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The organizational impacts of quality management in tourism firms: An empirical investigation of the Molise Region, Italy

Abstract

This study uses institutional theory to investigate the isomorphic pressures affecting quality in the accommodation industry. Following questionnaire development, pretest, and a pilot study, survey data were collected from a sample of 324 accommodation firms in the tourism industry of the Molise Region of Italy. Mimetic, coercive and normative pressures were assessed for influence on firm behaviour regarding visible attributes associated with quality. Results show that isomorphism exists in the degree to which quality factors are used in the different accommodation types. However, no substantive differences are observed between the two provinces (Campobasso and Isernia) of the Molise region in Italy. The research confirms the utility of new-institutionalism theory in the field of hospitality and tourism for several purposes including policy for tourism destination development.

Key words:

new-institutionalism theory; quality management; isomorphism; accommodation; empirical research; Italy

Introduction

We investigate the degree to which quality management practices are diffused throughout the various accommodation firms of two Italian destinations using a theoretical framing known as new institutionalism. The relevance of our work is based on general knowledge that tourists choose their vacation destination by considering not only the amenities of the place in relation to price but also increasingly on factors related to the quality of service provided. This quality of service is perhaps the most important criterion that guides the final choice of destination especially where there is little differentiation of amenities and price. While some believe that quality of service is ensured by special attention to the customer, others think in terms of total quality, a notion that every employee supports the mission of being a service provider to a customer (internal or external) with a strong desire to satisfy their needs.

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Quality is perhaps one of the most frequently used words in the language of entrepreneurs and managers, but also one of the most ambiguous. A universally accepted definition of quality is elusive because broad definitions are difficult to operationalize and more specific definitions are not sufficiently comprehensive to capture the richness and complexity of the construct. For some, quality is simply a job well done, common sense but of little use in a definitional sense. For others, it assures compliance of products and systems with a number of standards or procedures identified through some form of official recognition (often certification).

If we focus on quality in the accommodation sector, the definition becomes more complicated. The increasingly important role played by services and the inapplicability of traditional manufacturing-based definitions has led to a new conceptualization of service quality. Outputs from the accommodation sector contain elements that are tangible and intangible, standardized and customized. Therefore, quality in the accommodation context cannot adequately be defined exclusively as conformance to specifications or as meeting/exceeding expectations. However, both definitions are important for assessing different output components and a comprehensive definition of quality must encompass both of them (Wilkins, Merrilees & Herington, 2007).

There are different interpretations about the meaning of quality depending on the approach used. In this sense, it is possible to distinguish between an emphasis on the quality of instruments and procedures from an emphasis on corporate culture and change. At other times, quality management is associated with an approach that identifies the actual and potential negative environmental impacts of current operations and activities, measures current environmental performance and, also, evaluates the opportunities for improving environmental performance (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003).

Still there is a lack of fundamental reflection on the connections between the theme of quality, in its various facets, and business and management theories. There is also a lack of research bridging the gap between theory and empirical evidence. The focus of this work is to understand whether quality management implementation practices are diffused and spread out in tourism firms. After examining the theoretical lens of new institutionalism and the associated notions of organizational field and isomorphism (Scott, 1994; Di Maggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Hannan & Freeman, 1977), we apply this body of knowledge to assess whether the use of various quality factors, including certification and standards of behaviour induced by the relevant quality management methods are important forces of isomorphism (cause structural similarity among firms). In other words, the aim is to verify whether (and, if possible, to what extent) the behaviour patterns induced by the search for higher quality have a "self and ceremonial validation" (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991) in accommodation enterprises. If compliance with rules, procedures and practices typical of quality management, takes on value in itself regardless of whether or not it improves effectiveness and efficiency, this signals that the real objective of quality management initiatives is to achieve le-

gitimacy from the perspective of the organization's internal and external stakeholders rather than to improve competitiveness. The use of quality management methods and tools would then be less the result of a rational choice to improve quality and more an institutional adaptation through which to raise the level of compliance with a set of widely accepted and shared rules of behaviour in order to consolidate institutional and social consensus regarding legitimacy of the organization.

The theoretical proposition is empirically tested in Italy, a country typically regarded as a highly attractive tourism destination (Trunfio, Petruzzellis & Nigro, 2006). However, in relation to the quality of service provided, the reputation is not as positive. In fact, the results of various investigations place the quality of Italian tourist services below that of its direct competitors - France and Spain – and also below the quality of many newcomers (Becheri & Salamon, 2008). Moreover, according to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2007) prepared by the World Economic Forum, Italy ranks 33rd in the competitiveness of countries for travel and tourism.

