



Research Article

Toward a Methodology for the Smart Growth of Destinations

Del Vecchio Pasquale, Ndou Valentina and Passiante Giuseppina

Laboratory of Management Engineering, Department of Engineering for Innovation,
University of Salento, Lecce, Italy

Correspondence should be addressed to: Del Vecchio Pasquale; pasquale.delvecchio@unisalento.it

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a methodological framework that will be useful for supporting destinations (managers, policy makers etc) to create their own identity by using largely the new social media tools. The methodology here presented is the result of two local experimentations realized in the Apulia region with the intent to promote the destination through the extensive and intelligent use of digital and social technologies that enable processes of users' co-creation. Carried out in Apulia, both the two initiatives are aimed to promote and test a model of smart tourism, labelled with #ApuliaSmarTourism, inspired by the principles of service co-creation, digitalization and user centrality.

Keywords: Virtual Destination Management, Service Co-creation, Smart Tourism, #ApuliaSmarTourism

Introduction

In the current scenario, destinations are called in a high competition is affected by a lot of variables. The large diffusion of the ICTs, social and mobile applications are causing significant changes on both sides of demand and supply of tourist services and products. Focusing on smart tourism as a topic of growing actuality in the agenda of researchers and destinations' managers, the study aims to provide contributions at the enlargement of this research stream. Starting

from the comprehension of the current trends characterizing tourism, the paper derives a methodological framework to support destinations in creating their own identity by promoting the active involvement of tourists into the telling of their stories of journeys. Emotionally and socially embedded into a copious network of relationships, tourists are, nowadays, able to create by them-selves their experiences, share their feedbacks and contribute to create and take inspiration from the big amount of knowledge available online. The

methodology proposed has been conceived into the frame of an ongoing research project, Puglia@service, aimed to define an agenda for the smart growth of the Apulia region, a destination of growing popularity in the South of Italy. In particular the evidence coming from two case studies built around two ongoing experimentations of digital tourism, #Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown, has constituted the basis of data and information for the realization of the methodology presented. The methodology aims to provide destination managers with a process pathway to be activated for the integrated promotion and management of destinations. A crucial element of the methodology is the large employability of digital and social technologies that enable processes of users' co-creation. The methodology at the basis of the study is characterized by an integrated approach of qualitative methods, as case study, action research and netnography. Both initiatives aim to promote and test a model of smart tourism, labelled with the #ApuliaSmarTourism, inspired from the principles of service co-creation, digitalization and user centrality. Identified as an opportunity for the regional intelligent growth of the area, the model of smart tourism proposed is based on the centrality of users motivated into the design, consumption and sharing of their experience of journey. The evidence collected suggests useful implications for future development in theory and practice.

Literature Background

Networking and collaboration for smart growth of destinations

Tourism destinations are known to be amalgams of touristic products and services (Buhalis, 2000) and they are perceived as complex systems which are difficult to manage (Fyall, 2011).

It is a wide, complex, multidisciplinary and specific system with unique features and characteristics. The complexity of the sector

necessitates profound shift of thinking about the strategy and management practices of tourism, in particular in relation to how competitive advantage can be achieved and how sustainability could be attained.

While collaboration and interaction between different business actors has always been important, the widespread deployment of the Internet has greatly enhanced the ability of firms to engage in collaborative innovation in several ways. Thus, for example, the creation of virtual customer environments permits firms to tap into the social dimension of customer knowledge shared among groups of customers with common interests (Sawney, Verona and Prandelli, 2005).

The main features characterizing tourism are:

- tourists' consumption patterns comprise a large array of products and services made up of different syndicated resources supplied from different, singular suppliers. Delivering the product means coordinating and assembling different parts of the whole problem solving process for the client;
- tourism service typically involves multiple interdependent actors that have sophisticated roles, interact with each other and engage in tradeoffs.
- tourism innovation takes place in more complex supply chains where the tourism experience is the product of a wide variety of services. In many services, customers participate in the service processes, and are essential to the co-creation of value with service providers.
- The different actors and services are extremely heterogeneous, interdependent among them and Demand uncertainty and volatility characterize products and services.

