# EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF ROMANIAN TOURISM SITES DESIGN ON THE CONSUMER

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**Abstract**
*Recent research in the field of online marketing, e-tourism and information and communication technologies used by the tourism industry reveals that the Internet presence of a tourist destination can influence the purchasing decision of the consumer of tourist services through a multitude of factors related to how the online presentation of that destination was designed. In this context, the main objective of this research is to carry out an empirical investigation on the following issues: (1) identifying the main Romanian tourism sites and analyzing the specific traffic indicators; (2) analysis of consumer perception of interface elements and informational content through which some Web sites of tourism can influence the purchasing decision online.*
*The research findings identified the necessity of adjusting the marketing strategies dedicated to the online environment according to the variations noted in the user traffic as well as the necessity to adapt the various resources offered by the Romanian tourism sites to the information requirements of the users considering their important impact in creating options for a tourist offer.*

**Key words:** *site evaluation; e-tourism; traffic indicators; online marketing; tourism portals.*

**JEL Classification:** *M15, M31, Z32*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Current information and communication technologies are an important support for organizational entities in the field of tourism in the implementation of new types of online marketing activities, thus complementing the traditional promotional tools (Lo and Law, 2007). The online environment has a huge potential, not yet fully exploited, to model consumer behavior.

To assess as accurately as possible the impact the online environment may have on consumer behavior, according to a Eurostat study quoted by Ziarul Financiar (Tatu, 2017), seven out of ten Internet users in the EU made online purchases in 2017, highest figures being recorded among young and middle-aged people. Great Britain and Sweden take the lead in Europe in purchasing goods and services online, with users in Romania covering a lower percentage of only 23%. The number of online buyers, however, is on the rise, the most active being young people aged 16-24 and those aged 25-54 (71%). Romania has no tradition of online purchases, with the Romanian consumer preferring to personally choose the products and services he desires, but in recent years his behavior indicates in the field of tourism the tendency to use the online tourist guides, to know about the experiences of other consumers regarding the intended destination by consulting travel blogs and vlogs. In the European top 2017, holiday tickets rank third in EU consumer online purchases. These statistics reveal that online marketing must redirect its promotion strategies to this potential segment of consumers whose informational needs have not been fully explored. An analysis of e-tourism research indicates that in recent years there have been significant changes in the behavior of tourists, namely: (1) profiling of informed consumers and increasing demand for tourism services; (2) the evolution of tourism information technologies (complemented by voice recognition facilities, semantic search tools, business intelligence, behavioral CRM); (3) the tendency of consumers to seek unique, exceptional travel experiences; (4) consumer orientation towards the purchase of commodities recommended by friends (social travel); (5) customer preference for video presentations, which necessitates the promotion of various tourist destinations on specialized sites or on Youtube (Youtube Ads or Youtube remarketing); (6) the possibility of initiating virtual tours; (7) the emergence of social networks and their use in promoting tourism offers.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC APPROACH USED

The purpose of the research is to answer the following questions:

(1) What are the main Romanian sites dedicated to tourism and what are the conclusions of the analysis of specific traffic indicators?

(2) What are the elements through which the interface and the informational content of the site can influence the behavior of the consumer of tourist services?

In an attempt to provide answers relevant to the research questions being formulated, a mixed approach to research was used, based on the following specific activities: (a) systematic online consultation of bibliographic databases (SpringerLink and Elsevier) and progressive consultation of works with a large number of citations, rich in bibliographic references to identify the criteria for evaluating tourism sites existing in the literature; (b) systematic consultation of magazine collections dealing with online marketing; (c) analysis of Romanian tourism sites, both from the perspective of the traffic indicators and the criteria formulated by the literature.

To identify the elements through which the interface and the informational content of a site can influence the behavior of the consumer of tourist services, a questionnaire containing 14 questions was administered between 1 November 2017 and 15 December 2017 to 112 persons, aged 18 -50 years of age, frequently accessing travel sites and resorting to online reservations in selecting tourist destinations. For a pertinent evaluation, the 112 people had a weekly interval (the respondents were distributed in six groups, each group allocated a week from the research period) to access and consult the 5 sites under analysis, which rank the top 5 places in the tourism section of the www.trafic.ro site.

