Smart Tourism and Platforms. Italia.It, the Italian Tourism Digital Hub

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Abstract. Digital technologies have become a fundamental part of daily life, with the tourism industry consistently at the forefront of adopting new technological advancements and platforms. Smart tourism is essential for the industry's development, as it significantly leverages these platforms to enhance tourism services. The research explores smart tourism's transformative potential, emphasising platform-mediated tourism's impact. It examines the platform "Italia.it", the Tourism Digital Hub, promoted by the Italian government. The case study highlights the extensive implications and opportunities when governments create appropriate framework conditions for the digital transformation of tourism business models and the wider tourism ecosystem.

Keywords: Italia.it · Smart Tourism · e-participation · Italian Digital Agenda

1 Introduction

Digital technologies have become a fundamental part of daily life and can be considered ubiquitous. Society is increasingly digitized and interconnected, constantly permeating every aspect of citizens' lives [10, 16].

Emerging technologies herald the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, reshaping society in unprecedented ways, necessitating a collective and individual approach to harness its universal benefits [36].

The development and the integration of digital technologies are significantly changing lifestyles, work habits, travel practices, business practices and operations, revolutionising and redefining the tourism industry [29]. Tourism emerged as a trailblazer in digitalising business operations worldwide by being among the first to introduce online flight and hotel bookings. With the worldwide expansion of information and communications technology (ICT), the tourism industry has consistently been at the forefront in embracing new technological advancements and platforms [37].

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the tourism sector, with travel and accommodation restrictions dampening international tourism [21, 41, 19]. However, the sector gradually recovered as restrictions eased in 2021 [15]. In 2023, the international tourism sector recovered 88% of its pre-pandemic volume globally, with international

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arrivals close to 1.3 billion. The sector generated about 1.4 trillion U.S. dollars in revenue, accounting for 93% of 2019 figures. Additionally, the comprehensive export revenues from tourism, including passenger transport, amounted to nearly USD 1.6 trillion, representing 95% of the amounts tallied before the pandemic [39]. Despite this recovery, challenges such as inflation, volatile oil prices, and geopolitical tensions persist, influencing tourism trends and consumer behavior. Future challenges remain regarding sustainability, adaptability, and managing workforce shortages to address the evolving landscape effectively [12].

In the third quarter of 2023, the platform-based tourism sector demonstrated significant growth, overwhelming previous records and markedly surpassing the pre-pandemic benchmarks set in 2019, registering a collective growth of 13.4% in platform tourism with 309.4 million nights booked. This period continued and intensified the recovery that began in 2022. Data from online booking platforms[1] revealed unprecedented activity levels, with July alone recording 115.7 million nights booked—an increase of 10.7% compared to the same month in the previous year.

The outbreak of the pandemic accelerated the digitalization process, prompting industries, including tourism, to adopt digital solutions and data-driven approaches for administrative and operational continuity. Consequently, there is a growing trend towards smart tourism in Europe and globally[13].

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Sect. 1: Tourism and digitalization, Sect. 2: Italia.it. The Italian Tourism Digital Hub, Sect. 3: Discussion, Sect. 4: Conclusion.

2 Tourism and Digitalization

According to the UNWTO, tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, business, or professional purposes. These people are called visitors (tourists or excursionists, residents or non-residents), and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure [44].

The widespread availability and integration of technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), mobile applications, location-based and geo-tagging services, Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), social media, blockchain, and smart devices provide a wealth of opportunities for those in the tourism industry to promote services and access large volumes of data for a variety of applications. These tools and applications are crucial in enhancing the tourist experience, boosting destinations' competitive edge, and fostering sustainability improvements [40].

Incorporating novel technologies in tourism, such as augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI), indicates a transformative shift in the user experience, cognitively and emotionally. These technological instruments provide innovative means of

[1] Airbnb, Booking, Tripadvisor, and Expedia. The European Commission has reached a landmark agreement with four collaborative economy platforms – Airbnb, Booking, Expedia Group and Tripadvisor – on data sharing.

interaction with the surrounding environment, enhancing the touristic journey with virtual information and content that superimposes physical reality, thereby elevating travel's interpretive and affective dimensions [3].

