

Google Italy Ranking Factors 2026: A Correlational Analysis of 6,824 SERP Pages Across 57 Technical and On-Page Signals

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the association between 57 on-page and technical factors and organic search ranking positions in Google Italy. We assembled a keyword corpus of 841 Italian-language queries derived from verified Google Search Console data across five independent sites operating in distinct niches: herbalism, 3D printing, cybersecurity, pet e-commerce, and web design. For each keyword, we collected the top 10 organic results from google.it using headless Chromium (locale: it-IT, June 2026), yielding 7,404 URL-keyword-position triplets covering 6,824 unique URLs. Each URL was analyzed by the PerSeo Insights platform using real-page Playwright loads combined with Lighthouse audits, extracting 57 signals spanning keyword placement, structural markup, link profile, content characteristics, schema, and Core Web Vitals. Spearman rank correlation (ρ) was computed between each signal and SERP position (1-10), with statistical significance assessed at $\alpha = 0.05$. Of 57 factors tested, 10 reached significance. Keyword presence in the title tag showed the strongest negative correlation with position ($\rho = -0.087, p < 0.001$), followed by keyword in URL slug ($\rho = -0.071$), H1 ($\rho = -0.056$), meta description ($\rho = -0.055$), and H2 ($\rho = -0.036$). Content structure variables were also significant: number of H2 elements ($\rho = -0.039$), external link count ($\rho = -0.039$), and number of H1 elements ($\rho = -0.033$). The .it country-code TLD showed a small but statistically robust local advantage ($\rho = -0.031, p = 0.007$). Text-to-HTML ratio was the only factor positively correlated with position (meaning it *hurts* ranking) ($\rho = +0.045, p < 0.001$). Core Web Vitals (LCP, FCP, CLS), Lighthouse performance score, word count, schema markup, HTTPS, and title length showed no significant association with ranking. These findings suggest that within the Italian competitive top-10, keyword placement and structural content organization are the most discriminating on-page signals, while technical performance metrics do not differentiate positions among already-optimized pages.

Keywords: SEO ranking factors, Google Italy, Spearman correlation, keyword placement, Core Web Vitals, SERP analysis, Italian web, on-page optimization, search engine optimization

1. Introduction

Understanding which page-level signals correlate with organic search rankings has been a central question in both applied and academic search engine optimization research. While Google has publicly acknowledged over 200 ranking signals [1], empirical investigation of which signals most strongly associate with observed ranking positions remains methodologically challenging and practically valuable. Large-scale correlational studies, pioneered by organizations such as Moz, Backlinko, and Semrush, have produced influential benchmarks since the early 2010s [2,3,4]. However, these studies have typically focused on English-language SERPs and global keyword pools, with limited attention to the specific dynamics of national markets.

The Italian web market presents distinct characteristics. A significant share of queries targets content in Italian, the country-code TLD (.it) remains commercially dominant, and content quality expectations differ from those of English-language markets. Yet no peer-reviewed empirical study of ranking factors specific to the Italian Google index was available prior to our pilot study published in June 2026 [5].

This paper presents the second and substantially expanded edition of that work. Our v1 study (601 URLs, 135 keywords, 11 factors) established directional findings but lacked statistical power for robust inference. The present study increases the corpus by an order of magnitude: 6,824 unique URLs, 841 keywords across five niches, and 57 measured factors. This scale allows us to distinguish genuine correlation signals from artifacts of small-sample variance.

Our primary contributions are: (1) the first large-scale correlational ranking factor study specifically targeting Google Italy; (2) a detailed methodology for multi-niche SERP data collection using real-browser rendering; (3) empirical evidence against the practical significance of Core Web Vitals as a ranking differentiator within the competitive Italian top-10; and (4) confirmation that keyword placement in title, URL, H1, and meta description remains the strongest measurable on-page signal at scale.

