

'You will like it!' using open data to predict tourists' response to a tourist attraction



Eleonora Pantano ^{a,1}, Constantinos-Vasilios Priporas ^{a,*}, Nikolaos Stylos ^b

^a Department of Marketing, Branding & Tourism, Middlesex University Business School, London, United Kingdom

^b Department for Marketing, Innovation, Leisure and Enterprise, University of Wolverhampton Business School, Arthur Storer Building, Nursery Street, Wolverhampton, City Campus Molineux (North), WV11AD, England, United Kingdom

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploitation of open data to predict tourist's future preferences based on profile characteristics.
- The Random Forest method is employed to, first, train the system and, second, provide opt predictions and propositions.
- Better reach the target tourist markets, thus increasing the effectiveness of related marketing strategies.
- Applicable procedure for attractions and tourism destinations around the world.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 August 2016

Received in revised form

28 December 2016

Accepted 29 December 2016

Keywords:

Open data

Online reviews

Tourism

Travel propositions

ABSTRACT

The increasing amount of user-generated content spread via social networking services such as reviews, comments, and past experiences, has made a great deal of information available. Tourists can access this information to support their decision making process. This information is freely accessible online and generates so-called "open data". While many studies have investigated the effect of online reviews on tourists' decisions, none have directly investigated the extent to which open data analyses might predict tourists' response to a certain destination. To this end, our study contributes to the process of predicting tourists' future preferences via *Mathematica*TM, software that analyzes a large set of the open data (i.e. tourists' reviews) that is freely available on tripadvisor. This is devised by generating the classification function and the best model for predicting the destination tourists would potentially select. The implications for the tourist industry are discussed in terms of research and practice.

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1. Introduction

The recent advances in digital media technologies and environments, as well as the introduction and acceptance of sophisticated interactive software applications, have driven the digital evolution of marketing in the information society epoch (Garrigos-Simon, Lapiedra Alcamí & Barberá Ribera, 2012; Mekonnen, 2016). Digital social media has played a key role in this recently established sub-field of marketing and its rapid spread has transformed how information is accessed and shared (Di Noia, Mirizzi, Ostuni,

Romito, & Zanker, 2012; Pantano, 2014). In particular, the impact of social networking sites (SNSs) on word-of mouth communications and decision making processes has been well reported (Chu & Kim, 2011; Fotiadis & Stylos, 2016; See-To & Ho, 2014). Digital marketers realize that to successfully attract and leverage the interest of SNS users, they need to increase the utility of social networks by offering value added services (Diffley, Kearns, Bennett, & Kawalek, 2011). Thus, SNSs are now expanding their capabilities by offering a diverse portfolio of build-in applications (apps) to meet social media users' needs for novel experiences (Tung, Jai, & Davis Burns, 2014); namely, customized topic-specific virtual spaces to better support user-generated content (UGC) (e.g. Facebook apps, YouTube), including reviews, comments on past experiences and recommendations for future purchases (Turban, King, Lee, Liang, & Turban, 2015). As researchers note, online reviews based on SNS users' profiles and established preferences are integral to formulating future preferences and affecting consumer purchases (Baka,

* Corresponding author. W107 Williams Building, Hendon Campus, The Burroughs, London, NW4 4BT, England, United Kingdom.

E-mail addresses: E.Pantano@mdx.ac.uk (E. Pantano), C.Priporas@mdx.ac.uk (C.-V. Priporas), n.stylos@wlv.ac.uk (N. Stylos).

¹ W109 Williams Building, Hendon Campus, The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT, England, UK.

2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). The premise is that behavior is influenced not only by individuals' beliefs, feelings, impressions, and behavioral norms, but also by recommendations and prior experiences stemming from the social environment, which in turn produce attitudes and intentions (Cheng & Huang, 2013; Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014; White, 2005). In fact, the more the product online review features available to consumers, the higher the likelihood for sales of related items within the product category (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006).