### III. MARKETING ONLINE AND WEB SITE ANALYSIS: A BRIEF INVESTIGATION INTO THE LITERATURE

According to Eley and Tilley (2009), online marketing (digital marketing or e-marketing) can be defined as an Internet promotion that can take various forms including: social media, email marketing, search engines, online advertising. Chaffey et al. (2006) believes that Internet marketing aims to achieve the marketing goals of organizations by applying digital technologies. Clearly, online operations have specific features (Darby et al., 2003; Dickinger and Strangl, 2013; Kiang et al., 2000), which still rely heavily on traditional marketing models (Balaure, et al., 2002) and cannot quantify the effort associated with the marketing activity of organizations (Gurau, 2008). The natural consequence of this was to include online marketing elements in the traditional models (Chong et al., 2010) and new theoretical paradigms (Kucuk, 2011) designed to evaluate marketing strategies. Buhalis (2003) quantifies the impact of ITC on the tourism industry by evaluating websites of companies, travel sites, travel agency websites, search engines, travel portals, travel guides, magazine and newspaper websites, communities and specialized sites, highlighting the share of users who visited them.

Much of the research has led to the conclusion that the effectiveness of marketing strategies can be determined by evaluating websites owned by firms (Diaz and Kutra, 2013). The studied literature has revealed some fundamental attributes associated with web sites: the utility (Fang and Holsapple, 2007), the informational content (Chang and Wang, 2011), credibility (Kim et al., 2011) and even the attractiveness of the site (Abdallah and Jaleel, 2015).

Baggio (2003) considers that the list of essential elements in the development of a website requires: to clearly define the site's objectives, to identify the target audience for the site to meet its informational needs, the availability of tools to make it easy to interact with the user, the ease of use, credibility, relevance and accuracy of the information presented.

In principle, online users focus on a few areas of interest specific to tourism activities: airlines and travel, hospitality, tour operators, travel agencies, online reservations and management systems.

### IV. ANALYSIS OF TRAFFIC INDICATORS AND CONTENT OF ROMANIAN TOURISM SITES

According to www.trafic.ro, which monitors the flows of visitors on webpages associated with different areas of interest, in January 2018, the top 5 ranking sites for tourism were www.vremea.net, www. tourinfo.ro (1st place in the Tourist Guides subcategory), www.amfostacolo.ro (2nd place in the Tourist Guides subcategory), romanianbeauties.ro (3rd place in the Tourist Guides subcategory) and www.infoturism.ro (1st place in the Tourist Agencies subcategory). www.trafic.ro calculates and makes available to its users an evolution index of the Romanian Internet, the so-called Net Index, a Laspeyres type index that is calculated weekly and monthly based on the number of hits on the measured sites. The calculation method is similar to that of stock indices, taking into account the disturbing factors. This indicator is important because it valorizes information in high demand and previously unavailable. Depending on the variables, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the evolution of online and offline events that can be included in subsequent marketing activities. Thus, in the field of tourism, Net Index analysis for January 2018 indicated 873 sites, with 24178107 hits.

An analysis of the evolution chart of the Net Index shows that the number of visits to tourist sites registered significant amplitude variations during the holidays and holidays period (June to September), which implies an adaptation of the marketing strategy through a promotion-oriented Web, more intense, for this period.

An analysis of the tourist sites according to the monthly variation of the number of visitors / impressions indicates the following: during the holidays and summer vacations in the summer months, the highest number of visitors is recorded by sites providing complex information on to the tourist destinations, namely: the structure of the offer on tourist destinations, pictures, rankings and ratings for the destinations, reviews of the destinations. This category includes the websites: www.turistinfo.ro and www.amfostacolo.ro. For periods in the off-season, the first places are occupied by sites that provide information on the weather in tourist destinations (www.vremea.net).



**Figure 1- Top 5 Romanian tourist sites from the point of view of user traffic in January 2018**
Source: http://www.trafic.ro/visitors/top-site-tourism/luna

The analysis of traffic indicators and tourist site charts highlights the large number of users (561,504 unique visitors, 1,015,211 visits and 7,407,819 hits in January 2018 for www.turistinfo.ro, 538,197 unique visitors, 911,849 visits and 3,771,498 hits for www.amfostacolo.ro at the same month), demonstrating a significant increase in Internet traffic for websites with diversified informational content on tourist offer.