Social media and various GIS-related platforms have recently become vital data sources for tourism research. The growing relevance of combining tourism with geospatial technology is gaining considerable attention, particularly in the study and use of 'neogeography' or 'volunteered geographic information [34].

Geography and tourism are interconnected, with tourism responding to digital geography by leveraging digital technologies to enhance experiences and increase self-organisation of activities. Digital technologies are progressively permeating the domain of excursions and autonomous tourism, significantly contributing to the substantial expansion of independent tourism within the regions covered by the "*infrastructures oecumene.*" [31].

2.1 Smart Tourism

In 2009, Assistant Secretary-General Geoffrey Lipman of UNWTO defined "smart tourism" as clean, green, ethical, and offering high-quality services at all levels of the service chain [23].

UNWTO Secretary-General Taleb Rifai declare, "'*Smart tourism' is not a trend, but the future of tourism development"*[38]. Smart tourism is not just one of the many forms of tourism [35] but is a component that integrates with all types of tourism toward a more sustainable perspective.

Gordon Phillips described smart tourism as adopting a comprehensive, forward-looking and environmentally friendly strategy for creating, managing and promoting tourism services and businesses [30]. Smart tourism is driven by two main strategies: the smart management of customer demand and access to facilities and targeted marketing techniques designed to reach specific groups of consumers with personalized messages [23].

Chuang describes smart tourism:
Smart tourism refers to the provision of Smart tourism service through Internet devices on mobile devices combined with the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as timely access to tourism information and the convenient use of various travel methods (Xiao et al., 2019). Focusing on the individual personal experiences of tourists, smart tourism attempts to integrate high-quality services at the industry level and meets the growth of tourists' needs (Gretzel et al., 2015c). The tourism ecosystem will be able to obtain and use relevant tourist information in a timely manner to realize intelligent service and business management. Therefore, STS is empowered through the connection of smart technology, smart tourism experiences, and smart business ecosystems (Gretzel et al., 2015b). Objectives include consumers (tourists), industry (tourism service providers), and the government (local public tourism agencies)[10].

Smart tourism integrates Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the travel industry, signalling a shift towards more technologically enhanced tourism. It represents a collaborative approach at travel destinations to gather and interpret data.

By leveraging cutting-edge information technologies, the aim is to enhance the travel experience, making it richer, more streamlined, and sustainable[22].

As the European Commission suggests, smart tourism adapts to the rapidly evolving tourism sector by embracing advancements in digital tools, products, and services. It ensures equal access and opportunities for all tourists, promotes the sustainable growth of local communities and bolsters creative sectors, local skills, and cultural heritage [13].

Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, and Koo have identified three key elements that define smart tourism: the smart destination, the smart experience, and the smart business. A smart destination, often associated with smart cities, offers improved mobility, efficient resource distribution, and a sustainable living environment for its inhabitants. Additionally, it enhances tourism by providing an interconnected smart environment that amplifies visitors' experiences. The smart experience *focuses on technology-mediated tourism experiences,* involves enriching the interaction and engagement of tourists with their surroundings. Lastly, smart business pertains to the intricate network of tourism stakeholders who actively exchange information and collaborate to create and share tourism-related resources and services [16].

The European Commission has launched initiatives such as the European Capital of Smart Tourism and the European Green Pioneer of Smart Tourism to recognize and promote sustainable tourism practices within the EU, under the umbrella of Smart Tourism[2].

2.2 Smart Tourism Destination

Smart tourism destination (STD) has received growing recognition among scholars [4–6, 18, 28]. SMD is a crucial element of smart tourism [7]. Its meaning is directly derived from the literature on smart cities [19].