Similarly, in a travel and tourism context, tourists' recommendations via tripadvisor, Yelp etc. influence other travelers' decisions about many different aspects of their trips, e.g. selection of a tourist destination, accommodation and attractions to visit (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015; Hudson, 2014; Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013; Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Notwithstanding the fact that some researchers have indicated that many reviews are fake, or overly positive or negative, consumers perceive online reviews as more trustworthy than content provided by official destination websites (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012). Drawing on a huge amount of UGC, marketers make systematic efforts to exploit as much open data as possible to support digital marketing effectiveness. These efforts could potentially improve online sales and the profitability of e-travel services (e.g., accommodation, transportation, restaurants, entertainment, sightseeing and tourism destination information) (Korfiatis, Garcia-Bariocanal, & Sánchez-Alonso, 2012; Nguyen & Cao, 2015).

Nevertheless, up until now, most research in UGC and most online reviews have underlined the importance of analyzing ratings to increase the likelihood of travelers' having enjoyable trips (e.g. Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Neidhardt, Seyfang, Schuster, & Werthner, 2015; Phillips, Zigan, Silva, & Schegg, 2015; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Zhang, Zhang, & Yang, 2016), though only a few studies explicitly examine the impact of reviews on SNS users' future choices (i.e. Aye, Au, & Law, 2013; Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012; Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013; Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). These studies focus on the readability, credibility and helpfulness of online reviews, however they do not explore the extent to which recommendations may be perceived as useful to other travelers willing to travel to the same destinations (Schuckert, Liu & Law, 2015). Moreover, they do not investigate ways of using this data to improve traveller review sites' consultation capabilities to the benefit of individuals, hospitality businesses and tourist destinations at large.

Taken together, this study seeks to examine the extent to which open data analysis may apply to the tourists' process of selecting tourist destinations and/or services. In particular, we attempt to predict travelers' attitudes toward a tourist attraction by transforming large amounts of open data into value propositions. In doing so, we implement the random decision forest algorithm approach (Coussement & De Bock, 2013; Xie, Ngai & Ying, 2009) drawing on data available on a popular travelers' review site.

Given that few studies have explored the potential of open data to serve as means of providing opt vacations-related automated database-driven recommendations (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, & Koo, 2015; Jannach, Zanker, & Fuchs, 2014), the objectives of the study are twofold. First, it aims to investigate the potential benefits of using open data sources to form appropriate future travel propositions, thus moving one step forward from the standard method of investigating the influence of perceived value as well as the reliability of online reviews on formulating intentions (Fang et al., 2016; Korfiatis et al., 2012; Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011; Liu & Park, 2015; Sparks et al., 2013). Secondly, it seeks to highlight the effectiveness of leveraging a limited bulk of open data, as an alternative to big data sets, in terms of providing useful outputs.

From a theoretical point of view, this study draws attention to

the huge potential of using online open data sources to influence tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Practically, we propose a computational tool that can greatly contribute to the effective positioning of hospitality organizations and tourist destinations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Open data

Open data has been defined by the Open Knowledge Foundation (<http://okfn.org/>) in 2005 as “data that can be freely used, shared and built on by anyone, anywhere, for any purpose”. Maccani, Donnellan, and Helfert (2015) point out that there are 3 principles behind this definition: (1) availability and access (people can get the data); (2) re-use and redistribution (people can re-use and share the data); (3) universal participation (anyone can use the data). Furthermore, the volume of the information released through open data platforms is huge (Ojha, Jovanovic, & Giunchiglia, 2015; Wu, Liu, Chu, Chu, & Yu, 2014), it is based on a wealth of information and enables enhanced knowledge creation (Theocharis & Tsihrizis, 2013).

