

## APPROACHES IN INVESTIGATING ROMANIA'S IMAGE AS A TOURIST DESTINATION AMONG THE TURKISH STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*The image of the tourist destination plays an essential role in the decision making process regarding the choice of a holiday. Image has a crucial role in the success of the destination because it influences the consumers' satisfaction and helps in drawing up a promotion strategy for the positioning/repositioning on a certain market, branding/rebranding the tourist destination. Information from different sources contribute to the formation of the image of a certain destination, information which can be distributed into: the promotion performed by the destination; the other's opinions (direct or indirect); mass-media and the popular culture. We intended to investigate Romania's image as a tourist destination among the Turkish students. The results showed that the students had very poor knowledge of our country.*

**Key words:** *Tourism, Destination, Image, Research.*

**JEL Classification:** *M37, L83.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The image of a tourist destination is a highly interesting subject. The first studies on the image of the tourist destination (Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982; Goodrich, 1978) and the more recent (Sirgy and Su, 2000) show that the image of the destination influences the tourist's behaviour. The image has a critical role in the success of the destination for it influences the satisfaction of the consumers, regarding their expectations, but also through the value added to the tourist product (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005), and the information concerning this helps in drawing up a promotion strategy for the positioning/repositioning on a market, branding/rebranding the tourist destination (Paskaleva, 2007; Govers, Go et al, 2007; D'Hautesserre, 2001; Sonmez, and Sirakaia, 2002).

Several international studies had tried to measure the image of state, region or town type destination (Fan, 2005). Generally, the conclusion was that the image of the tourist destination had a key role in the decision making process regarding the choice of a holiday (Mountinho, 1984; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000). The central and Eastern European countries have fought to shape an attractive image, a unique image on the international tourist market (Hall, 1999; Hughes and Allen, 2008).

We have had in mind a first testing of the young Turkish's perception regarding tourist Romania, a research which will be followed by the process of investigation of the young Romanians regarding Turkey as a tourist destination. The goal of this research is to see which type of information reaches this category of public in correlation to the information channels used.

### 2. THE TOURIST IMAGE OF THE DESTINATION

#### 2.1. Defining the tourist image of the destination

The image of the destination is defined as representing "the perceptions of individual destination attributes ... [and] the holistic impression made by the destination. [It]... consists of functional characteristics, concerning the more tangible aspects of the destination, and psychological characteristics, concerning the more intangible aspects" (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991, p.8).

Baloglu and Brinberg define the image more generally, "image is the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place or destination" (Tasci, Gartner et al, 2007, p. 197).

The ongoing discussions regarding the relation between perception (justified though the surrounding stimuli), attitude (an opinion of long duration, formed in time) and image, excepting the idea of a coincidence of meanings. Also, the discussions are about whether we can or not talk about the image of a certain place, from an individual perspective, lacking the direct experience with that particular place. Dann defines the image as being a subjective and dynamic reflection or a representation given by the senses and which is built on a previous experience (Dann, 1996, p.42).

The image of a certain place can be built in an individual's mind in the absence of an immediate interest and, then, the affective aspects can have a higher weight. Before visiting and when there is no immediate intention to visit, the image of a destination is more dependent on the visual information than on

