IS SOCIAL MEDIA A VALUABLE TOOL FOR EVALUATION OF TOURISM SERVICES? EVIDENCES FOR BUCHAREST METROPOLIS AS A TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract
Tourism stakeholders are not currently using information and communication technologies (ICT) and social media tools at its full effectiveness, in order to relate and engage with tourists. Unfortunately, social media is not differentiated as a specific and vital marketing tool in order to enrich marketing strategy. DMO need to pay attention to social media websites because they assist consumer-generated content, and in order not to undermine their authority. Organizations no longer have ultimate power over their image. DMO should develop a more flexible strategy incorporating social media as a marketing tool. This paper presents the perceptions of tourists about tourism services provided by tourism operators from Bucharest metropolis, via social media networks, namely Booking, TripAdvisor and mobile applications.

Key words: *Bucharest, marketing, perceptions, social media, tourism services*

JEL Classification: *L83, L86.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet has evolved to a stage in which social networking has become a norm among users and communication has become multi-directional and instant (Cormode and Krishnamurthy, 2008). Web 2.0 led to the construction of business and destinations using the network effect to improve productivity, as more companies and individuals become active creators (William and Perez, 2008). With Web 2.0 communication flows are bidirectional, because web allows users to interact and share information with each other, creating virtual communities of users and social networks (Singh et al, 2009).

Social media are acknowledged as a more trustworthy source of holiday's information than others resources available (Fotis et al, 2012). From a marketing perspective, social networks can be used to: improve the product and brand awareness and reputation management; increase customer loyalty; market research, idea generation, and launch of new products or services (Berthon et al, 2012); amplify word-of-mouth marketing and other general marketing functions (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2010); facilitate employee communications and public relations (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

In the absence of sustained public promotion, private groups can support the voluntary promotion of the city in the virtual environment (blogs, on-line travel guides, displaying of the photos and videos, comments and reviews). In these conditions, there is a risk that certain negative messages to propagate with faster speed through the virtual environment. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) should pay a careful attention also to the negative effects of social networks. On social media, people make not only positive reviews but also negative ones and as a consequence, tourism operators should reinforce loyalty and satisfaction of visitors and avoid or even combat criticism and unproven speculation (Alonso et al, 2013).

With many unique tourist attractions, Bucharest is a city worth visiting. Many special places create unique experiences. In the historical centre, festivals, cultural events, and fairs of medieval art are organized.

The Parliament Palace is one of the most interesting and valuable buildings that impresses with its architectural style. The palace is open to tourists and offers visit programs in several languages. The largest concert hall in Romania is the one at the Romanian Athenaeum, and this building houses the headquarters of the "George Enescu" Philharmonic. The George Enescu Festival is a classical music festival, lasting almost a month.

Bucharest has many museums and memorial houses. At the Romanian Peasant Museum, a rich collection of traditional objects from Romania is found, with unique ceramics exhibitions and folk costumes from various regions. The Grigore Antipa National Museum of Natural History hosts important scientific collections, and also temporary exhibitions.

Among Bucharest's churches are among the city's must-visit destinations, with centuries-old paintings and rare objects. Among the most famous churches are The Patriarchal Cathedral, Stavropoleos Church, Coltea Church, the church of Antim Monastery, Kretzulescu Church, Mihai Voda Church, The Saint Spiridon Church, etc.

In Bucharest, there are many parks and gardens, including the Botanical Garden and Văcărești Nature Park - a natural urban delta.

The present paper is structured as follows. Next section is dedicated to the analysis of the literature review related to the capitalization of ICT and social media tools. Section three describes the methodology. Section four presents the main findings and discusses the results. Last section concludes the paper.

Our objective is to apply a qualitative content analysis of various ICT and social tools used by tourists to gather and share information about Bucharest as a tourism destination.

II. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO CAPITALIZE ICT AND SOCIAL MEDIA Tools

Recently, tourism industry has put an increasing interest on the utilization of social media for sharing information, communication, and collaboration, interactivity and transactions (Osei et al, 2018; Hays, et al, 2013). On the other hand, during their journey, travellers use the Internet for both decision-making and collection of additional information about tourism destinations. Individuals are becoming "addicted" to the Internet and social media platforms, through which they can quickly disseminate their experience and receive feedback from their friends.

Moreover, social media provide virtual travel experiences through virtual tours of tourism destinations, making tourism products more tangible. Thus, the web content needs to present current information, to be creative, exciting, and interactive in order to generate sales and revenues. The social media strategies should focus on enabling consumer-driven decisions, consumer-generated marketing content (Howison et al, 2015).

New technologies and social media pioneered new opportunities and challenges for tourism stakeholders, as all of them are involved, not only in the production, purchase, but also in the generation of content through brainstorming, criticism, consultancy, proposals, evaluation, and other activities (Bizirgianni and Dionysopoulou, 2013). Social media is, ultimately, a powerful tourism marketing tool, registering one of the fastest growths and recognition from the consumers. Using its large variety of tools (texts, photos, audios, videos, podcasts) to create user-generated-content (stories, opinions, complaints, reviews, warnings, advice/tips), consumers provide reliable data for travel planning, with social benefits (Kang and Schuett, 2013).

Consumers need to feel some degree of control of the marketing messages delivered by companies and this is why they get involved in the content generation to create some balance between what the organizations are saying and what they are actually thinking and receiving from the companies (Mhizha et al, 2015). On the other hand, this widespread connectivity available through mobile devices and smart-phones allows inexperienced travellers to take trips in different regions and both discover and share experiences. These developments will continue on a more rapid path, as consumers will adopt more travel-related apps and as tourists want for their travel experiences to become more visible (Buckley et al, 2015).

In conclusion, DMO need to pay attention to social media websites because they assist consumer-generated content, and in order not to undermine their authority. Organizations no longer have ultimate power over their image. DMO should develop a more flexible strategy incorporating social media as a marketing tool. This way the brand of a destination can be humanised and the engagement increased. Social media should remain an integrative marketing tool that may generate significant benefits (Hays et al, 2013).

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE METHODOLOGY

For the current investigation, several tools were used to explore the current perception of visitors about the quality of tourism services provided in Bucharest, namely:

- *Booking.com portal:* the radiography of the accommodation structures; the reviews received by each accommodation unit; the investigation of the main reasons to travel;
- *Tripadvisor.com* platform: the analysis of the main objectives and tourism activities; tourism guides, tourist accommodations and food services. On tripadvisor.com portal over 27,200 photos of Bucharest were uploaded. In the forum 1,902 threads on Bucharest were opened.

• *Mobile applications*: city guides, cultural and event guides, on-line maps, public transport guides, etc.

Table 1. Quality of tourism services - evaluation criteria

Characteristics	Data collection and evaluation
Diversity of the accommodation facilities a/b	Hotels; B&B and Inns; Specialty Lodging; Vacation Rentals
Diversity of the recreational facilities b	Concerts and shows , Water and amusement parks; Tours; Nightlife; Shopping; Casino and gambling; Fun and games
Quality of the accommodation facilities a	630 accommodation units (from 832 units) with at least 5 reviews; 127,000 comments
Diversity of restaurants b, c	Number and variety of restaurants
Tourism access facilities to the city c	The most representative 10 mobile apps, namely: Bucharest City App; Bucharest Map and Walks; Bucharest; Bucharest Offline City Map; București Calea Victoriei; Izi.Travel; Șapte Seri; Ghid Metrorex; Transport urban; Star Taxi & Clever Taxi, with at least 1,000 downloads.

Note: the data collected from: a - Booking.com; b-Tripadvisor.com; c – mobile applications.

A large amount of text on social websites is transformed and a high organised text and summary of the key words resulted. Thus, various labels for codes able to comprise one or more key ideas, such as related to impression about Bucharest etc.

