

## ONLINE SOCIAL ADVERTISING: PROMOTIONAL ELEMENTS POSTED BY TRAVEL AGENCIES FROM SUCEAVA CITY ON FACEBOOK FRIENDS' COMMUNITY

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### Abstract

*Like any other business in the travel and hospitality industry, it is essential for travel agencies to establish a good promotion policy, to be most noticeable among buyers of travel packages. The promotion – WOM (Word of Mouth), and especially Social Advertising via social networks offer a new perspective of economic development, based on participatory marketing policies that would break the barriers of classical marketing, perceived by tourists as unattractive and completely outdated socio-morally.*

*The new policy promoting travel agencies must be built in cyberspace, on account of social networks, which tend to overshadow the traditional ways of tourist feedback. In this relatively new conjuncture, travel agencies in Suceava are forced to adapt, offering potential customers in the online environment, tourism products and presenting highly attractive destinations in informal circumstances, with a seemingly purely informative character.*

*A research based on questionnaires, which benefited from dissemination on social networks, was carried out with the support of one affable group of 137 friends from Facebook community, and aimed to highlight the effectiveness of online promotion of travel agencies in Suceava and its driving force generated locally. We conclude that people from Suceava who are in the group of friends have constant activity on social networks (especially Facebook), have much knowledge about the travel agencies in Suceava that are active in the virtual environment, but are reluctant when they have the opportunity to sign in with the promotional offers of tour operators. It is therefore imperative that travel agencies in Suceava have a constant interaction with future tourists and respond as quickly as possible to the signals they receive from them, even if, at least for now, locally, there is no culture that fosters such promotion relations - offer for sale - purchase between travel agencies and potential customers, recruited on Facebook.*

**Key words:** *Social Advertising; Facebook; Travel Agency in Suceava Municipality; Promotion of Tourism Services; Loyalty.*

**JEL Classification:** *M31; L83, M39.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the online content is the main source of information on tourism, considerably reducing the other classical / traditional forms of media. Companies in the travel and tourism industry make contact with potential customers through the tools provided by social media (social networks, forums, blogs and other such online communities), various travel applications, platforms for online booking, information and promotional materials specific to online marketing.

All these information sources and distribution channels of tourist products are highly diversified and are used by more and more tourists (Tourism Economics, p.4).

The Internet has revolutionized the hospitality industry, both in terms of information sources and sales channels. The online marketing, the photos and the feedbacks from tourists promote and popularize destinations and tourist attractions worldwide. The online reviews of the travel consumers about: dream destinations, resorts, restaurants, conditions of accommodation, cuisine and hospitality of the locals have become vital for tourism entrepreneurship (Stanciu, Costea, 2012); because future tourists purchase decisions are influenced by them.

The fact that tourists post pictures, videos and share their real experiences, in their virtual circle of friends is beneficial for both suppliers of tourism products, the management of tourist destinations and for potential tourists. All these help diversify and improve the quality of the offered tourism products and services. Direct interaction with tourists and a receptive attitude towards the online appreciations or critics, may result in an increase in customer confidence in the offered tourism products and, at the same time, in the sales (Tourism Economics, p.13).

Increase of competitiveness on the global tourism market encourages travel agencies to invest more and more in promotion (Nedelea 2003, p.125), resources, information and quality in order to obtain a bigger satisfaction from tourists. It is important for any business in tourism to be in trend with the latest technology (Batinić, 2013, p.1).

Due to the popularity that the available online, 24 hours out of 24 virtual platforms and applications enjoy, increasingly more tourism organizations, such as hotels, resorts, airlines or travel agencies have adopted the Internet as an indispensable part of their marketing and communication strategy.

For improving the quality of online services it is necessary to continuously adapt marketing strategies to the needs of tourists based on their satisfaction measurement, experiences and behavior (Crnojevac, Gugić et al, 2010, p.42). There is a growing number of research, dealing with issues of tourism websites quality aimed at the identification of the key elements and the development of some successful websites in a new business environment, the online.

According to Cismaru (2012, p.42) "current online social networks (social networks) are the online communication platforms that use software tools, work similarly to natural social networks, based on direct interpersonal contact. Most social networks are built on a specific framework that includes the profile, friends, posts, groups and a set of tools that differentiate the network and constitutes the element of attraction for the public".

