


Chapter 6

Influence of the Website Features on Tourists' Choices: A Study on Agritourism Customers

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at analyzing the level of perceived relevance and satisfaction of customers on the websites of agritourism companies. After a literature review on the website adoption by small and medium-sized enterprises, an empirical research was conducted based on a four-stage model of website adoption. A web-based questionnaire was addressed to a sample of EU tourists who experienced a stay at an agritourism after selecting the accommodation through the agritourism website. By combining the perceived satisfaction and importance attributed to a series of features related to the website, the authors identified the main priorities to be considered when a website is being projected and on-line services have to be established. Moreover, for evaluating which variables have more influence in defining the overall evaluation of a website, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. This study provides useful indications at the individual firm level about the main features of a website on which investments for improvement may be addressed and which on-line services should be activated.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last half century, there has been a great deal of interest in the rural development policies. In particular, in countries belonging to the European Union, agriculture has changed its role, pandering to the emerging expectations of citizens in terms of food (quality, variety, availability, safety), safeguarding the environment, and ensuring farmers an acceptable standard of living. Simultaneously, in this new role,

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agriculture makes it possible to preserve rural communities and landscapes as a valuable component of European heritage. Furthermore, in recent years, touristic functions have enriched the natural functions of agriculture (Putzel, 1984; Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001; Jia, 2018).

One of the most relevant consequences of the relationship between agriculture and tourism, especially in Italy, is mainly represented by agritourism. This type of accommodation allows tourists to appreciate all the features that characterize a territory: culture, craftsmanship, history, traditions, landscape, environment, food and wine (Putzel, 1984; Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001; Havlíček, Lohr, Mejkalová, Grosz & Benda, 2013; Chinnici, Pecorino, Rizzo & Rapisarda, 2014; Musso & Francioni, 2015; Francioni, Vissak & Musso, 2015; Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019).

Nowadays, agritourism holidays have become a mass tourism phenomenon and this has led to a significant increase in competition. Furthermore, with the development of information and communication technologies (ICT), the information available to potential tourists has also increased (Wan, 2002). Indeed, the Internet plays a decisive role in the purchasing decision-making process. In particular, Buhalis and Law (2008), defined the company website as the place where tourists can gather information, compare and make a decision.

Tourists who choose agritourisms are more selective than those staying in hotel are. They are more careful and demanding about certain requirements such as contact with nature, food quality, quiet places, silence, relaxation, etc. (Phillip, Hunter & Blackstock, 2010; Karampela, Papapanos & Kizos, 2019). The choice is accurate, and tourists prefer to choose through the website of agritourisms rather than using online travel agents (OTAs) such as Expedia, Booking, Airbnb, etc.; and/or meta-search as Trivago, Tripadvisor, Kayak, etc. (Kim, Kim & Han, 2007).

According to the extant literature, the decision-making process related to the accommodation purchase is not completely rational, being influenced by social and psychological factors (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981), ethical issues (Randle, Kemperman and Dolnicar, 2019) and by the mental image about the destination (Um & Crompton, 1990; Obenour, Langfelder & Groves, 2005; Nuraeni, Arru & Novani, 2014).

The aim of this study is to analyze the influence of the key features of agritourisms' websites on customers purchasing decision-making process. After a literature review on the decision-making process in tourism and the website adoption by tourism companies, the results of an empirical research on the level of perceived relevance and satisfaction of customers about agritourisms' websites features will be presented. In addition, by combining the evaluation on the level of satisfaction on each feature after the stay, with the importance attributed to the same feature, a framework for identifying the key areas of a website has been defined, in order to identify those characteristics of a website that deserve more investments. Finally, discussion and conclusions will follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Decision-Making Process on Tourism Destinations

Tourist decision-making process has always been a key issue in the tourism management literature (Wong & Yeh, 2009), and a number of studies identified the factors addressing people to choose a destination (Karl, 2018), dividing them into pull and push factors (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Beerli, Meneses, & Gil, 2007), with the former resulting from promotional policies of tour operators and tourist destinations, and the latter as a result of subjective choices of tourists to undertake travel experiences. Other studies

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