

THE ONLINE COMMUNICATION MIX FOR TOURISM DESTINATIONS STUDY CASE ON ROMANIAN TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract: The present research aims at contributing to the field of Online Communication for tourism destinations. It provides a study on online communication of Romanian main tourism destinations, focusing on DMOs' websites completeness in terms of contents and on their capability to respond to users' needs. The results of the current research show that the Romanian Destination Websites offer a poor online experience for users, in terms of content, functionalities and fail to fully satisfy the needs and wants of potential tourists. This study is important for establishing the strategies for developing the tourism destination management in Romania.

Keywords: Destination Management Organizations (DMOs); online communication strategies in tourism; Romanian tourism destinations.

1. Introduction

Tourism is an information intensive industry, with the peculiarity of offering intangible products and services such as booking a hotel room, visit a museum or tasting local specialties, which cannot be tried before purchasing them. Moreover, the complexity of this issue increases when considering a destination as a product that needs to be promoted. A destination is a complex tourism product characterized by various types of attractions, products and services which are combined in various ways according to each tourist's preferences and with the final scope of enjoying a pleasant experience. Because of the main characteristic of the tourism products, their intangibility, the necessity of a powerful communication mix is more stringent than in any other industry, as supplying complex and relevant information about

the touristic offer is the most relevant opportunity to reduce the perceived risk of the tourist when making the purchase decision.

While the provision of information in the "offline" was based on traditional sources of information such as travel agents, tour operators, magazines and suggestions from friends and relatives, in the digital era the information need and intensity is amplified exponentially by the development and diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies. The internet, which according to current research has become the most relevant source of information in evaluating touristic products, offers global reach and offers consumers an infinite number of information channels, from official and institutional sources to informal ones such as blogs, wikis, small websites, with content generated by users. With the greater amount of information

available, comes however another complexity: the relevance and trustworthiness of the information is very difficult to be evaluated by users, which are overwhelmed by a high quantity of disparate, heterogeneous information. The mere online presence is no longer sufficient for tourism organizations. An integrated online communication approach has proven to be an essential strategic instrument for gaining competitive advantage in the tourism industry, and the tourism organizations need to continuously provide users with quality, up-to-date information and functionalities to satisfy their needs. The

For Destination Management Organizations the necessity for an integrated approach on the online communication mix is even more important, as the competitiveness among destination is increasing, while the tourists are attracted by more and more destinations worldwide. Therefore, an efficient management of the online image of a tourist destination is imperative.

The most recent research shows that the destination websites can, on the one side powerfully promote the beauty and attractiveness of a region, hence leading to the increase in the interest of tourists for the respective region, while on the other side, a poor content and quality of information leads to the distrust of the users, who will perceive the destination as being less attractive.

The profile of the tourist has radically changed with the rapid diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), challenging the tourism organizations to quickly adapt to the new behavior and expectations of their potential customers. The regular consumer is technologically skilled, always connected to the latest information. Consequently, successful players are those who are able to continuously provide high quality information and

quickly identify consumers' needs (Buhalis, 1998; Choi et al., 2007).

In this context, the aim of the present research is to investigate the online communication of Romanian tourism destinations, to analyze some Romanian tourism destinations online performance and capability to satisfy users' information and communication needs.

The paper is organized as following: in Section 2 an overview on the literature is presented; Section 3 is devoted to the presentation of the research strategy and design; the main results are presented in Section 4 and the conclusions and further developments are summarized in Section 5.

2. Literature review

2.1 Tourism and tourism destinations

McIntosh and Goeldner define tourism as a system: "Tourism may be defined as the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction of tourists, business suppliers, host governments and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting these tourists and other visitors".

