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***Pilgrimage experiences in electronic Word-of-Mouth: an analysis of paths and preferences of independent pilgrims to Rome***

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**Abstract**

The principal platforms for online travel advice and consumer reviews, like TripAdvisor or the Thorn Tree Forum of Lonely Planet, mostly impose to the users a 'market-driven' publish method, which forces them to think in terms of a singular aspect of the travel experience, like an attraction they visited or a hotel they stayed (Aakhus, 2007; Xiang et al., 2008). As a consequence, users' comments and advices often focus on a context-deprived product, setting aside the travel experience. Thus, when looking online for specific types of travel experiences, like pilgrimages or thematic tours, it is hard to find relevant comments, and to make an informed critical decision, based on the testimonies of others. The case is particularly relevant for the pilgrimage sector, where besides guided tours and organized groups, there is a big number of independent pilgrims, who might look online for other pilgrims' advice, to build an overall impression of the pilgrimage shrine and tailor their visit (MacWilliams, 2002).

The paper first describes eWord-of-Mouth as a new channel for travel advice (Dellarocas, 2003; Litvin et al, 2007; Grtzel et al. 2007), then it presents an exploration of the available eWOM for pilgrims, taking the case of Rome, which is among the traditional pilgrimage shrines of Christianity. The principal platforms for online travel advice (i.e. TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist, Frommers, Thorn Tree Forum of Lonely Planet, IgoUgo, BootsNAll) were systematically consulted using a keywords search method, in order to retrieve contents published by travelers about pilgrimage experiences in Rome. In a second stage, such contents were analyzed, with the aim of pointing out, in particular, two aspects: 1) the attractions independent pilgrims visited the most along their way, 2) their comments and advices about them. Finally, considered the recent closing of the *Year of the Faith*, launched by Pope Benedict XVI and closed by Pope Francis, which covered the period from October 11<sup>th</sup> 2012 to November 24<sup>th</sup> 2013, retrieved contents were specifically investigated with reference to this event.

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