

**E-BRANDING STRATEGIES AND DEVELOPMENT OF
E-COMMERCE AND TOURISM:
THE CASE OF ITALIAN TOUR OPERATORS**

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Abstract

This contribution refers to a research programme on 'E-commerce and tourism' launched in 1999 at the University of Rome and articulated in various phases. The programme started with the analysis of the representational field related to "Internet and its users" in a sample of Italian navigators and in the aim to underline the salient dimensions of the semantic space.

The support of specific techniques of data analysis like DiscAn allowed the identification of the dynamic of the discourse in a dictionary freely produced by the subjects responding to the 'associative network' (de Rosa, A.S. 1995).

In the second phase the programme aimed at exploring the persuasive power of publicity via the Internet in comparison to the traditional channels. During this phase, Italian Internet web sites dedicated to e-commerce and tourism were evaluated both from a psychological point of view, by studying the structure and the content of the web sites, and from a technical point of view, evaluating the efficiency and the correct use of HTML with the support of Usable Net, a Web Testing System available on line.

At the end a specific phase of the research programme was aimed at the comparison of the representations and attitudes towards the Internet, its advantages and limits, the strategies of development for e-commerce and tourism in a sample of 50 tour operators and travel agents and 100 potential buyers-on-line.

An introductory overview of several socio-psychological implications of the growth of the Internet and of various writings, texts and publications.

The way in which communication via the web is currently undergoing such a considerable rate of growth in Europe has doubtless proved both a topic and an opportunity for debate for social psychologists who, for various reasons, are involved in research on Social Representations and multimedia communication. Among these reasons, let us also recall that:

- The Internet has not only changed the notions of 'space' and 'time' in the world of communication, but also those of 'public' and 'private'. This is one of the reasons that makes it so interesting to study how representations, processes of influencing and social interaction between individuals, groups, institutions and companies have been changed by communication via the Internet;
- The Internet is a digital universe that has an impact on a whole range of aspects of community life: knowledge, business, work and entertainment to name a few. It reproduces multiple approaches to each of these sectors (scientific, commercial, educational, social...) and includes both positive and negative sides of this tool, stretching to using it, on the one hand, for social

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purposes and progress and, on the other, for abuses that verge on the realms of perversion and criminality:

- q The multi-faceted way in which the Internet has carried an impact world-wide identifies it as a medium that is at the same time of a global and a local nature, given its diverse levels of diffusion in various continents, nations and social environments. Under a socio-psychological point of view, it is interesting to study the dynamic nature of the world as it is recreated 'on' and 'by' the Internet, also in terms of the level of cross-cultural development. The factors that are taken into account within the notion of 'culture' include: users' levels of expertise in controlling strategies for communication, the level of interaction between individuals, virtual groups and communities or the complexity of websites that have rapidly evolved from having structures of a highly autonomous nature towards structures identified by many levels, links and extended functionality;
- q the very peculiar and unique 'mediated' nature of interaction in this virtual reality is a topic that concerns not only those who produce the technological infrastructures (hardware and software and so on) or services (technological interfaces), but it also serves as a privileged field of study for scholars of the social sciences who are interested in the area of communication. The traditional theories on influencing that are based on sources that serve to influence one particular target group have gradually been left behind and researchers are starting to identify new scientific paradigms that are useful in order to understand how communication grows, develops and spreads across the Internet, the hyper-textual characters within its contents and the flexible nature of the strategies of its users who are also its co-producers and who are principally self-learners.
- q The World Wide Web, born from the Internet as a tool for communication whose purpose was, at first, of a military nature, then of a mainly scientific one, has rapidly become a marketing tool and one for competition on a commercial level. Under this perspective, the web has become a vehicle to that no longer allows only individuals or groups to convey their identity but, rather, that allows institutions, businesses and organisations to do the same. This has generated new forms and methods of communication specifically created for this new media that have taken on the name of web marketing.

For all the above reasons the Internet carries a weight not only as a tool for communication between researchers but also as a form of watchtower for analysis and research.

There is now much scientific writing whose interest lies in the Internet and its digital worlds which communicate on an asynchronous and on a synchronous level, including the web which is now without doubt a globally accessible and extremely important reality – so much so that it is now identified tout court with the form of new media that it uses. This type of scientific literature is characterised by several approaches that slowly lose their so to speak generalised nature and face more specific empirical and /or applied types of research on different themes, from sociology to economics, from studies on communication to ergonomics, from psychology, to didactics etc. Among such contributions, which are continually on the increase, there are a number of different lines we can identify. These include:

- ◆ Books focused on a sociological approach to the macro-cultural aspects linked to the growth of the new forms of media, particularly the Internet, within the new economic situation of a society that 'lives on air'. (compare, among others, Thompson, 1995, Castells, 2000; Leadbeater, 2000);
- ◆ others focused on trends connected to the expansion and spread of e-commerce, e-business and web marketing as well as those linked to the creation of new markets (Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997, Greenwald & Dettori, 1998; Faccini, 1998; Scott, Murtula & Stecco, 1999, Morelli, 2000, Micelli, Ferraro 2000);

