ARTISTIC AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE TRAVEL REVIEWS ABOUT SAINT PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS (ROME)

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Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) is a social dynamic naturally occurring in the interaction among people, and represents the elective channel to share experiences. Thanks to web 2.0, WOM has gained a new significance: users now have a number of opportunities to voice their opinions and, conversely, to inform their decision thanks to advice from other users. The study presented is a first investigation of tourism experiences at a religious site shared on an online review platform. A corpus of Online Travel Reviews about the Roman Basilica of Saint Paul outside the Walls published on TripAdvisor served as a case study, to answer questions related to functional, content and semantic-linguistics aspects of religious tourism experiences reported online. In particular, the role of artistic religious sites as *mediator* for religious experiences is investigated.

1. ICTs, eWords-of-mouth and tourism experiences

Tourism is an experience which needs to be communicated. In fact, both if it was wonderful or terrible, a travel experience is usually shared with others; telling it, discussing it, comparing it with previous experiences is nearly a need for someone who just came back from a journey. Tourism is an experience of freedom, since it gives the tourist the opportunity to decide where, how and with whom to spend her free-time, fulfilling those desires which are usually subordinated to the duties and rules of the daily life. Tourism driven by religious motivations, then, is expression of the personal quest for meaning, and singles out the most inner values and beliefs. Many elements of a journey contribute to shape a unique experience, but each journey is usually fixed in the memory because of one or a few more aspects, which makes it special and different from all the others.

Experience is shared, mostly, by means of Word of mouth (WOM), which has always been an elective channel to spread and collect information, since it is a social dynamic naturally occurring in the interaction among people. WOM can be even considered as the primary enabler of economic and social activity in most of the ancient and medieval communities, which had not yet established formal law systems of contract enforcement. WOM has been showed to play a major role for customers' buying decisions, and WOM from friends and relatives has been found to be the most commonly used information source for travellers before they make a travel decision (Beiger and Laesser, 2004).

Web 2.0 – or 'read and write web' – is giving new significance to WOM, providing consumers with a number of opportunities to voice their opinions, which encompass a variety of media forms and types of websites: blogs, personal Web spaces, podcasts, wikis are only some of them. Such contents are known as User Generated Contents (UGC) and can equate electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The Internet provides easy access to word-of-mouth discourses about almost every kind of consumer and experiential goods, since almost every kind of product or consumer experience can now be reviewed or commented online directly by the user. Consumers increasingly rely on eWOM to make a variety of decisions, thanks to their easiness of access and multiplicity of contributors.

Dellarocas (2003) identifies three characteristics which make online feedback mechanisms different from the non-mediated WOM networks: the scale that can be achieved; the possibility information technology gives to control and monitor feedback mechanisms, through proper engineering of information systems that mediate them; new challenges introduced by the very nature of online interaction, as the difficulty of identifying the author, because of the lack of contextual cues and the easiness of changing online identity. In addition, eWOM includes many-to-many communication, since a comment may be left by a user, read by many, answered back or followed through by other users.

Tourism-related UGC usually reflect the experience of the tourist at specific destinations, her evaluations and reactions about the experience as well as about the destination itself. Prospective tourists use the net for gathering the necessary information to make decisions about the many different aspects of the journey; studies show that they trust more contents generated by other tourists – like online reviews or forum posts – than official sources, because they are considered more credible, genuine and not business-driven (Dwyer, 2007).

Online Travel Reviews (OTR) are a form in which content is created online; they are, indeed, the most accessible and prevalent form of eWOM in the field of tourism (Chatterjee, 2001). They represent people's wish to share their travel experiences online, recommending a tourism product or complaining about it. When reporting a travel experience, people do not just tell their stories nor do they only provide information about places and services, but make claims about those places and services and give reasons supporting their claims (De Ascaniis and Greco Morasso, 2011). OTR are, indeed, an argumentative type of text, where the opinions given are backed by values, beliefs, expectations about the very idea of travel and tourism. Analyzing OTR allows, thus, to get closer to people's most personal experiences and better understand them.