There are five key features of social networks which give them, at the same time, their uniqueness (Dube, 2009):

- are based on users - without them social networks could not exist;
- are very interactive;
- are built on the concept of community;
- promote the concept of relationship;
- are profoundly influenced by the emotional factor.

Naturally, the term "social networking" is associated with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, however, the complexity and variety of the concept extends well outside the three vectors of virtual interaction. The online environment instantly offers many other interaction and collaboration alternatives. According to White (2012) There are 7 major categories of social networks:

- *The multimedia social networking.* These online platforms facilitate the distribution of videos and photos. The most popular in this category are: YouTube - video, Flickr - Photo;
- *Social networks based on social connections.* Users of such online platforms are in permanent contact with friends and family members. This category includes Facebook, Twitter, Google+, MySpace;
- *Social networks that promotes and encourages hobbies.* One of the main reasons people use the Internet is to search for topics related to common hobbies. Users can find a whole community of people around the world who share the same passion and the same interests. It is considered that social networks focused on hobbies are most popular; Such networks are Oh My Bloom, Sport shouting, Strava;
- *Informational Social networking.* In this case, informational communities consist of people seeking answers to everyday problems. Whatever the problem that the group members have, a simple web search helps them find numerous blogs, websites and forums discussing and providing information on the searched subject. Representative of this segment are SuperGreenMe, Do-It-Yourself Community;
- *Professional social networking.* These networks are designed to provide social and professional development opportunities. Some of them integrate a series of forums for professionals, while others are focused on specific occupations or activities. LinkedIn, Classroom 2.0 or Nurse Connect are some of the most representative such networks;
- *The Educational social media* are those platforms in which students collaborate for various projects, pursuing research activities for the school, interact with teachers to address several types of specific needs / issues of school. These networks are becoming very popular and used within the education system today, some examples of such networks are: TheStudentRoom, TheMathForum, ePALS School Blog;
- *Academic social networks.* Researchers who want to share studies and compare their results with those of their colleagues prefer specialized networks in this area. The most popular online communities for the academic environment are: Google Academic, Connotea Colaborative Research, ResearchGate, Academia.edu.

These are only a few examples of the many opportunities by which Internet users can engage in dialogue. The fact that there are so many ways to connect with people can be very interesting and beneficial, but it is essential to proceed cautiously. However, the fact that nobody knows exactly who is really behind a public

profile can be dangerous. From this point of view it is very important for users to show caution when posting certain information and personal data (White, 2012), regardless of the social network they use.

Social networks play an important role in the strategy to promote travel agencies since they are frequently used by consumers around the world. If used properly, they can be one of the most effective tools of the strategy to promote travel agencies (Foster, 2015).

One of the most important benefits of using social networks (especially those based on social connections) to promote travel agencies is the fact that they contribute to making the agency name a trusted brand (Stanciu, 2012, p.111). Agencies can easily create a good online reputation for themselves by the simple fact that tourists can express their appreciations about the quality of services provided by agencies, can share their travel experiences and even criticize in a constructive manner. The positive / impartial feedback travel agencies receive from tourists who bought tour packages also helps to attract new customers, as people inform online in advance before making a trip (McNicholas, 2011).

Modern tourism marketing relies more than ever on social and human relations and is increasingly often associated with Social Advertising. This subtle and persuasive manner of promotion implies that, instead of convincing someone directly or personally going to sell travel services, talking to a friend that would recommend you. This kind of advertisement - WOM - Word of Mouth - is the one who makes the law today (Constantinescu, 2013).

At the level of Suceava municipality there are a considerable number of travel agencies (32 units) (NTA, 2016), given the city's population (92 121 inhabitants) and its surface (52 km<sup>2</sup>). Most travel agencies are classified as tour operator (20 units - 62.5% of total), having this quality, agencies should target their activity on the design and marketing of tourism packages for local consumers. However, 97% of these carry out a reseller agency specific activity, focusing mainly on marketing the outgoing lump voyages more and the incoming less.