- ◆ others more focused on the epistemology of knowledge inherent to the new ‘cognitive ecology’ (compare, among others, Meyrowitz, 1985, Brand, 1987, Levy, 1990, de Kerckhove, 1995, Negroponte, 1995, Breton & Proulx, 1996, De Carli, 1997, Fidler, 1997, Ciotti & Roncaglia, 2000, Giorda, 2000);
- ◆ others focused on research centred on what could be defined an epidemiological prospective that is concerned with how new technologies are used for social purposes, with the circumstances in which communication via computers is used, the social and demographic characteristics of the users, the type of use this form of media has and with the multimedia opportunities the Internet offers on a pedagogical and didactic level. (compare, among others, Dyck & Smither, 1994, Magli, 1997, Crespellani Porcella, Tagliagambe & Usai, 2000; Metitieri & Manera, 2000);
- ◆ other contributions related to psychological issues and relative psycho-social issues that arise when communication is mediated by computers (such as new forms of social interaction, the creation of an identity, distance co-operation and decision making processes and so forth (compare, among others, Caswell, 1988, Bruckman, 1992, Mantovani, 1995, Turkle, 1996, Bilotta, 2000, Wallace, 2000).

In the midst of such a varied selection of writings we must give space to those contributions that are linked directly to the subject of communication related to the world of tourism. This is the underlying theme of the research programme presented below that was carried forth from a psycho-social perspective. Moreover, these contributions are sometimes also combined with an interest in the frontiers that the World Wide Web opens.

The main guidelines of our research programme:

The research programme refers to a ‘circular and dialogue form’ approach to studying Communication and Social Representations. It takes into account various factors that are part of the process of influencing inherent both to the message, to its structure and contents, the medium used for communication, the type of good on offer (tourism versus work), as well as to the target and how it is represented, seen as factors which come before and/or after the impact with the message itself.

Keeping in mind the considerations set out in the introduction, there is no doubt that research on the topic ‘communication and social representations as factors which are either preceded or are correlated to the new media’ is a newly emerging and innovative area of research within the field of social psychology.

Our intention is to put forward the guidelines of a recently launched research programme, still in course today, at the Department of Psychology within the second Faculty of Psychology at the University of ‘La Sapienza’, Rome.

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As a result the study is split into various sections and directions that are outlined briefly below:

1) Pilot Research: Representations 'of' and 'mediated by' the Internet and its users.

The pilot study aims to identify the S.R. of the Internet and its users (taken as possible buyers of holiday packages) as seen by regular Internet users, so as to bring out the most evident measures that structure the semantic space.

The sample group of people was composed of 60 university students who regularly use the Internet.

- the method used is the "associative network" (de Rosa, 1995), suitable to highlight contents, structure and the index of polarity of the semantic field associated to the words used as a stimulus.

- The stimulus words are: 'the Internet' and 'person looking for a package holiday on the Internet'

The words associated with the Internet stimulus were grouped into semantic categories that were subdivided on the basis of the words' polarity (+-=).

POSITIVE:

- communication

(messages, dialogues, chat...)

-flexibility of fields of application

(study, work, tourism...)

-evolution

(progress, discovery, future..)

-characteristics of tools

(globality, accessibility...)

-specific technical aspects

(telecommunications)

NEUTRAL:

-technical equipment

(computer, modem,

server, browser...)

NEGATIVE:

- risks for the navigators

(alienation...)

-costs

(money...)

-technical difficulties

(virus..)

The study also highlighted the dominant 'metaphor' that characterises the way in which the Internet is represented, how it serves both to fasten it and objectify it. This metaphor is expressed both in terms that carry positive connotations (navigation) that are neutral (sea) and that have negative connotations (piracy).

When reflecting on the more significant correlations of the above metaphor, one could well agree with G. Ferraro (2000) when he claims that the navigational metaphor is related to the communicative effect that the Internet generates. The latter is based on a physical vision of moving from one place to another and meeting and interacting with other people as if they were actually physically present. This type of perception had never occurred before on impact with the more traditional forms of media such as when watching television or reading a newspaper.

In other words, the Internet is the first vehicle that unites the two meanings of the term 'communication'.

- 1) As a **method of information-communication** (like a TV, radio, newspaper...) = to transmit news;
- 2) As a **method of transport-communication** (like a railway, motorway etc) = to physically transport people and objects.

On the basis of our information, the index of polarity evoked by the stimulus 'Internet' resulted as being positive. This means that all those interviewed considered the majority of words associated to this term under a positive light. On a global level therefore the attitude component associated to the social representations of Internet was positive.