2. Religious tourism attractions and pilgrimage shrines

One of the "classics" in the field of pilgrimage and comparative religion is the monograph by Nolan and Nolan (1989) *Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe*, which reports a long-term study when, during over ten years of research, the authors visited nearly 1'000 pilgrimage sites, talked with pilgrims, tourists and service personnel, and made comparisons at geographical as well as devotional level. According to the results of that study (see also Nolan and Nolan, 1992), the universe of religious tourism attractions can be conceptualized in three overlapping categories: a) *pilgrimage shrines*, that are sites having mostly no particular historic or artistic significance, visited for religious reasons by people from beyond the immediate locality; b) *religious tourist attractions*, that are sites of religious significance drawing visitors because of their historic or artistic value; c) *religious festivals*, associated or not with pilgrimage shrines, that are sites where special celebrations are organized during religious occasions. As the authors point out, these conceptual categories are overlapping, and they exist various blends of the three basic categories. The classification is useful, however, to investigate and understand tourism-related dynamics of religious sites in terms of their main characteristics, in terms of public, tourists' motivations, site attractions.

For the study presented here, a religious tourist attraction was taken as case study: it is the Roman Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls. The site is, indeed, for many visitors, primarily a pilgrimage shrine; in particular, in the occasion of the 2000th anniversary of his birth, Pope Benedict XVI dedicated a special Jubilee year to the Apostle Paul, which started on June 28th 2008, and was officially closed on June 29th 2009. The Jubilee year attracted to the Basilica a number of pilgrims from all over the world, because "questa Basilica vuole essere la testimonianza viva e vitale dell'insegnamento e dell'esempio di Paolo per additarlo a tutto il mondo e continuarne la sua opera" [trans. by the authors: "this Basilica intends to be the living and vital testimony of Paul's teaching and model, to show it to the whole world and to carry on Saint Paul's missionary work"] (Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo, 2009, p. 23). In the following section, some historic and artistic aspects of the Basilica are presented.

2.1 Saint Paul Outside the Walls: between religious and heritage tourism

Saint Paul's Basilica is one of the most visited attractions in Rome: TripAdvisor ranks it at the second place (out of 649) of all the attractions in Rome reviewed by the users community, with over 1350 travel reviews (as at the end of 2013). The greatest majority of those reviews gives an excellent (over 1'000) or very good (over 260) rate to the attraction.

It is Rome's largest patriarchal basilica after St Peter's in the Vatican. It is located at about 2 Km outside the Aurelian Walls surrounding Rome and is property of the Holy See, enjoying extraterritorial rights. It was founded over the burial place of Saint Paul, immediately after the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which marked the end of the Christian persecutions and conferred on them freedom of worship, encouraging the construction of places of prayer. It was initially a small church with three naves, but immediately became a place of veneration and pray during years of Christian persecution, so that a bigger basilica was built. The actual Basilica has an imposing Byzantine structure, 131.66 metres long by 65 metres wide, rising to a height of 30 metres, comprising five naves, supported by 80 monolithic granite columns. Throughout the centuries many Popes restructured and embellished the Basilica with frescoes, mosaics, paintings and chapels. Famous is the series of papal portraits, which go round the top of the nave and the transept with 265 round mosaics. On the night of July 15th 1823 a terrible fire almost entirely destroyed the Basilica leaving hardly any of the structures and works of art intact, and most of the walls had to be rebuilt. The "new" Basilica was consecrated on December 10th 1854 by Pope Pius IX (1846-1876), on the occasion of the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

The Basilica has been designated as a National Monument by the Italian Government due to its artistic and aesthetic value and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage since 1980, together with the historic centre of Rome.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

Different aspects of the relationship between tourism and religious experience are worthy to be considered; in the study reported here, four of them were systematically investigated. The research questions, which drove the study were:

a) can different types of OTR be distinguished according to the main communicative function they accomplish?

b) does the artistic and/or the religious experience emerge from OTR?

c) can the artistic aspects of a religious attraction be drivers for a religious unsought experience?

d) is the artistic or religious experience 'revealed' by certain keywords?

The corpus of analysis comprised all the OTR in English about Saint Paul Outside the Walls, ever published on TripAdvisor until May 25th 2013. 400 OTR were retrieved, 388 of which were considered for the analysis. The corpus was coded and analyzed using UAM Corpus Tool, version 2.8.12, a software for semi-automatic annotation of texts and images. UAM allows to explore linguistic patterns and linguistic features in a text, which cannot be explored with simple concordances, and which cannot be automatically tagged because they pertain to the semantic or pragmatic level. UAM also provides statistical functionalities.