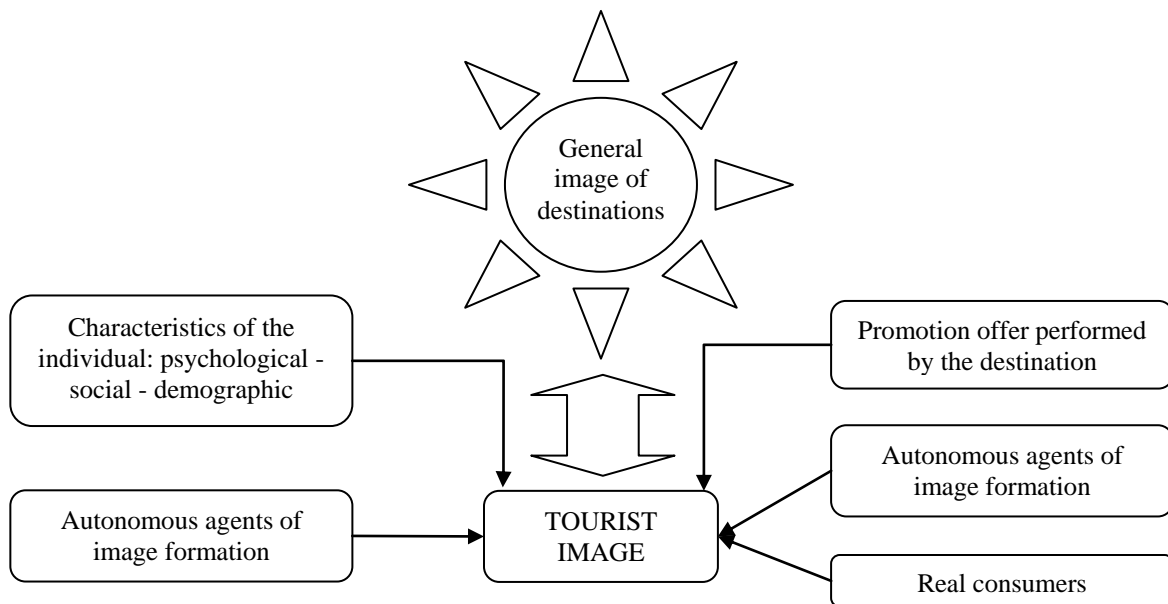
the real features of the destination, this meaning, except for the visitors, that the people's image of a destination is based on the information coming from the visual messages. As a result of the visit, the existing image undergoes adaptations and changes (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003, p.38). The content of the visual images are of a major importance and the inclusion or exclusion of such dimensions determines the type of image that the destination is trying to create in the minds of the prospective markets. The importance of the visual image requires an increased attention for it can create false expectations. It has been noticed that the expectations of those not visitors exceed the real performance reported by the visitors (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991).

Another discussion is that regarding the relation between image and brand. Kozak states that the brand of the destination has the tendency to last longer than the image of the destination (Kozak, 2003). Most theorists consider that the creation of the image is a step in the creation of a destination's brand.

**2.2. Sources of tourist image making at the addressee level**

We are talking about a beneficial image of the destination when the perceptions are oriented towards the potential benefits which the visitor might enjoy. It is another type of evaluation in which the functional aspects of a destination are inventoried. It is obvious that there are three components of image: cognitive, affective and connative. These three components are: what we know about an object (cognitive), how we feel about what we know (affective) and how we act regarding this information (connative). Other components suggested for image would be the holistic, attributive, common and unique ones which provide a deeper insight in the way in which each component acts.

The formation of the image of a tourist destination is contributed by an amalgam of information which can be distributed into: the promotion performed by the destination; the other's opinions (direct or indirect); Mass-Media and the popular culture (Govers, Go et al, 2007, p.15).



**Figure 1 - Sources of destination's image formation**

Tasci and Gartner (2007) divide these sources of information, conscious or not we would say, into: the promotion performed by the destination; the autonomous agents of image formation and the real consumers of the destination.

The formation of the image of a tourist destination is helped by, apart the promotional actions of the destination, "the autonomous agents of image formation" (Tasci and Gartner, 2007, p.415), which are relatively independent sources, with a higher impact. There are different theories regarding the potential effect of this type of media on the formation and change of an image. The change of the image depends on the volume and the environment of the information sending. If the new piece of information contravenes the expectations, a cognitive

disagreement occurs (Tasci and Gartner, 2007), and the subject will try to avoid this information in order to reduce this disagreement. If this information is successfully avoided, the image will be the same, but if the information goes on and it is overwhelming and it is impossible to be avoided, then the images will change, some gradually, other significantly and quickly. The availability to change the image depends also on the size of the audience of the new wave of information.

Lacking a message directed from the host destination, the prospective visitors will gather, consciously or not, data from the autonomous agents. The press and especially the tabloid press, based on negative reports, is the one that can influence

overwhelmingly such a subject (Ban and Gurău, 2000).

Another factor contributing to the formation of the image is represented by the actual consumers of the destination which acquire a strong opinion and are ready and willing to disseminate it.

Gunn speaks about the organic information (digested by the autonomous agents of image formation) and the induced information (originating from the destination through the promotion activity) (Gunn, 1972).

There has not been any direct connection between the type of image of a destination and the wish to visit it, but the existence of a positive image has more chances to encourage the visit of a destination. When two destinations are compared, the distinctive elements, the cultural differences compared to the tourists' native place are looked for, but these differences should be experienced in a familiar environment. The difference is attractive but it also creates anxiety.