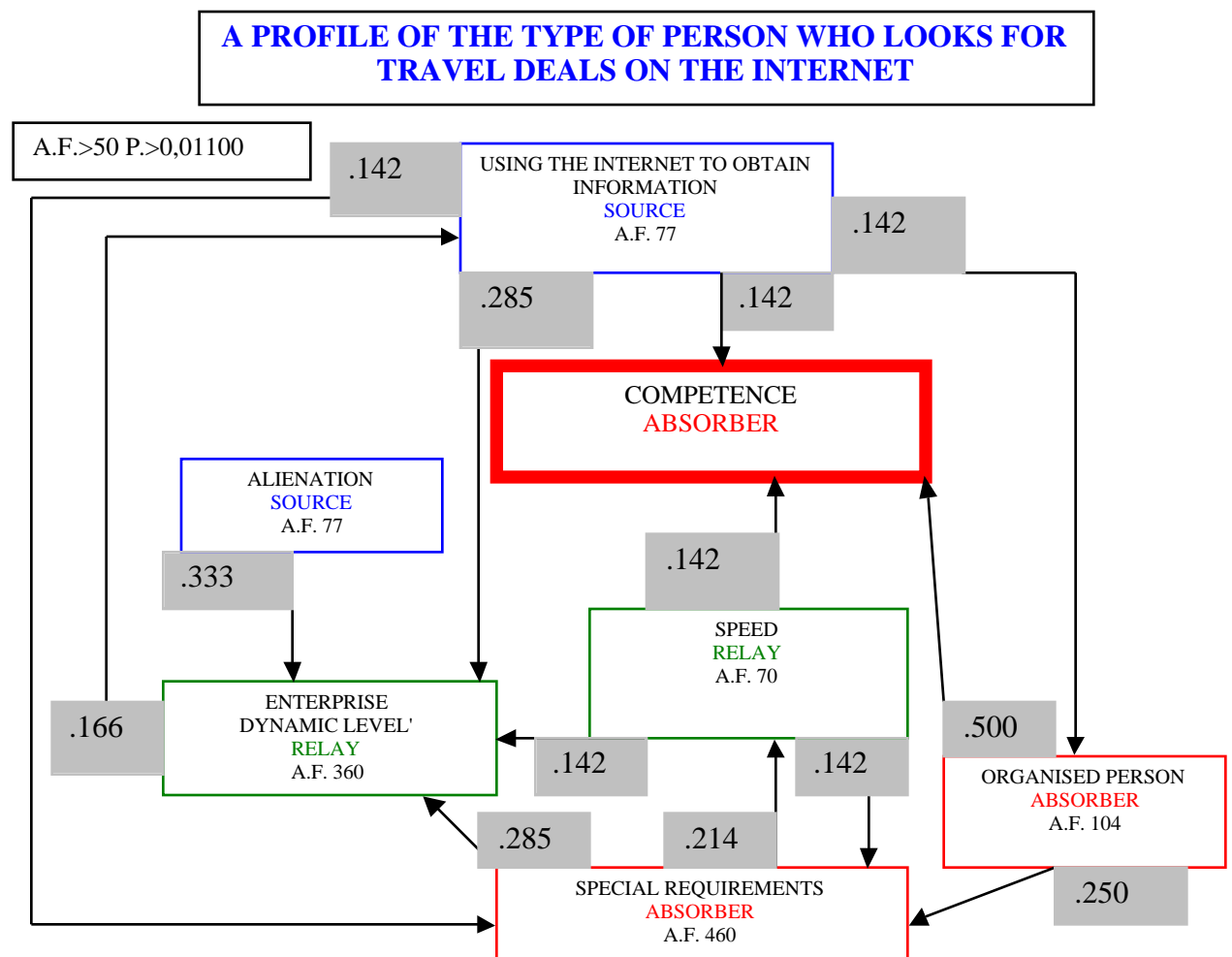
If we consider the characteristics of our sample group (university students participating at the 'Internet as a tool for socio-psychological research' event and other individuals selected among those who regularly use the Internet), the positive vision linked to the representations of the Internet stood in line and remained coherent with the results obtained previously by the French researchers Nicolas Roussiau and

Christine Bonardi (1998) on the relationship between “*Social practices and Social Representations of the Internet*”.

As for the ‘**person looking for a package holiday on the Internet**’, here the representation is more varied: from an analysis of the words elicited in those interviewed with the DiscAn³ programme (software designed to conduct a dynamic analysis of dialogue, created by Pierre Maranda 1990), what emerges is a representation of the surfer/navigator that centres on his or her ‘expertise’.

