Abstract

Although Facebook and Twitter traffic registers an important growth compared to blogs, the analysis of travel blogs remains extremely important for tourism marketers, as travelers use blogs for communicating their experiences, for offering objective evaluations and subjective opinions about the characteristics of visited destinations. They use social networks to increase the visibility of their blogs in the virtual space. Travel blogs represent a cheap and accessible information source about a travel destination, and bloggers participate in producing and broadcasting the tourist destination image in the virtual space. This study shows that blogs authored by those who aim at keeping in contact with their family and real life friends are suitable for analyzing a country’s image. Nonetheless, Romanian authors who aim for a broad and amorphous, unknown target can be better included in the promotion strategy of the destination image in the virtual space. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of a Romanian and French authors’ blogs sample shows that the type of communication used by travel blogs is decisive for the way in which they can be used in the communication strategy of Romania’s image as a tourist destination. Data revealed by this study can be used for elaborating communication strategies of Romania as a tourist destination for both local and foreign travelers. 

Keywords: travel blog, tourist destination, country image, tourism marketing instruments.

1. Introduction

Travel representation is one of the most popular themes of hobby blog authors. Traveling ranks seventh among the subjects covered in the blogosphere and fifth among hobby blogs (Technorati, 2012). Considering the decrease of blog traffic as opposed to social networking, blog study remains important to marketers for it continues to exceed other communication means covering recommendations that generate consume in terms of trust. Facebook is influential, but still less than blogs are, while Twitter’s influence is decreasing (Technorati, 2012; New Media Trend Watch, 2012).

Out of the information sources related to travel destinations, young internet users grant blogs with the highest trust level (54% for those aged 18-32), after family and friends. Among travelers, blogs are trusted even more (33%) than social networks such as Facebook (19%), or Twitter (14%), when it comes to taking a consume-related decision. (New Media Trend Watch, 2012).

* Beneficiary of the “Doctoral scholarships for the development of the knowledge-based society” project, co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund, Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013; National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, College of Communication and Public Relations, Bucharest; tudor_raluca@yahoo.fr.
The analysis of the blogosphere in 2011 (Technorati, 2012) showed a growth in communication practices through blogs. Most of the bloggers who participated in the study have been blogging for at least two years and the number of blogs with the same author has grown from two to three. This, in conjunction with traffic ascension on collaborative platforms, can be interpreted as an expression of a rational choice of the most fitted technology for the user’s purpose and interests. Users use blogs’ facilities for thoroughly expressing their experiences, knowledge, opinions, facilitating relationships and social networking dynamics as means of promoting blog content. Limitations imposed by social platforms in terms of space of expression and the content archival options (text, photo and video) determine users to opt for this communication mix.

Travelers use blogs as a digital communication technology to express and to archive their travel memories along with the evaluation of their experiences. Blogging has also become a part of the travel and post-travel behavior through the effort put in the conception of the content. Travel bloggers reconstitute and enrich the travelling experience. From this perspective, travel blogs remain a source of information on travel destinations, both for internet users and for researchers.

Bloggers communicate the attractions and the attributes of the tourist destinations, personal evaluations that follow their direct experience and both subjective-spontaneous and holistic opinions publicly, in the virtual space. Thus they participate, along institutional actors, in producing and wide-spreading the image of a destination. This is why blogs represent a sincere source of information for researchers interested in analyzing the potential of a tourist destination, a source which is both unsolicited and uncensored.

The image is an immaterial value of the destination that links the networks involved in tourist activity. The image of a tourist destination as an informational product circulates between the network of tourist organizations, the network of destinations seen as equipped with attributes capable of bringing plus-value, the consumer network and the communication network that interconnects the economic actors, destinations and consumers.

Given the context in which, on a competitive market, East European countries are making an effort to promote an unique and attractive image (Ban & Ozdogan, 2010), Romania as a tourist destination hasn’t yet succeeded in creating and imposing a clear, unique and positive image; in 2009 it ranked 81st out of the 102 countries analysed in the Country Brand Index report (Popescu & Corboș, 2010). Reports made by international organisms note a gradual descent of the country’s image in brand rankings: in 2010, Romania lost 10 positions and fell onto the 92nd place out of the 110 total in the Country Brand Index, and in 2011, it lost another nine, occupying the 101st place out of the 113, after Uganda and Nicaragua (The Futurebrand 2010-2011 Country Brand Index; The Futurebrand 2011-2012 Country Brand Index). In Europe, in 2011, Romania’s brand is ranked on the penultimate place – 32nd out of 33. In the context of a prolonged global economic crisis which affects the tourism sector, a distinct and favorable positioning in the tourism macro network is nevertheless required.

One of the sources of the failure of campaigns designed to promote Romania’s image as a tourist destination was the low level of public knowledge of the pre-existing image. The broadest image study published by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism is included in the 2007-2026 Master Plan. This study, as its authors declare, is based upon a unified methodology. As stated on the official MRDT website, further image campaigns were based on market research that has not been published.
The travel blog can be a cheap and accessible information source for assessing the image of a tourist destination (Carson, 2008). Through technical facilities of posting multimedia content, linking, and through the uses given by travelers, blogs play a double role in the process of forming the image of the destination: on the one side, it is an expression space of the image that the visitor has formed throughout the travel experience, and on the other side, it is an information source considered credible by those Internet users that have not yet visited that particular destination. This double valence can be used by researchers and tourist sector practitioners either in the analysis process, or in the marketing mix of the image of the destination.

We aim to find out how Romanian and foreign travel blogs can be used in the process of communicating Romania’s image as a tourist destination. The first objective is to describe the blogs from the perspectives of their authors, targeted publics, by looking at the way in which the content producers relate to their publics, by looking at forms and contents, and by analyzing the stakes of communication. From this analysis we will extract a typology of blogs that allows the analysis of communication factors influencing the image of tourist destinations represented through blogs. Starting with the differences between the perception of the tourist destination among inland and foreign travelers we will comparatively analyze Romania’s image as it is outlined by Romanian bloggers with prior studies’ results which are aimed at the country’s image among French bloggers. The object of this comparison is outlining similarities and differences between the images produced and broadcasted by the two blogger categories. Starting from the communication styles through travel blogs and the differences between the represented images we shall be able to determine how blogs can be used in the communication strategy of a tourist destination image.

This article proposes a cheap and accessible means of evaluating Romania’s image as a tourist destination. Given the increase of communication importance in the virtual space and the fact that a quarter of the travelers search for information about tourist destinations on the internet, the online image study, as it is broadcasted, becomes a priority. Travel blogs are trusted among consumers, and their opinions are invested with truth value by readers, therefore monitoring the image which bloggers produce and broadcast is important. Analysing travel blogs brings out data related to the image of the destination as it was outlined after the travel experience among individuals of a specific public.