IV.   MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In terms of tourism service quality, Bucharest city offer is very good with a wide variety of hotels, restaurants, and access facilities. The accommodation facilities offer very good quality as the average score of 8.34 (see Table 2). Also, the Bucharest accommodation offer indicates that its diversity is very good, while there are a wide variety of restaurants. Recreational facilities enrich the tourism offer as the metropolis offers concerts and shows, water and amusement parks; tours; nightlife; shopping; casino and gambling; fun and games. Only half of the mobile apps have been specifically developed for the tourists visiting the city, while the others are more useful for residents, considering that they refer to public transportation services or cultural activities and they were created in the Romanian language.

Table 2. Quality of tourism services – results and observations

Characteristics	Observations
Diversity of the accommodation facilities a/b	Hotels (169 units), B&B and Inns (118 units), Specialty Lodging (126 units), Vacation Rentals (405 units), Hotels with Special Offers
Diversity of the recreational facilities b	24 facilities for concerts and shows (best reviews for Romanian Athenaeum, Bucharest National Opera House and National Theatre); 3 facilities for water and amusement parks; 121 tours: city tours (47), cultural tours (41), walking tours (24), bike tours (10), night tours (4) etc.; 119 nightlife locations (active nightlife); 74 facilities for shopping*:* souvenir shops (Romanian Boutique, Romanian Folk Art Fashion), book shops (Cărturești, Librăria Bizantină, Humanitas bookstore), malls (AFI Palace Cotroceni, Băneasa Shopping City, Promenada), etc.; 7 facilities for casinos and gambling.
Quality of the accommodation facilities a	The average score: 8.34
Diversity of restaurants b, c	Mexican, Indian, Arabic, Turkish, Italian, etc.; Diets (Vegetarian; Vegan; Gluten Free; Halal); pubs; cafes and teahouses;
Tourism access facilities to the city c	Self-guided walking tours (architectural; religious orientation city parks; nightlife venues; squares walk, children entertainment); Tour route maps and navigation features; Interactive map of the city; Search engine for the streets; Points of interest (museums, restaurants, cafés, hotels, sights); Audio guided tours developed by local experts; Trip recording; Pedestrian tour guide; Cultural guide of the events and venues; Information, pictures of places; Optimal route and the time of travel using subway; Public transport routes; Maps of the routes; Route planning; Tickets and public transport subscriptions; Taxi available in the given area; Events (concerts, theatre performances, parties, shows); Tourist attractions; Tips and secrets.

Note: the data collected from: a - Booking.com; b-Tripadvisor.com; c – mobile applications.

Booking.com portal presents Bucharest city as "a *confident and cosmopolitan capital. With infectiously chatty locals, scores of world-class museums, cafés in overgrown gardens – plus the literally un-missable People's Palace*".

According to booking.com, the most popular areas in Bucharest, with a high concentration of accommodation facilities, are the following:

Universitate – Romană Square (145 units); Victoriei Street (108 units); Old Center (81 units); Unirii (39 units); Kiseleff (6 units); Cotroceni (4 units).

Bucharest is one of the favorite cities of portal customers. In the day when we collected data for the study (December 13th), a total of 85% of the listed rooms were occupied.

A number of 630 structures allowed the calculation of a review score based on comments (see Figure 1, Figure 2)
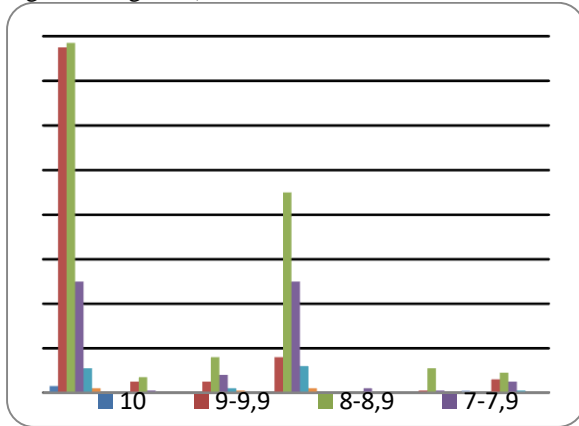