Kitchin (2014) asserts that the focus of open data could be any type of socio-economic or business phenomena but that in general, the emphasis to date has been on opening up data that has a high policy and commercial re-use value, such as economic, transport and spatial data. Today, open data are mostly provided by public and services providers (organizations, institutions, and enterprises) while the potential of open data for business development is still mostly unexplored (Pesonen & Lampi, n.d). For example, governments are trying to exploit open data to support the development of better services for citizens (Chan, 2013; Hielkama & Hongisto, 2013). Processing open data is recognized as a potentially powerful alternative to analyzing data collected via surveys (Gurstein, 2011). In specific, the use of open data is being increasingly acknowledged as a means of supporting knowledge management in various contemporary business and technological applications such as, smart cities (Inayatullah, 2011; Ojo, Curry, & Zeleti, 2015). Cities have been the first to be involved in processing open data in various applications (Longhi, Titz, & Viallis, 2014), such as the management of their tourist destination products (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013; Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi, & Vitouladiti, 2014), recognizing them as a key component of their smart city strategy (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015).

2.2. Open data in tourism

Tourism is by nature an industry in which marketing communications strongly depend on data exchange (Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008). In today's rapidly changing world, various forms of data related to tourism activities and services are produced and utilized across a range of online applications (Buhalis & Law, 2008). This is primarily the outcome of the increasing ability to digitize growing volumes of data, and the development of open-sources and open data policies (Sabou, Braşoveanu, & Önder, 2015; Soualah-Alila, Coustaty, Rempulski, & Doucet, 2016). For tourist destinations there are significant opportunities to use open data to develop cultural sights, transportation, marketing and the environment (Wiggins & Crowston, 2011). As people have increasingly focused on the quality of the tourist experience, the demand for open data in tourism and hospitality research has become intense (Wu et al., 2014). A growing amount of tourism-related open data is now available on the platform in XML, CSV, or JSON format (Wu et al., 2014). According to Longhi et al. (2014) tourism is the first industry to be concerned with open data. Open data can facilitate local authorities in their planning processes (e.g., advertising) and in

adapting to the needs of tourists. Mobile technologies have shifted the focus of the tourist industry from a focus on mass tourism related practices to a focus on “one to one” marketing practices (i.e., real mobile, just in time information about attractions, catering facilities and transportation alternatives), resulting in communication plans that could prove much more effective (Longhi et al., 2014). In terms of mobile technology, having reliable real time information always available is crucial in terms of enabling the tourists to find their way. The information primarily interests consumers-tourists, based on this information these tourists can find restaurants near their position and can get information on monuments and sightseeing in the areas they are visiting (Longhi et al., 2014). Mariani et al. (2014) assert that the development of the disruptive technologies under ‘mobiquity’—a new term emerging from the mobility and ubiquity of smartphone market penetration—combined with the free access open data revolution are profoundly changing the whole tourist industry, bringing along new technologies, new knowledge bases, and new roles for the different stakeholders.

Although research has started soliciting new studies on the adoption of new technologies for smart tourism (Gretzel et al., 2015; Rossetti, Stella, & Zanker, 2016), the benefits emerging from the open data use are still under investigated by current literature in tourism (Fermoso, Mateos, Beato, & Berjon, 2015). In fact, there is an increase in online communities that focus on travel discussions (i.e. tripadvisor and social networks like Facebook and Twitter). These new means for tourists to both obtain information and plan travel force tourism managers to create better tailored and more efficient marketing approaches, as well as develop new models for hospitality (Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). Efficient analyses of the big data sets might support the development of these new approaches (Pantano & Di Blasi, 2015).

As far as tripadvisor is concerned, it can be identified as a significant source of open data given the figures and reviews on attractions/destinations. For example, in 2015, tripadvisor reached 320 million reviews and had 6.2 million opinions on places to stay, to eat and on things to do – including 995,000 hotels and forms of accommodation, 770,000 vacation rentals, 3.8 million restaurants and 625,000 attractions in 125,000 destinations throughout the world (Tripadvisor, 2016).

2.3. Vacation decision making

The vacation decision-making process is much more complex than the decision-making process for tangible goods (Park, Nicolau, & Fesenmaier, 2013). The process depends on whether a person goes on a vacation alone, as a couple or as a family with children, and on the planning process (Decrop, 2006). According to Hyde and Decrop (2011), the process also differs for different types of vacation trips (i.e., short, long, annual family vacation) because different trips include different levels of involvement, different time spent planning and a different number of decisions that must be made before travel. Swarbrooke and Horner (1999) stated that vacation planning is a high-involvement process, because many people spend large amounts of money on an intangible product with a low level of security and great social implications.