The comparative study of Romania’s tourist image on French and Romanian blogs brings tourism marketers data for elaborating communication strategies for these consumer segments. Given the online audience that personal travel blogs can achieve and the trust that internet users grant them, using these as country image vectors can be a way of promoting the image of the tourist destination. In what Romania’s particular situation is concerned, using this type of online promotion that counts on the consumer-to-consumer model is the more useful as the strategies that the mass communication was based on haven’t returned expected results.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The travel blog and its functions in tourism marketing

The travel blog represents a category of a blog typology based upon thematic criteria. This approach already rises problems, as the way it is viewed cannot respect the category exclusivity criteria. In the case of travel blogs, difficulties arise from the interference of the daily
life posts with the travel posts. For example, a blog that posts about the experience of a long-term mobility in a foreign country can be introduced in both categories. Another difficulty arises from the notions of traveling or tourism and the way they are defined by various theoretical approaches. Traditionally, from a sociological point of view, tourism implies a note of superficiality, of consume, of pleasure. Travel, however, is granted with a role of enriching knowledge, with the heroism of discovering a new space, with culture and with the traveler’s personality. From the tourist management perspective, a visitor is any person who moves through a territory, backpacker or temporary visitor who makes a less than 24 hour visit, while the tourist is the one that spends the night in another place than his/her home.

Cardon (2006) proposes a categorization of blogs starting from the way in which the author is represented in relationship with the public and with the statement. In this typology the travel blog is introduced in the daily life descriptive personal blogs category, which reach a narrow public formed by the family and friends. Cardon’s categorization doesn’t include the travelling aficionados, blogs that share relevant knowledge and experience for a public formed out of unknown travelers and persons interested in some attributes of tourist destinations (history, culture, nature). Therefore, the category exclusivity rule is again violated, as travel blogs could be included both among those which coagulate hobby communities and among those of which the author is enough detached by the assertion so that he/she can reach large, amorphous publics.

Schmalanger and Carson (2008) divide travel blogs’ content in personal stories and evaluations and critics of the tourist products. By analyzing the image as a tourist destination we conclude that the personal experience descriptions are blended with objective evaluations of the attributes of the destination and with subjective opinions. The authors suggest a classification of the ways of communication using the travel blog from the marketing perspective: consumer-to-consumer, business-to-business, business-to-consumer, government-to-consumer.

Studies of travel blogs as tourism marketing tools start with a few theoretical models of communication through blogs. The most frequent ones are those based on the model of the leader in spreading the information and orienting the consumer and those that take interpersonal “word-of-mouth” communication into consideration. Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts (2007) start with the “two step flux model” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955 in Mc Quail & Windahl, 2004) and with the model of interpersonal communication to study the role of travel blogs in travel destinations marketing. Carson (2008) uses the word-of-mouth model as a theoretic base to study the blogosphere as a research instrument of travel destinations marketing, while Wenger (2008) starts with it to study Austria’s image as a tourist destination. From this perspective the blog appears as a particular form of interpersonal communication, even though it doesn’t have the advantages of face-to-face communication, it still has the advantages that come from the annulment of distance. Bloggers and blog readers are seen as members of an interest community, and out of this trans-border community perspective that shares the same language and cultural horizon (Rezende-Parker & Dazed, 2003; Gillet, 2007; Sawhney & Suri, 2008). On the other side, the blog’s capacity of forming interest communities offers researchers the possibility of studying the way in which the model of image congruence works in communities of travel bloggers (Back & Lee, 2009). Schmallenger and Carson (2007) use the C2C (consumer to consumer) model in analysing the functions that are fulfilled by the travel blog in travel marketing.

Studies regarding functions that the personal travel blog can fulfill in touristic marketing highlight three big directions: research, communication and promotion. Starting from observ-
ing this richness of information, a colloquial way of expressing the variety of described ex-
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satisfaction (Carson, 2008; Wenger, 2008; Crotts, 2009). These scholars consider blogs a very
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information is not directed by the researcher as it happens in the case of asked opinions. The
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uses of the travel blog: identifying and monitoring trends in traveller movements to and from
the destination such as previous and future stopover locations, specific product evaluations
and reviews of service standards, event evaluations, identification of product or infrastruc-
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dence of the efficiency of connecting some personal blogs to the websites or blogs belong-
ing to tourist organisations.

2.2. Romania’s image as a travel destination

The tourist destination image is quite a vague concept to which different researchers of-
fer definitions that vary from travel impressions to perceiving the destination’s potential (Jenk-
ins, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Different sciences tackle the study of image; therefore,
there are a variety of angles in which it is approached. Following the exhaustive critical analy-
sis of the image of the tourism destination, Echtner and Ritchie (2003, p. 43) propose a syn-
thetic definition of the ones used by researchers from 1975 to 1990: “In effect, then, it appears that the destination image could be considered both an attribute-based component and a holistic component. In addition, some images of destinations could be based upon directly observable or measurable characteristics, (scenery, attractions, accommodation facilities, price levels), while others could be based on more abstract, intangible characteristics (friendliness, safety, atmosphere). Therefore, the notion of functional and psychological characteristics, as suggested by Martineau (1958), could be applied to destination images”.

The quoted authors elaborated a three-dimensional model of tourist destination components which comprise of an axis varying from functional components to psychological characteristics, a second axis covering imagery attributes and a third axis displaying elements which confer the common or unique aspect of a destination.

The theoretical framework elaborated by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) was at the basis of researches on Romania’s image as travel destination as represented on French travel blogs. The content analysis applied to the texts showed that Romania has a mainly positive image (61.68% of the overall expressed opinions). The subjective perception of Romania as a tourist destination is 47% positive, 44% neutral and 9% negative. The difference between the evaluation of attributes and the subjective perception results in the need of a more effective communication to facilitate the recovery attributes of Romania as a tourist destination (Tudor, 2010). From the point of view of the French bloggers, the main touristic attractions in Romania are local specificity, surprisingly followed by the ambiguous item “other”, both of them standing for positive and negative evaluations in terms of country image. These two items are followed by historical monuments and natural assets, most of them being known and visited as a result of their affiliation to the UNESCO patrimony (Tudor & Turza, 2010). The content analysis conducted on photos published on French travel blogs demonstrated that Romania, as represented, is a rural and profoundly religious country in which the natural scenery is vitiated by the industrial one; a Romania lacking cultural life, except for that belonging to the Orthodox cult. A country with lots of religious monuments and very few historical or civil architecture ones. A tourist destination with few means of entertainment, without sports, without balnear tourism and with scarce mountain tourism. A Romania which is worth being visited and photographed for its locals, for its patriarchal lifestyle and for the traditional specifics of the place (Tudor, 2012).

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3. Method and corpus

Taking into account the typologies promoted in the literature, as well as the use of travel blogs, as emphasized by researchers, we qualitatively analyzed the means of travel blogs for creating a relationship with its targeted audiences, for creating contents and shapes, for posting comments and having certain economical interests which can influence the way authors interact with the content and its publics. While creating the corpus we also took into account the highlighted categories.

The database formed of French authored blogs consists of 30 blogs, which gather up 162 posts hosted by the uniterre.com platform. While literature dictates that a general search takes up more time and doesn’t reach conclusive results (Carson, 2008) and internet users form interest communities (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008), search returns of blogs hosted on travel websites were taken into consideration. This justifies that those interested by travel experiences of certain persons will search for their information on specialised blogs. The corpus was built starting from the Google search engine, French pages. The sites blogs voyage search keywords entered on 20th of April 2010 returned the following results: uniterre.com, enroutes.com, travelblog.fr, voyages.net, en-escale.com, expedia.fr, tour-du-monde.net, tourismevoyage.com, govoyages.com, globeblog.com.