One of the most relevant definitions defines the smart tourism destination as: "*an innovative tourist destination, built on an infrastructure of state-of-the-art technology guaranteeing the sustainable development of tourist areas, accessible to everyone, which facilitates the visitor's interaction with and integration into his or her surroundings, increases the quality of the experience at the destination, and improves residents' quality of life"*[24].

STD can be split into 4 subcategories: Cutting-edge technology, governance, quality of life and sustainability [33]. STD represent a holistic approach to tourism, combining technology and innovation with sustainability, accessibility and inclusiveness throughout the entire travel cycle, before, during and after the trip. STD employ continuous data analysis and integration, improving the travel experience through simplified decision-making and effective resource management. Smart destinations incorporate inclusive tourism governance by involving all community stakeholders, tourists and residents, thus ensuring accessibility to sites, products and services and simplifying mobility. Data use helps understand and manage the impacts of seasonality on tourism and sustainability, facilitating the forecasting and regulation of tourism flows and leading to more efficient and effective destination management [42].

[2] https://smart-tourism-capital.ec.europa.eu/index_en.

2.3 Sharing Economy and Tourism Platform

The sharing economy has significantly restructured the tourism industry, with its growth largely facilitated by the rise of digital platforms. These platforms offer alternative traditional services, creating a more dynamic tourism ecosystem [1].

The phenomenon of platform tourism, also known as platform-mediated tourism, has been studied and explored, especially in the urban context [9]. It often has meanings that highlight the negative impacts that the short-term rental of properties produces in the city, such as the financialisation of housing, gentrification, touristification, and deterioration of working conditions [27].

Over the last ten years, digital platforms for services like short-term rentals, transportation, and social dining have fostered a new wave of entrepreneurs in the tourism and mobility sectors. Initially, these platforms were seen as part of a sharing economy dominated by no-professional providers but have since evolved into a form of capitalist speculation [28]. Although the expression platform tourism mainly refers to short-term rentals [45], it includes goods or services private individuals offer to visitors through digital platforms [17]. The platformization of tourism is gradually expanding [8]. Digital platforms in the tourism industry facilitate travel, reducing search costs and providing travellers with more information about a given destination; digital platforms reduce the monetary and non-monetary costs of traveling [25] (Fig. 1).

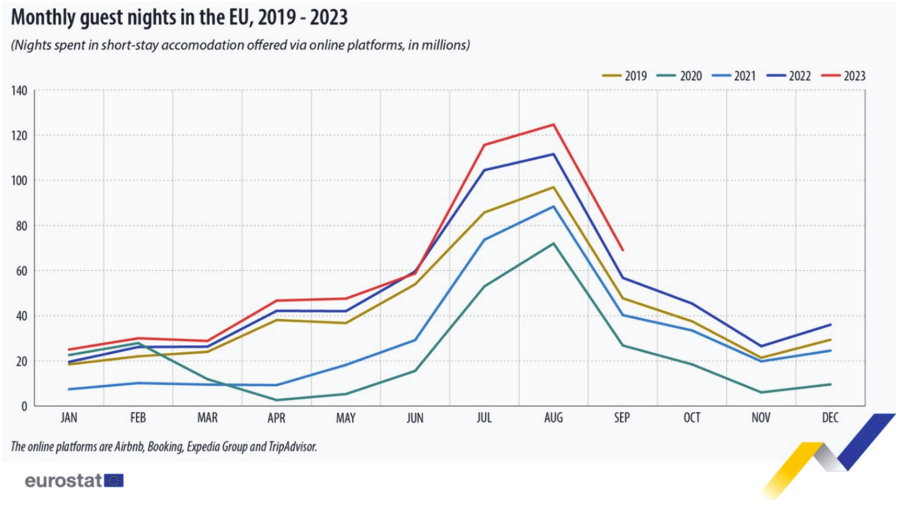

Fig. 1. Monthly guest night in Eu 2019–2023 via online platforms. Source: Eurostat

3 Italia.It. The Italian Tourism Digital Hub

The Italian government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, called Italia Domani, allocates 27 per cent of resources to digital transition. This strategy is structured around digitizing Public Administration and implementing access to technologies for small

businesses ultrafast networks. The 7 investments planned by the NRP to digitise access to technologies for small businesses and improve connectivity for rural and remote communities.

