Chapter 13

E-Branding and Institutional Web Sites: The “Visiting Card” of the Municipalities of Rome and Paris

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ABSTRACT

The research presented in this chapter is at the intersection of two large research programs designed and directed by de Rosa, both inspired by the Social Representations Theory: the first is aimed at mapping and comparing both representational and experiential imagery dimensions of tourists and citizens interacting with European historical capitals; the second explores the contribution of new internet based communicational systems to psychosocial research under different forms and through different channels, with a focus on communication applied to the field of tourism. In particular, this chapter presents the analysis of the municipal web sites of two historical capitals, Rome and Paris, considered as the Visiting Cards these two cities offer citizens and tourists.

In order to study the contents of both institutional web sites (www.comune.roma.it and www.paris.fr), a multi-method approach has been applied and in particular: the use of a grid designed by de Rosa & Picone, Nielsen’s usability test, and the Atlas/ti program for a qualitative analysis of both web sites in two versions downloaded simultaneously.

The use of the three tools has enabled the identification and comparison of the elements that characterize the web sites of the Municipalities of Rome (analyzed lengthwise in time, comparing the versions

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downloaded in June 2003 and April 2004, with a replication of the usability test in November 2004) and of Paris (downloaded the first of April 2004 the same day of the Roman web site, with which it was compared). The analyses have allowed to highlight aspects related to contents, structure, and several technical elements important from a user’s point of view (graphics, interactivity and usability in particular), emphasizing strengths and weaknesses.

Other than the descriptive value and the possible function of guiding web professionals and institutional communication managers of the city, the results presented in this chapter have a historical value (given the volatility and dynamicity of web sites, like many other Internet environments) with respect to the evolution towards web 2.0 scenarios, assuming a particular interest for further comparative analysis with 2010 web sites, currently under investigation.

**INTRODUCTION**

Being on the web is more and more equivalent to existing. This is true for single individuals, organizations and institutions. Institutional web sites of cities are like *visiting cards* for both citizens and tourists.

Manuel Castells has dedicated an entire volume of his “Network Society” trilogy to the theme of identity on the web (Castells 1996, 2000), offering an interesting contribution to the debate on the pervasive need to be visible on the web – at times polarized on “apocalyptic” (cfr. Interalia: Slouka, 1995; Maldonado, 1997; Wolton, 1999; Calegari, 2000) and “integrated” (cfr. Interalia: Turkle, 1995; Levy, 1997; Mitchell, 1999; Castells, 2001) viewpoints.

In the ‘90’s the debate became more lively among experts belonging to different disciplines on topics related to new “virtual” identities of individuals, institutions and online organizations, and the spreading of social internet habits. Contemporaneously de Rosa together with collaborators of the Chair of Psychology of Communication and New Media (Faculty of Psychology – La Sapienza University of Rome) gave way to a series of longitudinal empirical researches aimed at monitoring the developments of Social Representations of internet and the metaphors associated to them (navigation, ocean, global village, place, marketplace etc.). The main focus of the studies was relative to the evolution of social practices and more specific fields (i.e. tourism) in which changes tied to e-commerce and web-marketing have radically redefined the relationship between possible customers that buy travel packages, tour operators and travel agencies.

The present contribution satisfies the interests of research on communication via internet applied to tourism (de Rosa & Bocci, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2005; de Rosa, Bocci & Saurini, 2006) and a wider research program, led by de Rosa, on citizens and European and non-European first-visitors to nine historical capitals (Helsinki, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Wien and recently also Warsaw and Brussels) This program is contextualized in the framework of previous empirical studies on Social Representations of Rome in first-visitors of six different nationalities (de Rosa, 1995; de Rosa, 2006; de Rosa, Bonaiuto, Calogero, & Antonelli, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; de Rosa, Calogero, & Antonelli, 1992; de Rosa, Antonelli, & Calogero, 1995; de Rosa & d’Ambrosio, 2009, 2010) and meets the interest of the “Environmental Psychology” and “Social Representations of urban places” research areas (Ardone, de Rosa, & Bonnes, 1987; Ardone, de Rosa, Bonnes, & Secchiarioli, 1987; Bonnes, de Rosa, Ardone, & Bagnasco, 1990; Bonnes, Bonaiuto, Ercolani, & de Rosa, 1991a, 1991b; Nenci, de Rosa, Testa, & Carrus, 2003).