The search proved that there are two major French blog platforms that host a larger number of articles concerning Romania: uniterre.com and travelblog.fr. Following successive searches of other keyword combination on the same theme, the first 10 search results were the same, yet in a different order. Still, uniterre and travelblog were found on the 1-3rd places, uniterre always before travelblog. These were the conditions under which the Romania related blog research on uniterre.com was conducted.

In order to create a more homogenous corpus, we intended to keep the same restrictions which governed the database of French authors for the one of Romanian authors. We first looked up Romanian travel websites which host free personal blogs in which authors express their travel experiences in Romania. At a Google.ro search using keywords site blog călătorie and site blog turism and variants we drew the conclusion that in the Romanian virtual space there are no free platforms for personal travel blogs. Instead, we found social campaign websites having tourism and travel as their object, which solicited the implication and sustainment of the blogger (Pe bicicletă, Asta-i România care-mi place!, Păstrez România curată). In this context, we decided to use a corpus which would be representative for the typology of Romanian authored travel blogs. To this end, we searched google.ro for the following keywords: blog călătorie România, blog turism România and similar words. Out of the first 100 returned, only 6 blogs consisted of personal travel experiences. This observation sustains Carson’s (2008) assertion, which draws attention on the irrelevance of searching generalist travel engines for keywords that refer to the type of activity and destination. In the next phase we used Ze list – a platform monitoring the Romanian blogosphere following, “among other parameters, the total number of blogs, the total number of active blogs, the number of published posts or the number of comments” (http://www.zelist.ro). At the consulted date, the platform followed 7.153.608 posts and returned 28 posts for searching călătorie and 61 for searching turism. Given the fact that monitoring platforms rank only subscribed blogs, we used the roblogfest.ro website, a web-competition which includes a special section entitled Personal & Infotainment – Travel Blog.
After analysing a database of 500 blogs, we eliminated the blogs which didn’t have any travel or tourism content (ex. calatorieprinconstiinta.wordpress.com, articoleturism.wordpress.com, despreculturism.wordpress.com). Then we eliminated the blogs belonging to travel agencies and offices, tourist services providers and those which, even though declared personal, masked, in fact, some economic actors on the tourist market. We also eliminated blogs that treat tourism as an activity (http://practicainturism.wordpress.com/) and those that offer information or consultancy for tourism marketers http://comunicariturism.wordpress.com/, http://www.turismark.ro/blogs/). Explicitly regional blogs as well as those not containing any Romanian travel posts were excluded. The main selection criteria were that the blogs to be personal.

Observing the 88 remaining blogs lead to building the following typology: blogs with single or multiple authors, general and specialised blogs (regarding viticulture, railway, ecology, food, mountain and speleological tourism), advertising or sponsored blogs, solitary and campaign or thematic platform linked/hosted blogs, blogs dedicated to travel in Romania and blogs about travelling worldwide, but containing posts about Romania.

We saved 30 blogs containing travel and tourist posts about Romania in a proportion that reflects the share of informal analysis types in the total of the remaining 88, after the exclusion process. The typological variety of content lead to a bigger variety of form: from blogs with one or two postings about travelling in Romania to blogs with hundreds of posts. The posts’ length also varies from those containing a title and a few notes with legend value for photographers, to those spreading out on 10 pages which are structured into sections. We introduced all blog posts which had a smaller or at least an equal number of 5 articles in the database. With blogs containing more than 5 articles we used a random sampling in a 5 step. Thus we obtained a database of 231 posts.

In order to create a photography blog database we analysed the 231 posts and kept all photographs, if their number was lesser or equal with 5 and randomly sampled them in a 5 step, if their number was bigger than 5. Thus, we obtained a database of 506 photographs.

In the end, to analyse Romania’s image as a tourist destination, as it is perceived and broadcasted by Romanian travel bloggers, we used a corpus of 30 blogs, 231 posts and 506 photographs. To respect the homogeneity of the corpus with the one consisting in the French authored blogs we used the tourist area as a registration unit.

To reply to the question: which are the differences between the perceived and broadcasted image in Romanian and foreign blog posts we will analyse a database of 60 blogs, 393 posts and 1024 photos authored by both French and Romanian bloggers.

We used a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. We applied the textual analysis of the corpus of Romanian and French blogs which are to be compared. We followed: who the authors are, which are the targeted publics, the comments, the number of visualisations, the economical stake (the existence of advertising or of sponsors).

So as to attain the objective of identifying and evaluating Romania’s image as a tourist destination as it is perceived and shared by Romanian bloggers the research will answer the following research questions:

Q1: Which is the Romanian bloggers’ interest for various visited tourist areas, destinations and objectives?
Q2: Which is the subjective, spontaneous and holistic evaluation of the visited touristic areas?
Q3: Which are the touristic attractions and the attributes of the touristic areas which are most present in posts of Romanian travel bloggers?

Q4: How do Romanian bloggers evaluate these attractions and attributes?

In order to reach the objective of detecting the similarities and differences between Romania’s image in blogs with Romanian vs. French authors, we will compare the results of this study with prior published ones (Tudor, 2010; Tudor & Turza 2010; Tudor, 2012).

Travel bloggers use mostly photography as a means of visual communication in the multimedia text. Starting with the premise that there is a positive correlation strongly significant in the number of words and the number of photographs contained in blogs and that there is no subordination ratio between the two means of expression (statistically, photography is not used as argumentation for subjective appreciation, but neither does it replace it) (Tudor, 2011), we will compare texts and photographs of Romanian and French blogs separately.

To attain the purpose of this research we used the evaluation of the travel blog as an instrument of analysis with the more recent public data which refer to the image that Romanian and French travellers have of the country. This comparative analysis between classical research methods of the image of tourist destinations and blog analysis is intended to highlight the soft and the strong spots of the personal travel blog as an evaluation means of the travel destination image.

For this comparative research we used the database and the results of prior research conducted on French authored travel blogs (Tudor, 2010; Tudor & Turza 2010; Tudor 2011, 2012), as well as a database consisting in Romanian authored blogs. As a comparison element, we used the data offered by the Master plan for tourism development 2007-2026 – for French tourists – (none others were found) and by the INSOMAR 2009 survey for Romanian tourists.

In accomplishing the quantitative analysis grid we started with a qualitative analysis of blog content which we adapted to the list of attributes established by Ehtner and Ritchie (2003) in terms of measuring the touristic destination image and the tendency evaluation was based on positive, negative and neutral appreciation. Romania’s image as touristic destination has been evaluated based on 5 categories of attributes: touristic attractions, transport infrastructure, accommodation, traditional food and public alimentation and people from the hospitality point of view.

In this study we focused our research on the category of touristic attractions. Touristic attractions have been grouped in 9 research items: 1. Entertainment – bars, clubs, dance halls etc., 2. Sports activities, 3. Spa activities, 4. Historical and architectural monuments, 5. Natural assets, 6. Local specificity – a patriarchal traditional lifestyle in the rural areas and the specificity of the urban areas, 7. Folk art, 8. Mountain tourism, 9. People – under the aspects of objectivity and goodwill towards foreigners.

While creating the analysis grid of photo content covered in Romanian blogs, we applied the already made and tested grid of analyzing Romania’s image as a tourist destination, as seen in French blogs (Tudor, 2012). The starting point was the type of photographic content: portraits, static nature (Feininger, 1965). Judging by content type, landscapes were split into natural, rural, urban, industrial and religious categories. These were adapted to the grid elaborated by Echtener and Ritchie (2003), and the portraits and static natures were added to the content categories extracted from categorizing the landscapes. We therefore ended up having the same categories as those used at analyzing texts.