This framework will guide digital-related actions, setting measurable goals regarding connectivity, digital skills, and digital businesses; the PA is made available through 14 measures, totalling more than 6 billion euros.

The European Digital Decade aims to equip everyone with technological skills, facilitate access to technologies for small businesses, and improve connectivity for rural and remote communities. This framework will guide digital-related actions, setting measurable goals regarding connectivity, digital skills, digital businesses, and public services. In addition, the strategic program defines four main objectives: digital education, infrastructure security, digital transformation of businesses, and digitization of public services.

3.1 Italian Tourism Digital Hub

The Italian government's Tourism Digital Hub represents the web platform, funded with an investment of 114 million euros from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), aimed at revolutionizing the Italian tourism ecosystem by implementing advanced digital infrastructure and adopting artificial intelligence-based technologies. Aiming to promote integrated and homogeneous management of information, promotion and marketing in the tourism-retail sector, the project aims to stimulate territorial economic recovery.

The concept of the Tourism Digital Hub does not find much traction within the scientific debate. The Hub's guidelines for intervention include the modernization of the Italia.it portal, which aims to improve the user experience and enrich the informative content by integrating new data sources. This will expand the portfolio of services available to tourists, including health support and essential information, and enhance professional figures in the sector, such as guide and tour leaders. At the same time, predictive models will be used to analyze tourist flows and identify areas of strategic interest, both established and emerging, to personalize the visitor experience and incentivize locally distributed and conscious tourism. Another key aspect is developing an information system for the promotion and management of tourism-related activities, with a focus on small and medium-sized operators in less developed areas.

Specific goals of the TDH include personalizing travellers' experiences, supporting more than 20,000 tour operators within two years, creating an automated bidding system through AI, and co-constructing detailed customer profiles by integrating different data sources. This will make it possible to connect each visitor with the content, providers and services best suited to his or her needs, thus promoting greater visibility of lesser-known places and improving the coordination of promotional actions at the national level. Finally, the focus is on cross-media dissemination of content through mobile apps, chatbots, and social media development to ensure a wide range of communication and interaction with the public (Fig. 2).

The expected outcomes of TDH are:

- *Increasing flows, destinations and spending, by increasing the quality of the offer and the related exposure of the Italian Points of Interest for Tourism (POI);*