The preoccupation with the image of a destination comes from its role in the process of making the decision to purchase. According to MacInnis and Price (1987) the image of a tourist destination accompanies the entire consumerism experience of the tourist (Jenkins, 1999, pp.2-3). Before purchasing, the image contributes to the formation of some expectations regarding the future experience, during the purchase – the value of the product increases and also the satisfaction and after the purchase – it allows the fixation of the experience as an unforgettable memory. The sine qua non condition is the correspondence within certain limits between the image projected and received and the reality perception. The realism of the image formed is decisively influenced by the previous experiences with that destination (Gunn, 1972) and the degree of closeness of the destination to the tourist's residence (Hunt, 1975; Scott, Schewe et al, 1978).

### 3. IMAGE RESEARCH

#### 3.1. The context of the research and research methodology

The image of a destination contains both the distinctive characteristics of a destination as well as the impressions that an individual has regarding a destination. The majority of studies manage to tackle with the image formed based on the distinctive characteristics of a destination and less on the overview suggested by a destination.

A research of the speciality literature relevant in the field of the destination image has conducted to a list of attributes through which, theoretically, the image of the destination can be measured. Therefore, the image catches features which can be framed within the following groups (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005, p.250):

- Tourist attractions (natural and anthropic resources);
- Climate;
- Culture;
- Behaviour of the host population;
- Entertaining activities;
- Scenery.

The research of the image of the destination requires a qualitative research (unstructured), to identify the advantageous attributes of a destination and a quantitative research (structured), to evaluate these attributes among the destination's target.

The research of the beneficial image takes place in five stages: the selection of the tourist destinations which are going to be studied; the classification of the answers and the selection of the final advantageous attributes; the development of the main value dimensions and, in the end, the development of the questions for the evaluation of the beneficial image. (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000, p.40)

This model was suggested and followed for the research of the image of a tourist destination of two countries: Thailand and the United States, for which a different number of characteristics have been identified. In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that Thailand can base on the advantageous image referring to the attributes in the functional, epistemic and conditional value dimensions just lie the United States can base on the emphasis of the attributes contained in the functional, emotional, epistemic and conditional dimensions in order to create a beneficial image for the Australian public.

The advantages of this model are connected to the fact that the starting point is not a predetermined set of attributes of a destination, but first of all, the particular manner in which a destination is seen by the respondents is identified. They are asked to answer open questions about the holiday destination. The free answers are analysed and then classified into the classical five groups of characteristics: functional, social, emotional, epistemic, conditional characteristics (Sheth, Newman et al, 1991). Finally, a series of five statements were created, reflecting five dimensions of beneficial image for each country studied. Subsequently, each respondent is asked to express his agreement or disagreement regarding the statements issued.

Romania has not created yet an identity, a brand on the international tourist market, still not existing a consensus regarding which dimensions, as a tourist destination, should be strengthen. The latest promotion campaign of tourist Romania, launched in 2009 by the resort Ministry of the Ministry for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, Commerce, Tourism and Liberal Professions "Romania - The land of Choice" has still an information role. The approach is general – it is presented the geographical diversity of Romania – mountains, sea, cities, monasteries, and the rural space. Three personalities, known worldwide,

were chosen: Ilie Năstase, Gheorghe Hagi and Nadia Comaneci. The second spot of the same campaign – in a humorous note – emphasises that you could say anything about Romania because it is too little known. The campaign has been criticised because it used a slogan similar to that of Croatia's, "The land of Choice". The previous campaigns also had the same fate – they have been criticised and abandoned, the investment effort being practically cancelled. The previous promotion campaign called "Romania - Simply Surprising" was criticised because it does not show and send the essence of tourist Romania.

This study is not a properly research study of the tourist image but is rather a test of the prominence of some characteristics of the tourist offer in relation to others.

The research took place during March-June 2009, in Kusadasi, Turkey. A number of 140 Turkish students have been investigated, their majors being *Tourism - Travel management* and *Tourist guidance* *Tourism - Hotel management* *tourism - Food and Beverage Management*, from the Adnan Menderes University, Aydin, Turkey.

In this paper we intend to catch, through a survey by questionnaire, the way in which the general characteristics of the tourist offer of Romania are perceived: mountain natural resources, balneoclimateric, seaside resources; public tourist accommodation and alimentation services (unit and service personnel); the hospitability of the inhabitants and traditional cuisine; shopping opportunities; the perceived level of the prices used in tourism; access possibilities; the safety of the destination.

We positioned the tourist offer of Romania in the regional offer (Bulgaria, Poland, Croatia and the Czech Republic) in order to identify the level of interest for Romania. These countries' problem is that of finding an identity, a distinct personality in the regional and world tourist offer (Hall, 1999, p.230).