The notion of "tourism destination" has been analysed from various points of view by researchers all over the world. Buhalis (2000) focuses on the product aspect, defining a tourism destination as "amalgams of tourist products offering an integrated experience to consumers". From the same perspective, Hu and Ritchie (1993) define a tourism destination as a package of tourism facilities and services composed of a number of multidimensional attributes determining its attractiveness. Buhalis (2000) however develops this perspective even further, by proposing six characterizing components which define a tourism destination, building a framework in the tourism literature called the six As:

Actions (natural, man-made, artificial, purpose built, heritage, special events)

Accessibility (entire transportation system comprising of routes, terminals and vehicles)

Amenities (accommodation and catering facilities, retailing and other services)

Available packages (pre-arranged packages by intermediaries and principals)

Activities (all activities available at the destination and what visitors will do during their visit)

Ancillary services (services used by tourists as banks, post, hospitals etc.)

Another view on the tourism destination is consolidated by other researchers, (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Marzano et al., 2009), who stress more on the concept of destination as defined by the coexistence of multiple private and public actors and stakeholders.

The tourism destination has been defined, on the other hand, also by considering the geographical perspective. Buhalis (2000) and Medlik (as cited in Hall, 2000) introduce the geographical element describing tourism destinations as defined geographical entities or locations. Despite the different elements that characterize a tourism destination, it is rather difficult to clearly define its limits as purely geographic boundaries. A destination can also be a perceptual entity, perceived differently by different consumers and running over government boundaries (Buhalis, 2000; Hall, 2000).

2.2 The impact of ICT on the tourism sector

ICTs and the internet had deeply changed the way business is conducted in the tourism sector (Buhalis and Law, 2008); As a consequence, it is essential for tourism organizations to increase their efforts in creating and maintaining

a strong online presence, which represents nowadays a prerequisite for remaining competitive in the tourism market. The development of the online communication mix in the tourism industry must be supported by permanent efforts to improve its efficiency, and to adapt to the fast changing consumer needs and behaviour.

The website becomes one of the most important elements in the communication process, while the internet becomes the most relevant channel of communication. It is the technology that has had the highest impact on the tourism sector (Buhalis and Law, 2008) and is continuously changing the business models in this industry. According to Cantoni and Tardini (2006) it has a clear competitive advantage with respect to other mass media, in terms of: multimedia (use of different type of media such as text, audio, picture, video), interaction (high level of interactivity), persistence (information can be easily archived), in-depth studies (online publishing) and immediacy (information can be easily updated).

A new strategic element is introduced in the communication mix by (Govers et al., 2007), which came as the result of the evolution of the Internet and the birth of Web 2.0: the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). It has become a powerful tool that tourism organizations can use in order to gain competitive advantage, and has appeared as a direct consequence of evolution of the online communication process, which has shifted from a monologue, a unilateral communication

2.3 The Destination Management Organization

According to the World Tourism Organization (2004) Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are the organizations responsible for the

management and marketing of tourism destinations.

DMOs are responsible for developing a unique image of the destination, coordinating private and public actors within the tourist industry and providing visitors with pre-trip and on site comprehensive tourism information and selections of tourism products. (Gretzel et al., 2006; Choi et al., 2007; Wang 2008)

A pivotal ICT tool supporting DMOs in all the above mentioned areas of activities are Destination Management Systems (DMSs).

According to Bédard et al. (2008) different views of Destination Management Systems exist, defining them as information systems, distribution channels, strategic management systems or inter-organizational information systems. Buhalis (2003) define a DMS as “a collection of computerized information interactively accessible about a destination”.

More specifically, Frew and Horan (2007) refer to DMS as “systems that consolidate and distribute a comprehensive range of tourism products through a variety of channels and platforms, generally catering for a specific region”. This definition highlights the double function of DMSs that is not only to collect and store key data but also to channel and present them outside, on the market.

Additionally, Park and Gretzel (2007) identified 9 success factors for destination marketing websites: information quality, ease of use, responsiveness, security/privacy, visual appearance, trust, interactivity, personalization, fulfilment.

According to Gretzel et al. (2006) the tourist experience is characterized not only by a consumption phase – the real trip and experience at the destination – as any other product or service but by extensive pre- and post-consumption phases as well: the pre-

consumption phase is dedicated to the planning of the actual trip while the post-consumption phase is dedicated to re-experience activities.