The semantic map found on the basis of the discursive functions (source, relay, absorber) identifies:

- The fount of the dialogue (*the source*) in two factors bound to the use of the Internet. (One of which seen as positive: to obtain information; the other as negative alienation, which can, at the same time, be taken as being a preceding or correlated factor);
- The connection of dialogue (relay) within the dynamic and fast nature of the Internet as a technological vehicle;
- The ‘absorbing’ point of the dialogue (*absorber*) in the image of the person who searches on the Internet as, above all, something of an expert or as an organised person, with different necessities and particular requests (particular types of holidays, possibility to choose etc).



The DiscAn map shown here and interpreted in brief shows a clear amount of interest for those who are heading to start up e-commerce businesses and schemes in the world of tourism (those who operate in the sector, tour operators, webmasters). The technical aspects connected to this form of technology and identified in the dynamic and rapid nature of communicating via the web remain a binding element in the dialogue. The origins and objectives are however centred on the person and his or her reasons, on their ability to find answers to their questions and needs, in other words on a very active target group of individuals able to guide themselves among the different competing offers. This results in the fact that for a tour operator who aims to launch into the world of e-commerce creating a website cannot correspond to simply printing a digital catalogue.

2) Another approach the research programme takes is to look at exploring the *persuasive power of advertising on the Internet, compared to the more traditional means of communication*. In more detail, this section aims at discovering 'how, by whom and with what results' two goods that are widely diffused and are also of considerable public interest are put on offer. The first is of these is of a commercial nature (on-line offers of package holidays and services connected to 'tourism'), the second is of an economic nature (on-line job opportunities).

On the subject of 'tourism' the research focused on the following factors:

2a) The first phase aims to *evaluate the message and structure of Italian websites dedicated to tourism* from the users' point of view (as potential buyers) and to examine the structure of imaginary websites as seen by expert users of the web.

2a1) To study the persuasive power of advertising on the Internet and to discover on the basis of which criteria Internet users judge a website, we conducted a 'double phased' enquiry that included the academic years 1999/2000 and 2000/2001. We set up some focus groups of 'fairly expert Internet users' who were charged with identifying the most interesting web sites dedicated to tourism and selecting the best among them.

The web sites that were considered most interesting from an advertising point of view were:

First phase of research: years: 1999/2000		Second phase of research: years: 2000/2001	
TOUR OPERATOR	INTERNET ADDRESS	TOUR OPERATOR	INTERNET ADDRESS
-Last minute	www.lastminute.com	-Cts	www.cts.it
-Cts	www.cts.it	-Alpitour	www.alpitour.it
-Francorosso	www.francorosso.it	-E-viaggi	www.eviaggi.it
-Alpitour	www.alpitour.it	-Caesartour	www.caesartour.it
-Touritel	www.touritel.it	-Viaggiare	www.viaggiare.it
-Travelonline	www.travelonline.it	-Nouvelles frontieres	www.nouvellesfrontieres.com
-123via	www.123.it	-Valtour	www.valtour.it

Those questioned were asked to carry out the following tasks, in relation to each of the best websites they had identified:

- To write the words that came to mind when they thought about each single web site and to give them a positive (+), negative (-) or neutral (0) association;
- To identify the structure of the web sites and the elements they had in common as well as those that made them different;
- To make comparisons between the sites and express an evaluation of these.

The diagrams show the choices made by those participating and the relative index of polarity for each of the sites selected as best.

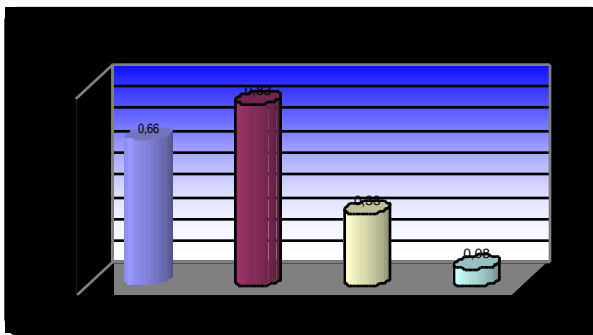
The index of polarity is considered as being a summarised method of measuring evaluations and attitudes implicit in the social representations and is worked out on the basis of the formula that follows:

Index of polarity (P) = (Number of positive words – Number of negative words) / total number of associated words. This index varies between –1 and +1:

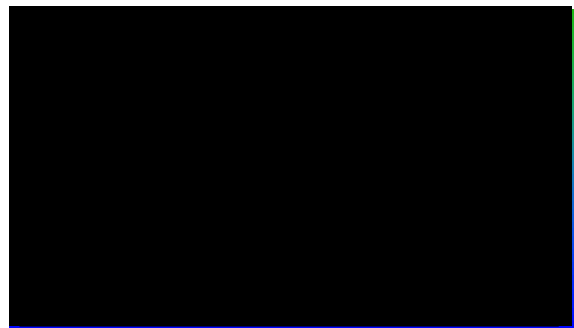
- Where P is between -1 and -0.5 this indicates that the majority of words associated had negative connotations;
- Where P is between -0.4 and $+0.4$ this indicates that negative and positive words tend to be the same;
- Where P is between $+0.4$ and $+1$ this means that the majority of the words had positive connotations.