## **II. SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE PROMOTIONAL MEASURES OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN SUCEAVA**

Social networks play an important role in the strategy of promoting tourism agencies in Suceava because it contributes directly to increasing their visibility among people living in Suceava buyers of travel packages, and can have a direct impact on the purchasing decisions of potential customers. Travel agencies in Suceava attach different to promotion on social networks and base their marketing strategy depending on the goals envisaged. Social networks, especially Facebook, have become a specific online marketing tool, and this research aimed to highlight the extent to which people from Suceava know the online activity of local travel agencies, how they promote their offer, how they interact with potential buyers and which segment of the population is affected with preference by the promotion in the online environment.

The justification for such an approach is based on the fact that social networks tend to become a veritable source of information to the masses, a vector of communication and therefore a more easy way to disseminate successes and personal achievements. Internet users spend most of their free time socializing on social networks, accessing the hottest games (Candy Crash Saga, Bubble Witch Saga, Dragon City ș.a.) or by zapping the user accounts.

For travel agencies in Suceava these social networks provide multiple benefits because they are an effective and economical means of promotion of the tourist offer, allowing a permanent interaction with tourists, increasing the confidence of potential buyers of travel packages and last but not least, even leading to customer loyalty. At the same time, costs with the promotion are significantly reduced since the printing of catalogs and booklets in large print runs is no longer absolutely necessary.

The fact that people are influenced by the opinions of others can increase the number of potential buyers of travel packages, as they see in social networks other tourists that were satisfied with the quality of services provided by travel agencies in Suceava and, in turn, will be tempted to purchase travel packages rather than practice tourism on their own (unorganized). Thus, there is a strong influence on decisions to purchase tour packages offered by travel agencies among citizens in Suceava.

This research was conducted using a questionnaire containing 14 items, a statistical tool uploaded on the profile site iSondaje.ro and which benefited dissemination using the social network Facebook. The target group was represented by people from the friends list of the authors. The questionnaire was applied during May-June 2016.

Of the 150 questionnaires sent to people from the friends list on Facebook, I received answers from 137 of them. A total of 13 people who did not want to answer our requests, reasoned that it is a waste of time or that they are not interested in participating in this kind of research.

The purpose of the research was grafted on the highlighting of the effectiveness of social media promoting of tourism agencies and their impact on the decision to purchase travel packages among the population of Suceava.

The main objectives of the research are:

- measuring the frequency of accessing social networks by users in Suceava;
- Identifying the travel agencies in Suceava that promote their tourism offers on social networks;
- quantifying the degree of confidence that people in Suceava have in advertising online and travel offers posted on Facebook;
- measuring how online promotion would attract more buyers of travel packages among the inhabitants of Suceava;
- identifying the correspondence between the frequency that the inhabitants of Suceava present in the Social Media call for the services of a travel agency promoting their tourism offer in Facebook;
- identifying the segment of the population that is most interested and attracted by the online promoting of travel agencies in Suceava;
- identifying the motivations behind the interest of the population segment identified in the preceding paragraph.

All these objectives, envisaged for the implementation of this research contribute to highlighting the main aspects of online promoting of travel agencies in Suceava.

To achieve the research I started from a number of assumptions, given the fact that social networks are accessed, both by the population of Suceava and by the travel agencies that operate locally. The most relevant are:

- people from Suceava spend at least one hour of their free time on social networks;
- Most travel agencies in Suceava have Facebook account, but no Instagram, Twitter or Google+ accounts
- people from Suceava know most of the travel agencies that operate in the municipality of residence, but only use their services occasionally;
- people from Suceava are familiar with how travel agencies promote themselves on Facebook;
- travel agencies in Suceava promote their tourist offer on Facebook in different ways from exposing images to presenting of offers and disguised advertising (indirect posts made by means of some false customers);

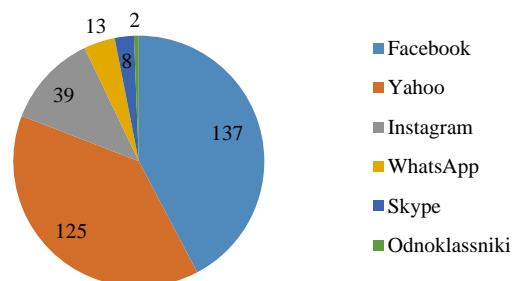
Following the questionnaire, and quantifying the results we are able to highlight the most relevant aspects relating to the promotion activity of tourism agencies in Suceava on social networks - especially Facebook - the efficiency of online promotion, and how it influences the decision of the population to purchase travel packages offered by agencies in Suceava.