To each consumption stage correspond different communication and information needs and, consequently, different use and need of technologies. In the pre-consumption phases information technologies are used to satisfy the need for information, comparison, evaluation and interaction with providers in order to plan the tourist experience; at the destination, visitors seeks for accurate and up to date information related to the specific moment and place of their trip while, once the visit at the destination is over, the post – consumption phase is dedicated to relive, share and document the experience as well as maintain contacts with providers.

It is therefore clear how the use of Information technologies is extended to all the stages of the tourist experience. In this complex context, DMOs are vigorously working on their online communication improving contents and functionalities to support consumers all along the tourist experience, from information search and booking, to mobile technologies to be used en route and newsletters, forums and other sharing opportunities once the physical experience of the trip is over (Choi et al., 2007).

3. Research strategy and design

3.1 Research methodology

The sample of destination websites has been selected considering the main attraction regions in Romania. To reach the objectives two research questions have been defined:

Q1: How are Romanian tourism destinations performing in terms of online contents and functionalities?

Q2: To what extent are Romanian destinations' websites suited

for the fulfilment of online goals and tasks?

In order to answer the research question and reach the research objectives, two different methodologies have been devised and combined: The contents and functionalities analysis of a destination website, and the scenario-based evaluation of the tourism destination website.

3.1.1 Contents and Functionalities analysis:

A Contents and Functionalities analysis has been performed on a sample of 10 Romanian tourism destinations, in order to investigate the level of completeness of Romanian destinations' websites and understand which are the best performing destinations and spot trends in the use of contents and functionalities. Our scope is to describe at a macro level the context of Romanian destinations.

For reaching this objective, 10 destination websites of the top rated tourism destinations in Europe (London, Rome, Paris, Istanbul, Barcelona, Berlin, Florence, Prague, Dublin, Amsterdam) have been thoroughly analyzed and used as benchmark. The outcome of the research was a framework for destination website evaluation which comprises 120 indicators that have been structured into the following sections:

- *Information about the destination* (map, description, history, geo-poli-eco-demographic information, languages & dialects, main cities / main places, information about nature and wildlife, destination guides, currency, laws, list of attractions, surrounding areas, embassies and consulates addresses, information by season.

- *Cultural information* (cultural/historical places, monument/attraction symbol of the destination, information about folklore and traditions, attractions descriptions, list of major museums and galleries,

museums description, exhibitions description, cultural/heritage associations, local food description (produce, specialties), local products, list of conference/events venues, guided tours)

- *Practical info* (weather conditions, weather forecasts, weather report (e.g. snow), webcams

- *Local facilities* (tourism information centres, how to get "here" (by train, sea/waterways, air, car), local transportation, local transportation prices & conditions, train stations, trains timetables, taxi, underground, underground timetable, bus stations, bus timetables, boat - ferries Information, sightseeing conditions and companies, rental services, traffic and road info, parking places, driving rules, cycling routes and cycling information, places to stay, list of accommodations, hotels, hostels, residences, apartments, bed and breakfast, camping, parks and gardens info.

- *Functional tools*: travel planner, destination highlights, search for accommodation (search engine), accommodation booking service, accommodation grading, accommodation reviews, attraction search, organize a trip, suggested itineraries (by users), virtual tours, 3D monument/attraction tours, event search event tickets purchasing, forum, newsletter, Multilanguage, page printing, internal search engine, send a page to a friend, site help, website map, web contact, brochures download, guides download, mobile website, online ticket purchasing, link to social network official page, official blog, wish list, FAQ, reports and documents, eating and drinking venue search, chat with tour operators, brochure by mail, news/What's on, web contact (form), photo gallery, video gallery.