The research examines 324 accommodation enterprises in the Italian region of Molise. With a population of 321,953 (Italian Observatory of Tourism, 2009), Molise is the smallest (4438 km²) and newest (1963) region of Italy. It is bordered by the regions of Lazio, Campania, Puglia, and Abruzzo and consists primarily of mountainous and hilly terrain. However, despite only 35 km of coastline on the Adriatic, beach tourism is still the primary attraction for Molise.

Recent statistics (Italian Observatory of Tourism, 2009), reveal that in 2007 Molise had 194,879 arrivals and 652,171 overnight visits with an overall capacity of 13,723 beds. Analysis of these data using key ratios indicates that tourism is still a niche phenomenon for Molise. Two key ratios are the touristic rate (Number of Overnight visits /inhabitants) and the touristic density (Number of Overnight visits / Land area) that are respectively 2.03 and 147 for Molise, very low compared to Italy overall which has a touristic rate equal to 6.44 and touristic density equal to 1,249. To improve the performance of tourism in the region, it is imperative that tourism accommodation providers understand, among other things, expectations that tourists have with regard to quality.

Literature review

NEW-INSTITUTIONALISM PERSPECTIVE

We use the theoretical lens of new-institutionalism, as described by Powell and Di Maggio (1991), for studying the phenomenon of quality management. The new-institutionalist perspective is based on the notion of a socially constructed reality (Berger & Luckman, 1969) and on how the existence of social interactions tend to stabilize this reality through processes of legitimacy that place constraints on the range of organizational options, thus reducing the variety and unpredictability of individual behavior (Camuffo & Capellari, 1997).

The organization is seen as the result of a process of institutionalization derived from social relations that are embedded within the broader social system. In essence, the behavior of the individual firm will be influenced by regulations, rules and customs of the sector in which it acts, and also by the culture, values, ideas and beliefs implicit in the referent social environment. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), the success or failure of an organization and its capacity to survive will not depend on the effectiveness and efficiency of its performance but rather on its adherence to ethical norms, rules, prescriptions and institutionalized knowledge.

Institutions exist as supra-individual units that, although the result of human activity, are not necessarily based on a rational design aimed at achieving a particular goal (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991). In choosing between alternative actions, subjects prefer that which is most conforming to a standard of conduct already institutionalized, regardless of its convenience. This does not mean that individuals are not autonomous agents, but emphasizes the fact that they move within symbolic patterns, which could provide guidance and reference points (Moschera, 2007). Highlighting the relationship of institutions with the environment is one of the most important and innovative aspects of the new-institutionalism of society (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991; Zucker, 1977).

The environment is comprised of rules, beliefs and symbolic elements influencing organizational structures, regardless of the specific transactions. They permeate the organization, providing the lens through which its actors see the world (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991). If the characteristics of an organization are defined by the environment, then the organization cannot be studied in isolation, but within an organizational field in which all organizations have convergent structural characteristics (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991). In order to determine the influence exerted by the environment, a new-institutionalist analysis looks for common features between organizations.

The concept of "field" denotes the existence of a community of organizations that share a common system of meanings. Actors within a field interact with each other more frequently and more intensively than they do with actors outside the field (Scott, 1998, p. 83). Early in their development, organizational fields have a considerable variety of organizational forms. Over time, as a field becomes more institutionalized, there is a commensurate move towards homogenization. This gradual process of structuring is the result of a gradual reduction in the variety of practices and organizational structures. The result is convergence toward models recognized as legitimate and with which new entrants will have to comply.

Institutions create standards and shared interpretations that lead to the construction of models of behavior that homogenize social relations within the field among members. However social relations with the actors external to the field vary. The scope of an institutional field is defined by the areas of homogeneity (behavioral models, organizational structures, modes of social relations, etc.) that clearly distinguish which orga-

nizations are included in the field from those that are excluded. The clearer and more explicit the distinction, the greater will be the degree of institutionalization (Lanzalaco, 1995). An organizational field that has a high degree of institutionalization develops forces that cause the member organizations to increasingly resemble each other. The concept with which new-institutionalists explain this process of homogenization is called "isomorphism" (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983).

Institutional isomorphism emphasizes how organizations aiming to achieve economic and social prosperity are competing not only to appropriate resources and market share (competitive isomorphism of Hannan & Freeman, 1977) but also for political power and social legitimacy. Di Maggio and Powell (1983, p. 149) identify three different mechanisms through which isomorphic institutional change occurs:

- *Coercive isomorphism* develops after formal and informal pressures are applied to an organization by other organizations, laws, and cultural expectations existing in the society in which the organization operates.
- *Mimetic isomorphism* results from the tendency of organizations to imitate other organizations that are considered to be excellent and that have high social legitimacy. In essence, faced with a problem that has ambiguous causes and where solutions are not clear, organizations tend to replicate the methods adopted by similar organizations that are also perceived as most legitimate from a societal perspective.
- *Normative isomorphism* stems from the existence of specialized staff that are also subject to coercive and mimetic pressures so that it is possible to observe, in different companies, a similarity between the profiles of organizational positions. Two factors combine to produce normative isomorphism. The first is the pressure exerted by educational institutions from which individuals come. The second factor relates to the specific needs of trade associations, professional associations or other associations that contribute to the spread of prescriptive rules of organizational and professional behavior.