The corpus was undergone to a three steps analysis:

1) a *functional analysis*, aimed at distinguishing the reviews in terms of their main communicative goal, that is the effect the text was conceived to bring on reality (for instance, to give an advice or to describe an event);

2) a *content analysis*, with the aim of identifying passages in the reviews where the author reported his/her experience at the site, paying attention, in particular, to artistic and religious aspects of the tourism experience;

3) a *semantic-linguistic analysis*, aimed at identifying keywords particularly representing of the artistic and the religious experience.

4 Results

4.1 Functional analysis

Three types of OTR were distinguished, according to the main communicative function they accomplish (Searle, 1969):

a) *practical reviews*, which mostly give trip planning-related advices, as indications to reach the site, means of transport, time to allocate for the visit. An example is the following:

"Another Major Church"

5/5 Reviewed April 2, 2013

(…) It's fast, maybe 15 minutes, to get to this church on the Metro Blue Line from the Termini. This same Metro train stops at the Colosseum, so in the Termini you can follow the signs to the Colosseum train. There is also a bus from Rome with this church as its ultimate destination. The bus parks in the street right in front of the front of the church. (…)

b) *attraction outline reviews*, which report mostly about historical or artistic aspects of the site, or provide details about tourism services and facilities. Below is an example:

"Portraits of all Popes"

4/5 Reviewed November 25, 2012

Monumental complex, very scenic! Inside there are the portraits of all Popes, included the current one. You can find how many Popes might find their places before... Doomsday!

c) *first person account reviews*, which focus on the tourist's experience, reporting his/her travel story, opinions on the attraction and recommendations to prospective tourists. This type of reviews represents the major source of insights for users seeking for travel advice and looking for the touristic value of specific sites. The following review is an example of this type of texts:

"Beautiful Church!"

5/5 Reviewed March 31, 2013

Loved it! What a beautiful church! This was not on our tour, but we had some extra time on the way to the catacombs and made this stop. I was so glad we did! Loved the history behind this church. And now can say I was at the place St. Paul is buried.
Make sure to see this beautiful church!!

Figure 1 shows frequency results for each category, including frequencies for mixed categories.
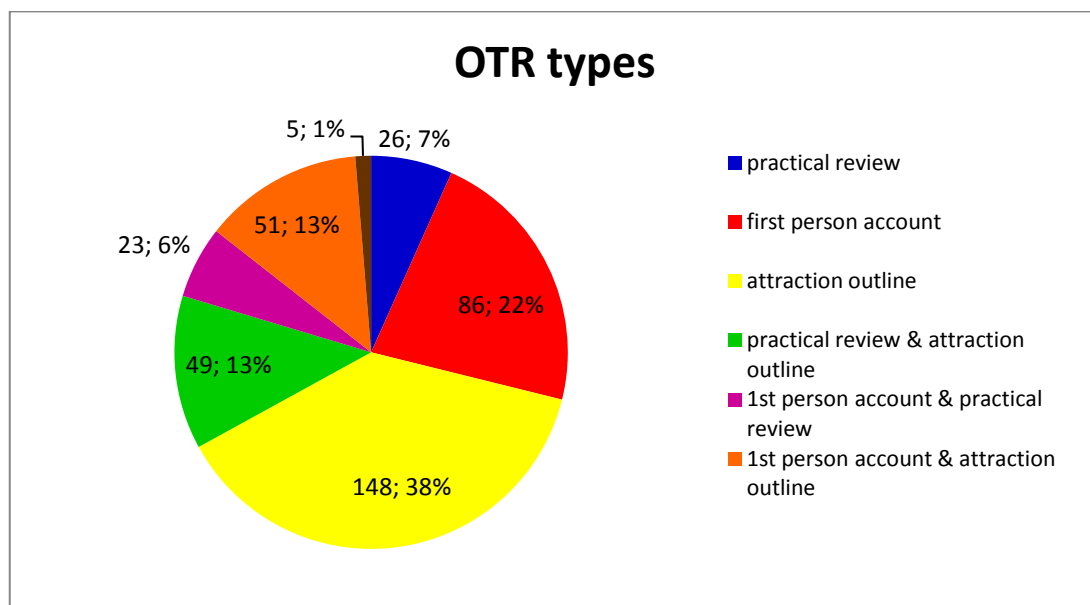

Figure 1: Types of OTR according to their main communicative function.