A negative aspect of the content of the Romanian websites is that offer presentations lack information needed to solve potential crisis situations (police, pharmacy, hospital, etc.).

Most of the Romanian tourist sites offer pertinent reviews, calculating the degree of recommendation for a particular tourist destination on the basis of the ratings provided by the clients of that destination. From this point of view, the website www.amfostacolo.ro can be considered as an example of good practice.

**Figure 2 - Information facilities offered by www.amfostacolo.ro**
Source: http://amfostacolo.ro/croaziere-pareri,38/

Most tourist guide sites provide customer reviews and rating systems based on several criteria: services, accommodation, kitchen and dining, entertainment options, natural settings, etc. Reviews are accompanied by extensive descriptions of the location and photos provided by customers, as well as information on the journey time, the transport price, the age and typology of the customer (e.g. family with children). Based on these reviews, a recommendation score is quantified for that location.

Structuring of informational content on tourist areas makes it much easier for the user to search. Most sites have search filters on tourist destinations, regions, travel impressions, or impressions of accommodation. In the case of www.amfostacolo.ro, members of the site can ask questions for accommodation or travel suggestions that are directed to customers in the area of interest.

In the case of www.turistinfo.ro, which is the most popular direct booking site in Romania, with about 7606 active accommodation units, the index page contains an interactive map, search tools by destination, and top favorite destinations registered for the last period. Selecting a specific destination will result in a full list of options, with their general overviews, facilities and tariffs available depending on the selected period. The search is complemented by filters that allow you to choose a particular type of accommodation (hotels, hostels, villas, cottages, holiday homes, hotel apartments, etc.)
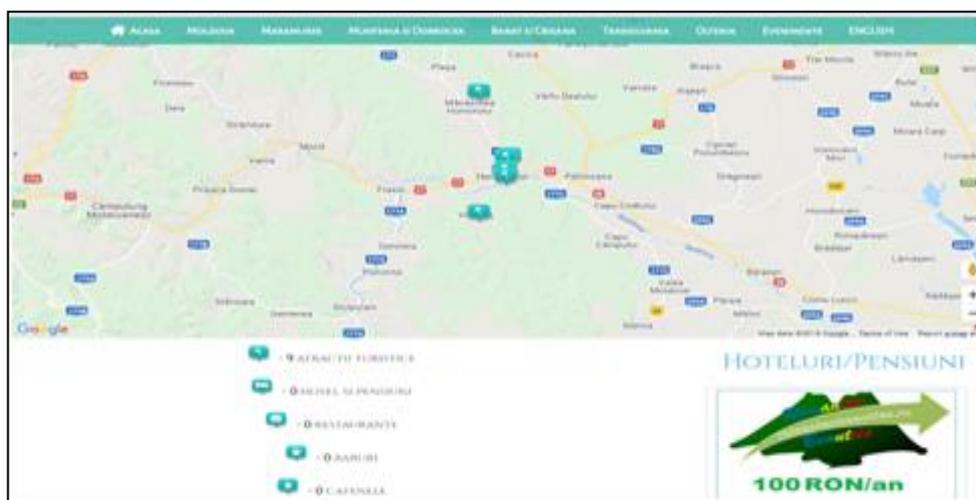


**Figure 3 - User routing facilities for www.romanianbeauties.ro**
Source: http://romanianbeauties.ro/en/cityPage.php?catId=1&cityId=5

An intensive-visual approach is provided by www. romanianbeauties.ro that structures the informational content on historical regions and allows the user to select the desired location from an interactive map. For each destination are displayed the main tourist attractions, existing hotels and pensions, bars, restaurants and cafes. However, the content analysis revealed the unavailability / incompleteness of information for many of the localities presented in relation to the presentations of other sites.

## V. ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE INFORMATIONAL CONTENT OF TOURISM SITES

To identify the elements through which the site's information interface and content can influence the behavior of the consumer of tourist services, a direct questionnaire containing 14 questions (8 answer questions, 3 open questions and 1 questionnaire) was administered during November 1, 2017-15 December 2017 3 scaled questions) to 112 people aged 18-50, frequently accessing travel sites and calling for online reservations in selecting tourist destinations.