The diagram relative to the first phase of the enquiry (1999/2000) shows that among the four best web sites identified Francorosso and Lastminute were the tour operators considered as having positive connotations while CTS and Alpitour were seen as neutral. The diagram relative to the second phase of the experiment (2000/2001), on the other hand, shows that the four best web sites identified were all considered as having positive connotations.

years 1999/2000 Websites considered "the best"



years 2000/2001 Websites considered "the best"



If we consider both phases of the research (that is over a period that stretches between 1999 and 2001), the best web sites repeatedly result as being the CTS and Alpitour sites.

The CTS (Centro Turistico Studentesco) website was launched initially in 1995 and was then renewed and updated in 1999. It is the most colourful web site among those that appear on the web under the voice of 'tourism'. What sets it aside is the fact that it appears as a game (see the home page illustrated below). The web site is very informative and serves as an extremely rich, articulated and exhaustive source of data for visitors.

It offers not only news on holiday packages but also allows users to find links with offers related to services that are aimed, above all, at young people. These include, for example, overseas language courses, last minute offers targeted at those who do not necessarily plan long term, information on student accommodation etc.

Up until the end of the second phase of the research programme (2001) there were no e-commerce offers on the CTS web site given that the main strategy behind the site was based principally on re-directing the target group from the digital scenario to a face to face, more daily relationship with one of the approximately 170 sales points spread out across the country.

However, it appeared that in the near future CTS too would offer the possibility to purchase on-line.

In fact one year later (2002) CTS has modified the web pages offering the possibility to purchase on line through two different solutions:

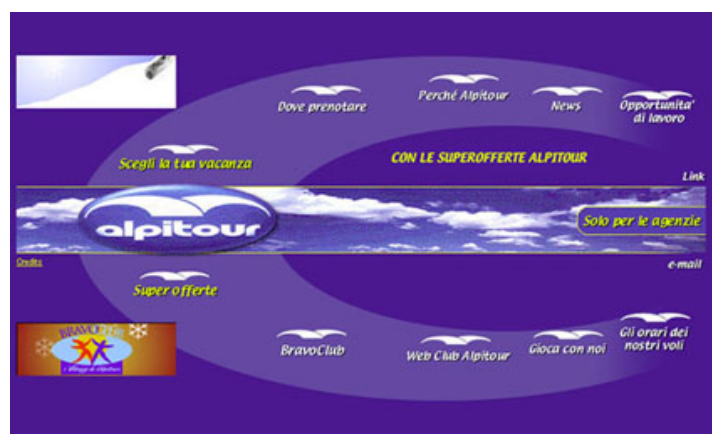
- by using callcenter (phoning to the green number 840.50.11.50);
- by buying on line after an exchange of e-mails with the operator.

This only serves to confirm that e-commerce in Italy is in rapid evolution.



The evolution of e-commerce web sites dedicated to tourism can clearly be recorded not only on the basis of the possibility to purchase on-line but also on that of the level of innovation of other services available. These may include, for example, an electronic library as recently launched on the new 'Viaggi dell'Elefante' web site. *It consists of an archive with a search engine that allows detailed individual files on around ten thousand travel books, many of which antique, to be viewed (compare Affari & finanza, La Repubblica, 17th September 2001).*

Alpitour is considered as being the most important Italian tour operator and one of the main ones on the European market ("Affari&Finanza" insert of 2nd October 2000, Year 15, n. 30, page 16), due to its company buy-out activities and the launch of new brands. The home page of the Alpitour web site (illustrated below) consists of 14 options set out in a circular form.



The contents of the options set forth are not exclusive among each other in that a single theme may be contained, to a different degree of detail, in more than one section. The sections are aimed fundamentally at introducing the tour operator on the web site, at holiday offers, at on-line services and at Bravo Club, a new type of holiday village option launched by Alpitour. Up till now (2002), Alpitour does not seem to fully exploit the potentials and advantages offered by the Internet by allowing the option to buy on-line. It offers the opportunity to consult a list of travel agencies in Italy or to go to the address of the web agency 'welcome on line' (www.welcomeonline.it) to get information. This is in strong contrast to the tourism and holiday e-commerce web sites in the USA where this possibility is widespread. This proves that, even if information and news are transmitted on a global scale, media offers and products are exploited on a local level, due to the fact that everything depends on how individuals, groups and institutions interpret and use them, according to their resources and their economic and social situation

When asked to identify some features that the sites had in common, the participants highlighted the features set out in the table below which also shows various elements that recurred across the two periods of the research:

First period of research: Years 1999/2000	Second period of research: Years 2000/2001
<i>1) simplicity of structure;</i>	<i>1) simplicity;</i>
<i>2) extent of on-line information;</i>	<i>2) extent and amount of information;</i>
<i>3) attention given to on-line offers.</i>	<i>3) booking on line;</i>
	<i>4) circular structure;</i>
	<i>5) Dynamic nature.</i>