According to new-institutionalists, innovation has taken place only by the "first movers", that is, those who first adopt the innovation. If over time organizations that have adopted the innovation are successful, other entities, which belong to the field in question, will adjust for the sole purpose of increasing their social legitimacy.

Finally, there has been suggestion that the diffusion of innovations related to isomorphic pressures occurs via a two stage process with the early adopters (considered stage one) being motivated by economic gains from efficiency and late adopters (considered stage two) motivated largely by concerns about achieving social legitimacy (Westphal, Gulati & Shortell, 1997).

However, more recently this two stage process has been questioned as a problematic distinction since both economic efficiency and social concerns over legitimacy are not mutually exclusive but rather may coexist (Lounsbury, 2007; Lounsbury, 2002; Thornton, 2004). Indeed, why would early adopters not also be interested in social legitima-

cy and why would late adopters not be interested in economic gains? Most recently, Kennedy and Fiss (2009) argue against the two stage model suggesting that economic and social considerations together drive innovation with the differences for early versus late adopters being that early adopters see innovation as an opportunity while late adopters see it as a threat (if not adopted).

Quality management implementation practices in the accommodation sector

Several models relating to service quality in hotels may be found in the literature (Tari, Claver-Cortés, Pereira-Moliner & Azorín, 2009; Min & Chung, 2002; Callan & Kyndt, 2001; Callan & Bowman, 2000; Danaher & Mattsson, 1994; Saleh & Ryan, 1991) confirming interest in the field. Within this literature there is general consensus that guests are the ultimate judges of the quality of service delivered (Crick & Spencer, 2011). There is also broad recognition that consistent quality assurance requires more than ad-hoc efforts. Rather, it must be a management philosophy that influences all organizational functions to focus on meeting customer needs and related organizational objectives.

In keeping with the extant literature on the subject, wherein quality of service is best measured from the customer perspective, several quality factors were determined by direct survey from tourists (customers) to the Molise region in a previous study by Prezenza, Minguzzi, and Camillo (2009). These specific customer-generated quality factors have never been operationalized in an empirical study until now. These factors are: using e-mail to communicate with guests and potential guests; maintaining a website; offering on-line booking to customers; accepting payment by credit card; offering (or not offering) guestrooms with private washrooms; accessibility for disabled persons; air conditioning; satellite TV; high-speed Internet; Wi-Fi; soundproofing to reduce noise; water conservation systems; energy conservation systems; waste recycling; assessing customer satisfaction; having working knowledge of at least two foreign languages; and maintaining quality certifications.

The role of industry sector in isomorphic pressures

In the present study, there are a variety of different sectors or accommodation providers (hotels, Bed&Breakfast, agricultural tourism, etc.). It seems likely that each sector (type of accommodation provider) is subject to specific isomorphic pressures. In this case the isomorphic pressures are of the variety related to proving legitimacy to powerful stakeholders (Abrahamson, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) such as customers, and industry sector peers. If this is true, the accommodation providers will behave differently with respect to their adoption of various quality improvement factors to gain social legitimacy specific to their own sector's peers and customers. These conjectures lead to the following hypotheses.

H1: Differences will be observed in the degree to which quality factors are used in the different accommodation types.

The role of geographic region in isomorphic pressures

Several studies have found that institutional environments vary from country to country and produce isomorphic pressures that result in varying management practices and organizational structures (Gooderham, Nordhaug & Ringdal, 1999; Jepperson & Meyer, 1991; Strang & Meyer, 1993). In the present study, we explore whether such differences might exist within firms (accommodation providers) in a country (Italy) but in different regions (the Provinces of Campobasso and Isernia). We expect that firms in these regions are subject to different institutional fields that may create different isomorphic pressures. If different isomorphic pressures exist, the accommodation providers will behave differently with respect to their adoption of various quality improvement factors to gain social legitimacy specific to their own regional environment. This observation leads to the following hypothesis.

H2: Differences will be observed in the degree to which quality factors are used in the accommodation firms of Campobasso and Isernia.

Study method

A structured questionnaire was used to gather data regarding the accommodation system of the Molise Region. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section asked for information relating to the use of policies, practices, and technology to minimize adverse effects on the environment (such as collection of waste, energy reduction, water conservation, etc.). The second section consisted of questions probing the level of interest of the accommodation firms regarding quality management activities.