When asked which social networks they know, respondents nominated 13 (Table 1), but many of them stating that they use several such networks.

**Table 1. - Social networks known and used by respondents in Suceava**

No.	Social network	Number of respondents
1	Facebook	137
2	Yahoo	125
3	Instagram	39
4	Twitter	16
5	WhatsApp	13
6	Skype	8
7	Snapchat	7
8	Viber	6
9	Tumblr	3
10	LinkedIn	2
11	Odnoklassniki	2
12	YouTube	2
13	Badoo	1

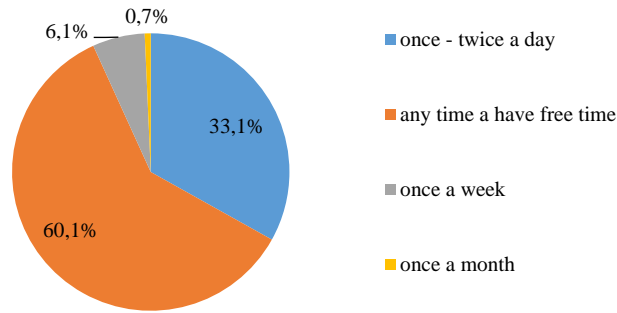
Source: Own processing of data obtained from the questionnaire



**Figure 1. Social networks in which respondents have active accounts**

Considering the data in Table 1, it is noted that all 137 respondents are familiar with the social network Facebook. Among the most popular social networks are: Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Skype, Viber and Snapchat. The presence of the Odnoklassniki network also draws our attention, very popular in Russia and the former Soviet region, with a 2.0 used vector web, most likely, by the students from Moldova who follow their university studies in Suceava.

Of all the social networks listed, respondents claim to have accounts only on 6 of the 13 social networks. Over 60% of them stated that they access social networks whenever they have little free time, 33.1% of users visit social networks once or twice a day, and about 6% of respondents access social networks only once a week. One person says it uses social networks rarely, about once a month (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 - The frequency of accessing social networks by users in Suceava**

This situation allows us to conclude that people participating in this research have a constant activity on social networks, the vast majority are connected online to the internet and certainly not a day goes without them socializing, finding out what's new in the life of their friends, upload photos or share videos or other personal materials / interesting from their point of view.

The fact that social networks have become a vector of promotion for all businesses, regardless of their field of work, significantly reduced the marketing costs and encouraged pseudodirect contact (Visually perceptive direct contact) with consumer products and services and the exclusive ones.

Promotional and persuasive activities in the web 2.0 era are based largely on the likes, sharings, comments and tags of the users. Therefore, wanting to know how often users in Suceava open / view the online ads on social networks. Thus, 42.4% of respondents claim that they rarely open online ads, while 20.4% of them never open advertisements that appear within social networks. Less than a third of respondents (27.7%) only occasionally and selectively open the advertisements posted on social networks, while only 9.5% often or always open advertisements launched on the network.

About 90% of those interviewed (of which 19% have absolutely no trust) said they were reluctant when it comes to the online advertising they meet on social networks because they either consider it to not present any interest or are a waste of time to watch, either that it distorts reality, or that anyone indirectly benefits only from accessing these spots, or may contain viruses or malware attached. Only 12.4% of the people questioned have given a sufficient degree of trust to online advertising, and in this case special attention is given to those in the tourism or those on the benefits of the hospitality industry.