The interdependence of a high variety of stakeholders and industries complicates management while at the same time it is causing fragmentation within the control and

development of the tourism destination. Besides, different values and cultures, and the interrelated impacts on the local population all make for a complex planning system within tourism destinations (Jamal and Jamrozy, 2006).

The growing complexity and dynamicity, the explosion and use of e-commerce and e-business models generate major impacts for tourism businesses and its competitive positioning strategies.

As it is highly discussed in the the social exchange theory, firms' sustainability depends largely on other firms' provision of resources, which causes a situation where this latter is exchanging resources with other firms. As Gulati (1999) argues, networks offer greater potential as they allow firms to access key resources from its environment, such as information, capital, goods, services that have the potential to maintain or enhance a firm's competitive advantage. Firms can influence networks for knowledge acquisition and exploitation by building relation – specific assets, knowledge-sharing routines as well as effective relational governance mechanisms. Furthermore thanks to new emerging technologies firms have larger opportunities for establishment of electronic networks where they can collaborate with former competitors and potentially achieve competitive co-evolution (Ordanini, 2001)

Especially, the network approach is a viable model for the success and innovativeness of the tourism sector due to its characteristic (heterogeneity, modularity, local embedding's, SME etc). Due also to the proliferation of ICT tools and applications, tourism enterprises are able to establish virtual linkages with their counterpart in innovative ecosystems – where tourism enterprises can highly collaborate horizontally, vertically and diagonally and can achieve economies of scale and scope, make cost effective use of technology, reach global customers, take part of global online marketplace and develop further their skills

and possibilities for competitive advantage (Ndou, 2015).

Accordingly, tourism competitiveness could be conceptualized as the result of recombining existing resources that are embedded in a network of interacting actors that re-configure in a flexible and dynamic way their capabilities and roles to focus on a specific problem solving and value co-creation opportunity.

This leads toward the definition of smart tourism as the result of the interconnection of tourism destination with multiple stakeholders' communities through dynamic platforms and knowledge intensive flows of communication and enhanced decision support systems (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2015; 2014).

Smart Tourism Destinations can be perceived as places utilizing the available technological tools and techniques to enable demand and supply to co-create value, pleasure, and experiences for the tourist and wealth, profit, and benefits for the organisations and the destination (Boes et al, 2015).

This new conceptualization has relevant implications for the competition among destinations. Tourism destinations' success depends on the co-opetition intensity of their stakeholders, where there is a combination of collaboration and competition offering greater opportunities (Ritchie and Crouch, 2005).

Furthermore, to ensure the success of a tourism destination, Ritchie and Crouch (2005) stress the importance of human resources and innovation in combination with cooperation and collaboration on a local and regional level.

Networking and Collaboration for Smart Growth of Destinations

Due to the large diffusion of social networks and digital applications, tourism experience is more and more a collective process

(Aarikka-Stereos and Jaakkala, 2012). The web 2.0, social media and user generated content and platform for interaction play a significant role in changing the tourism industry (Buhalis and Law 2008). Especially, the interaction with customers in the tourism industry is of particular relevance being that tourism is an experience network in which various stakeholders co-create value and the individual human being is the started point on co-creating authentic tourism experiences, instead of the company itself (Binkhorst, 2006).

Nowadays, tourists arrange their holidays using the web and their social networks, and this is not only confined to booking almost all the services they need, but it extends to virtual explorations of the entire journey lifecycle, that is pre-tours, in tours, after tours of their destinations, to share in their own networks, the experiences they expect to live as well as their satisfaction or frustration during and after the trip (Ndou and Del Vecchio, 2012). The web enables them to take responsible decisions by learning from official sources and – crucially – from users' feedback available online.