We applied the content analysis on texts and photos found in the database, using the SPSS program. As Romania is a destination with an extremely varied touristic potential we chose
the tourist area as a recording unit. In area division we guided ourselves after regions currently used in sociological studies in the country, but we kept track of the tourist potential and the variety of opportunities each area has. Therefore, for comparing French blogs’ texts studied in literature with the ones in the current research we adapted the content analysis grid. The differences resulting from the qualitative analysis are going to be highlighted. Same procedure was applied to photographs.

4. Results

The textual analysis of the 60 Romanian and French blogs highlighted a few major differences. While French bloggers have advertising interdiction through the platform host regulation, 2/3 of the studied Romanian blogs do have advertising; out of the 9 advertising free blogs, two are about wine and travel, two participate in the Asta-i Romania care-mi place! Campaign, 4 have reduced visibility. From the query formulations, monikers and blog comments’ study, results show that French bloggers mostly address the social group they belong to in real life – family, relatives, friends, close ones and acquaintances, while Romanian bloggers address a wider public of foreigners who are passionate about travelling. Post comments confirm through feedback a right aim at the proper key publics blog authors have. Comments on French blogs’ postings belong to the close ones encouraging authors in their travels, asking for further information about the author’s health and comfort, details regarding the return date. Generally these comments refer to the traveller and offer very little information about the tourist destinations and objectives reflected in the posts. Comments on postings of Romanian blogs ignore the personal character of the blog and address the blogger in his quality of member of a community of travel bloggers and travel aficionados by appealing to -, or putting under discussion his competence of providing information and pertinent evaluations. The dialogues, which can be initiated by the author of the blog or, sometimes, by commentators have a polemical or ad-hoc colloquial role, where exchanges of information and opinions related to the tourist destinations described in that certain posting are made.

The studied Romanian blogs have many external links, which are visibility generators in the blogosphere. Some of them even contain mutual indexing proposals explicitly expressed for raising the ranking level. With very few exceptions, they are linked to social and micro blogging networks. French travelling blogs rarely have other external links, other than personal blogs or the author’s social networks accounts.

The studied French travel blogs, with two exceptions, were created for recording a single travel. Romanian travel blogs have a tree structure categorisation, on geographical area criteria and writings of more travels.

All studied French blogs are hosted on a platform that freely offers travellers blog formats, travel journals, photo albums and other communication facilities between the members of the virtual community gathered around the platform. Without a specialised platform for communicating travel stories, Romanian bloggers use free platforms of generalist blogs or buy domains in the virtual space.
4.1. Romania’s image as a tourist destination represented in the texts of Romanian travel blogs

4.1.1. Representing the Romanian areas, destinations and tourist objective in travel blogs’ texts written by Romanian authors

Texts of the 231 posts on the 30 blogs which have representativity for the travel blog typology consist in 340 referrals to tourist areas. Their frequency analysis evidenced that the most nominated tourist area is Transylvania (26.5%). The capital and the seaside meet Romanian travel bloggers’ interest in equally sensitive proportions: București – 12.9%, seaside – 12.6%.

The next approached areas in Romanian blogger’s texts are Maramureș (11.2%) and the mountain area covering the Prahova Valley from Sinaia to Brașov (9.1%). The least represented tourist area in the selection of studied posts is Bucovina (2.4%), although it’s a tourist area which covers a large concentration of natural and cultural attractions, 8 of which are declared UNESCO monuments (www.cimec.ro). The Muntenia-Oltenia area, which benefits of a single UNESCO monument – the Horezu Monastery – has 8.8% of the nominees of the tourist areas.

In the Transylvania area there are 100 nominations of some tourist destinations. Most of them – 51% are away from the most known tourist cities, known and rated by MDRT as having a very high concentration of resources (OUG 142/2008). Brașov and Sibiu are nominated in the sample studied 12 times each, and Sighișoara 6 times. Fortified citadels belonging to the UNESCO international patrimony are evoked 9 times.

The capital is evoked in Romanian bloggers’ texts with less than half of the frequency Transylvania is nominated a self-standing tourist destination (6 times). The most mentioned tourist objectives are: The Village Museum (7), castles, mansions, monasteries, the fort circling the Capital, which sum up only 5 nominees, the historical centre of Bucharest – which has lately become a space for spending free time and enjoying entertainment, is nominated 4 times; the Cotroceni Palace (3), the Antipa Museum (2), Romanian Peasant’s Museum (2). Other architectural monuments, cultural destinations and show halls make up 13 nominees.

In the seaside area of Romania I included the destinations and tourist objective from the entire Dobrogea area, Danube Delta included. Out of the 43 references to the area, most of them focused on Constanța-Mamaia (11), Delta Dunării and Vama Veche-2 Mai as destinations, 5 each. Even here most references are grouped in the „others” category (20).

In the Maramureș area, the wooden churches have 2 nominations in the studied corpus, the Happy Cemetery of Săpânța has 3, the Dacian citadels in the Orăștiei Mountains have 2 and Cluj-Napoca 9. It must be mentioned that the hand-painted exteriors of the churches in Bucovina are approached in the studied blogs 8 times, while all the other destinations and tourist objectives in Moldova are mentioned 20 times.

The subjective, holistic and spontaneous evaluation of the tourist areas in Romania is 82.4% positive, 3.8% negative and 13.8% neutral. Bucharest meets most negative evaluations/area, with 4 reported to a total of 44 references. Romania, as a tourist area had 3 negative references out of a total of 20.
4.1.2. Evaluating attractions which participate in forming Romania’s image as a tourist destination nominated in Romanian blogs

For the 340 recording units, 944 referrals to the tourist attraction in the areas have been made. The biggest percentage belongs to cultural attractions (36.02%), followed by the natural ones (19.81%) and by the specifics of the locals (9.85%). Speleological tourism (3.92%) sum up more than half the nominations of cultural attractions.

The lack of interest in this type of activities can be related to the material status of the spas, the lack of investments in the necessary equipment for spa and beauty activities, to a certain attitude of tourism marketers serving in areas such as bar service, clubbing, dancing and other forms of spending free time during holidays. The poor representation of mountain tourism in Romanian blogs can be seen in comparison with the crescent number of people practicing winter sports, who prefer foreign resorts, motivating their choice through the high costs, modest equipment and the low quality of the services that are being offered in Romania. This hypothesis is also founded on the fact that mountain tourism nominees, apart for 2 exceptions, are all related to hiking, alpinism and visiting natural monuments. The local specific is nominated only 17 times as an attraction of certain tourist destinations (1.8%). Rural life specifics are nominated in the context of visits to Maramureș villages, spiritual life is mentioned as an attraction of religious monuments, while the most often made referrals are to daily life in citadel-villages with fortified churches and in the medieval city of Sighișoara.

The share of positive assessments is 92.69%, negative assessments are in proportion of 4.55% and 2.75% neutral terms. Out of the most negative feedback, 15 assessents refer to cultural attractions and reproach that authorities do not maintain and restore historical and architectural monuments. 12 negative remarks focus on either the shortage of fun or on the poor quality of equipment and services. The 6 negative appreciations related to the natural attractions refer to the trash left behind by tourists who visited the countryside. In the studied sample only one case of inhospitable attitude is reported.