In fact, selecting the most suitable choice of destination, travel mode and accommodation is a time and effort consuming process (Hsu, Lin, & Ho, 2012; Li, Law, Vu, Rong, & Zhao, 2015). This selection may be made on the basis of expectations, preferences, purposes, previous accommodation experience, costs, transport mode, etc. (Li et al., 2015), or even on the basis of others' past experience, word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word of mouth or word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Law, Buhalis, & Cobanoglu, 2014). When WOM is mediated through electronic means, internet users pass information to others via social networks, instant messages, news feeds and travel

review sites that users can freely access (Liu & Park, 2015). Actually, the influence of the Internet has been significantly transforming the tourist industry in a number of ways: it has become one of the most efficient means of reaching new tourist markets and foster revisiting the same destinations (Pan, Xiang, Law, & Fesenmaier, 2011) and is now the leading information source for tourists due to the many online tourism communities it supports (Liu & Park, 2015; Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). Although the abundance of online tourists' reviews makes information retrieval easier, it could overexpose tourists to a huge bulk of information thus making it harder for them to select the most useful information (Zhang et al., 2016). Individuals are able to process only a part of the available information and only according to certain personal criteria (Johnson, Bellman, & Lohse, 2003; Zhang et al., 2016). This implies that they can only process the information which is included in their selection criteria, which might exclude a large amount of information (Zhang et al., 2016). For this reason, current developments in information and communication technologies are looking at new ways to support consumers in their search for useful information in finalizing holidays planning while avoiding the information overload (McCabe, Li, & Chen, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016). The tourist industry has benefited from employing intelligent systems, which are new generation information systems that can provide more applicable and better tailored information, advanced decision support systems, and, ultimately, improved tourism experiences. Examples of intelligent systems employed in this industry are recommender systems, context-aware technologies, autonomous agents searching and mining web resources (Gretzel, 2011). Specifically, recommender systems make use of sophisticated technology that filters out personal information, which could be used for pinpointing interesting items or activities to tourists according to their preferences (Al-Hassan, Lu, & Lu, 2015). Recommender systems' strength relies on their ability to automatically learn tourists' preferences by analyzing their behavioral responses (Batet, Moreno, Sánchez, Isern, & Valls, 2012; Borrás, Moreno, & Valls, 2014; Noguera, Barranco, Segura, & Martínez, 2012). Borrás et al. (2014) postulate that these systems can facilitate tourists' selection process by dynamically recommending sights of interest based on real time data (i.e. location and context related information). Same authors argue that this setting fosters the development of intelligent autonomous agents, which offer some important benefits through their advanced abilities; first, an enhanced analysis of tourist behavior; second, the ability to provide opt and proactive visit-related recommendations based on automatic learning of tourists preferences and needs. Consequently, smart technologies have the ability to create, develop, manage and deliver intelligent tourism experiences, thus developing an emerging trend in tourism which is characterized by intensive information sharing, relationships building and value co-creation among tourists, tourism managers, organizations, etc. (Prebensen, Kim, & Uysal, 2016). In this context, processing and transferring large volume of tourism-relevant data is of utmost importance (Gretzel et al., 2015) and as a consequence, problems related to information overload could be overcome by future progress in technology. Technology would provide a more enhanced service for tourists in terms of ubiquity, connection, context-awareness, and the capacity to process more data (Borrás et al., 2014; Gavalas, Konstantopoulos, Mastakas, & Pantziou, 2014).