Questions were developed based on previous research on tourists visiting the Molise Region regarding their views of quality in the destination and specifically in the accommodation sector (Presenza et al., 2009). From this research, a list of key factors representing different aspects of accommodation quality was developed. The list was reviewed and formulated into a draft questionnaire based on a focus group consisting of local politicians, and leaders of accommodation consortiums, associations, and destination management organizations. Several drafts of the questionnaire were developed and the final draft was pilot tested on a convenient sample of five accommodation firms.

Reliability and validity of the measures are relatively straight forward because the language used to describe each quality factor was derived directly from customers (respondents) in previous research in the same geographic region (Presenza et al., 2009). We are therefore confident that the measures truly represent the quality factors with little room for interpretation errors. Reliability and validity were also enhanced with the pilot test on sample respondents where we checked for clarity and understanding of all aspects of the survey instrument. Of course, it is possible that some respondents, due to social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993), may not respond truthfully (thus affecting reliability). However, the promise of anonymity made to respondents, as suggested by Singer, Hippler and Schwarz (1992), minimizes this bias.

The key quality factors are: using e-mail to communicate with guests and potential guests; maintaining a website; offering on-line booking to customers; accepting payment by credit card; offering guestrooms with private washrooms; accessibility for disabled persons; air conditioning; satellite TV; high-speed Internet; Wi-Fi; soundproofing to reduce noise; water conservation systems; energy conservation systems; waste recycling; assessing customer satisfaction; having working knowledge of at least two foreign languages and maintaining quality certifications. A total of seventeen (17) questions (one for each factor) were asked with each having a YES/NO answer reflecting whether or not the accommodation firm used or offered the factor.

The accommodation industry is not homogenous. We differentiate it using an established typology in Italy consisting of the following eight accommodation types:

- a) Guest houses which range from low-budget rooms to luxury apartments, and tend to be like small hotels;
- b) Agricultural tourism which is a commercial enterprise at a working farm, ranch or agricultural plant operated for the enjoyment or education of visitors, and that generates supplemental income for the owner;
- c) Hotels that provide lodging and usually meals and other services for travellers and other paying guests;
- d) Distributed hotels which are unconventional hotels where rooms are distributed among non-contiguous buildings (often acquired/developed over time) all sharing a common front desk (usually located in one of the buildings – often the first location);
- e) Bed & Breakfasts that are private residences, where one to several rooms are set aside for overnight guests whose paid accommodations include breakfast.
- f) Camping with tents, huts, or other temporary shelters set up for travellers;
- g) Resorts which are groups of buildings and facilities located in a scenic area, providing lodging, entertainment, and a relaxing environment primarily for people on vacation; and
- h) Rural tourism that is accommodation in rural areas other than that designated as "agricultural tourism".

The data were collected during the period April – September, 2008. The survey was sent to all 362 accommodation firms in the Molise Region of Italy. To maximize the response rate, the questionnaire was administered through direct interviews, telephone, fax, and a survey website. However, most respondents participated through the website (www.molisediquality.it). A total of 324 useable responses were received representing an overall response rate of 89.5 % (Table 1). Also, the accommodation businesses may be split by geographic location within Molise as belonging to either the Italian Province of Campobasso (236 respondents) or Isernia (88 respondents).

Table 1
SAMPLE AND POPULATION OF ACCOMMODATION FIRMS SURVEYED BY TYPE OF FIRM

Type of accommodation	Sample	% of total sample	Popula-tion	% of total population
Hotel	89	27%	93	26%
Bed&Breakfast	75	23%	79	22%
Agricultural tourism	62	19%	65	18%
Guest House	55	17%	61	17%
Rural tourism	20	6%	23	6%
Camping	14	4%	17	5%
Resort	6	2%	19	5%
Distributed hotel	3	1%	5	1%
Total	324	100%	362	100%

Results and discussion

A descriptive summary of the results are given in Table 2. The table shows the percentage of respondent accommodation providers indicating that they do use (or provide) various quality factors that were identified as important to tourists in this region of Italy (Presenza et al., 2009). Surprisingly, despite the stated importance of these factors by tourists, accommodation providers, on average only provide one in three (34.2%) of the factors. However, this is not evenly distributed across either the quality factors or the accommodation providers.

Accommodation providers in aggregate are more likely to provide e-mail (79%), a website (60%), guestrooms with private washrooms (53%), have knowledge of at least two foreign languages (52%), accept payment by credit card (47%), and have disabled accessibility (47%). Collectively, they are least likely to provide soundproofing between rooms (6%), have waste collection systems (14%), offer WiFi (16%), offer internet (18%), and on-line booking (21%). Occupying the middle ground are quality factors of air conditioning (32%), quality certifications (31%), systems to save energy (29%), systems to save water (26%), satellite TV (25%), and tools to assess customer satisfaction (24%).