2. Related Work

2.1 Correlational Ranking Factor Studies

The methodology of correlating page-level features with SERP position at scale was established by Moz's Search Ranking Factors surveys and Searchmetrics' Ranking Factors reports [3,6]. Backlinko's large-scale analyses (examining over 1 million results) found content length, HTTPS, and page speed to be among the top correlates for English-language queries [4]. However, correlation studies of this type are subject to well-documented limitations: they capture association, not causation; confounding factors (domain authority, link equity) are difficult to isolate; and findings can be highly sensitive to niche and keyword intent [7].

More recent studies have focused on specific signal categories. A 2023 analysis by Semrush [8] found Core Web Vitals to have weak but positive correlations with ranking in English SERPs. Bartoli et al. [9] examined Italian e-commerce SERPs and found structured data and title optimization to be significant factors, though their dataset was limited to 200 URLs. No prior work, to our knowledge, has examined ranking factors across multiple niches in Italian SERPs at the scale presented here.

2.2 Core Web Vitals as a Ranking Signal

Google formally introduced Core Web Vitals (CWV) as a ranking signal in May 2021 through the Page Experience update [10]. LCP, FCP, and CLS were designated as user experience metrics tied to search ranking. Subsequent research has produced mixed findings on their empirical impact. Several studies

found weak or non-significant correlations between CWV scores and SERP position [11,12], while others found modest but consistent effects in specific verticals [13]. The consensus interpretation is that CWV functions as a tiebreaker rather than a primary ranking signal, and that its discriminatory power within already-competitive top-10 results is limited. Our findings are consistent with this interpretation.

2.3 Keyword Placement Signals

The importance of keyword presence in title tags has been consistently supported across studies spanning three decades of search engine research [14,15]. Despite repeated claims that keyword placement has diminished in importance due to semantic understanding, recent large-scale studies continue to find it among the strongest correlates with ranking [4,16]. Our findings confirm this at scale in the Italian market.

3. Methodology

3.4 Research Design

This study employs an observational, cross-sectional design. We measure associations between page-level features and organic search ranking positions using Spearman rank correlation. This design allows us to characterize which features co-occur with higher rankings without establishing causal direction. Data collection was conducted in June 2026 as a single cross-sectional snapshot; longitudinal ranking dynamics are outside the scope of this study.

3.5 Keyword Corpus Construction

Keywords were sourced from verified Google Search Console (GSC) data across five independently operated Italian websites:

Table 1. Source sites for keyword corpus construction.

Site	Niche	Initial GSC Pool	Final Keywords
wikiherbalist.com	Herbalism / natural remedies	4,210	198
stampa3f.it	3D printing	2,840	156
f-hack.com	Cybersecurity	3,120	187
instapetshop.com	Pet e-commerce	3,890	172
perseodesign.com	Web agency / SEO	3,080	128
Total		17,140	841

From each site's GSC performance data, we extracted all queries with at least 10 impressions and a click-through rate above 0.5% over a 90-day window ending May 31, 2026. This base pool of approximately 17,140 queries was then augmented with semantic variants using Google Autocomplete API calls (up to 5 variants per seed query), producing an expanded candidate set. Keywords were then filtered using the following criteria: (1) query must appear in at least one of the five GSC datasets; (2) the top 10 Google results must include at least 8 crawlable, non-redirect URLs; (3) the SERP must not be dominated by a single domain (no domain appearing more than 3 times in the top 10). After filtering, 841 keywords were retained.

The corpus spans 5 niches with the intent distribution shown below. Navigational and branded queries were excluded. Informational queries (how-to, definitions, guides) represent approximately 58% of the corpus; transactional and commercial investigation queries account for the remaining 42%.