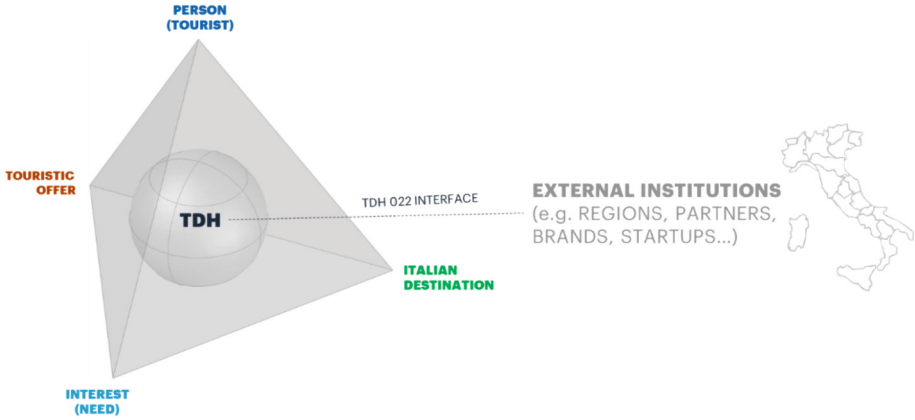

Fig. 2. TDH ecosystem and external connection through TDH022 Source: Italia.it

- *Enhancing the existing framework of digital assets - e.g., regional portals - without any overlapping, while also offering cost saving solutions;*
- *Strengthening the role of TDH's digital assets, defining them as real institutional reference points for searching for POI-related information with respect to an audience of national and international tourists;*
- *Involving the entire Italian tourism system through an open-source approach that collects input and generates output for all stakeholders;*
- *Retaining users (and therefore potential tourists) through tailored proposals based on their needs and preferences, offering a bespoke portal experience;*
- *Favoring the development of a platform that provides timely and correct information on POIs across Italy, and whose data will be used by external tracking platforms such as Google My Business, Bing Places, Apple Maps and so on - thus bringing an additional benefit in terms of visibility on the most common search engines.*

Italia.it will offer content with a triple relevance:

- *Content of Interest: editorial content enables the TDH to infer the Person's interest when reading it. It enables the description of one or more destinations, one or more offers and/or any event related to the tourist experience in our territory (e.g.: an editorial article that talks about the Palio of Siena, if read by the tourist, suggests interest for Siena and its historical pageants);*
- *Destination: local attraction related to a point of interest (x, y coordinates) or to a geographical area («geometry») that persists in the medium-long term (e.g., Colosseum, Trevi Fountain, the city of Rome, etc.);*
- *Offer: a touristic item that can be consumed/booked/seen for a fee (e.g., a hotel room, a museum entry)* [26] (Fig. 3).

3.2 The Platform Italia.It

The Italia.it website, beyond its homepage, is delineated into four primary sections, namely: (I) Where to Go, (II) What to Do, (III) Plan Your Trip, and (IV) Information.

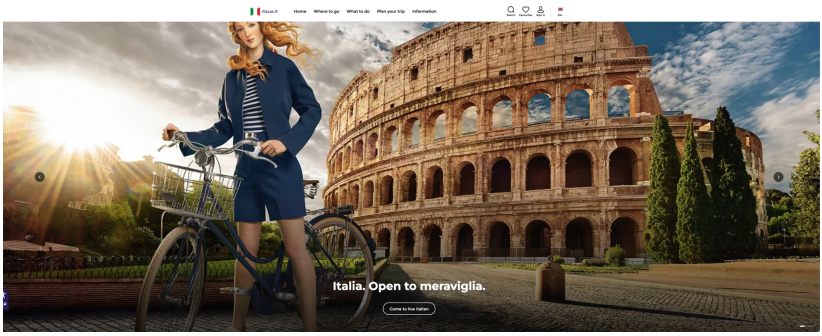

Fig. 3. Home page Italia.it source: www.italia.it

There are 3 languages available Italian, Spanish and English.

The "*Where to Go"* section organizes travel destinations into categories such as: regions, cities, seas, mountains, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, villages, and countryside.

This section underscores the extensive geographical and cultural heterogeneity of Italy, providing travelers with a deep dive into a multitude of destinations. Every part of the page is meticulously curated to showcase Italy's allure through vivid imagery and detailed narratives, designed to inspire journeys and discovery throughout the nation (Fig. 4).

The *"What to Do"* section systematically arranges activities into themes, including Interesting ideas, Seasons, Travel ideas, and Magazines. Interesting ideas are structured as follows: nature, Art and Culture, Food and Wine, Sports, Leisure, Events, Relaxation and Wellness, Spirituality, Shopping and markets, Luxury Experiences, Itineraries, Excursions, and Seasonal Activities. Season is divided into: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. Travel ideas is organized: Solo holidays, Couple holidays, Family holidays, Young people holidays. Each category is complemented by articles about specific attractions or activities, ranging from cultural institutions like museums and historical landmarks to outdoor pursuits and gastronomic expeditions.

The "*Plan Your Trip"* section is further segmented into three subcategories: "Where to Eat", "Where to Eat in Italy", agency.

The *"Where to Eat"* guides to the Italian gastronomic realm, showcasing an array of dining locations such as pizzerias, trattorias, country houses, taverns, and wine bars.