As defined earlier, isomorphism refers to the degree to which firms behave in a similar manner (structural similarities). With respect to the factors examined in this research, high isomorphism would be evidenced by a high proportion of the firms adopting the same behaviour regarding a particular factor. For example, if the vast majority of firms offered (or did not offer) internet service then we would say there is high isomorphism on this factor. However, if close to half (50%) of firms offered internet service, then we would say there is low isomorphism on this factor. Therefore, the degree of isomorphism may be thought of as a continuum. At the extremes of the continuum all firms behave the same (either 0% adoption or 100% adoption) and therefore look the same on this factor – in other words they exhibit high isomorphism.

At the center of the continuum, an equal number of firms adopt the factor as do not – in other words, they exhibit no isomorphism. In between the extreme ends and the middle there exists a majority of firms that either adopt or do not adopt the factor – in other words, they exhibit moderate isomorphism. Accordingly, based on this conceptualization, we have categorized (and described in more detail below) isomorphic behaviour by firms as high, low or moderate.

Table 2

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS SAYING "YES" TO QUALITY FACTOR QUESTION AND ASSESSMENT OF DEGREE OF ISOMORPHISM

	Guest house (n=55)	Agricultural tourism (n=62)	Hotel (n=89)	Distributed hotel (n=3)	Bed & Breakfast (n=75)	Camping (n=14)	Resort (n=6)	Rural tourism (n=20)	Mean (n=324)	Campobasso (n=236)	Isernia (n=88)
E-mail	65% L	66% L	83% H	67% L	75% L	100% H	100% H	75% L	79%	79% L	66% L
Website	44% 0	48% 0	67% L	67% L	43% 0	64% L	100% H	50% 0	60%	52% 0	58% 0
On-line booking	25% L	16% H	20% H	0% H	13% H	14% H	67% L	10% H	21%	17% H	24% L
Payment with credit card	42% 0	34% L	83% H	33% L	5% H	57% 0	67% L	55% 0	47%	50% 0	33% L
Guestrooms have private washrooms	78% L	77% L	59% 0	67% L	63% L	0% H	0% H	80% H	53%	60% L	76% L
Disabled accessibility	25% L	52% 0	62% L	0% H	15% H	64% L	83% H	75% L	47%	42% 0	47% 0
Air conditioning	27% L	16% H	61% L	33% L	21% L	36% L	50% 0	10% H	32%	38% L	19% H
Satellite TV	20% H	18% H	30% L	67% L	23% L	0% H	17% H	25% L	25%	20% H	31% L
High-speed Internet	15% H	5% H	33% L	33% L	17% H	0% H	33% L	10% H	18%	17% H	20% H
Wi-Fi	11% H	3% H	31% L	33% L	9% H	0% H	33% L	10% H	16%	17% H	10% H
Soundproofing	7% H	11% H	15% H	0% H	7% H	0% H	0% H	10% H	6%	9% H	10% H
Know at least two foreign languages	38% L	34% L	57% 0	33% L	47% 0	86% H	67% L	55% 0	52%	47% 0	53% 0
Quality certifications	24% L	34% L	27% L	0% H	51% 0	50% 0	33% L	32% L	31%	32% L	41% 0
Use systems to save water	36% L	15% H	29% L	0% H	43% 0	21% L	33% L	30% L	26%	29% L	34% L
Use systems to save energy	33% L	39% L	30% L	0% H	53% 0	29% L	17% H	35% L	29%	38% L	36% L
Have waste collection systems	51% 0	6% H	18% H	0% H	7% H	7% H	17% H	5% H	14%	17% H	19% H
Use tools to assess customer satisfaction?	31% L	26% L	27% L	0% H	36% L	21% L	33% L	20% H	24%	31% L	24% L
Mean Yes	33.7%	29.4%	43.1%	25.5%	31.0%	32.4%	44.1%	34.5%	34.2%	34.2%	34.8%

* Degree of Isomorphism is assessed as follows: None (0): 40-60%; Low (L): 20-40% and 60-80%; High (H): 0-20% and 80-100%

Note: where no isomorphism is present, organizations would be expected to respond "yes" and "no" in equal proportions (50%).

A high percentage (80-100%) indicates that a high proportion of the firms comprising that accommodation type use (or adopt) that quality factor. A low percentage (0-20%) indicates that a low proportion of the firms comprising that accommodation type use (or adopt) that quality factor. However, a low percentage also indicates that a high proportion of the firms comprising that accommodation type do not use (or adopt) that quality factor. Therefore both high and low percentages of use (or adoption) of a quality factor are indicative of high isomorphism.