The product tourists buy consists on a series of events, themes such as the trip, the museum, the hotel, the restaurant etc that he wants to be engaged on during his journey. Tourist does not appropriate a tangible product, but overall some memorable moments that could result in a good or negative experience. If an organization fails to provide a positive user experience, negative consequences can occur such as negative publicity and loss of user engagement. Furthermore, tourism is an important example of a sector where the service encounter is of central interest: production and consumption typically involve interaction between employees and users (Sorensen 2011).

Therefore, tourists are recognized as the most valuable source for providing valuable information, knowledge on their needs as well as feedback and suggestions to reduce

market uncertainties and increase new service adoption (Sigala 2012). Empowered with a large range of technological tools such as travel blogs, travel review websites, social media, virtual communities, mobile technologies, recommendation systems etc (Neuhofer et al. 2012), tourists are gaining power and control over firms and are shifting the competition toward the co-creation experience as a basis of value and as the future of innovation (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2004, Binkhorst 2006).

Neuhofer et al. (2013) focused on the “technology enhanced tourism experiences” as integrative conceptual framework to describe tourism of our days as combination of “experiences, co-creation and technology” (Neuhofer et al., 2013).

In an experience-based exchange, the tourist enters into a multifaceted interaction with the regional actors and the setting of a narrative staged by the local community.

Pralhad and Ramaswamy (2004, a) stress the need of high-quality interactions that enable a customer to co-create unique experiences with the company as the key to unlock new sources of competitive advantages. In the view of Pralhad and Ramaswamy (2004, a), it is fundamental to set an experience environment where customers can create their own unique experiences: informed, networked, empowered, and active consumers co-create value with the firm.

Co-creation model envisages a collaboration between organizations and their stakeholders in order to develop systems, products or services, reinforcing the idea that consumer experience is central to enterprise value creation and innovation (Ramaswamy & Pralhad, 2004).

Several scholars and researchers studied the profound changes in the relationship between producer and consumer (Arvidsson, 2005; Firat et al., 1995; Pettinger, 2004), their engagement in the co-creation of value

through individual co-creation experiences and interaction with brands, companies, and other consumers (Del Vecchio & Ndou, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), which is the meaning of their configuration as aware prosumers able to select and construct products, services but also stories, (more and more digital), about their own experiences. Recent studies (Ind, 2001; Lundqvist et al., 2013) agree in pointing to the helpfulness and effectiveness of brand storytelling in order to reach and engage firms' management and employees and also to create and reinforce positive brand associations (Kornberger, 2010) among consumers. According to Shankar et al. (2001), storytelling is fundamental for consumers to make sense of their consumption experiences and even part of their lives. Supported by the large diffusion of digital media, storytelling can be currently considered as a powerful communication tool (McLellan, 2006). Narrative, in fact, is considered "as a mode of thinking, as a structure for organizing our knowledge, and as a vehicle of meaning making" (Bruner, 1996, p. 119). If telling stories means constructing meaning, "it seems evident, then, that skill in narrative construction and narrative understanding is crucial to constructing our lives" (Bruner, 1996, p. 40).

Storytelling is usually inspired by direct experiences, emotional connections and engagement opportunities that allow people to be heard and/or co-create directly with brands themselves. It is in this perspective that storytelling can be assumed as a precious tool for the collaborative process of interaction and development between firms and customers. Lots of firms are using storytelling as a crowdsourcing tool to innovate, for instance, food and packaging with consumers. Co-creation meets the concerns of the "prosumer" approach and accounts for the changed roles of consumers and producers, with positive impact also in terms of reduction of risk in terms of customer resistance and thereby market failure.

Following these trends, this paper derives a methodological framework to support destinations in creating their own identity by promoting the active involvement of tourists, which are emotionally and socially embedded into a copious network of relationships, into the telling of their stories of journeys, sharing their feedbacks and contributing to create and take inspiration from the big amount of knowledge available online.