3.6 SERP Collection Protocol

SERP data was collected between June 1 and June 20, 2026. For each keyword, we retrieved the top 10 organic results from google.it using the following technical configuration:

- **Browser engine:** Chromium 124 (headless) via Playwright 1.44
- **Locale:** it-IT (Accept-Language: it-IT, it; q=0.9)
- **Geolocation:** Italy (IP-based, residential proxy pool)
- **Safe search:** Off
- **Request delay:** 8–15 seconds (randomized, uniform distribution) per query
- **Session rotation:** New browser context per 25 queries
- **Deduplication:** URLs appearing in multiple keyword SERPs were counted once per keyword

Google ads, shopping boxes, knowledge panels, featured snippets, and local packs were excluded; only organic blue-link results were retained. The collection yielded 7,404 URL-keyword-position triplets. After URL-level deduplication (the same URL appearing for multiple keywords was processed once, with features used for all associated keyword-position pairs), 6,824 unique URLs were analyzed.

3.7 Feature Extraction

Each unique URL was analyzed by the PerSeo Insights platform (insights.perseodesign.com), which performs real-page loading via Playwright and executes Lighthouse audits in a controlled environment. The extraction pipeline operates as follows:

1. Full page load in a headless Chromium instance with viewport 1920×1080
2. DOM parsing for structural and semantic feature extraction

3. Lighthouse 11.x audit suite run against the loaded page (Performance, Accessibility, SEO, Best Practices categories)
4. Content analysis (word count, readability, keyword detection)
5. HTTP-level checks (HTTPS, canonical, hreflang, robots meta)

Extraction was performed within 7 days of the SERP collection date to minimize temporal drift. Pages returning HTTP errors, requiring authentication, or redirecting to a different domain were excluded (n = 112, 1.5% of the dataset).

The 57 extracted features are organized into six categories:

Table 2. Complete list of 57 measured features by category.

#	Feature	Category	Measurement
1	Keyword in title tag	Keyword	Binary (exact or partial match)
2	Keyword in URL slug	Keyword	Binary
3	Keyword in H1	Keyword	Binary
4	Keyword in meta description	Keyword	Binary
5	Keyword in H2 (any)	Keyword	Binary
6	Keyword in H3 (any)	Keyword	Binary
7	Keyword in first paragraph	Keyword	Binary
8	Keyword in alt text (any image)	Keyword	Binary
9	Keyword density in body (%)	Keyword	Continuous
10	Keyword in anchor text (internal links)	Keyword	Binary
11	Exact keyword match in title	Keyword	Binary
12	Number of keyword occurrences in body	Keyword	Count
13	Number of H1 elements	Structure	Count
14	Number of H2 elements	Structure	Count
15	Number of H3 elements	Structure	Count
16	External links count	Structure	Count
17	Internal links count	Structure	Count
18	Total links count	Structure	Count
19	URL depth (directory levels)	Structure	Count
20	URL length (characters)	Structure	Count
21	Word count	Content	Count
22	Text-to-HTML ratio	Content	Ratio (0–1)
23	Gulpease readability index	Content	Score 0–100

#	Feature	Category	Measurement
24	Average sentence length (words)	Content	Continuous
25	Paragraph count	Content	Count
26	Image count	Content	Count
27	Video embedded (binary)	Content	Binary
28	Table presence (binary)	Content	Binary
29	List items count	Content	Count
30	Content freshness (days since modified)	Content	Days
31	Publication date present (binary)	Content	Binary
32	HTTPS (binary)	Technical	Binary
33	Canonical tag present (binary)	Technical	Binary
34	Hreflang present (binary)	Technical	Binary
35	Robots meta (index/noindex)	Technical	Binary
36	Mobile viewport meta (binary)	Technical	Binary
37	TLD .it (binary)	Technical	Binary
38	Schema markup present (any)	Schema	Binary
39	OpenGraph tags present (binary)	Schema	Binary
40	Twitter Card present (binary)	Schema	Binary
41	Breadcrumb schema (binary)	Schema	Binary
42	Article schema (binary)	Schema	Binary
43	Organization schema (binary)	Schema	Binary
44	Number of structured data types	Schema	Count
45	LCP: Largest Contentful Paint (ms)	Performance	Milliseconds
46	FCP: First Contentful Paint (ms)	Performance	Milliseconds
47	CLS: Cumulative Layout Shift	Performance	Score 0-1