The section provides a search tool complemented by a series of filters. The offer are categorized Region, Kitchen Type, Price Level, Occasion, Services, Bookable.

This page accentuates the variance within Italian gastronomy and endeavours to cater to every culinary preference, assisting tourists in pinpointing the ideal gastronomic venue that aligns with their palate. It furnishes practical tools for exploring menus, pinpointing precise locations, verifying operational hours, and arranging dining reservations online. As of the current update, the Italia.it database includes 19,929 registered accommodation structures.

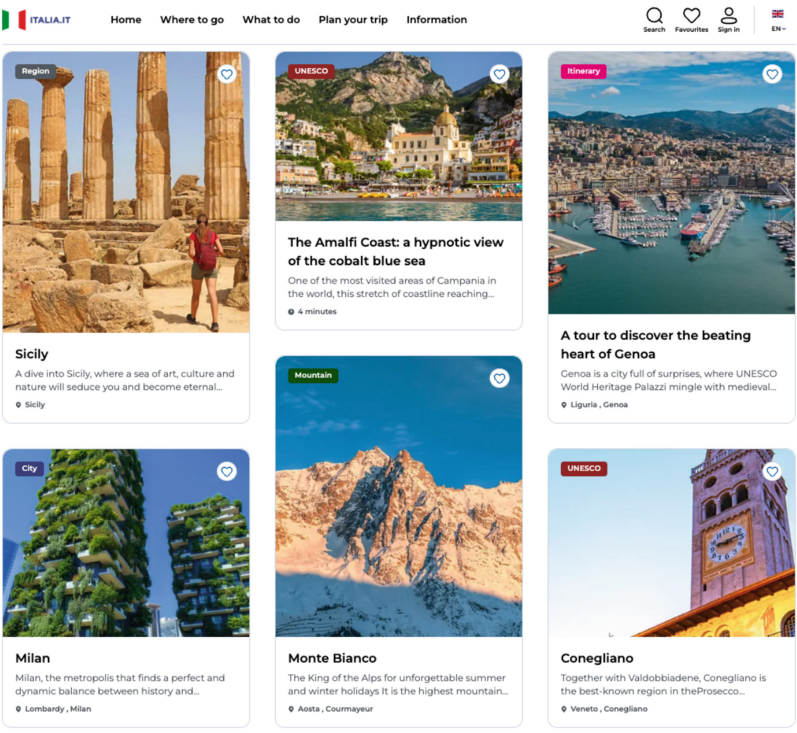

Fig. 4. Where to go page Italia.it. Source:www.italia.it

The *"Where to Sleep"* sub-section categorizes lodging options in Italy, providing a search tool complemented by a series of filters: Region, Services, Structure Type, and Stars. The accommodations are categorized by type, including, but not limited to, guesthouses, agritourism lodgings, farm stays, apart-hotels, apartments, bed & breakfasts, bungalows, campsites, cottages, glamping, hotels, hostels, pensions, and villas. Each category is detailed, facilitating informed decisions based on individual travel requirements, location preferences, and budget constraints. Currently, there are 3,091 registered lodging structures.

The travel agencies sub-section offers a comprehensive directory and insights into travel agencies and tour operators throughout Italy. It provides robust tools for search and filtration, enabling travelers to identify agencies tailored to their unique travel requirements, whether they seek individual, group, luxury, or specialized tours. Presently, there are 672 travel agencies registered.

The Section *"Information"* of Italia.it is a repository of travel information for visitors to Italy. It encompasses pragmatic advice, guidelines for necessary documentation, options for transportation, emergency contact information, and strategic counsel for easily navigating the country.

4 Discussion

The assessment of the Italia.it portal must consider its recent relaunch and the ongoing implementation phase, including the engagement of businesses aiming to reach a target of 20,000 affiliations by June 2024.

Currently, the platform is in a preliminary phase of experimentation and initial deployment, providing a basis for early-stage analysis and evaluation.