Research Methodology

Aimed to define a methodological framework to support destinations in creating their own visibility by promoting the active involvement of tourists into the co-creation and sharing of their stories of journeys, we adopt a qualitative integrated approach based on case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994), action research (Myers, 1997; De Vos et al., 2011) and netnography (Kozintes, 2002). The opportunity of an integrated methodological framework arises from two local initiatives, the cases of #Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown, aimed to *promote the destination through the extensive and intelligent use of digital and social technologies inspired by the principles of service co-creation, digitalization and user centrality*.

The active involvement of researchers as catalysts of knowledge results is a critical element for the objectives of this study. As a qualitative research approach that adapts the techniques of ethnography to the study of virtual communities that coalesce around (Kozinets 2002), netnography allows to monitor the trends on the official pages, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, of both initiatives in order to derive useful insights on the popularity and social dynamics of shared news and updating. The involvement of institutional actors as Municipalities, Local Groups of Actions, Regional and National Agencies for tourism promotion, in addition to two communities of storytellers: a first of walkers in #Appiedi and a second of Instagram's top influencers in

#SalentoUpNDown, involved into the creation and storytelling of their experience of journey, has requested the adoption of an integrative approach of analysis. Framed in the context of an ongoing research project, Puglia@service, aimed to define an agenda for the smart specialization for the Apulia (South of Italy) region, the cases are two innovative examples of initiatives of smart tourism, inspired by the principles of service co-creation, digitalization and user centrality. Carried out in Apulia, both initiatives aim to promote and test a model of smart tourism. This has suggested the opportunity of an additional hashtag #ApuliaSmarTourism that has been promoted in both initiatives as a further label of study.

Case studies has been analyzed on the basis of the following parameters: period of journey, geographical areas interested by tourist experience, areas of experience, promoter of the initiative and associated partners, types of social media e networks, number and profiles of storytellers primarily involved, official hashtag adopted, web popularity on Google.

Sources for data analysis are represented by official web sites and profiles on social networks, web pages and social profiles of storytellers, institutions and organizations (public and private) involved. In addition, report on direct observations conducted by the researchers and analysis of web data has been used to integrate the contents useful to compose the two cases. The period of study is from April 30, 2015 to September 1, 2015.

Research Findings

#Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown can be identified as two initiatives of innovative management of destinations offering interesting evidence for the goals of our study. Specifically, even if representative of two different ways of living the destination, both are characterized by a perspective of experiential and knowledge intensive tourism.

In the table that follows, a synthetic overview of the two initiatives is offered.

Table 1: #Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown at the glance: preliminary results

	#Appiedi	#SalentoUpNDown
Nature of Tourist Experience	Slow Tourism- Walking along the old roman "Via Appia" . Project of promotion and requalification of the old roman "via Francigena" of South of Italy.	Project of promotion of Lueca's area through social networks and digital media with structured paths of visiting.
Period of experience	May 30 – June 6, 2015	May 29 – June 2, 2015
Geographical area interested by	South of Italy, from Brindisi to Matera (segment of Roman Via Francigena, walking tour of 124,2 miles/200 km), with intermediate stops in 15 cities and municipalities.	South of Italy, Lecce (only for the first day) and Santa Maria di Leuca and surroundings.
Areas of Experience	Art, Culture, History, Food,	Travel, Art, Food, Fashion, Technology
Promoter of the initiative	Touring Club Italia – Association EDENO	Instagrammers Lecce - University of Salento
Other partner	Laboratory of Management Engineering of the University of Salento + Institutional Partners (regional agencies, municipalities, etc) + Technical Partners (food companies, hotels, ICT providers, etc.)	Laboratory of Management Engineering of the University of Salento + Institutional Partners (regional agencies, municipalities, etc) + Technical Partners (food companies, hotels, ICT providers, etc.)
Types of Social Media and Social Network	Touring Club Web Site, Facebook, Twitter	SalentoUpNDown Web site, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
N. of Official Storytellers	8	23
Profile of Storytellers	Experts in arts and culture, not social networks addicted	Instagrammers, Top Influencer at Italian and European level
Official hashtags for sentiment analysis	#appiedi #ApuliaSmarTourism	#SalentoUpNDown #ApuliaSmarTourism
Results from Google Search related to the official hashtag (Sept. 1, 2015)	#850	#20,000