The hypothesis we start from is that Romania is little known as a tourist destination for the subjects, we want to check which characteristics of the offer are more prominent than others. We admit the fact that not having much information about the characteristics of the offer, the subjects have a rather an overview of the tourist Romania. "Potential tourists have difficulty obtaining objective measures on the important destination or vacation site attributes and thus, the image of destination will take the holistic position in the evaluation process of a tourism product" (Tapachai and Waryszak 2000, p.37).

We used the Likert scale to grade the answers. We have investigated also the sources of information used by the subjects in order to evaluate the potential of some channel and their level of usefulness in the present for the promotion of tourist Romania.

### 3.2. Romania's image as a tourist destination among the Turkish students

The structure of the segment researched is the following: up to 24 years old 93.2%, between 25 and 34 years old 6.8%; female 37.2% and male 62.8%; residency in the urban area 88.8% and residency in the rural area 11.2%; monthly income under 100 Euro 8.5%, between 100 - 150 Euro 10.9%, between 150 - 300 Euro 55.5%, between 300 - 1000 Euro 19.1% and over 1000 Euro 6%.

Only 1.7% of the subjects interviewed visited Romania, but 73.8% would like to do it. The same wish to visit is manifested regarding the countries mentioned: Bulgaria, Poland, Croatia and the Czech Republic. If they were to choose only one country to visit, 39.2% would choose Poland, 25% the Czech Republic and 21% Romania. After Romania, Bulgaria follows with 9,4% and Croatia with 5.4%.

The question through which we wanted to see the manner in which Romania is perceived as a destination among the Turkish students is: *When we say **tourist Romania** which is the first word which comes to your mind? And the second?*

The results were surprising because it had been proved that Romania is very little known. Romania is known for the football player and coach Gheorghe Hagi, for the beautiful women (blond blue or green eyed women!), the capital city Bucharest, the football player Gică Popescu, Count Dracula, gypsies and generically – Romanian culture.

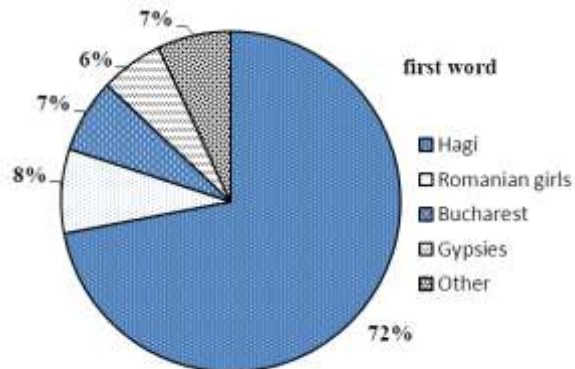


Figure 2 - The first word associated with Romania

In an overwhelming proportion the young Turks associate Romania with the football player and coach Gheorghe Hagi. Romania is identified through the people who got to Turkey and created a reputation there. Romania could be the country of talented football players, the country of beautiful women – blonde with blue or green eyes – atypical for Turkey, but also for Romania. Romania is associated with the gypsies who have invaded the neighbouring countries and who have generated a bad reputation. The mention of the word *Bucharest* – is mostly connected to the mediatisation that any capital city enjoys than a more profound knowledge of the destination.

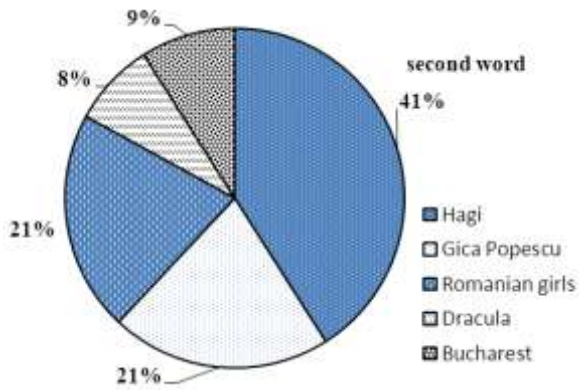


Figure 3 - The second word associated with Romania

The very high percentage (41.46%) of those who mentioned the second word associated with Romania - Gheorghe Hagi again, suggests the fact that for the greatest part of those interviewed, Romania is reduced to a single man. Also from the world of sport, the young Turks know Gică Popescu (20.73%). These answers could be justified by the fact that 62.8% of those interviewed are males.

On the third place are mentioned the Romanian women – as ambassadors of Romania (!), followed by Count Dracula on the same position with the capital city Bucharest. A certain category of Romanian women do not have a good reputation Turkey, especially in big cities like Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir.