- *Promotional tools*: special offers, why to visit, best of: attractions, excursions suggestions; accommodation suggestions, suggested

itineraries (by DMO), tourism packages (advertised by DMO), travelling tips; suggestions and guides for couples, suggestions and guides for groups, suggestions and guides for families, eco-green vacation suggestions and guides, on a budget, events, best of: activities; press area, leisure tips, information and guides for disabled visitors.

- *Entertainment information*: spa & wellbeing information, amusement /entertainment, nightlife, cinemas, disco/clubbing, casinos, eating and drinking, list of bar and restaurants, restaurant information, bar Information, shopping information.

The Contents and Functionalities analysis is performed visiting and navigating each destination website of the sample and filling the grid for each website with value 1 or 0 depending on the presence or absence of an indicator.

Value 1 is assigned when the indicator and consequently the piece of content/functionality associated with it is available on the website and when there is an external link giving the precise information. Value 0 is assigned when the piece of information is absent or when the external link points to a generic website.

3.1.2 Scenario-based evaluation

One of the objectives of the present study is to investigate destinations' websites capability to satisfy users' needs. In this context, a scenario-based evaluation has been performed on the 10 Romanian destinations in order to understand to what extent a set of tourism related goals and tasks can be performed.(focus more on the micro level performance)

As fundamental part of a company online communication strategy it is important that the website suits the various needs of specific users in real life situations. (Cantoni and Tardini, 2006; Brinck et al., 2002). In this

context, scenario-based evaluation (also called task-driven evaluation) is used in website design and evaluation phases to describe how a website will be used by specific users in specific situations; it is performed completing actions within the website which represent typical and significant activities, taking into account the level of satisfaction of the user when interacting with the website (Brinck et al., 2002; Triacca et al., 2004; Carroll, 2000).

The present research adopts a user scenarios structure where each scenario is defined by:

- one goal (the main objective of the user when navigating the website)
- a set of tasks (operations to accomplish in order to achieve the goal)
- user profile (specifying user's attributes and requirements)

The final user scenarios library is composed by 8 user profiles and 15 goals, with an additional number of specific tasks that need to be fulfilled in order to reach the goals.

In order to create user profiles that are as realistic as possible and consistent with the context of Romanian tourism destinations, the researchers performed semi-structured interviews with scholars specialised in the tourism field from the University of Craiova, and practitioners working in travel agencies as well as tourism units offering accommodation. From this cooperation and business insight 8 user profiles have been defined. We have gone further in our research, and conducted semi-structured interviews with persons representative for each customer typology. After analysing the results of our research, we have defined a set of goals and tasks which are realistic and able to cover the most part of contents and functionalities that can be found on a tourism destination website:

G1 Obtain destination information: T1.1 Find the city overview; T1.2 Find the city history, T1.3 Find information on how to get there by car,

train, plane, T1.4 Find information about internal transportation, T1.6 Find information about tourist card

G2 Obtain attractions information and book tickets: T2.1 Find the list and map of the attractions, T2.2 Download/print the map of the attractions, T2.3 Find attractions by type, T2.4 Find multimedia information about an attraction, T2.5 Find a hotel near the attraction, T2.6 Find ticketing information for the attraction, T2.7 Find children discounts on tickets, T2.8 Book tickets online for the attraction

G3 Find and Book a Hotel: T3.1 Find hotels in the city centre, T3.2 Find a 4* hotel for up to 500 RON per night, T3.3 Find a hotel that has Wi-Fi and a gym, T3.4 Find hotel information, T3.5 Find hotel pictures, T3.6 Book a double room en-suite (single use) for 3 nights

G4 Find and Book a tourist apartment: T4.1 Find tourist apartments, T4.2 Find apartments suitable for 4 people, T4.3 Find apartments with a price range from £ xx to xx, T4.4 Book the apartment, T4.5 Find suggestions about budget solutions at the destinations

G5 Navigate the website and obtain accessibility information: T5.1 Find list of accommodation that has accessibility information

G6 Find a Restaurant and a Café nearby a location: T6.1 Find restaurants nearby a selected hotel, T6.2 Find a restaurant nearby with awards, T6.3 Find restaurant contact information, T6.4 Find a café nearby a conference venue