As the table shows, the recurring elements that came up during the two years were: the level of simplicity for managing information and, at the same time, the wealth of information transmitted via the Internet. The following important differences between websites were also found to recur throughout the entire duration of our enquiry. They are set out under point one of the table below:

First period of research: Years: 1999/2000	Second period of research: Years: 2000/2001
<i>1) only some allow on-line booking;</i>	<i>1) only some allow on-line booking;</i>
<i>2) some contain a copy of the catalogue, while the contents of others are totally different from it;</i>	<i>2) variety and quality of photographs and images;</i>
<i>3) the structure of some is vertical while the tendency is now to use a horizontal structure.</i>	<i>3) variety of colours (with a preference for softer colours).</i>

As the table shows, the presence or the lack of e-commerce offers are, in both cases, a fundamental difference.

Those we interviewed also suggested some **changes** to these sites that aimed at modifying the elements already present and/or at adding new elements:

First Period of research: years: 1999/2000	Second period of research: years: 2000/2001
<i>1) increase speed;</i>	<i>1) reduce amount of advertising;</i>
<i>2) increase level of clarity;</i>	<i>2) reduce and simplify home pages;</i>
<i>3) render the structure more compact.</i>	<i>3) communicate directly;</i>
	<i>4) circular structure;</i>
	<i>5) attention to colours.</i>

All the changes suggested were related to the realm of communication and looked towards obtaining major clarity in the 'format' and contents. In passing from the first to the second phase of the enquiry we can see that the participants who evaluated the sites re-directed their attention from aspects innate to the technological medium (transmission speed) towards elements related to how the 'web-message' was structured (home pages, circular structure etc...)

Regarding the addition of new elements, the participants suggested:

First period of research: years 1999/2000	Second period of research: years 2000/2001
<i>1) addition of on-line sales and booking;</i>	<i>1) on-line booking and purchase</i>
<i>2) addition of images;</i>	<i>2) addition of photos and moving images.</i>
<i>3) increase in range of offers.</i>	<i>3) ticket delivery.</i>

Our participants in the research programme, divided into the two years, seem to have followed a course with several basic characteristics:

- Attention to the web-sites' architecture with an apparent preference for information presented in a clear, schematic manner;
- Attention to the 'aesthetic dimension' in the planning of sites where the textual and written areas for direct communication are accompanied by photos and moving images. Particular preference was shown for light, warm colours;
- In conclusion, attention to the 'commercial and economic aspect' that refers mainly to e-trading that was, over the various phases, repeatedly mentioned as an element that needed developing.

In comparing the two phases of our test we can see a more demanding target-user in the second phase where users required home delivery of tickets on top of the possibility to book on-line.

When comparing the results of this particular section of the enquiry, the Brand [R@ting](#) study conducted by the first study and observation on webmarketing in Italy (ETA META), confirmed CTS as a leader among Tour Operators present on the Internet when comparing various portals dedicated to tourism. Although the gold star went to Last Minute Tour for its dynamic and usable features, the CTS portal stood

out for being captivating and tempting and for offering complete and varied services and information to its clearly identified target audience (young people). The Alpitour web-site on the contrary was granted less value by the Brand [R@ting](#) study. It was judged as being very ordinary and as being designed as a normal travel brochure that simply provides lists of destinations and prices. This study was conducted parallel to ours, although we are unaware of the methods of analysis and of the procedures used to carry it out. The situation it depicted, on a more general level, was one where the Italian market was far less evolved compared to the more advanced realms of e-commerce. 'Failures: simple on-line brochures that lack those dream images that allow you to travel with your imagination before boarding any plane. Reduced level of interactivity, lack of images, lack of photos: tour operators choose a decisively plain form of communication to present their on-line catalogues, preferring to focus on a comprehensive offer rather than on an appealing site.' (compare: *La Repubblica*, 28 July 2001: 31).

We received further confirmation of a fairly general feature that recurred among the evaluations expressed by the focus groups we had created ad hoc for our **longitudinal** research. This came from a comparison with the evaluations supplied by Usable Net, a website Testing System available on-line at <http://liftonline.usablenet.com>. The sites that were analysed by our fairly expert web surfers were, in technical terms, mainly seen as negative while the CTS portal confirmed its position at the top of the league by obtaining the mark 'good' within a scale that went from excellent to good, to fair, to poor. This was thanks to the fact that the web-site contained no problems that obstructed the user although there were a few minor problems related to some links, to the opportunity to download several images and to some missing strings. Alpitour was judged, again on the above scale, as deserving a 'fair' given that it was seen as having some problems as far as structure, images, colours and links were concerned.