Figure 1 – Number of accommodation units, by types and user's reviews

More than three-quarters of the accommodation facilities in Bucharest that have allowed calculating a review score achieved scores above 8 - translating in quite a very good value for money. If to them we add the fact that only 5.1% of the accommodation facilities received a rating of less than 7, we can draw the conclusion that the overall Bucharest accommodation offer is of very good quality.
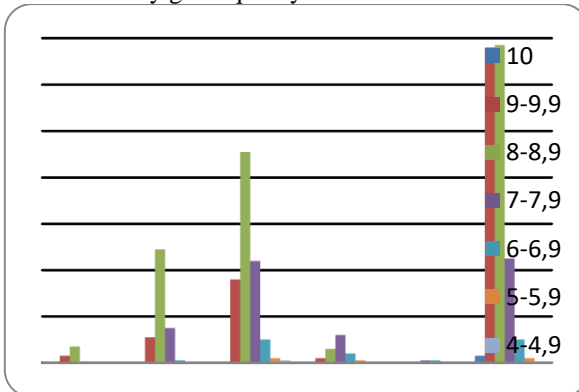

Figure 2 – Number of accommodation units, by stars and user's reviews

Among the issues highlighted by tourists staying in hotels that have failed to achieve a score of 7, stand the following:

• Poor cleanliness (most of these hotels);

• Improper staff attitude and poor management (lack of helpful staff, requiring payment in advance, not issuing fiscal receipts - "Babylon" Hotel; requesting a different price at the time of booking - "Sir Orhideea" Hotel)

• Misinformation of tourists (the fact that is not accessible to people with disabilities, although it was written in the presentation - "Triumf" Hotel, lack of parking, although the allegations that there is parking- "Răzvan" Hotel);

• Issues with amenities (old air conditioning system, noisy air conditioning system or in exchange of a fee, lack of light bulbs, TV too small or no batteries in the remote control, missing or inoperative WI-FI);

• Lack of heat ("Sir Orhideea" Hotel);

• Noise level exceeded (due to too thin walls or nearby construction works);

• Old furniture ("Triumf" Hotel, "Răzvan" Hotel);

• Limited options for breakfast ("Triumf" Hotel).

Large events can be organized in locations like: Parliament Palace International Conference Centre, Romexpo Exhibition Centre, Sala Palatului (Palace Hall), Rin Grand Hotel.

In the presentation made by the **tripadvisor.com** portal, Bucharest is presented as the city established by Vlad Ţepeş ("Vlad the Impaler", the historical character associated with the legendary character of Dracula). It is also said that the city was known in the early 20th century under the surname "Little Paris" due to the French architectural influences present here. Among the objectives that should not be missed by any tourist are listed: the Village Museum, the Romanian Athenaeum, the Romanian Peasant Museum and the Palace of Parliament, the second-largest building in the world after the Pentagon.

In terms of activities for the tourists who come to Bucharest, the attractions and activities are grouped into several categories and within each category the first five options are presented (see Table 3).

Table 3. Tourism activities & objectives: reviews received from tourists

Categories of objectives / activities	The most important in terms of the reviews received from tourists
Sights & Landmarks (105)	1. Romanian Athenaeum (Ateneul Roman) 2. Stavropoleos Church (Biserica Stravrapoleos) 3. Palace of Parliament 4. Old Town 5. Patriarchal Cathedral
Museums (47)	1. Village Museum (Muzeul Satului) 2. Grigore Antipa National Museum of Natural History 3. The National Museum of Art of România 4. Palatul Primăverii 5. The Art Collections Museum
Nature & Parks (24)	1. Herastrau Park 2. Cismigiu Gardens 3. Carol Park (Liberty Park) 4. Alexandru Ioan Cuza Park 5. Tineretului Park