G7 Find a Green/Vegetarian Restaurant: T7.1 Find restaurants that have an eco-label, T7.2 Find a restaurant that is suitable for vegetarian, T7.3 Find restaurant opening hours, T7.4 Find contact information, T7.5 Send an enquiry email

G9 Find information about cultural events in a certain period and book tickets: T9.1 Find the list of the events, T9.2 Find cultural events, T9.3 Find the

calendar of the events, T9.4 Find cultural events that take place within 2 weeks from the arrival date, T9.5 Download the calendar of the events, T9.6 Find other tourists' reviews about the event, T9.7 Find ticketing information, T9.8 Book tickets

The final output sees the presence of 15 goals, distributed among the profiles as follows:

1. Business tourist
 - a. Goal 1: Find and book a hotel with specific requirements
 - b. Goal 2: Find a restaurant and a café nearby a location
2. Retired couple (60+)
 - a. Goal 1: Obtain information about guided tours
 - b. Goal 2: Obtain information about surrounding areas
3. Mother of young family (parents + under 12 years old children)
 - a. Goal 1: Obtain attractions information and book tickets for an attraction
 - b. Goal 2: Find destination map/guides
4. Small group (4 people) of students
 - a. Goal 1: Find and book a tourist apartment
 - b. Goal 2: Book cultural events tickets and find information about language courses
5. Young Couple
 - a. Goal 1: Obtain destination overview
 - b. Goal 2: Obtain activities/nightlife information
6. Father of a teenage family (parents + 12+ teenage children)
 - a. Goal 1: Experience recall
 - b. Goal 2: Create personal itinerary
7. Tourist with disability
 - a. Goal 1: Obtain accessibility information
8. Green/Eco Tourist
 - a. Goal 1: Find a Green/Vegetarian restaurant
 - b. Goal 2: Obtain information about nature and natural excursions

Each goal is subdivided into a set of tasks. The total number of defined tasks is 43. The scenario-based evaluation is performed navigating the website and completing – or attempting to complete – actions and tasks to reach a goal. The possibility to perform a task is evaluated on a 3-level scale where:

0 = the task is impossible to complete

0.5 = the task can be partially completed and/or issues and problems were encountered

1 = the task can be totally completed with satisfaction

The results of the above mentioned methodology have then been combined and integrated to derive the Destination Website Readiness Index, a metric that is able to measure tourism destinations' online communication and provide an easy-to-use tool to measure, evaluate and potentially adjust the online communication of a destination considering the performance of its competitors.

3.2 Sample selection

After establishing the framework of our research, we have evaluated the most relevant tourism destinations in Romania, and we have selected the following official destination websites, which have been subject for further evaluation:

- Website 1:

www.litoralulromanesc.ro

Our research shows that the destination management organization that has created and is currently managing this website is S. C. Creative Eye SRL, a Tour operator Agency in Romania.

- Website 2:

www.descoperadeltadunarii.ro

The DMO that is administrating this website is ANTREC Tulcea (National Association for Rural, Cultural and Eco-Tourism)

- Website 3:

<http://www.turism.sibiu.ro/>

Sibiu is one of the most attractive tourism destinations in Romania, both for local as well as for outbound tourists. The region is promoted online through the destination website mentioned above, which has been created and is currently administered by a public institution: Sibiu Cityhall

- Website 4:

<http://www.turism-constanta.ro/>

Another strategic region in Romania, as far as the tourism industry is concerned is the Romanian seaside region, and especially the city of Constanta, which represents an important attraction point both for Romanians and for foreigners. The destination website is managed by Constanta Cityhall.

- Website 5:

<http://www.prahovatravel.ro/>

The most popular mountain region in Romania is represented by the Prahova Valley region. The offer of tourist products and services is very generous, therefore attracting both local and foreign tourists all over the world. The destination website is managed by a Travel Agency

- Website 6:

<http://www.inromania.info/>

This destination website has been selected considering the evaluation of the information about the main touristic regions of a country that a potential tourist would find online. The administrator of the website is unknown, as no information about the source is mentioned online.