Scoring the appreciations: the football players and coaches – a positive impression, a certain category of Romanian women and gypsies – a negative impression and Bucharest and Count Dracula – neutral.

The specific questions concerning the appreciation of the natural environment, of the different types of resources, of the tourist services in Romania have revealed the fact that, for the subjects interviewed, Romania is a little known country. The appreciations of the subjects were situated at an average of 2.5-2.9 on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 5 represents the maximum of appreciation). We conclude that the characteristics evaluated have not necessarily been appreciated as mediocre but rather little known. The only exception is represented by the balneoclimateric resorts which received an average over 3.

The results conclusion is that Romania is very less known as tourist destination. We can't register strong and weak points of tourist destination Romania, as long as it's not known. Another interesting survey made through German touroperators, about Romania as tourist destination, catch some weak and strong points of touristic Romania (Chaşovschi, Năstase și Hildebrandt, 2008).

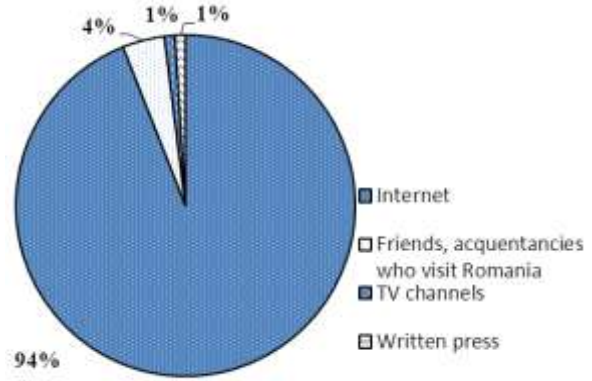


Figure 4 - The first source of information

We obtained interesting information when asking *What source did you use to obtain information about Romania (first choice)?* In a proportion of 94.5% the Internet was chosen as the main source of information, explainable because of the age of the subjects (93.2% up to 24 years old). As a secondary source of information the recommendations of friends, relatives who visited Romania were mentioned (69.9%). We allow ourselves to notice that the Internet has been mentioned as a source of information gathering about Romania because it has become a source for gathering information about everything. Taking into account the associations made with Romania, we ask ourselves to what extent the students found news about the Romanian gypsies, the Romanian women and even about the football players. Anyway, the Internet remains the first option as a channel of communication for this age group.

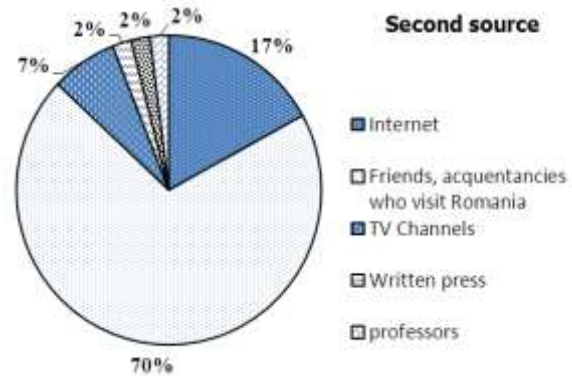


Figure 5 - The second source of information mentioned

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The shaping of an image about a destination is a complex and difficult demarche, especially when the media context is unfavourable. When forming an image of a tourist destination different information contribute, information which can be classified into: the promotion made by the destination; the opinions of the others who visited the destination (direct or indirect); mass-media and the popular culture. The analysis of Romania's image as a tourist destination among the Turkish students has revealed a poor knowledge of Romania, in spite of the relative geographical closeness. Even though Turkey is not a target for the actions to promote tourist Romania, the poor information process of the young generation is yet surprising. When forming the image of Romania as a tourist destination among the Turkish students the following have contributed: information from the mass-media (an important weight), the popular culture and to a certain extent the opinions of those who were

in Romania. Actually, the Turkish students do not have any information officially, as a component of the promotional message.

Although visited only in a proportion of 1.7% of those interviewed, Romania is on the third place after Poland and the Czech Republic as interest to be visited. Romania has not been associated with any tourist objective, the only elements of identification being: Gheorghe Hagi and Gică Popescu (who stayed in Turkey for a long time and were present in the Turkish mass-media), the Romania women with a dubious morality, Dracula and generically the country capital.

The theory stating that in the absence of a directed message from the host destination, the prospective visitors will gather, consciously or not, data from the autonomous agents holds true. The press and especially the tabloid press, based on negative news is the one that can influence to an overwhelming extent such a subject.

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