Italia.it is the official government portal for Italian tourism, evolving from an existing site created in 2007. In the nearly two decades since its inception, it has seen limited evolution, characterized by significant governmental investment on the one hand and by continuous interruptions and even suspensions of service on the other.

It is important to acknowledge the presence of numerous official websites that promote tourism within various European nations, Italia.it being one example.

Examples of such websites include VisitBritain for the United Kingdom, Germany.travel for Germany, Spain.info for Spain, France.fr for France, VisitPortugal.com for Portugal, Holland.com for the Netherlands, VisitSweden.com for Sweden, VisitNorway.com for Norway, Croatia.hr for Croatia, VisitGreece.gr for Greece, Austria.info for Austria, VisitCzechRepublic.com for the Czech Republic, Switzerland.com for Switzerland, VisitIceland.com for Iceland, and VisitDenmark.com for Denmark.

The structural and organizational framework of the original site is not significantly different from the current portal. The initial version of the site featured sections such as (I) what to do, (II) itineraries, (III) events, and (IV) plan your trip, which in terms of organization and content correspond to the current categories (Fig. 5).

The current redevelopment of the Italia.it portal, intended to transition it from a simple website to a comprehensive portal and platform, is in a nascent phase. Despite its official unveiling, it remains a work in progress, with several functionalities not yet operational. The new Tourism Digital Hub incorporates several notable innovations.

Foremost among these is the direct interaction with local businesses, which now can register on the portal. Another significant feature is the added functionality for users to make reservations. The individual pages for businesses allow users to explore the characteristics of these enterprises, such as hospitality or dining options, complete with service descriptions, product offerings, and location. They also offer the possibility to make reservations, specifically for dining establishments. The reservation function is facilitated for restaurants by integrating the Fork platform within the site. As for lodging facilities, while they do not currently possess an internal booking function on the portal, prospective guests can make reservations via the individual hotel's website linked from their page on Italia.it.

Asadullah [2] identifies some characteristics of digital platforms: reductions in transaction costs, including distribution, search, contracting, and monitoring costs, help organize and coordinate the technological development of complementary products through modularity and appropriate governance structures. Tourism aggregation platforms compile and consolidate travel data from various providers into a single interface, thereby diminishing the expenses associated with seeking information and employing the services of intermediary brokers. Despite having features characteristic of a Tourism aggregation platform, Italia.it cannot be considered a true aggregation platform.