A percentage at or near 50% (40-60%) indicates that firms comprising that accommodation are evenly split in their use (or adoption) of that quality factor. A relatively even split indicates that there is no isomorphism. Moderately high (60-80%) or moderately low (20-40%) percentages of use (or adoption) of a quality factor are indicative of low isomorphism.

Next these data are analyzed to test two specific hypotheses. The first examines differences across the various accommodation types, stating that differences will be observed in the degree to which quality factors are used in the different accommodation types. Degree of Isomorphism is assessed as follows: none (0): 40-60%; low (L): 20-40% and 60-80%; high (H): 0-20% and 80-100%. In general, differences in the use of quality factors are apparent across the various types of accommodation thus supporting H1. The biggest users are resorts and hotels (at 44% and 43% respectively). Moderate users include rural tourism accommodation providers (35%), guest houses (34%), camping (32%), and bed & breakfast (31%). Finally, the lowest user is the distributed hotel (26%). In order to better understand these differences, the degree of isomorphism is examined for each accommodation type. From Table 2 we see variation across the various accommodation types in terms of degree of isomorphism. With these categories, we can now assess the degree of isomorphism in each accommodation type regarding the quality factors.

Guesthouses. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to not offering satellite TV, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi and soundproofing between rooms – with less than 20% of guesthouses offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, offering a private washroom in guestroom - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering online booking, disabled access, air conditioning, speaking at least two foreign languages, using water conservation systems, using energy conservation systems, maintaining quality certification, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include maintain a website, accepting payment by credit card, and having waste collection systems – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, guesthouses appear to have high isomorphism on four factors, low isomorphism on ten factors, and no clear isomorphism on three.

Agricultural tourism. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to not offering on-line booking, air conditioning, satellite TV, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi and soundproofing between rooms, using water conservation systems, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, and offering a private washroom in guestroom - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to accepting payment by credit card, speaking at least two foreign languages, maintaining quality certification, using energy conservation systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include having disabled access and maintaining a website – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, agricultural tourism accommodation providers appear to have high isomorphism on eight factors, low isomorphism on seven factors, and no clear isomorphism on two.

Hotel. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, soundproofing between rooms, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is also high isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail and accepting payment by credit card – with more than 80% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering satellite TV, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, maintaining quality certifications, water conservation systems, using energy conservation systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to maintaining a website, having disabled access, and air conditioning - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include offering a private washroom in guestrooms and speaking at least two foreign languages – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, hotel accommodation providers appear to have high isomorphism on five factors, low isomorphism on ten factors, and no clear isomorphism on two.

Distributed hotel. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, having disabled access, soundproofing between rooms, maintaining quality certifications, water conservation systems, using energy conservation systems, having waste collection systems and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, maintaining a website, satellite TV, and a private washroom in guestrooms - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to accepting payment by credit card, air conditioning, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, and speaking at least two foreign languages – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. In summary, distributed hotel accommodation providers appear to have high isomorphism on eight factors and low isomorphism on nine factors.

Bed & Breakfast. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, accepting payment by credit card, having disabled access, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, soundproofing between rooms, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering air conditioning, satellite TV, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, and offering a private washroom in guestrooms - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include maintaining a website, speaking at least two foreign languages, maintaining quality certifications, water conservation systems, and using energy conservation systems – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, bed & breakfast providers appear to have high isomorphism on seven factors, low isomorphism on five factors, and no clear isomorphism on five.

Camping. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, guest rooms with private bathrooms, offering satellite TV, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, soundproofing between rooms, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is also high isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail and speaking at least two foreign languages– with more than 80% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to air conditioning, water conservation systems, using energy conservation systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to maintaining a website, and having disabled access - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include accepting payment by credit card and maintaining quality certifications – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, camping accommodation providers appear to have high isomorphism on nine factors, low isomorphism on six factors, and no clear isomorphism on two.

Resort. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to private washroom in guestrooms, satellite TV, soundproofing between rooms, using energy conservation systems, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is also high isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, maintaining a website and having disabled access – with more than 80% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, maintaining quality certifications, water conservation systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, accepting payment by credit card, and speaking at least two foreign languages - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. The only quality factors that shows no clear isomorphism is offering air conditioning – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using this. In summary, resort accommodation providers

appear to have high isomorphism on eight factors, low isomorphism on eight factors, and no clear isomorphism on one.