4.1.3. Evaluating the attributions that take part in forming Romania’s image as a tourist destination

Attributes referring to Romanian travel bloggers can be grouped into five broad categories: transportation and communications infrastructure, accommodation, attractions category, quality cuisine and catering services. Although the list drawn up by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) mentions water quality, one single blog in the study referred to drinking water, but it is a blog centred on hiking and the author states where the drinking water springs for long routes are. In these conditions, we excluded this category from the grid.

Transport and communications infrastructure are mentioned 126 times in the studied sample. Most of the assessments are negative (37.3%), where the vast majority relate to roads and highways – 36 of 47 total references in negative terms. All roads and highways have the highest number of positive comments (14). They relate to county and local roads which provide access to areas where mountain routes start. Appreciation is neutral for 32.54% of the total and the most (27) are still in the subcategory of roads and highways; references noted without feedback mark the access routes to various tourist points of natural attractions of the lesser category. Travelling by bicycle meets 10 positive comments and no negative or neutral ones. In the situation in which bloggers make negative appreciations regarding the state of the road their bikes roll on, these are summed up in the roads and highways category, and when they make appre-
ciations regarding the quality of transport of people and bikes, by train, these are counted as part of the railway transport category. Railway transport counts 6 positive appreciations which are found in the blogs of those passionate about railway tourism, 9 negative appreciations and 13 neutral. 7 of the 8 appreciations on boats are positive and refer to entertainment boats. There is a single reference to boats as a means of transport and it is negative.

Housing units have mostly positive feedback – 60.46%, the negative ones representing 9.3% of the total. Hostels have the largest number of references (44), followed by hotels (38). References to local accommodation, tents and cabins represent a percentage of 36.43%. Traditional Romanian cuisine has a total of 73 nominations: 68-positive, 2 negative and 3 neutral.

The quality of catering services is appreciated as mostly positive, comprising 65 out of 85 nominations with appreciative references. The 12 negative references relate to the cleanliness of premises, staff incompetence and misunderstandings on the specific needs of mountain tourists.

4.2. Romania’s image as a tourist destination, as it is perceived and broadcasted by Romanian bloggers

Touristic Romania as represented on Romanian travel blogs in the study has a mainly positive image (82.83%), while the number of negative (8.55%) and neutral (8.62%) assessments is substantially the same and each is representing less than 10% of the share of positive evaluations. The largest share in the appreciation of the sights has positive reviews (77.85%). In terms of contribution to a negative image, transport and communications infrastructure have the highest participation with 40.52%, followed by 37.07% participating attractions. There is a strong polarisation of the weaknesses and strengths of the tourist destination image as it is represented on Romanian travellers’ blogs. The most important attribute is the format of the attractions which have a high share in the third evaluation of the positive and the negative.

4.2.1. Romania’s image as a tourist destination represented in the photographs of Romanian travel blogs

To identify Romania’s image as it is presented on photos from Romanian travel blogs a corpus of 30 blogs were used, selecting 231 posts. The recording unit was the tourist area, and photographs were selected from those in the posts that have been studied for text analysis. The 506 photographs were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively by the same criteria as the basis of texts.

The positive, negative or neutral evaluation of photo content is questionable because of observer bias. For example, a picture on the subject of a ruin can be interpreted as capturing the image of an ancient monument and therefore can be very valuable, or rather as a proof of negligence of the authorities who do not take care of the monuments. The key often lies in reading the text accompanying the picture. Therefore, the study divides the body of photo bloggers in area, destinations, sights and attractions and attributes photographers. Where photography is of explicitly negative content (bottles in the water, dirt and garbage in natural landscapes) it is presented accordingly in the article. This is the case of 11 photographs that represent 2% of the total corpus.
4.2.2. The representation of areas, destinations and tourist objectives in Romania as depicted from the photographs posted by Romanian travel bloggers

The most photographed tourist area is Transylvania (22.3%), followed by the Muntenia- Oltenia (18.4%) and Maramureș (15.6%). The least represented in the corpus of images studied are Bucovina (1%), Moldova (3.8%) and Romania nominated as such in the photo caption or representations that haven’t been located (4.7%).

Most photos of Transylvania don’t represent destinations listed as having a high tourism potential. 36.88% of the 113 photographs in this area are marked as others because they are unique to that case. The most represented Transylvanian city is Cluj-Napoca (19.86%). Brașov is present in 13.47% of the shots, followed by fortified cities (12.06%) and Sibiu (10.64%). Sighișoara is only represented with 10 photos of the corpus.

In the Muntenia-Oltenia region the most represented destinations are the muddy volcanoes – 29 photos and Oltenia with the same number of representations. Note that most pictures of Oltenia are associated with wine tourism – the Drăgușani area.

Even in Maramureș the mainly represented areas are other destinations and attractions than the most known and visited ones, therefore the others category includes 24 photographs, followed by photos of the Dacian citadels (20).

The capital is present in 44 photos, which represent 8.7% of the total. The most, photographers enjoy the historic centre – 12 photos and the Village Museum – 11 photos. In the corpus 7 general postcards or photographs of disparate buildings were found. The House of Parliament has 5 photos, the Cotroceni Palace has 4 and the castles around Bucharest, 4.

4.2.3. Most represented tourist attractions in Romanian bloggers’ photographs

Feininger’s categorisation (1965) was used as a starting point in elaborating the content analysis grid. Therefore, photographed subjects were classified in natural, rural, urban, industrial and religious landscapes. The latter include photographs that capture the religious monuments in the landscape. By contraction we adapted to the needs of the grid after Feininger’s image characterisation of the tourist destination.

Cultural attractions are the most photographed by Romanian bloggers. They represent 31.52% of the 958 photos of attractions found in the studied corpus. Natural attractions are represented by 29.75%, 15.55% by mountain tourism, the local specifics by 9.6%, 4.17% involving sport activities. Entertainment, folk art, business and local resorts are each represented by less than 3% of the images that have content related attractions. Of the images that represent cultural attractions, 73.51% had monuments as their subject. 88.42% of the natural attractions were natural landscapes.

Most represented tourist destination attributes as represented in photographs of Romanian bloggers

In the 506 images analysed, 1103 representations of attributes of tourist destinations were found. Most representations are related to tourist attractions (86.85%), all the others summing up 13.14% – transport and communications infrastructure (5.89%), housing (3.26%), Romanian traditional cuisine (2.9%) or the quality of services (1.09%).

Romania’s image as a tourist destination is represented in Romanian bloggers’ photographs as overwhelmingly positive: 2.17% of the explicit photographs have negative content, which sums up a share of 1.07% of the total tourist destination attributes.
4.3. Comparison between the representation of Romania’s image as tourist destination in Romanian and French authored blogs

4.3.1. Comparison between Romanian and French blogs

In order to compare data taken from French text blogs and photos from Romanian blogs in both categories we used the cross-tabulation statistical method. To emphasise that there are significant differences between French and Romanian bloggers’ interest for tourist areas we applied the chi-square test.

