparison to other Italian regions, such as Trentino, Bozen province, Tuscany. Thus, rural tourism is an innovative activity for farm management and furthermore for the local social network of rural areas.

The SNSs are to be considered as the *virtual* extension of the *real* social network (Gilbert, 2008) as:

- (i) the dimension of the network is not locally constrained when using the ICT (Di Bernardo, Pilotti, 2000);
- (ii) the modern marketing thought, besides quality and brand policies, focuses on market relationships to increase the level of customer's loyalty and thus revenues and profits.

The field research confirms that most part of rural tourism firms presently is willing to catch the opportunity of modernity. But such "*Modernity 2.0*" is still far from an actual practice in managing business, and especially in rural area and in agritourism farms.

The Marche region pertains to the *Third Italy* and its economy is based on industrial districts and the diffusion of SMEs. The entrepreneurship is a typical figure of the society and largely diffused in several productive sectors and industrial modernizations are frequently detected at present and in the past.

The real point is if the rural society is willing to promote its modernity. Indeed, many agricultural entrepreneurs are seemingly using some of modern tools in a "non active" manner that refers to an "adaptive behaviour" instead of a more productive "proactive behaviour".

Rural tourism in the Marche region demonstrates great developing potentialities but still faces difficulties due to digital divide and lack of a common strategy. The local SMEs acting in the rural tourism sector are clearly under-utilizing the Internet and the "proactive behaviour" is not yet diffused among entrepreneurs.

The current evolution of marketing tends to relationship marketing in private firms. In rural communities, SMEs using web-tools seems to follow a non-active model, apart from only a few pioneers. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the future will face the sudden explosion of the use of blog and SNs also in rural areas of the region, due to sporadic initiatives that actually play the role of an economic leadership. Sooner or later, these pioneers will be followed by other entrepreneurs in building durable relations with customers in order to achieve their retention and satisfaction.

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Figures in the text

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