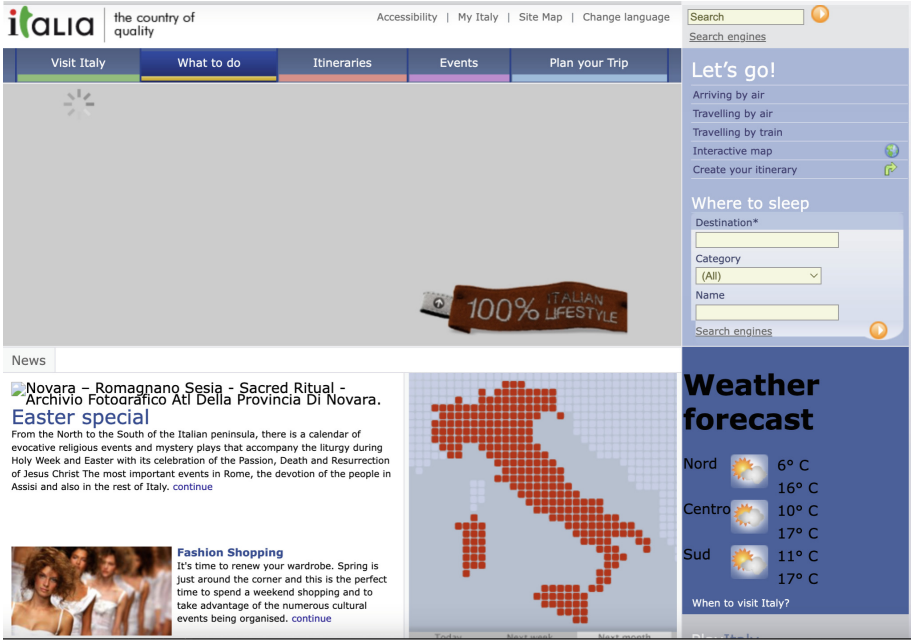

Fig. 5. Home page Italia.it 2007 source: web archive

5 Conclusion

Governments have an important role to play in creating the right framework conditions for the digital transformation of tourism business models and the wider tourism ecosystem. Integrated and coherent policy approaches are needed to leverage the opportunities of digitalisation while also addressing challenges and minimising any negative consequences that may emerge. Policy work can also be positioned across a spectrum of tourism businesses (e.g. digital natives, hybrids and tourism SMEs with low levels of digitalisation) [29].

Within the framework of Europe's Digital Decade strategy, the EU promotes the digital transition of the tourism sector, focusing on four key areas: Improving the digital skills and education of the workforce ("skilling and upskilling"). Developing secure and sustainable digital infrastructure. Encouraging the digital transformation of businesses. Advancing the digitalization of public services [43].

The impact of Italia.it on digitalization can be categorized based on its beneficiaries: the digital transformation of businesses, the implementation of digital solutions for the public sector and tourism managers, and the provision of digital solutions for visitors.

Digital solutions for business. Italia.it play a role as a catalyst for new start-ups by providing a complimentary ecosystem where they can present their businesses, while also aiding existing companies in better aligning their offerings with market demand. For local governments and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), the platform facilitates the digital transformation of tourism destinations. Moreover, Italia.it could

act as a valuable instrument for tracking and analyzing trends, supplying data that can help formulate sustainable tourism strategies across various levels.

Digital solutions for the public sector and tourism managers. Italia.it supports digital innovation in public sector tourism by offering tools and services that assist in managing and promoting tourist activities. The platform serves as a digital ecosystem to aid tourism managers in optimizing the visitor experience, engaging with tourist demands, and enhancing the accessibility and dissemination of information.

Digital solutions for visitors. Italia.it facilitates visitor experiences through digital solutions for visitors by providing a centralized portal that aggregates travel-related information and resources. Features such as interactive maps, a booking system, downloadable guides, and real-time updates are designed to support and enhance the travel planning process, ensuring visitors can access a wealth of information to plan their trip to Italy efficiently (Italia.it). The experience is not 100% customised experiences, and does not consider before, during and after a visit.

The digital transition planned by the Italian government with the PNRR has an approach aimed at public administrations, specifically through an orientation related to implementing the infrastructural part of access to digital services. There is a lack of a digital transition-oriented vision with an approach related to the culture of digitization aimed at citizenship and the uses of digital in people's daily lives. Digital pervasiveness in people's lives must be an element central to public policies to enable the individual to experience its potential and be an active element of this process in terms of user and policy co-construction.

In the context of the PNRR, Italia.it and digital facilitation centers represent distinctive actions that diverge from the predominantly infrastructure-focused initiatives for digital transition. Unlike many projects within the PNRR that primarily concerned with enhancing digital infrastructure, these initiatives aim to facilitate digital transformation by improving citizens' experiences and competencies. Italia.it as a Vanguard Platform: Italia.it stands out as a pioneering government platform, not by replacing existing popular tourism platforms, but by complementing and integrating with them.

This approach allows for a more cohesive and comprehensive tourism experience, leveraging the strengths of various platforms to provide rich, accessible information and services to tourists. The platform exemplifies how government-led digital initiatives can enhance, rather than supplant, existing digital ecosystems in sectors such as tourism.

The exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) utilization within the Italia.it platform and its direct or indirect benefits to tourists remains an area suitable for investigation.

Several features could be integrated into Italia.it, including tourism data management and the facilitation of data sharing.

The Italia.it platform has the potential to strategically direct its services towards promoting slow tourism[4], prioritizing sustainable experiences that emphasize the intrinsic value of the inner areas [14].

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