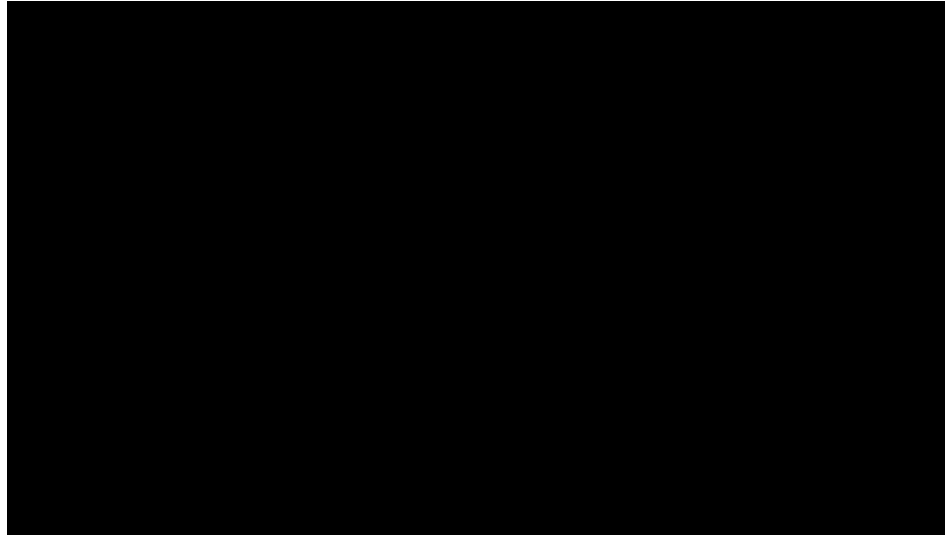
The correspondences between evaluations provided by our Internet surfers and those of a technical nature provided by Usable Net are all the more interesting given the fact that the users' criteria are very different when compared to those of the technical experts. This is because the website Testing System is based on factors that are linked purely to aspects of efficiency and precision related to so-called 'computer grammar' in the use of HTML. These concern, for example, the speed with which downloading takes place, the concision and significance of the website's address, the presence of frames within already existent frames, browser compatibility, compatibility with more advanced versions of HTML, etc.

2a2) Once we had completed the section of our enquiry that centred on an assessment of Italian websites dedicated to tourism that are now on-line, the participants were split into small groups and asked *to imagine they themselves had to construct a website for a tour operator*. In other words, they were to help plan a digital product that attracted potential customers, designing the home page, drawing a diagram with the ideal structure, using texts, images or both these elements.

Below is an example of a home page as planned by a small group during the part of the test carried out over the years 1999/2000. Its graphics contain many warm, rich colours; the top left part of the page contains the clear title 'Mondo Viaggi', while on the right there is a sketched image of a tropical sea with a setting sun, a beach and two Palm trees. The bottom part of the page contains various links and has a typically horizontal structure within which the most important subjects are:

- Who is Mondo Viaggi? (a section aimed at positioning the tour operator, establishing its identity and creating a relationship of trust with the potential buyer);
- Our agencies;
- Our offers;
- Last Minute;
- Initiatives and reductions;
- Press review (this section is also aimed at strengthening the element of trust required for mediation with the possible buyer by presenting a form of legitimisation that comes from the press and boards or institutions);
- On-line booking.

The charts set down in brief the common need to use a form of e-branding that is aimed at 'creating trust' in potential buyers and at 'personalising' offers for very different target groups.



A degree of awareness towards some basic criteria needed to 'create a travel agency web site' became evident from the above example, as well as from other sites as imagined by our participants who, although interested in issues of communication, certainly cannot be compared to experts of web design or web marketing. These criteria were based on fast and simple navigation, on the issue of updating, on a pleasant appearance and on care granted to the graphic design. This shows an understanding that: 'Creating a web page does not correspond to setting out a colourful display window with glittering Flash animations, but rather requires an effort to create a fast, up-to-date, elegant tool that is easy to consult and that saves the user from getting lost in the wilderness of the internet'. (compare. Tutto Internet 2001, insert of daily newspaper La Repubblica, n.4).

2b) Another section within the research programme was aimed at comparing **representations and attitudes related to the Internet, to its advantages and limits, to the strategies of development linked to e-commerce and to consumer goods and tourism services**. This was **conducted among a sample group of 50 professionals** (tour operators and travel agents) and a **sample group of 100 potential on-line buyers** (navigators who differed in age, sex, and the frequency with which they used the Internet, chosen on the basis of a percentage that reflects the statistics of Italian Internet users at the time the information was gathered).

The category of professionals granted more emphasis to electronic features geared towards communication, such as chat, email, newsgroups and so on, while Internet surfers grant more importance to technical elements which clearly have more impact on them as users.

Also when responding on the topic of the advantages of the Internet, the emphasis on communication was greater among professionals, while Internet surfers seemed to appreciate the '*universality*' of this vehicle to a greater degree.