The majority (38%) of the OTR about Saint Paul are descriptions of the site, providing details about historic, architectural and other artistic aspects, such as the fact that it is the burial site of the apostle Paul, the interior is

enriched with mosaics and paintings of all the Popes, the naves are sustained by massive columns. The description of the Basilica is often accompanied by practical hints on how to reach it, the best time to go or how to plan a visit within a wider tour. Summing up OTR which give practical hints and attraction outline, it amounts to nearly 60% (precisely 58%) of the whole corpus; in all the remaining OTR, some level of personal account about the experience at the attraction is reported. In particular, in almost one fourth of the reviews (22%) the account of the personal experience prevails on other elements. These results show that OTR do not only provide informative content about a specific tourism site, but might be a source of *opinionated information* (De Ascaniis, 2013). When reporting on personal experiences, in fact, people give value judgments and express opinions; such judgments and opinions entail a persuasive power, in that they are claims supported by reasons, thus, they may influence the reader's perception of the site being reviewed and give a base for pondering about it. OTR contribute to shape the reputation of a tourism site and, this way, to lead travel decisions.

4.2 Content analysis

The analysis of the content of the corpus of OTR aimed at identifying the parts of the texts where the reviewers commented about their visit to the attraction in terms of an artistic or religious experience. The corpus was annotated classifying tourism experiences according to the following types:

a) *artistic experience*, that is when the reviewer commented about artistic aspects of the attraction giving an esthetical judgment, as in the following example:
   - "During masses, the front part of the church is lighted and the gold mosaic art work on the walls and ceiling is spectacular." (*Another Major Church*, April 2, 2013)

b) *religious experience*, that is when the expression of an emotion caused by or related to a sacred object/event/environment was reported, as in:
   - "Have been now a few times for mass and even as a non Catholic I can say the mass is quite uplifting. Wonderful voices and setting." (*Spiritual!*, September 4, 2012)

c) *combination of artistic and religious experience*, that is when comments about artistic aspects of the attraction were intertwined with expressions of personal emotions, as in:
   - "This is a definite pilgrimage site for Christians everywhere, and the decorations are beautiful too." (*The tomb of St. Paul!*, March 14, 2013)

d) *service at attraction*, that is when the reviewer commented about services for tourists at the site, or generically about his/her experience as a tourist, as in:
   - "The reason this church gets two stars is (…)the very nice gift shop selling abbey made products". (*Disappointing …*, March 5, 2012)

Inter-coder reliability was measured, to check the consistency of the categories. Two coders coded a sample of 40 reviews, and agreed both on the passages of the text to be annotated and on the categories assigned, except that in 5 cases. Figure 2 reports the frequencies for each category.

Experience types

- artistic exp
- religious exp
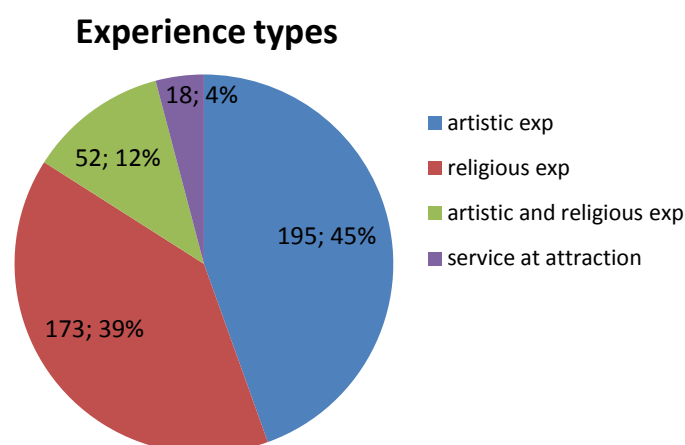- artistic and religious exp
- service at attraction

Figure 2: Types of tourism experiences reported in the OTR about Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Nearly half (45%) of the tourism experiences reported in the OTR are related to some extent to the spiritual dimension or religious life, and a bit smaller amount (39%) concerns artistic or aesthetic aspects of the attraction. In 12% of the annotated assertions, then, comments on religious experiences at the attraction are combined with comments on the reviewer's artistic experience. These results show that when reviewing a religious tourism attraction, beyond describing it and giving practical information, people share their personal stories, pointing out those elements, which impressed them the most and made their visit worth to be communicated. Even the most intimate of the experiences, that are those related to the religious and spiritual life, are put to the fore and shared. This might not be

due only to the type of attraction – i.e. a religious site –, since one could only comment about artistic aspects of the site, without revealing his/her spiritual experience. In addition, the religious experience should not be taken for granted just because the reviewer was visiting a religious tourism attraction, in fact, as often reported in the reviews making up the corpus "you don't have to be religious to enjoy!". The artistic dimension of a place precedes the religious dimension, and this is why tourists visiting religious sites neither need to have pilgrimage motivations nor to belong to the religion representing the site to appreciate it.