#	Feature	Category	Measurement
48	TTFB: Time to First Byte (ms)	Performance	Milliseconds
49	INP: Interaction to Next Paint (ms)	Performance	Milliseconds
50	Lighthouse Performance score	Performance	Score 0–100
51	Lighthouse Accessibility score	Performance	Score 0–100
52	Lighthouse SEO score	Performance	Score 0–100
53	Lighthouse Best Practices score	Performance	Score 0–100
54	Mobile performance score	Performance	Score 0–100
55	Total page weight (KB)	Performance	Kilobytes
56	JavaScript execution time (ms)	Performance	Milliseconds
57	DOM size (elements)	Performance	Count

3.8 Statistical Analysis

We employed Spearman rank correlation (ρ) as the primary statistical measure. Spearman correlation is non-parametric and robust to violations of normality, making it appropriate for SERP position data (which is ordinal, bounded 1–10, and non-normally distributed). For binary features, the correlation is equivalent to a point-biserial correlation in rank space.

The correlation coefficient is defined as:

$$\rho_s = 1 - (6 \sum d_i^2) / (n(n^2 - 1))$$

where d_i is the difference between the rank of observation i on the feature variable and its rank on SERP position, and n is the number of observations.

With $n = 7,404$ observations, our study is adequately powered to detect small correlations. At $\alpha = 0.05$, the minimum detectable effect size is approximately $\rho = 0.023$ (two-tailed). All correlations reported as significant have $|\rho| > 0.031$.

Statistical significance was assessed using a two-tailed t-test on the transformed correlation:

$$t = \rho_s \sqrt{(n - 2) / (1 - \rho_s^2)} \sim t(n-2)$$

We applied a Bonferroni-like correction threshold for the 57 simultaneous tests: $\alpha_{\text{corrected}} = 0.05 / 57 \approx 0.00088$. We note that 8 of our 10 reported significant factors survive this conservative correction ($p < 0.001$). The two factors significant at $p < 0.01$ only (external links: $p = 0.008$; .it TLD: $p = 0.007$) are noted accordingly. All analyses were conducted in Python 3.11 using `scipy.stats.spearmanr`.

4. Results

4.9 Overview

Of 57 factors tested, 10 reached statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. Nine are negatively correlated with ranking position (i.e., they are associated with higher rankings), one is positively correlated (associated with lower rankings). The remaining 47 factors showed no significant association with SERP position in this dataset.

Table 3. Statistically significant factors ($p < 0.05$), sorted by $|p|$.

#	Factor	ρ (Spearman r)	p-value	Significance	Effect
1	Keyword in title tag	-0.087	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
2	Keyword in URL slug	-0.071	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
3	Keyword in H1	-0.056	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
4	Keyword in meta description	-0.055	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
5	Text-to-HTML ratio	+0.045	<0.001	***	Hurts ranking
6	Number of H2 elements	-0.039	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
7	External links count	-0.039	0.008	**	Improves ranking
8	Keyword in H2	-0.036	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
9	Number of H1 elements	-0.033	<0.001	***	Improves ranking
10	TLD .it	-0.031	0.007	**	Improves ranking

*** p < 0.001 ** p < 0.01 * p < 0.05 n = 7,404

Table 4. Selected non-significant factors ($p > 0.05$) of theoretical interest.

Factor	ρ	p-value	Category
Word count	-0.007	0.603	Content
LCP (Largest Contentful Paint)	-0.011	0.360	Performance
FCP (First Contentful Paint)	-0.007	0.570	Performance
CLS (Cumulative Layout Shift)	-0.002	0.840	Performance
Lighthouse Performance score	+0.009	0.445	Performance
TTFB (Time to First Byte)	+0.014	0.260	Performance
Mobile performance score	+0.005	0.680	Performance
Schema markup (any)	-0.019	0.100	Schema
HTTPS	+0.010	0.368	Technical
Title tag length	+0.002	0.897	Keyword
URL depth	+0.003	0.770	Structure
OpenGraph tags	-0.013	0.260	Schema
Gulpease readability index	-0.008	0.490	Content
Image count	+0.006	0.610	Content
Video embedded	-0.004	0.720	Content
Internal links count	-0.015	0.210	Structure
Content freshness (days)	+0.011	0.340	Content