As for the limits to the Internet perceived, navigators came across as less worried about the risk of the loss of frontiers and about the impersonality (social alienation) factor on which travel agents had placed much emphasis.

As for the potential on-line buyer of goods linked to the tourism market, we worked on the hypothesis that the buyer was guided not only by his or her experience of using the Internet and by the attractive idea of saving time in comparison to purchasing the same product in a travel agency, but also by the increased freedom to make decisions without the pressure that a face to face dialogue with a travel agent involves.

This serves once more to highlight the differences between the points of view of the professionals and the web surfers.

Some of the results of our test show that the phenomenon of 'electronic tourism' in Italy is still a long way from actively involving the potential on-line buyer in the structuring of offers. In other words the prosumer, as an active participant and constructive contributor within this new dynamic form of economy, does not, as yet, seem to have stepped into the arena.

For both categories (professionals and navigators on the Internet) a post-hoc control of the quality that is perceived of offers is the most commonly used manner of involving clients and accounts for 50% of cases. Only 17.4% of the Internet surfers interviewed felt that involving the client in the construction of websites was vital. This stands in opposition to the higher 41.7% of professionals who seem to be more aware of the active role carried by the on-line buyer (with respect to the traditional client). Attention to the more commercial aspects is still seen by our Internet users as more important than the client's active involvement (36% against 17.4%).

It has yet to be seen if Italian Internet users are fully aware of the concept of a *prosumer*.

On the basis of the data presented above we can however answer this question with a 'no' or, at least, a 'not yet'. Nevertheless, considering the speed with which changes occur in this domain one must remain careful in setting down these results that are based on data gathered in the years 1999/2000 and which, as a consequence, risk being out-of-date already.

Further fields of research and conclusions

Considering the highly 'dynamic' and changing nature of research material that comes from the web, the programme's development is taking it towards a comparison between results based on the data that was gathered during the 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 academic years and that which is currently being analysed, based on more recent information. This concerns both analysis of Internet sites produced by webmasters and designed by fairly expert web users as well as of the strategies that determine which decisions an on-line buyer makes in comparison to a buyer who continues to refer to traditional travel agents.

Indeed, new statistics are being gathered to determine the decision-making process of potential package holiday buyers in relation to their source of information: traditional (holiday brochures, information gathered in a travel agency) and electronic (Internet) and in relation to their representational schemes linked to the stimulus terms of 'Internet' and 'tourist'.

The results obtained so far tend to confirm the presence of two fundamental factors in the field of e-commerce:

1) The need for 'personalisation' and to have a vehicle that can offer support to the individual as he seeks information independently.

'Consuming across the Internet, very much in coherence with its fundamental characteristics, entails the growth and development of new figures who are capable of satisfying a demanding and narcissistic consumer, the possibility to actively obtain a large amount of information and to make comparisons, in addition to the possibility to access a personalised service – these are the true strong points of e-commerce' (Olivero, N. 2000, p. 325).

2) The 'need for trust'. E-commerce, especially where intangible goods are concerned, may well decrease the presence of intermediary figures within the value added chain and thus reduce costs. On the other hand, in order to link clients and retailers, some intermediary figures are necessary so as to create 'trust'; an important factor for e-commerce, given the wide and very particular expansion of the Internet market.

While the previous procedure was defined 'dis-intermediation', the latter is known as 're-intermediation'. 'As e-commerce causes the 'dis-intermediation'; of some intermediary figures, it creates both a considerable dependence on others, as well as a number of totally new intermediary roles. The main service provided by many such new intermediary figures is determined by trust. This is an extremely important factor for electronic methods of doing business given that both buyer and seller are total strangers to one other and also because the expansion of the Internet means that fraud may occur more easily here than it would be on the traditional market. The notion of trust can also be translated into an

uncertainty about quality. In the aim of decreasing this type of uncertainty about quality standards, the three main intermediary aspects of potential services are: advertising, safe on-line payment and delivery. (Yang, L. 2000, p. 514)

Even if e-commerce is a strictly economic field, it is undeniably linked to factors and processes that are very much of a psychosocial nature. Examples are the above-mentioned desire for 'personalisation' and the need for trust. Nobody can have remained blind to the obvious growth of this sector that is so often subject to opposing trends which over or under-rate it, making the world of the new economy highly unstable in comparison to the predictable and stable nature of the traditional economy.

This has brought us to identify a field of that research that could help companies and tour operators who decide to combine their traditional-style offers with a digital version, alongside those who decide to take the risk of offering on-line deals only. This field of research, we feel, should aim at developing a better understanding of the interaction between those who develop and design the architecture of digital offers, the technological components that mediate the communication procedures and those Internet users who, once in 'cyber space' go from simply surfing the web and using it out of sheer curiosity to being veritable on-line buyers

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