About the nature of tourist experience and the area of interest, #Appiedi can be classified as a not conventional initiative of

slow tourism based on walking from Brindisi to Matera (South of Italy) along the old roman " via Appia" in that segment

coincident with the “via Francigena” of South of Italy. Differently, #SalentoUpNDown is a more glamorous project of promotion of the Lueca’s area (the southwest land of Italy) built completely on the usage of social networks and digital media for telling the stories related to different structured paths of visiting. About the areas interested, both initiatives have interested primarily the Apulia Region (South of Italy). In the case of #Appiedi, the area from Brindisi to Matera (Basilicata) with the inclusion of 15 Apulian municipalities; while in the case of #SalentoUpNDown the area interested was exclusively that one of Leuca interesting the municipality of Santa Maria di Leuca and its surroundings, even if the tour started in Lecce.

As for the period of experience, both initiatives have been launched in the late spring of 2015, specifically #Appiedi from May 30 to June 6, 2015, while #SalentoUpNDown from May 29 to June 2, 2015. Those are the periods of real visiting and journey of the storytellers, however the nature of the phenomena observed as well as the proximity of summer have suggested the opportunity of a longer period for the sharing and telling of the stories till September 30, 2015.

About the areas of experience proposed and offered during the two initiatives, in #Appiedi there was the valorization of the art and cultural heritage of the area, its roman and mediaeval history (via Appia was one of the consular roads of the Roman Empire and was defined as the road of the salt, while the via Francigena was the mediaeval road to reach the Holy Land). About #SalentoUpNDown, the areas of experiences proposed into the tour are: travel, art, food, fashion and technology.

As for the promoter, in #Appiedi the initiative has been launched by the Chapter of Brindisi of the Italian Touring Club, as part of a larger project of requalification of the network of “vie Francigene” and the Edeno Association, a no-profit organization

operating in cultural and social fields. Partners of #Appiedi are the City of Brindisi and the Laboratory of Management Engineering of the University of Salento, together with a wide large number of institutional and technical actors. In the case of #SalentoUpNDown, the promoters have been the Association of Instagrammers of Lecce and the University of Salento with the Laboratory of eGovernment. Larger is in this case the network of other partners and supporters: the Laboratory of Management Engineering of the University of Salento, the Apulia Regional Agency for Tourist Promotion and several other institutional and technical partners.

In terms of presence on the web and social networks, #Appiedi has been officially hosted on the institutional web site of Italian Touring Club and presents an official profile on Facebook. Furthermore, the personal profiles of walkers on Facebook and Twitter, together with the page of the Laboratory of Management Engineering on Facebook have contributed to nurture the social visibility of the initiative. As for #SalentoUpNDown, the presence of the Instagrammers within the nucleus of promoters of the initiative has assured a larger presence on the web and mainly on the major social networks. The echo of the project has been also in this case supported by the other partners and individuals.

About the number and profiles of storytellers, in #Appiedi the team of walkers was composed of 8 people, all coming from the Apulia region, presenting different cultural backgrounds and professional experiences. The team covered different segments of age. In #SalentoUpNDown, the team of storytellers was composed of 23 top influencing European Instagrammers. Also in this case, members have different cultural backgrounds and professional experiences. As for the hashtags monitored, both initiatives have used a large number of keywords. In several cases, all the organizations’ partners have required the usage of # to make visible their offers of

products and services. However, for the goal of this research, the official hashtags associated to the initiative were: #Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown, together with #ApuliaSmarTourism that has been created by the Laboratory of Management Engineering as label of the ongoing experimentations.