4.10 Keyword Placement Signals

The strongest and most consistent findings relate to keyword placement. The presence of the target keyword in the title tag ($\rho = -0.087$) is the most predictive individual signal in the dataset. Pages ranking in positions 1–3 contain the keyword in the title 11.4% of the time; pages in positions 7–10, 5.7%. This 2× differential is consistent across all five niches in the corpus.

The cascading pattern across elements (title > URL > H1 > meta description > H2) is statistically coherent and consistent with prior literature. The finding that keyword presence in the meta description correlates with ranking ($\rho = -0.055$) is notable: Google has publicly stated that meta descriptions are not a direct ranking factor [17]. This correlation may reflect that pages with well-optimized meta descriptions

also tend to be more thoroughly optimized overall (editorial quality proxy), rather than indicating a direct causal relationship.



4.11 Content Structure Signals

Three structural factors are significant: number of H2 elements ($\rho = -0.039$), number of H1 elements ($\rho = -0.033$), and external links count ($\rho = -0.039$). These are independent signals from keyword placement and collectively suggest that content structure (not raw length) is associated with ranking performance.

Word count is not significant ($\rho = -0.007$, $p = 0.60$). This decouples content quantity from quality: a page with 12 H2 sections and 800 words may outperform a 3,000-word article without clear structural organization. The external links correlation likely functions as an editorial quality proxy: pages that cite external sources tend to be more thoroughly researched.

4.12 Text-to-HTML Ratio

The only factor that significantly hurts ranking is text-to-HTML ratio ($\rho = +0.045$, $p < 0.001$). A high ratio indicates a page where plain text constitutes a large proportion of the total HTML byte size, characteristic of minimal-layout pages with little structural markup.

This finding does not contradict the H2 count result. Modern high-ranking pages tend to have rich HTML infrastructure: complex header elements, navigation, sidebars, interactive components, footer. The text content represents a smaller fraction of total markup. A plain-text heavy page with minimal HTML structure tends to rank lower.

4.13 The .it Country-Code TLD

The .it TLD emerged as a significant factor ($\rho = -0.031$, $p = 0.007$) with 65.0% of positions 1–3 on .it domains versus 61.1% of positions 7–10. This finding was not significant in our v1 study ($\rho = +0.069$, $p = 0.09$, $n = 601$), where the sign was opposite. The sign reversal and attainment of significance with a 10× larger sample strongly suggests the v1 result was a small-sample artifact. The .it advantage is small but consistent and aligns with Google's documented use of ccTLD as a geotargeting signal [18].

4.14 Core Web Vitals

No Core Web Vitals metric approaches statistical significance. LCP ($p = 0.36$), FCP ($p = 0.57$), CLS ($p = 0.84$), and the Lighthouse performance composite ($p = 0.45$) all fail to reach $\alpha = 0.05$ by a wide margin. These results are not anomalous: they align with several independent studies finding weak or absent CWV-ranking correlations within competitive SERP segments [11,12].

The most parsimonious explanation is a floor effect: pages in the Italian competitive top-10 are already fast enough that performance variation does not produce differential ranking treatment. The distribution of LCP scores in our dataset has a median of 2.1 seconds, already within Google's "Good" threshold of 2.5 seconds, leaving limited variance for correlation to emerge.

Note on causal inference: The absence of a CWV-ranking correlation in this dataset does not imply that performance improvements will have no ranking effect. Pages below the "Good" threshold for CWV may be penalized; this study only observes within-top-10 variance and cannot speak to the threshold effect.

5. Discussion

5.15 Comparison with v1 Findings

The transition from v1 (601 URLs, 135 keywords) to v3 (6,824 URLs, 841 keywords) produced predictable changes: absolute correlation values attenuated (keyword in title: $\rho = -0.139$ in v1 vs -0.087 in v3) while statistical robustness increased. This pattern is consistent with small-sample inflation of correlation estimates when the true effect is modest [19]. The direction of all keyword placement signals was preserved across both studies.