The sample consisted of 61 women (54.46%) and 51 men (45.53%). The age structure was 72 respondents aged 18-24 (64.28%) and 50 respondents aged 25-50 years (35.72%).

To respond to the questionnaire questions, the 112 people had one week (the respondents were distributed in six groups, each group allocated a week from the research period) to access and consult the 5 sites under analysis , which appear on the top 5 places in the tourism section of the www.trafic.ro site.

To the question "What should informally provide a tourism site?", A total of 64 respondents (57.14%) consider that an honest hierarchy of tourist destinations based on criteria related to quality of services and price would be the most important aspect for them, 32 respondents (28.57%) envisage the presentation of the real characteristics of the destination, with the strong points but also with the less favorable elements, 14 respondents (12.5%) pointed out the necessity of existence on tourist sites, information that can be used in emergency situations.

96 respondents (85.71%) had previously visited one of the top 5 sites for selecting a tourist destination or for online reservations. 64 of the respondents (66.6%) who have contacted these sites consider that the information presented by these sites has been very useful to them and only 18 respondents (18.75%) consider that the information presented was not in line with reality.

The hierarchy of the attributes of tourism sites revealed that for the respondents the most important aspects regarding the interface and the informational content of the tourism sites are: the usefulness of the information (82.14%), the ease of use of the search facilities and the available filters (63.39%), credibility (58.03%), site attractiveness (45.53%), video and audio presentation of virtual guides (43.75%).

To the question, "What is the content component of the site that seemed most useful to you?", 90.17% considered that reviews of other clients were the most useful informational component of the sites analyzed.

59.82% of respondents believe it would be useful to present last minute deals on the searched destinations as well as discounts offered by the owners.

Only 16.96% of respondents use online bookings, with the vast majority preferring to access these sites to get the desired information about a tourist destination and eventually contacting the owners and administrators of the hostel. The vast majority of respondents (64.28%) justify avoiding online bookings by the fact that many Romanian tour operators do not respect or ignore this reservation type.

67.85% of respondents believe that site accommodation sites very often omit the unpleasant aspects of the destination in their presentations. Often, less attractive neighborhoods, such as industrial sites, heavy traffic or difficult access and inadequate roads, are not highlighted. Many exceptional tourist attractions in terms of location are situated in areas with low or no coverage for mobile networks. For users aged 18-24, the Internet and Wi-Fi facilities are extremely important in choosing a tourist destination.

Often, presentations on travel sites exaggerate the entertainment facilities offered by the location, especially in the case of agro-tourist accommodation, which is considered a negative aspect of the informational content of the sites. Often, out of desire to attract customers, the owners of the hostels promise turfs, playgrounds and gymnasiums fitted with maintenance appliances that either prove to be non-existent or unavailable or far from the image they tried to promote. About 42.85% of respondents have struck this type of problem.

Therefore, the credibility of the information content of tourism sites and its consistency with reality is an important factor in shaping the online travel services behavior modeling.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the analysis, the Romanian tourism sites offer the huge potential, yet not fully exploited, to attract new consumers of tourist services to the online environment through the size of the user traffic and the presented content. The design of these sites should be based on a design strategy based on the information requirements of the clients as well as on what they want to communicate with the tourist entities. Certainly,

online tourism is one of the directions to which tourism in Romania is also heading. There is a clear development trend of the mobile-based online area. A lot of tourist guide-type applications have appeared, and the number of mobile Internet connections increases at an exponential pace. There is also a growing maturity of the tourism blogosphere in Romania and an increase in the number of projects in this area. There are related initiatives in online tourism, such as those launched by travel agencies developing content projects such as blogs: www. travellbuzz.ro, www.tavelica.ro. Social media channels have become very important in promoting tourist destinations.

The concept behind the design of a tourism site is the honesty of the destination approach. Consumers are interested in finding details such as price, interest-specific activities, previous experiences at the destination, variety of activities offered, and promotions. A package of successful tourism services has to solve a need that needs to be identified and exploited in the content of a tourist site, but it must be visible and presented in a fair manner, to stimulate interest, to be appreciated by those who have tried it and desired in the future.

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