3. Predictive models

Open data analyses might support tourism managers in predicting tourists' judgements about a certain tourist attraction. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to introduce predictive models that support information selection within a huge amount of data. A predictive model is a mathematical tool able to produce a

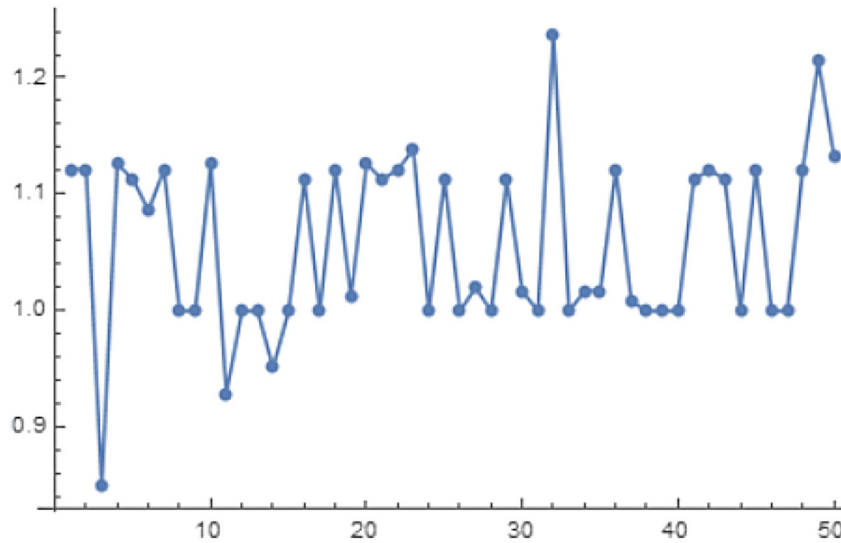


Fig. 3. Results of the experiment 1 based on the building of 50 classifying functions.

$$f : I \rightarrow S$$

$$(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_{18}) \in I \rightarrow s \in S$$

where $x_i, \forall i = 1, \dots, 18$.

The function f assigns to a data configuration, a value of 0 or 1.

The goal is, thus, to find a function describing these relationships, which are usually described as a rules table (Fig. 1).

The prediction system is designed to deliver outputs; in case the 2^{18} values of the target would be defined. Fig. 2 represents how the table of rules appears for our set, just considering a sample of 10 configurations as example (where 0 is white and 1 is black).