- Website 7:

<http://moldova.romaniaexplorer.com/>

The Moldova region represents also a key touristic destination, considering the beauty of the natural landscape, but nevertheless with a reach cultural and religious heritage. The destination website is managed by an unidentified administrator.

- Website 8:

<http://www.baileherculane.ro/>

Another important touristic region is represented by Baile Herculane, the oldest tourism destination in Romania, and one of the oldest in the world, being founded by the romans. The beautiful, unique landscape, and also the health benefits attract a high number of tourists annually, mainly Romanians. The administrator of the website has not been identified, as there is no available information online.

- Website 9: <http://www.vatra-dornei.info/>

Vatra Dornei is a well-known tourism destination even from the XIX-th century, which is best known for balneal tourism products and facilities for winter sports. The destination website has an unidentified administrator

- Website 10: <http://www.visitmaramures.ro/>

The destination website of Maramures is managed by a public institution, Maramures County Council. The website promotes the main attractions and touristic facilities of the region.

4. Results

4.1 Results of the Contents and Functionalities analysis

For the first part of the current research the framework presented at 3.1.1 was used, with the final scope of answering the Research Question 1: How are Romanian tourism destinations performing in terms of online contents and functionalities?

The results obtained after following the methodology we have designed are summarized in the following Table:

Table 1

Results of the Contents and Functionalities Analysis

Indicator\Site	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6	Site 7	Site 8	Site 9	Site 10	Total indicator
Info about place	9	6	8	7	9	7	6	6	8	8	14
Cultural info	3	7	7	5	7	7	7	0	6	10	12
Practical info	4	0	0	0	4	0	1	3	3	0	4
Local facilities	17	7	16	0	9	7	8	14	11	17	27
Functional tools	14	15	14	5	14	6	4	6	10	15	38
Promotional tools	9	10	6	4	8	0	1	6	8	9	17
Entertainment info	9	0	11	0	4	5	0	9	7	7	12
Total	65	45	62	21	55	32	27	54	53	66	120

Source: Empirical research conducted by the authors

As we have described in the methodology section, the current research proposes an evaluation framework for each website based on assigning scores to the destination websites according to the presence or absence of the defined indicators. The total score ranks from 0 to 120, 0 being the lowest value, which implies the fact that none of the indicators has been found on the website, and 120 being the maximum value, which suggests that

the respective destination website has reached the highest complexity, with all the indicators being present online.

As it can be seen in Table 1, none of the analysed websites reach this score, moreover only one website reaches the maximum score of 66 (www.visitmaramures.ro). The next place in the evaluation ranking is occupied by www.litoralulromanesc.ro with a score of 65 points. Following close behind, with a score of 62 points

is www.turismsibiu.ro. The websites of Prahova Valley Region, Baile Herculane and Vatra Dornei, reach approximately the same score, between 53 and 55 points. The lowest score is reached by www.turism-constantia.ro, which represents a dramatic drawback for the region and tourism destination, in terms of attracting potential foreign and local tourists.

4.2 Results of the scenario based evaluation

The second part of the research was based on the scenario evaluation using the previously defined tourist typologies. The scope of this research is to answer the second question proposed for evaluation: "To what extent are Romanian destinations' websites suited for the fulfilment of online goals and tasks?". The results of the research are summarized in the following table:

Table 2

Results of the scenario-based evaluation

Tourist profile\Site	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6	Site 7	Site 8	Site 9	Site 10	Total indicator
Business tourist											
Goal 1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1
Goal 2	0.5	0	0.5	0	0	0	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	1
Retired couple											
Goal 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Goal 2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
Mother of young family											
Goal 1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1
Goal 2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Small group of students											
Goal 1	0.5	0	0.5	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1
Goal 2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Young couple											
Goal 1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Goal 2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Father of a teenage family											
Goal 1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Tourist with disability											
Goal 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Green/Eco Tourist											
Goal 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Goal 2	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
Total	8.5	5	8	3.5	6.5	3.5	4.5	7	7	8	14

Source: Empirical research conducted by the authors

The 10 Romanian destination websites have been evaluated according to the second framework proposed by the authors. The score for

each website expresses the ability of the website to fulfil the needs of the potential tourists. The score ranks from 0 to 14, according to the defined goals and tasks, 0 expressing the incapability of the website to satisfy any need of a user, and 14 being the maximum score, which would offer the potential tourist full satisfaction with the website.