Test results show a significant difference between the two types of bloggers and their interest for tourist areas: \( \chi^2 (9) = 96.995, p = .000 \). The comparison table analysis shows that interest in the Maramureș area is fairly equal for the two categories: 11.2% for Romanian authors and 11.3% for the French. A similar situation occurs in the case of the mountaineous – 9.1% of Romanian bloggers and 8.8% of the French, and also a small difference of interest is shown for the coastal area – 12.6% for the Romanian bloggers and 12.2% for the French. As far as the capital is concerned, the difference of interest is still as small as 2% – 12.9% for Romanian authors and 10.5% for the French. In the studied sample the largest discrepancies occur in the following interest areas: Muntenia-Oltenia – 8.8% for Romanian bloggers compared to 1.3% for the French, Romania (nominated as a tourist destination in its own right) – 5.9% / 30.7%, Bucovina – 2.4% / 8.0% and Transylvania 26.5% / 12.6%.

Particular areas of interest on the chi-square test show a significant difference – \( \chi^2 (31) = 196.722, p = .000 \), but the result should be viewed with caution because the percentage of cells in the minimum expected frequency is below 5.

There is a significant association between the nationality of the bloggers and the subjective appreciation, as spontaneous and holistic of Romania as a tourist destination – \( \chi^2 (2) = 64.344, p = .000 \). While French travel bloggers made positive appreciations in a proportion of 47.4%, Romanians mainly expressed a positive impression (82.4%). Romanian authors express their critical opinions at a rate of 3.8%, while the French bloggers have a negative opinion rate of 9.0%. While Romanian authors express their subjective, holistic opinions, positive or negative in 86.2% of cases, French bloggers’ evaluation is neutral in 43.6% of cases.

In terms of tourist attractions, no significant differences between the French and Romanian bloggers’ assessments for natural attractions were made – \( \chi^2 (2) = 3.139, p = .208 \) and – \( \chi^2 (2) = 0.176, p = .916 \) for mountain tourism. Significant differences are recorded in the cultural attractions section (\( \chi^2 (2) = 41.669, p = .000 \)). Regarding entertainment, the chi square test indicates that there are differences between the views expressed by Romanian and French bloggers (\( \chi^2 (2) = 6.62, p = .036 \)), but with reserves, because of the cells in which the frequency is below the expected minimum of five. Opinions of Romanian and French travelers’ are different in evaluating local specifics (\( \chi^2 (2) = 11.857, p = .003 \), except that 16.7% of cells are below the expected minimum of five. The statement that no significant differences in terms of Romanian and French bloggers’ assessments on sports (probability 2-sided Fisher exact \( p = 1.000 \)), health tourism (likely 2-sided Fisher exact \( p = 0.284 \)) and folk art (probability 2-sided Fisher exact \( p = 1.000 \)) should be regarded as a recommendation for further studies, given the small number of blogger expressions on these topics and, thus, the reduced sample size.

Regarding the evaluations expressed on Romanian and French blogs on the transport infrastructure, significant differences are seen according to chi-square test (18.2% of the Romanian bloggers expressed positive evaluations compared to 2.2% of the French, and 46.8%
of Romanians’ views are negative compared to 86.7% of the French opinions), and there’s no significant difference to the assessment of rail, bike, plane or ship transports, except that there is a minimum expected cell frequency of below 5.

Table 2. Chi-square Tests for determining differences between Romanian and French bloggers in what Romania’s attributes as a tourist destination are concerned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Chi-square Test</th>
<th>Cells with a minimum expected frequency of below 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transport infrastructure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>car</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=19.457$, $p=.000$</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>train</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=3.148$, $p=.207$</td>
<td>16.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bike</td>
<td>Exact 2-sided Fisher probability $p=0.015$</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plane</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=3.733$, $p=0.155$</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ships</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=8.571$, $p=.014$</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accommodation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=12.316$, $p=.002$</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B &amp; B</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=1.010$, $p=.603$</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locals</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=2.410$, $p=.300$</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tent</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=3.545$, $p=.170$</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=.944$, $p=.624$</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romanian cuisine</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=7.074$, $p=.029$</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locals</td>
<td>$\chi^2(2)=10.531$, $p=.005$</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.2. A comparison between photographs in French and Romanian authored blogs

There is a significant difference between general representations of tourist areas in Romanian and French bloggers’ photographs – $\chi^2(11)=236.128$, $p=0.000$. The biggest differences are shown by photos that represent landscapes which can be seen anywhere in Romania (4.7% of the Romanian blogs and 17.09% of the French ones), and, as far as the Transylvania area is concerned, with a representational percent of 22.3% in Romanian blogs and 13.9% in the French ones.

Regarding the representation of destinations and attractions, the chi-square test shows a significant difference between representations of photos of Romanian and French authors $\chi^2 (39) = 466.355$, $p = .000$, but with the reserve that there are cells with a minimum expected frequency of below 5.

The representation of natural attractions is significantly different in photographs contained in the studied Romanian and French blogs $\chi^2 (1) = 137.540$, $p = 0.000$, as is the case of national character representation $\chi^2 (1) = 57.255$, $p = 0.000$, while the representation of the bloggers’ means of entertainment is not associated with their nationality $\chi^2 (1) = 6.360$, $p = 0.012$. Significant differences are seen when following the entertainment representation in Romanian and French bloggers’ photos $\chi^2 (2) = 11.496$, $p = 0.003$, but that is subject to the
minimum expected cell frequency of below 5. There is no significant relationship between the blogger’s origin and the mountain tourism representation \( \chi^2 (3) = 119.986, p = 0.001 \), but that is subject to minimum expected cell frequency below 5.

The comparative analysis of tourist destination attributes representations in photos is inconclusive by the chi-square test because of the low frequency representations – eg. 18 for rail and 38 for air transport, hotels are not represented at all in French bloggers’ photos and other types of accommodation meet up to 35 photos each, compared to a sample of 1058 photos. It is unsuitable to use statistical analysis as a means of comparing Romanian service and cuisine quality as attributes of the tourist destination because of the small number of representations (30 and 54).

5. Discussion and limits

As the textual analysis (both qualitative and quantitative) revealed, the content of sampled Romanian and French blogs showed that the differences between the two categories are much bigger and deeper than the origin of the travelling authors. While the French travel blogs are records of personal experience, Romanian travel blogs are strong online study guides written by the traveller who has seen and personally evaluated the destinations. If French blogs faithfully recorded each stage of the itinerary and each crossed zone, Romanian bloggers make a subjective selection of the destinations and sights they write about and shoot. The authority the French blogger has towards his/her public is constructed through his/her pioneering position – discovering the exotic and little known territories. The Romanian blogger builds in the position of authority as he/she has a much broader and deeper knowledge than the potential reader. The French blogger is a hero who discovers and reports, the Romanian blogger is the one who invests in shares of library documentation, selection and verification of information with a high degree of novelty to the reader.

Comparing the studied literature, overriding the boundaries of bloggers’ belonging cultures and concentrating on a blog typology that is relevant from the used communication strategy perspective, we can state that the studied French bloggers have a purpose of maintaining contact with the belonging group and offer a message that is very attached to the announcer that has a retrained level of generality. Content is built around the adventures of the announcer character, and the destination plays the role of decor or secondary character that provokes. Out of this reason the evaluations which have been attributed to the destinations are sincere. Their blogs don’t touch a broad public, a thing that is proved by the reduced number of visualisations and comments. These characteristics recommend them for their utility as sources of information about the country tourist image, as it was perceived after the travelling experience.