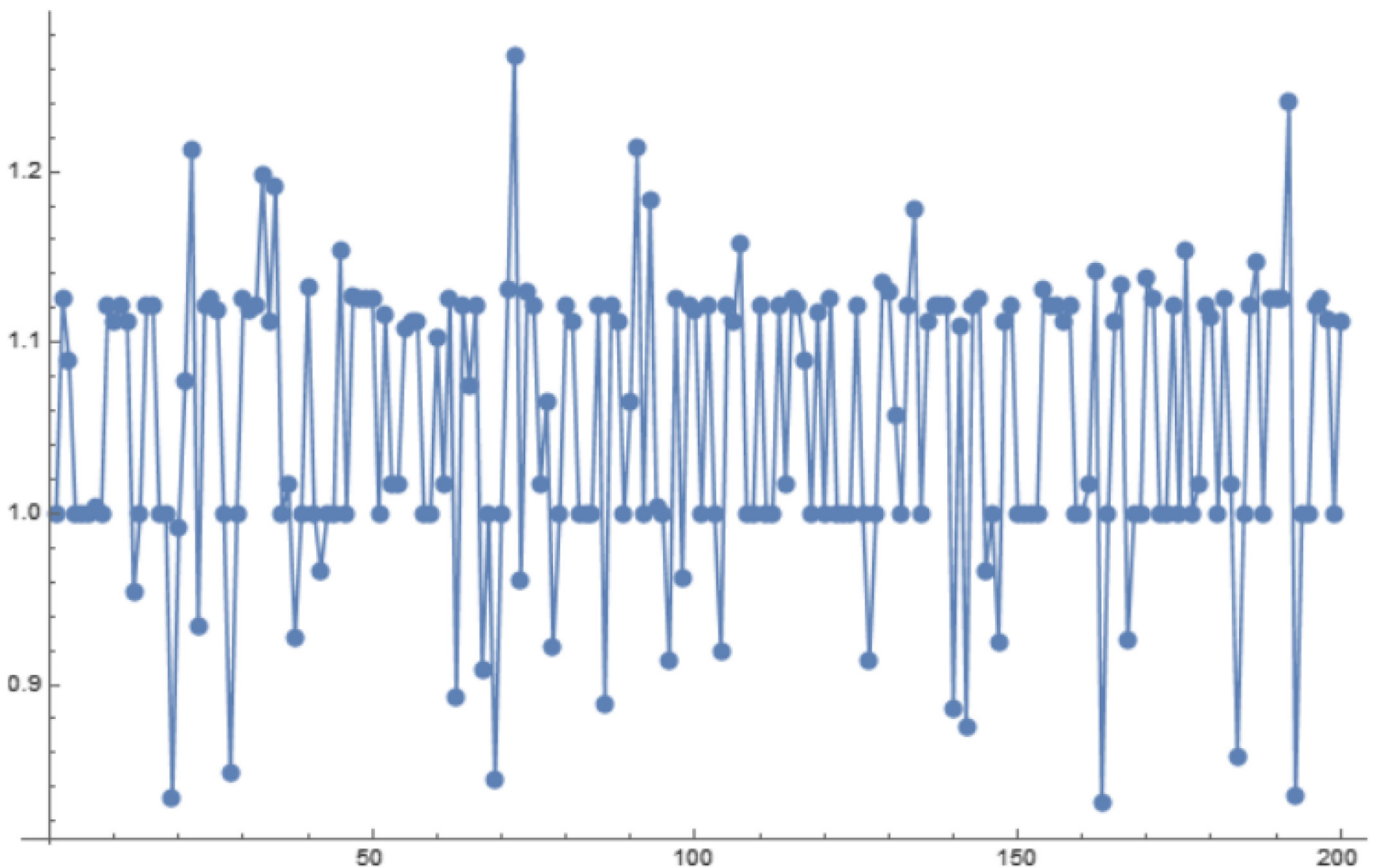


Fig. 4. Results of the experiment 2 based on the building of 200 classifying functions.

Second, this study focused on one tourism attraction located at a specific tourist destination to serve as a case for driving data analysis. Thus, future research could test the applicability of data analysis and compare outputs from attractions and tourist destinations across the globe. Third, data analysis was based on the reviews posted within a timeframe of two months. A study incorporating data from a longer time period could improve the predictability of the proposed technique. Moreover, a longitudinal study could offer a better validation of the travel propositions made over time.

Appendix A

The algorithm employed can efficiently perform a non-linear classification using what is called the kernel trick, implicitly mapping their inputs into high-dimensional feature spaces. Formally, it builds a hyper-plane, which can be used for classification, regression, or other tasks. Intuitively, a good separation is achieved by the hyper-plane that has the largest distance to the nearest training-data point of the true and false classes (Fig. 6).

Given some training data set D :

$$D = \{(\vec{x}_i, y_i) \mid \vec{x}_i \in \mathbb{R}^n, y_i \in \{\text{true}, \text{false}\}\};$$

Therefore, the algorithm finds the maximum-margin hyper-plane dividing the points exhibiting $y_i = \text{true}$ from those having $y_i = \text{false}$; any hyper-plane can be written as the set of points \vec{x}_i satisfying the following equation (see again Fig. 1):

$$\vec{w} \cdot \vec{x} - b = 0;$$

In case the training data are linearly separable, then two hyper-planes can be selected in a way that data are separated, thus maximizing the distances between the points.