As shown in Table 2, none of the websites have obtained a higher score than 8.5, which means the customer expectations are hardly met by the online communication mix. The website that has the highest score, 8.5 points is www.litoalulromanesc.ro. The websites www.visit.maramures.ro and www.turism.sibiu.ro rank second, with a score of 8 points, while the lowest scores, of only 3.5 points are reached by www.turism-constanta.ro and www.inromania.info.

5. Conclusions and further developments

For the first part of the research the evaluation scale ranges from 0 to 120, as 120 functionalities were analysed for each destination website. The present research shows that the Romanian destination websites lack to offer the functionalities expected by an average user, which means that potential tourists cannot find the relevant information they search for in their planning process. The highest score is reached by www.visitmaramures.ro, but the score is still very low. The destination management organizations, whether they are public institutions or private organizations fail to satisfy the needs and wants of potential tourists, which has a negative impact on their perceived image of the respective destination. The lower the score of the destination website, the lower is the trust of the users and hence the attractiveness they perceive when evaluating tourism destinations. This fact has a direct impact on the decision

making process, especially for tourists that do not consult other sources of information. The destination management organizations need to update the content of their websites with relevant information and add the lacking functionalities, as suggested in the current research framework. It is very surprising for the researchers that, one of the key tourism destinations in Romania, Constanta-the main city of the Romanian Seaside Region, has a very poor online presence, and fails to attract especially outbound tourists, who want to find out relevant information about the region, the entertainment facilities, the accommodation facilities as well as practical and cultural information about the region. This drawback is even more relevant, as www.turism-constanta.ro is the official website of the city, created and managed by Constanta City-hall.

The second part of the research includes 43 specific tasks, each ranked according to the ability of the destination website to fulfil the specific needs and requirements of the potential tourists. The total score ranks from 0 to 43. The results of the current research demonstrate that the websites do not succeed in offering users a satisfying online experience. The DMOs need to be informed about the potential customers' needs and wants, and try to offer the online solutions to fully satisfy them. They currently lack the ability to offer the online users a pleasant experience, this drawback leading to the distrust of the users in the touristic potential of the region. Also, not being able to accomplish their goals online, might highly influence their decision making process in a negative way.

One of the tourists' goals that none of the websites succeed in satisfying is finding accessibility information for tourists with disabilities. Also, none of the websites offer information about a vegetarian or eco- restaurant, which is a primary objective for the eco-tourist. These two tourist segments are

completely neglected by the Romanian destination websites, which means losing potential customers because of a lack in the online communication mix. Also, finding information about guided tours, which is usually a goal of the retired tourists, is very difficult, only one of the websites offering such information. Only one of the identified tourists' goals can be attained by surfing all the evaluated websites, which is finding an overview on the destination. The rest of the goals can be only partially satisfied, or cannot be satisfied at all.

The main conclusion of the current research is that the Romanian destination websites lack to offer relevant information for potential tourists or the functionalities needed in order to

research and book a vacation in one of the analysed regions. The online communication mix needs to be improved, and DMOs need to take into account all tourists segments. As mentioned in the literature review, a poor online presence has a very negative impact on the users' trust and perceived image of the destination, negatively affecting his decision making process.

As further developments of the current research, we will put efforts into documenting and creating a framework for the strategic management of the online communication mix of tourism destinations, that will assist Romanian DMOs in their process of managing the destination websites.

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