Still, we must notice a limit to this research in the fact that this analysis was made only on one specialized site, which could bias the result of the research in itself. At this moment, we cannot generalize towards all foreign authored travel blogs or even towards all French blogs. A later research conducted on a group that contained blogs with foreign authors posted on other travel and generalist platforms could demonstrate that blog uses as a communication instrument of the travel are much more diverse than those relevant to this study and overlap the two that have already been noticed when studying local authors’ blogs.
Local bloggers have two types of targeted publics: the interest community and the broad public. They use communication mixes that can maximize their audience: links to other blogs, participating in community actions, linking to personal or dedicated pages on social networks. The tourist destination which they broadcast in their network is much more complex and is not only based on an image previously made before the travel, but on personal experience, which makes it the fruit of an intellectual work in which an important role is played by the information gained from sources exterior to the travelling experience. Under this aspect and for this category of bloggers, our research confirms Braun-La Tour et al. (2006) results, which demonstrate that the travel’s memory is distorted by external informational factors. Bloggers’ financial interests, either in advertising from tourism operators, or in sponsoring the travel can induce distortions of the image represented on the blog. Even if we’re not talking about censorship in the hard sense of the word, self-censorship does interfere, as well as the tendency of overseeing some negative aspects of the tourist destination or services. The results of this research show that this type of content has a low informational value about the image made throughout the travel. However, given the general character and the richness of information on the destinations and, mostly, the traffic that each author can attract, this type of blogs can be included as online image vectors for tourist destinations. In this case, bloggers’ interest for attracting advertising and sponsorships becomes an engine of creating audience and positivating the image, and therefore efficacy factors of broadcasting a desirable image.

Romania’s image as a tourist destination represented in the analysed Romanian travel blogs is mainly positive, negative evaluations and the number of neutral assessments are each less than 10%. It is observed that while the percentage of almost positive evaluations is the same in the holistic, subjective, spontaneous evaluation and in the attractions and attributes appreciation of the tourist areas, the number of negative appreciations doubles in evaluating the tourist areas compared to the spontaneous, subjective evaluations. It could be said that the attachment to the country of origin influences the subjective appreciation of the tourist area.

The comparative analysis of the Romanian and French texts blogs noted that there was a significant association between the country of the travelling author and the evaluation of the tourist destination. This notes that in the texts of the foreign authors’ studied blogs, 31% of the registered units are not accompanied by holistic and subjective assessments and that 30% of the holistic and subjective evaluations are neutral, as long as the blogs of local authors nominations of a tourist area corresponds to a subjective evaluation and thus the number of the neutral ones is much lower.

The nominated areas, destinations and attractions in text blogs can be seen as a map of the visited areas, but one must also bear in mind that the author makes a selection of information and opinions expressed on the blog according to their interests. Therefore, this map of the most nominated tourist areas rather expresses interest in their dual aspect of authors and passengers. The significant difference between the representations of tourist areas on Romanian and French blogs must be discussed not only in terms of the tourists’ origin – domestic and foreign – but also in terms of travel motivations, the rationale of blog writing, the targeted audience and the financial implications. For a finer analysis of the value of travel blogs as a tool of measuring the tourist destination image, the quantitative study should be followed by a qualitative analysis to highlight the factors that determine the content and form of communication on the blog.

The online preliminary observation of this study showed a major difference that can influence the choices of destinations represented, as well as their evaluations. The presence of
advertising on the blog is likely to influence the representation of tourist destinations and their evaluation by the need of adopting strategies for increasing online visibility and by censoring critical attitudes that may interfere with economic interests. The way the travel blogs’ authors relate to advertising will be studied later.

In the two blog categories, the most often mentioned are the tourist destinations in the West of the country – Transylvania (including Crișana), Banat and Maramureș. However, there is a double share of representations of Transylvania in Romanian authors’ blogs, compared to the representations of the French blogs. Another significant difference is at the level of nominating tourist objectives. French blogs nominated objectives are on the UNESCO heritage list and have acquired a clear positive image. Comparatively, Romanian authors choose to write mostly about lesser known destinations, about objectives that hold an aura of originality. On one hand, this significant difference in the sights nomination confirms the handling of image deficiencies of the Romanian tourist destinations abroad and, on the other hand, highlights the need to analyse how authors construct their self image through postings and how they influence the staging of the self through communicating content.

The difference between the way the Eastern side of the country is represented on local and French blogs is even more flagrant. While French blogs studied the exteriors of the hand painted churches of Bucovina meeting overwhelmingly positive assessments, these are underrepresented in texts on Romanian blogs. Bucovina, the accumulation lakes, the nature reserves, the muddy volcanoes are the destinations and attractions that are most often mentioned on the Romanian blogs, while being totally amiss on French blogs. Beyond the weak prior documentation of the travel that French bloggers have (an area of which existence is ignored and cannot be accessed or recorded), this research study raises the question of studying the public targeted by the blog authors. Given the poor information on Romania at international level, as a tourist destination (2007-2026 Master plan Part I), the information published on French travel blogs brings added value to their audience, even if it is related to destinations which already have an international image. It is much more difficult for Romanian authors to capture the interest of the local public, who has a much better knowledge of Romania’s tourism potential (2007-2026 Master plan Part I). This difference may be an important explanation for the tourist areas chosen to be covered on travel blogs.

A direct comparison between the results of this study and those published in the documents of the Regional Development and Tourism Ministry cannot be made, but it can be stated that neither the top, nor the nominated areas and tourist destinations of Romanian blogs coincide with the ranking and the visibility obtained through surveys. In other words, the content analysis of Romanian travel blogs brings no information regarding the level of visiting of certain tourist areas. Rather, this analysis provides a projection map of the author regarding the interest of their potential readers.

Given the scarcity of information regarding the image French tourists have about Romania before and after the trip to Romania (Master plan for tourism development from 2007 to 2026) and research on French travel blogs (Tudor, 2010), we can say that the study of French travel blogs makes a major contribution to the knowledge of their perception regarding the experience of travelling in Romania.

From the data offered by the Bureau of Tourism in Paris we deduct that individual French tourists prefer circuits in Transylvania, Bucovina, the Danube Delta or short stays in the capital, while those who practice organised tourism head mainly towards the seaside (in-
comemagazine.ro, 2008). At this level, the results obtained by analysing travel blogs converge with analyses by conventional means.

The same study affirms that: “The French tourist in Romania’s profile is as follows: aged between 55 and 70, medium income, belonging to the middle class”. It also shows that travel blogs bring information about a specific category of travellers – individuals or groups who don’t call travel agencies to organise the trip, instead preferring itinerary holidays to sedentary vacations, who prefer other forms of accommodation than hotels and who do not spend much on travelling. This category of tourists, backpackers, as they are called in the literature, is becoming increasingly important for the global tourism economy due to the increase of their number, even if each individual’s funds are quite modest. As statistic studies published by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism are largely based on reports made by travel agents, hoteliers and accommodation providers in hostels, the backpacker category is lesser known. From this perspective, analysing personal travel blogs of foreign authors proves itself to be very useful.

The results of this research show that content analysis provides relevant information regarding major attractions of tourist destinations. Study of the attractions which travel blogs for tourist destination offer for analysis on the one hand, and the information on the most frequently nominated and evaluated in terms of attractions and local/foreign travellers on the other hand, allows the categorising of the reported assessments of travel categories – domestic and foreign.