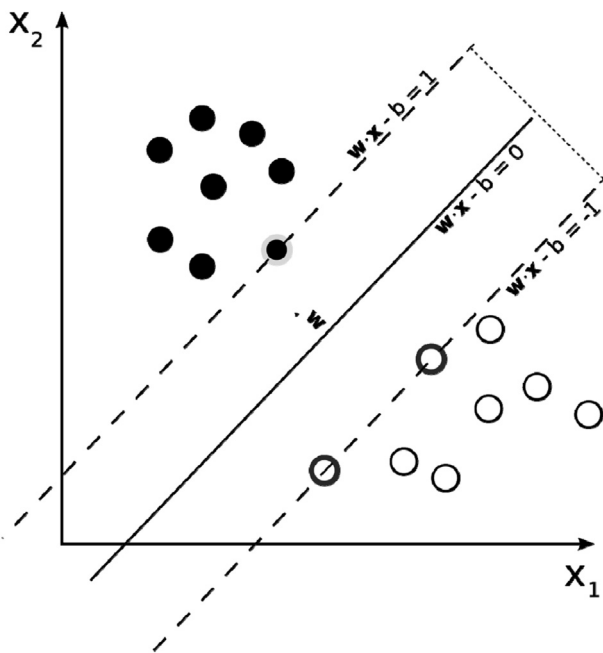


Fig. 6. Hyper-plane building among data.
Source: Pantano and Di Blasi (2015, p. 445).

Appendix B

Code used in *Mathematica* software.

```
xx3 = Table[xx[[1,a]][[9;26]],{a,2,Length[xx[[1]]]};
xxa = Table[xx3[[a]]->1,{a,125}; xxb = Table[xx3[[a]]-
>0,{a,254,385}]; xxc = Union[xxa,xxb];
ccy = Table[c = Classify[xxc]; f1 = Table[c[xx3[[a]]],{a,253}];
f2 = Table[c[xx3[[a]]],{a,254,501}]; {c,N[Total[f1]/Length
[f1],N[(Length[f2]-Total[f2])/Length[f2]],N[Total[f1]/Length
[f1]]+N[(Length[f2]-Total[f2])/Length[f2]],i,200}]; Table[ccy
[[a,4]],{a,200}]
```

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Eleonora Pantano, PhD, is a Lecturer in Marketing at Middlesex University Business School, UK. Prior to joining Middlesex, she was post doc research fellow at University of Calabria (Italy) and researcher at Technical University of Eindhoven (The Netherlands). She held a Ph.D. in “Psychology of Programming and Artificial Intelligence” and a Master Science in Business and Management Engineering at University of Calabria (Italy). Her research activities explore marketing management and mainly relate to consumers acceptance of new services and to customer experience in modern and ancient retail formats, design of new customers solution in retail industry, implementation of business and retail models in terms of innovation and technology management, and success factors of innovation management with emphasis on retail industry. Her findings appear in numerous international journals such as *Computers in Human Behavior*, *Information Technology & People*, and *International Journal of Information Management* (e-mail: E.Pantano@mdx.ac.uk).



in several international academic journals and conferences, including *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, *The Services Industries Journal*, *EuroMed Academy of Business*, *EMAC*. In addition, he co-edited a book. He is a member of several professional bodies and he is editorial board member of the *Journal of Customer Behavior* and has acted as a guest editor, reviewer, and track chair in academic journals and conferences. (e-mail: C.Priporas@mdx.ac.uk).

Nikolaos Stylos, PhD, SFHEA, MCIM is Senior Lecturer in Marketing and Director of the Marketing Science Laboratory at the University of Wolverhampton Business School, UK. He has a PhD in Business Administration (Marketing), an M.B.A, an M.Sc. in Mechanical Reliability Engineering and a Graduate Diploma in Mechanical Engineering. His research interests include cross-cultural consumer behavior, tourism marketing, digital marketing and environmental management. He has published in various international journals including *Tourism Management*, *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, and *Journal of Cleaner Production*, acted as track chair in conferences and served as a professional management and technical consultant for more than a decade. (e-mail: N.Stylos@wlv.ac.uk).



Constantinos-Vasilios Priporas, PhD, MCIM, FEMAB, is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at Middlesex University Business School, UK. His research interests include consumer behavior and strategic marketing with main emphasis on tourism, food and retailing. He has published