The seven factors newly significant in v3 (meta description, H2 content, external links, H2 count, H1 count, text/HTML ratio, .it TLD) were either not measured or not significant in v1. Their emergence at scale (all with $p < 0.01$) is consistent with genuine but small effects that required larger n to detect.

5.16 Practical Implications

The findings support a prioritization framework for Italian-market SEO practitioners:

1. **Keyword placement is foundational.** Title, URL, H1, meta description: all four carry significant independent correlation. Optimizing these elements for the target query should precede all other interventions.
2. **Structure outweighs length.** H2 count and H1 count are significant; word count is not. Content strategy should prioritize clear section structure over volume targets.
3. **The .it TLD provides a modest, measurable local advantage.** For sites targeting Italian-language queries without multinational requirements, .it is the empirically supported choice.
4. **Core Web Vitals improvements within the already-fast range produce no measurable ranking benefit.** Engineering effort targeting sub-2.5s LCP reductions is unlikely to yield ranking gains for pages already in the competitive top-10. Accessibility and user experience remain valid independent reasons to optimize performance.

5.17 Limitations of Correlational SEO Research

Correlational studies of this type cannot establish causation. Several important confounds are not controlled for in this analysis. Domain authority and off-page signals (backlink profile, brand search volume) likely influence ranking strongly but are outside the scope of this study. Niche-specific effects (five niches may not represent the full range of Italian query types) remain a concern. The snapshot design captures a single moment in time; ranking dynamics and Google algorithm updates may change these relationships.

6. Limitations

Single-market, single-language scope. All data originates from google.it with Italian-language content. Results should not be generalized to other markets without replication.

Niche bias. Five niches were selected based on data availability from the authors' client portfolio. These niches may share characteristics (high content depth, editorial quality standards) that inflate keyword-placement correlations relative to e.g. purely transactional or local-intent queries.

Off-page factors excluded. Link equity, domain authority, brand signals, and click-through rate data are not included in the 57 features. These are likely among the strongest ranking predictors and their exclusion is a known limitation of page-level correlation studies.

SERP volatility. Rankings were collected over a 20-day window. Pages near position boundaries may have shifted rankings between collection and analysis.

Feature interdependence. Many of the 57 features are correlated with each other (e.g., H2 count and word count; keyword in title and keyword in H1). No multivariate analysis is presented; reported correlations reflect bivariate associations only. A regression-based analysis controlling for feature covariance would be a valuable extension of this work.

Binary measurement of keyword presence. Whether the keyword appears is treated as binary; the semantic relevance, position within the element, and partial-match quality are not captured. Future work should incorporate semantic similarity scores.

7. Conclusion

We conducted the first large-scale correlational ranking factor study targeting Google Italy, examining 57 features across 6,824 unique URLs retrieved from the top 10 results for 841 Italian-language keywords. Of 57 factors, 10 reached statistical significance. Keyword placement in title, URL, H1, meta description, and H2 are the strongest positive signals. Content structure (H2 count, H1 count, external links) is significant; content length is not. The .it TLD provides a small but measurable local advantage. Text-to-HTML ratio negatively correlates with ranking. Core Web Vitals and related performance metrics show no significant association with position within the competitive top-10.

These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that within a competitive SERP segment where all pages meet baseline technical standards, content relevance signaling (particularly keyword placement and structural organization) remains the primary discriminating factor. Technical performance optimization, while valuable for user experience, does not appear to differentiate ranking within this segment.

We release this study as a preprint to invite methodological critique and replication. Dataset summary statistics and the Jupyter notebook containing the correlation analysis are available on the project repository. Future work should extend this analysis to a multivariate framework and incorporate off-page signals.

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Full study: perseodesign.com/en/blog/google-italy-ranking-factors-study-2026-v3