Rural tourism. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, air conditioning, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, soundproofing between rooms, having waste collection systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is also high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering a private washroom in guestrooms– with more than 80% of firms offering this. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering satellite TV, maintaining quality certifications, using water conservation systems, and using energy conservation systems– with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail and having disabled access - with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include maintaining a website, accepting payment by credit card offering, and speaking at least two foreign languages – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, rural tourism accommodation providers appear to have high isomorphism on eight factors, low isomorphism on six factors, and no clear isomorphism on three.

In comparing the various accommodation types, high to low isomorphism is prevalent (Table 3). The distributed hotels exhibit the highest level of isomorphism with all 17 quality factors being either high or low in isomorphism. Resorts (at 16 factors) show the second highest level of isomorphism followed by agricultural tourism, hotels, and camping all at 15 factors. The least isomorphism is seen in rural tourism (14 factors), guest houses (14 factors), and Bed & Breakfasts (13 factors).

Table 3
THE NUMBER OF QUALITY FACTORS FOUND TO HAVE HIGH, LOW AND NO ISOMORPHISM FOR EACH ACCOMMODATION TYPE

Number of factors	Guest house	Agricultural tourism	Hotel	Distributed hotel	Bed & Breakfast	Camping	Resort	Rural tourism	Average
High isomorphism	4	8	5	8	7	9	8	8	7.13
Low isomorphism	10	7	10	9	5	6	8	6	7.63
No isomorphism	3	2	2	0	5	2	1	3	2.25

The second hypothesis compares levels of isomorphism between the two provinces (Campobasso and Isernia) of the Molise region. It states that differences will be observed in the degree to which quality factors are used in the accommodation firms of Campobasso and Isernia. Degree of Isomorphism is assessed as follows: none (0): 40-60%; low (L): 20-40% and 60-80%; high (H): 0-20% and 80-100%. The differences in the use of quality factors in accommodation firms are barely discernable across

the two regions of Campobasso (34.8%) and Isernia (35.4%). Therefore, we find no evidence at this level to support H2. However, we provide a richer discussion of the results for each region below by separately assessing the degree of isomorphism for each quality factor.

Campobasso. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, satellite TV, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, soundproofing between rooms, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering air conditioning, maintaining quality certifications, water conservation systems, using energy conservation systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, and offering a private washroom in guestrooms – with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include maintaining a website, accepting payment by credit card, having disabled access, and speaking at least two foreign languages – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, accommodation providers in Campobasso appear to have high isomorphism on six factors, low isomorphism on seven factors, and no clear isomorphism on four.

Isernia. There appears to be high isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering air conditioning, High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, soundproofing between rooms, and having waste collection systems – with less than 20% of firms offering these. There is low isomorphic behaviour with respect to offering on-line booking, accepting payment by credit card, satellite TV, using water conservation systems, using energy conservation systems, and using tools to assess customer satisfaction – with between 20 to 40% of firms offering or using these. There is also low isomorphic behaviour with respect to corresponding with guests by e-mail, and offering a private washroom in guestrooms – with between 60 and 80% of firms offering these. Quality factors that show no clear isomorphism include maintaining a website, having disabled access, speaking at least two foreign languages, and maintaining quality certifications – with between 40 to 60% of firms offering or using these. In summary, accommodation providers in Isernia appear to have high isomorphism on five factors, low isomorphism on eight factors, and no clear isomorphism on four.

The use of quality factors when aggregated at the provincial level are very similar – 34.8% for Campobasso and 35.4% for Isernia. Only two large differences were observed – in air conditioning (38% in Campobasso vs 19% in Isernia) and payment with credit card (50% in Campobasso vs 33% in Isernia). In the other cases, the difference between the two provinces is not so large. However, there is considerable variation around the 35% average with the different factors. The most prevalent for Campobasso being e-mail (79%), private washrooms in the guestrooms (60%), website presence (52%), and payment with credit card (50%). For Isernia, the most prevalent are private washrooms in the guestrooms (76%), e-mail (66%), and website presence (58%). Therefore, there still may be very specific isomorphic pressures occurring in each region.

Conclusions and implications

This study has revealed that many of the quality factors that are important to tourists are not being offered by accommodation providers. Collectively, accommodation providers only provide one in three (34.2%) of the factors considered important to tourists (Prezenza et al, 2009). From a practical perspective this means there is great opportunity for accommodation providers to improve the quality of their offering in the eyes of tourists by adopting or offering more of the quality factors.

Another important finding is that the adoption of quality factors is not consistent across either accommodation providers or the quality factors themselves. Accommodation providers in aggregate are more likely to provide e-mail (79%), a website (60%), guestrooms with private washrooms (53%), have knowledge of at least two foreign languages (52%), accept payment by credit card (47%), and have disabled accessibility (47%). While these are clearly the more commonly adopted quality measures, their use is still far from being ubiquitous.