In terms of visibility on the web, posts and comments generated, the two events presents significant results. A first evaluation of flows of communication, performed by using Google Search demonstrates as, at September 1, 2015, there were n. 850 results for #Appiedi and 20,000 for #SalentoUpNDown.

Toward a Methodological Framework for the Virtual Destination Management

Aimed to define a strategy for the active involvement of tourists into the management of the destination based on the creation and sharing of their own experiences of journey, the two experimentations conducted, #Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown, provided useful insights in terms data and information. This has suggested the opportunity of deriving a methodological framework for the virtual destination management consisting in 5 phases (Fig. 1):

- Destination local awareness;
- Creation of Destination's Identity;
- Launching of a pilot initiative;
- Consolidation of the Destination's Virtual Identity;
- Monitoring and Feedbacks.

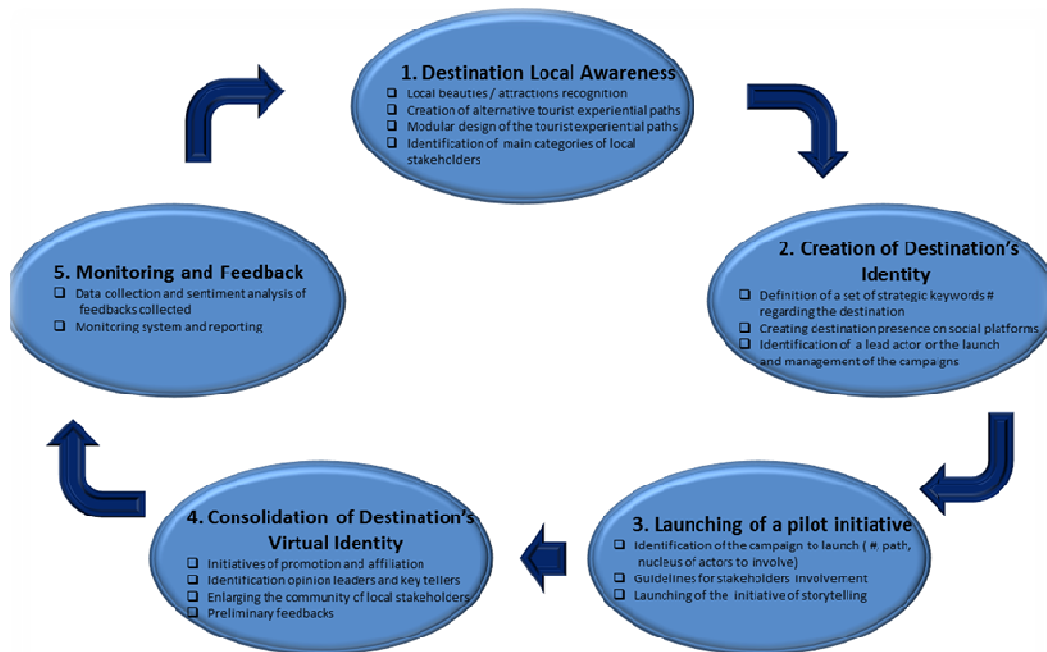


Figure 1: "A methodology for the management of virtual destination identity based on the sharing of users' experiences"

The first phase of the methodology starts with destination local awareness that aims to provide a preliminary recognition of the local beauties and attractions. This will allow creating alternative experiential paths. By considering the timing and monetary constraints that usually characterized all the consumption experience as well as in reason of the personalization that is behind the profiles of the tourists, the effective management of the destination in terms of alternative packages has to be inspired by the principle of modularity. This will provide opportunity for recombination and higher personalization and it is the reason of the modular design activity foreseen in this phase. Finally, it is necessary to sensitize a preliminary nucleus of local stakeholders, that shaping the boundaries of the traditional tourism supply chain, has to involve a community of stakeholders with a differentiated profiles.