Fun & Games (105), 63 of these are included in the category Room Escape Games	1. TROLL Escape Rooms 2. Captive Escape Room 3. Locked In - Escape Rooms 4. Escape Arena 5. Trapped
Concerts & Shows (24)	1. Romanian Athenaeum (Ateneul Roman) 2. National Theatre 3. Bucharest National Opera House 4. Point 5. Odeon Theatre (Teatrul Odeon)
Shopping (73)	1. Romanian Boutique 2. AFI Palace Cotroceni 3. Cărturești Carusel 4. Baneasa Shopping City 5. Promenada Mall
Outdoor Activities (34)	1. Open Doors - themed tours (Communist, Alternative, Historical) 2. Slow Tours – Bike Tours with a focus on Communist Period 3. Touring Romania - Day Tours 4. Outdoor Activities in Romania - Day Tours 5. Romania Motorcycle Tours (the last 3 have Bucharest only as a starting point)
Spas & Wellness (33)	1. Puri Bali 2. Terme 3. Sandal SPA 4. Kineto DoDo 5. Sandal SPA Novotel Hotel
Water & Amusement Parks (3)	1. Divertiland 2. Terra Park 3. Crangasi Aqua Parc

Other important information that should be retained regarding the 169 hotels listed on tripadvisor.com portal:

- 78 units (46.1%) are rated with a rating of at least 4, which ensures a good price-quality ratio;
- 35 units (20.7%) achieved a score of 3.5, which is associated with an average price-quality ratio;
- 16 units (9.5%) achieved a score of more than 3, suggesting a modest price-quality ratio;
- 40 units either did not receive reviews or received less than 5 assessments, which is considered irrelevant for fitting into a certain category.

It should also be pointed out that the 169 hotels have received a total of 25,618 reviews, of which only 1,588 reviews (6.2%) are negative (1 or 2 stars).

Regarding hotels that failed to obtain a score higher than 3 stars, tourists have complained in particular about the following issues:

- Poor cleanliness (in most units);
- Outdated furniture and amenities (e.g. the following hotels: "Triumf", "Dalin", "Elizeu", "Răzvan" and so on) or malfunctions (e.g. the following hotels: "Dalin", "Est", "Magic Grand", "Funny Time", "Royal");

- Improper staff attitude (e.g. the following hotels: "Euro Hotel International Gara de Nord", "Royal");

- Limited options for breakfast (e.g. the following hotels: "Est", "Royal", "Razvan", "Elizeu" and so on.);

- Lack of privacy and a high level of noise (e.g. the following hotels: "Funny Time", "City Hotel", "Răzvan", "Elizeu and so on).

Generally, it is considered that *the hotels from the center are the best and very luxurious.*

The mobile applications provide information about: events (concerts, theater performances, parties, shows); restaurants, pubs, cafes and teahouses; tourist attractions, which have been presented individually or included in thematically relevant tours; tips and secrets, from the point of view of locals, are also included in the app.

The recommendations can be sorted, based on distance (proximity), rating or several other variables, can be added to custom lists or under personal bookmarks. A key component of the app is the idea of sharing these lists with friends.

V. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Bucharest remains a destination for cultural tourism as a result of its mixture of museums, cultural places and events i.e. festivals, concerts (Zamfir and Corbos, 2015).

The most visited and known tourist site in Bucharest is the Parliament Palace, legacy dated from the communist period. Nowadays, for foreign tourists, the Parliament Palace represents not only a curiosity but also an ambivalent heritage attraction. The building is a testimony of a difficult historical period, but the foreign visitors perceive it differently, consequently a dissonance in significance appears (Light, 2000).

Tourism operators and Bucharest DMO should develop their websites as their main marketing and communication tools, through permanent updating of the website content, improvement of the website access, training (Vila et al, 2018). Smart tourism websites represent an alternative for sharing information to tourists as they filter data and then provide accurate and updated, customized information. These proactively search for information implies data interflows among interrelated websites (Zhang et al, 2018).

VI.   REFERENCES

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