Collectively, accommodation providers are least likely to provide soundproofing between rooms (6%), have waste collection systems (14%), offer WiFi (16%), offer internet (18%), and on-line booking (21%). The latter three particularly stand out as concerning given broad societal expectations of being connected while away from home and being able to find information and book accommodations online.

Occupying the middle ground are the quality factors of air conditioning (32%), quality certifications (31%), systems to save energy (29%), systems to save water (26%), satellite TV (25%), and tools to assess customer satisfaction (24%). Again, with relatively low levels of adoption, these quality factors represent an opportunity for accommodation providers to provide a product that better meets the current needs of customers as well as monitor changes in needs and desires through customer satisfaction assessments.

The overall empirical results confirm that differences do exist between the various types of accommodation providers with respect to the adoption of quality factors (supporting the first hypothesis). Hotels and resorts clearly stand out as providing or using more of the quality factors than the other accommodation types. At the other extreme, distributed hotels and agricultural tourism accommodation providers also stand out as exhibiting the lowest level of usage or adoption of quality measures. One possible explanation is proximity to peers of the same accommodation type. Hotels and resorts are often in close physical proximity and often have a local association with periodic meetings where they may share information on customer quality expectations. Such sharing may facilitate mimetic isomorphism.

However, the difference in the use of quality factors in accommodation firms between the two provinces (Campobasso and Isernia) is negligible (not supporting the second hypothesis). While the levels of isomorphism may not vary much by region, the drivers of isomorphism may indeed vary. In Isernia the isomorphism is likely coercive

in nature due to the large influence of government policy and incentives to stimulate small-scale tourism development. The province of Isernia is relatively early in its development of a tourism destination – perhaps the exploration phase of the destination life cycle (Butler, 1980). In Campobasso the isomorphic forces in the accommodation firms are likely mimetic in nature due to it being more mature as a tourism destination where there is seasoned competition and clearer understanding of tourist desires.

In sum, applying new-institutionalism in the field of hospitality and tourism may open an exceptionally rich domain for studying a wide range of phenomena that have potentially important practical implications. First, it may help public officials in creating more adequate policies for the development of tourism destinations. Governments must consider the general behavior of the various stakeholders that shape a tourism system when creating policies or programs to improve the competitiveness of the province or region as a destination. In fact, notable is the influence of organizational field on the actors operating within it: the organizational behaviours are the result of joint values, ideas and beliefs that have origin in the institutional context.

Furthermore, it seems appropriate to take into account the stage of the life cycle (Butler, 1980) that the destination is in. In doing so, it is possible to highlight and better understand the different organizations' capacity to adapt to and better understand the process to identify and comply with best practices to maintain perceived legitimacy as determined by the institutional actors in the field.

As already mentioned in the discussion, it is also important to understand which type of path is driving isomorphism. In this sense, for example, institutional actors can impose coercive standards. This can include regulations from the government that require the adoption of quality certification of processes and products for accessing public funding. Also tour operators may create coercive pressures as they impose specific standards on accommodation providers wishing to be included in their catalogue. With regard to tourists, the specific consumption behaviour often influences the nature of the product offering. A good example is the difference between domestic and international markets in terms of different needs, traditions, customs, etc.

In this research, it was difficult to identify normative isomorphism. One might draw inference from the specific organization of the accommodation firms that comprise the tourism system in Molise. They are almost exclusively small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with a simple organizational structures leading to a relatively low presence of professionals. Consequently, professional organizations are likely to generate only a low level of normative isomorphism. It seems reasonable to conclude that, due to the typical organizational structure (almost exclusively SMEs), characterized by individualism rather than collectivism, the presence of the isomorphism is more related to a mimetic path. This means that the decision for the firm to engage in a particular behaviour is directly related to the belief that to stay competitive in the marketplace it has to emulate behaviours of firms in its field. In Molise, this is confirmed by the proliferation

in recent years of non-hotel accommodations such as agricultural tourism and Bed & Breakfasts.

This study is subject to some limitations. First, this investigation refers only to a specific geographical area. Consequently, further investigation would be useful for generalizing the results to other geographical areas. Second, the category of "distributed hotels" being a relatively new form of accommodation with small numbers has even less generalizability. Third, the values used to label isomorphism as high, low or none are subjective.

Finally, this research has illustrated how the theory of new institutionalism, and specifically the notion of isomorphic pressures, may be used to examine firm behavior in the tourism industry. The specific context of quality management in the accommodation sector is only one of many possible applications. Subsequent studies should deepen knowledge by investigating additional factors beyond quality and sectors beyond accommodation.

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Submitted: 04/18/2011

Accepted: 11/28/2011