The creation of the destination identity is the main goal of the second phase. This requires the definition of a set of keywords regarding the destination and its most valuable offerings. In this phase, a set of distinguishable words needs to be identified in an integrative and intelligent way, as they will provide the crucial words to remember, use, promote and describe the local destinations. Therefore, the words to be used should be easy, simple, expressive, and creative. This process in fact integrates together different stakeholders to express, comment, suggest the best words that better express the local features. The choice of these elements in our two experimentations was the result of meetings realized with the major stakeholders of the destinations. Then it will be necessary to proceed with the creation of a destination web presence, also considering the presence on the main social networks. The creation of new web or social presences will require a preliminary check of pages already present, in order to avoid overlapping and the risk of confusion. About the social networks to consider, it will be useful to assure an integrated and coherent

presence on the most diffused ones, as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. The successful execution of this phase will also require the identification of an organization, public or private, or an actor responsible for the destination identity management.

The third phase is aimed to creating and executing of a pilot initiative useful to test the virtual identity and model of management defined. Coherently with the objectives of destination development, the pilot campaign will be structured in terms of a set of keywords (#) to be used for the telling of the tourist experiences, paths of visiting and journey, nucleus of involved users, identified on the basis of the matching between objectives to reach and profiles (cultural background, web social presence, professional experiences, etc). At this purpose, it will be useful to monitor the preliminary results achieved with the launching of the pilot campaign, to provide feedbacks and adjustments. The contribution of this preliminary initiative will be valuable to define guidelines for stakeholders populating the destination that will be also sensitized and invited to support the growth of the virtual destination identity.

The fourth phase is devoted to the consolidation of the destination identity, through the creation and the launch of initiatives for the promotion, fidelity and the enlargement of the community of stakeholders involved. In this phase arises the opportunity of a structured and continuous monitoring of feedbacks and experiences shared online. The definition of a structured service of content (netnography) and sentiment analysis to automatically provide feedbacks is, in this stage of the methodology, compulsory for providing insights and corrective actions to be activated. Despite the utility of the methodology for guiding tourism managers and policy makers to activate approaches for the digital promotion of their destinations, the availability of the data that will result from this technique will constitute another

crucial element for destination management. In fact, the use of this approach enables the creation of a series of data and information that constitute a strategic information source. However, this requires then a structured monitoring and procedures for systemic gathering, analysis and elaboration of the Data.

Conclusions and Implications

The paper presented a methodology for the virtual destination management, based on the active involvement of tourists as co-creators of their own services and tellers of their experiences of journey. Focused on the literature debate on smart tourism destinations, the methodology is the preliminary result of a larger research labelled with #ApuliaSmarTourism aimed to promote the smart growth of Apulia region, a destination of growing popularity of Southern Italy. The premises at the basis of the methodology refer to tourism as a knowledge-intensive business service, regional integrated system and bundles of products and services offered by a large community of local stakeholders. The study of two recent initiatives of digital tourism, #Appiedi and #SalentoUpNDown, has offered interesting evidence for the development of the methodological framework for the virtual destination management based on the active involvement of users, presented in the paper. Structured into 5 phases, the methodology is a coherent approach to addressing regional destinations towards the challenges of the global competition and digitalization of consumption. Specifically, it is useful for promoting the active involvement of tourists into the design and sharing of their own local experiences by supporting destinations into satisfying the needs of users, more and more empowered in their experiences of consumption and communication by the diffusion of ICTs and digital and social applications. The centrality of the tourists' experience is the common feature charactering all the phases of methodology. The contribution of storytelling that tourists can offer to support the growth of a destination is a primary evidence of the

study. In the meantime, the process of virtual destination management requires the awareness of a wide large integrated community of regional actors called to support the process of creation and development of the destination. This is the main practical implication suggested by the study that calls in public and private actors the importance of activating a strategy of destination recognition and creating a culture of collaboration and integration among the stakeholders populating the destination. Further implications for future research are identifiable into the need of consolidating the results of the two experimentations with a more consolidated approach at the sentiment analysis in order to confirm the goodness of the methodological schema developed as well as to replicate it in different contexts.

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