Less valued attractions in travel blogs can be analysed in terms of their contribution to a positive, negative or neutral image of tourist destinations. Results from comparing the assessments of other attractions are to be taken subject to small sample size and need further study on a larger sample.

In the light of the contribution to the positive image attributes, the negative or neutral image of Romania as a tourist destination, the content analysis of travel blogs provides relevant information, but cannot be associated, unless with certain reserves, belonging to foreign or domestic travel category, with two notable exceptions: that of tourist attractions and the transport road infrastructure. It shows that both Romanian and French blogs express dissatisfaction towards road transport, but there are significant differences between the assessments recorded in the two categories of studied blogs.

The analysis of travel blogs in terms of multimedia communication highlights differences between textual and photographic discourse. Relevant to this finding, which continues to the next level of study findings regarding the relationship between image and text in French travel blogs (Tudor, 2011), is that as long as textual discourse does not depend on the natural attractions, it doesn’t depend on a group or on the other, the picture category shows significant differences. Conversely, the representation of cultural attractions, the level of text are significant differences between the two categories of blogs, however photographic nationality of the perpetrators are not associated with the nationality of the travelling authors.

The results of this research in conjunction with those presented by Tudor (2012) highlights the poor capacity of photography to bring information on some of the attributes of the
tourist destination: transport infrastructure, service quality and traditional cuisine. In addition, photo content cannot be assessed as positive or negative in the absence of textual explanations, apart for rare cases. But the photos bring out very valuable information about what the bloggers consider important and useful to be shown. Thus, the local specifics expressed primarily through rural and religious landscapes, is overrepresented in French blogs’ photos. Instead, the local specifics are under-represented in local authored blogs. Further qualitative research is likely to explain the criteria behind the choice of text and the election of the information or subject to photograph and blog about. On the other hand, given the importance of visual communication in promoting the destination image, the photographic analysis is very important as it gives a very easy and quick means to deciphering blog consumers.

Further analysis of the representation of tourists and locals in the photos will bring out new information about how locals and foreigners travel, represent and communicate their relationship with local people. This aspect of visual communication compensated for the inability of photography to communicate in terms of assessing local hospitality.

It should be noted that the comparative analysis of photographs posted on the studied Romanian and French blogs can detect visual aspects of the tourist attractions which can be exploited to promote the destination image.

The comparative analysis of travel blogs on one hand communicates features which are popular tourist destinations, both for local and for foreign travellers, as well as those features which catch the interest of one group of tourists. This quality of the analysis can be used to direct actions to promote the tourist destination image in the category of targeted public.

6. Conclusions

Travel blogs contain information about the tourist destination image which can be researched by analysing the content of text and photography. Travel blogs’ content analysis decelerates the tourist attractions and attributes whose evaluations do not depend directly on the origin of travels, attractions and attributes of which nomination and evaluation depend on the category of the visiting tourists and attractions which are highlighted through text and photography analysis. Therefore, travel blogs as a tool for image analysis may indicate tourist destinations to marketers, tourist attractions and attributes of destinations which can be included in general campaigns, locally or internationally. It can also indicate the level of strategy adoption, substantially textual or visual, in the light of the image which is to be promoted.

These differences lead to two main uses of blogs as marketing tools for the tourism industry. Personal travel blogs of French authors’ studies can be used as a means of image analysis collected from travel experience. Analysing the content of these blogs provides tourism information on the most visited areas, destinations and objectives to marketers, concerning how these places are valued by visitors, about the most popular attractions and attributes and reasons for the dissatisfaction of foreign travellers. The analysis of foreign authored blogs brings indirect information about the awareness of Romania as a tourist destination before the travel experience, positive attitude, neutral (objective intended) or critical visitors.

The analysis of Romanian travel blogs indicates that their authors are tourist communication market players. Their value as image vectors is supported by their position of leaders in cyberspace, an image built through tourist knowledge, credibility and mastering techniques of increasing visibility. They are involved in promoting the internal image of some tourist des-
tinations and contribute to bettering readers’ knowledge with historical and cultural information by providing criteria and arguments. These research findings recommend personal travel blog entries by Romanian authors in the promotion mix of the DMOS. The study indicates the involvement of Romanian bloggers in image campaigns taking Romania as a tourist destination abroad as appropriate.

The study shows a travel blog typology based on the criteria of usability in the country brand image strategy of communication. A category is formed by the blogs of those authors who mainly require maintaining relationships with the belonging group of the real space. These blogs are recommended for analyzing the image built after the travel experience. The second category is formed by authors who aim at communicating towards the community of interests and the large, amorphous public from the virtual space and can be integrated in broadcasting a desirable image of a tourist destination.

The indirect comparison with MDRT published data indicates that travel blogs provide information about a category of foreign tourists hardly investigated by traditional means – the backpacker. Analysis of travel blogs signed by foreign authors can supply for the lack of information about Romania’s image as a tourist destination survey obtained by traditional means. A travel blog is an indisputable means of investigating the evolution of the destination image and traveller’s perceptions of travel experiences in time.

This exploratory research shows that foreign authors’ blogs are a useful tool for evaluating Romania as a tourist destination. Content analysis of blogs is recommended to be used in conjunction with questionnaires and interviews as complementary instruments/methods of investigation. Since blogs opinions are expressed in a sincere, unsolicited and uncensored manner on travel experience, their analysis can provide a starting point for constructing questionnaires and interviews so that greater, real interests of tourists can be taken into account.

Thus, the biases effect of questionnaire construction can be mitigated from solely basing them on researchers’ interests and their perceptions of tourists and their interests. Most studies on the potential tourist areas are based on evaluations provided by local authorities and services providers. Complementary research on travel blogs with Romanian and foreign authors could offset the effect of biases of a unilateral outlook by taking into account the interest of the beneficiaries in tourist services.

In conclusion, this exploratory research recommends using travel blogs as a means of investigating the tourist image of Romania and as part of the mix that promotes the country’s image internally and externally.

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Rezumat: Deși Facebook și Twitter înregistrează cea mai mare creștere de trafic dintre rețelele sociale, analiza blogurilor de călătorie rămâne foarte importantă pentru agenții din turism, odată ce turistii folosesc blogurile pentru comunicarea experienței de călătorie și rețelele sociale pentru creșterea vizibilității blogurilor în spațiul virtual. Blogurile de călătorie reprezintă o sursă ieftină și accesibilă de informații despre imaginea unei destinații turistice, iar bloggerii participă la producerea și difuzarea imaginii destinației turistice în spațiul virtual. Acest studiu arată că blogurile ai căror autori vizează menținerea legăturilor cu grupurile de apartenența din spațiul real sunt potrivite pentru analiza imaginii, pe când blogurile care au autori autohtoni, care vizează publicul larg și amorf din spațiul virtual pot fi incluse în strategia de promovare a imaginii destinației turistice. Cercetarea calitativă și analiza cantitativă de conținut a unui eșantion de 60 de bloguri cu autori români...
și francezii arată că tipul de comunicare prin intermediul blogurilor de călătorie este determinant pentru felul în care blogurile pot fi utilizate în strategia de comunicare a imaginii României ca destinație turistică. Datele furnizate de acest studiu pot fi folosite pentru elaborarea strategiilor de comunicare a imaginii turistice a României pentru călătorii autohtoni și străini.

Cuvinte-cheie: blog de călătorie, destinație turistică, imagine de țară, instrumente de marketing turistic.

References