A different matter is, then, the question if artistic aspects of a religious attraction can be *drivers* for a religious unsought experience. To answer this question, the analysis of the keywords used to describe the artistic and respectively the religious experience at the Basilica might be of help.

4.3 Semantic-linguistic analysis

The UAM Corpus Tool allows compiling the absolute frequency of words, the frequency of keywords and the frequency of key-phrases in the corpus. The absolute frequency of words lists usually place on top words such as "the", "of" or "and", while the keywords and key-phrases frequency orders words or phrases (called *n-grams*) in terms of their 'specialness' for the corpus, that is in terms of how important each word is for a specific corpus when compared with other corpora. The 'specialness' of words is measured in terms of *propensity*, that is the likelihood that a word occurs in the annotated texts that are under investigation compared with everything else in the corpus; a propensity value of 100, for instance, indicates that the word appears 100 times more in the annotated texts than in the corpus as a whole. UAM CT also allows to visualize keywords in the form of a tag cloud, that is highlighting more important words using a bigger font.

Words that are representative of the reviewers' artistic experiences at the attraction particularly highlighted:

1) the *overall impression of the church*, given mostly by its size and architecture, that is described with words as 'huge', 'gorgeous', spectacular', 'amazing', 'impressive', 'astonishing'. These words speak of an intense emotion of surprise; a surprise because, maybe, the architectural beauty and greatness of the church was not expected, or maybe because, even if expected to some extent, such beauty and greatness moved the soul towards transcendent realities.

2) *singular artistic elements*, such as the garden, the paintings of the popes, the mosaics, the sculptures.

When revealing elements of their religious experience, reviewers mostly speak about two aspects:

1) Words as 'peaceful', 'peace', 'moving', 'inspiring', 'quite' and 'holy', all refer to the *atmosphere* surrounding the Basilica. Such an atmosphere raises feelings of peace and quietness, drives intense and deep reflection, allows an intimate experience.

2) Words as 'pilgrimage', 'tomb', 'apostle', 'buried', point to the fact that the Basilica is the *burial place of Saint Paul*, and let emerge one core aspect of pilgrimages, that is the encounter with a witness. Saint Paul, in this case, is the witness of a faith and the icon of a way of living; he is a person, who others would love to emulate.

5 Conclusions

The paper presented a first investigation of the tourism experiences shared online by visitors to a religious tourism attraction, the Roman Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, that is also part of UNESCO World Heritage. The blend between the artistic value and the religious nature of the site, allowed to see, in particular, if and under which respect the artistic experience might become mediator of a religious experience. Three kinds of analysis were performed, which pointed out functional, content and semantic characteristics of the reviews published on TripAdvisor about the Basilica. Results show that, beyond providing practical tourist information and describing the site, online reviewers give first person accounts of their visit, even sharing intimate experiences as those pertaining to the religious dimension. OTR are, indeed, a source of opinionated information and contribute, this way, to shape the reputation of a site and to lead travel decisions. The fact that reviews of a religious attraction tell of personal religious experiences should not be taken for granted, since they represent a sort of 'revelation' of the reviewer's most intimate dimension; one, indeed, could limit him/herself to comment on artistic aspects. The wish to share the religious – intimate – experience provoked by the site is a cue of the value attributed to it; the religious experience, maybe unexpected and unsought, enriches the visit and makes it even worthier to be communicated. The Basilica of Saint Paul, in particular, strikes visitors for the majesty of its architecture and the beauty of its works of art as well as for the atmosphere that these aesthetic characteristics combined with the religious aspects create. The peace and serenity of the place, in fact, make the artistic experience more intense, facilitating the very role of the art, that is to break the narrow and painful fence of the reality and to open a window towards the transcendent.

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