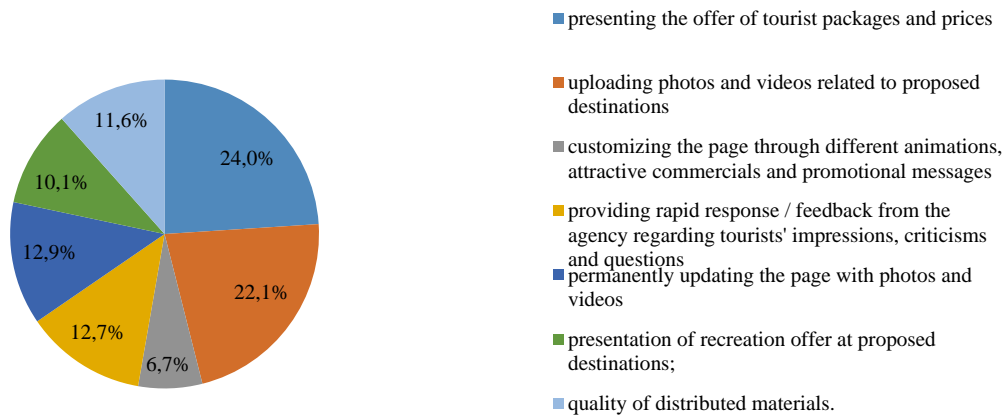
Also, 21.9% of the total respondents say it would be unlikely for them to seek the services of a travel agency in Suceava who would promote their tourism offer within social networks unless it would be recommended by someone known and only 3.6% said they would certainly turn to the services of a travel agency if it would promote its tourism offer through social networks.

Knowing that many travel agencies in Suceava have constant activity on social networks and are aware of the novelties and the emerging trends that occur in this field, we were surprised to find that 40.1% of respondents admitted that they have never resorted to the services of a travel agency (in Suceava) and in a lesser extent those who also promote their tourism offer in social networks.

A fifth of respondents (21.9%) say they have used or have been tempted to contact the representatives of travel agencies after seeing their offers distributed on Facebook.

Knowing the benefits that social media offers users - to upload photos and videos anywhere and anytime, share various materials fast communication between people - and taking into account the classical elements related to the promotion, I recommended a list of specific items of Social Media Marketing and I asked people who participated in the research to rank them in terms of their importance (Figure 3).

The most important aspects for a good promotion in social networks are associated by the questioned subjects with presenting the offer of travel packages and the prices charged in the most objective and attractive manner (24%), by uploading photos and videos to promote the destinations concerned, but especially with pictures showing the facilities of tourist resorts (22.1%). Besides the description of the destinations through images 10.1% of those questioned suggest that recreational opportunities available during their stay, adds a touch of notoriety and can constitute a favourable incentive for tourist consumption. Not least, it is not enough for travel agencies to regularly upload various promotional materials, but it is necessary for them to have a good resolution, as confirmed by 11.6% of respondents.



**Figure 3 - Useful elements for a good promotion of tourism agencies in Suceava through social media**

In line with the expected an explicitly highlighted results within the study hypotheses we consider that 50.8% of respondents know the travel agencies in Suceava that promote their tourism offer within social networks, while the remaining 48.2% stating that they are not aware of this. The most frequently mentioned travel agents with an offer present on social networks we can mention: Christian Tour (28 references), Life Tour (19 references), Eximtur (15 references), West Travel (15 references), Champion Tour (12 references), Iason Tourism (10 references), Monny Travel, Bilco Travel, Paralela 45 and Simply Travel with 5-7 references for each. There were a total of 14 travel agencies named in the municipality of Suceava, active on Facebook and other social media.

A percentage of 75.2% respondents state that people aged between 20-30 are most receptive and interested in the tourism offers of travel agencies that are promoted within social networks. The motivations underlying these results are manifold, among which the most important are: these people spend so much time on social networks, are extremely familiar with current technology (internet, gadgets - laptops, smartphones, tablets etc..) have a higher predisposition to travel, the convenience and wish to save the time they would be wasting while going to the agency, that makes them more receptive to the online promotion policy, are accustomed to buying online, can find information about various destinations from other travelers through social networks.

Not in the least, 22.6% of respondents believe that the segment between 30-40 years would be more attracted to online promotion, the main reasons being related to the fact that they have higher incomes than those in the 20-30 segment, and the fact that they are integrated into the workforce for a relatively short time, having no spare time to allow them to go to one of the travel agencies in Suceava, their entourage and circle of friends causes them to inform themselves in terms of tourism, predominantly through social networks.

To better emphasizing what the Social Media of travel agencies in Suceava implies, I accessed and viewed the Facebook pages of the 14 agencies listed by the respondents, the most active five of them being: Champion Tour, Monny Travel, Bilco Travel, Simply Travel and Dream Travel. It is noted that of all units with a high visibility online, the only one situated among the best known travel agencies in the city is Champion Tour.

By accessing the Facebook pages of these agencies I analyzed the aspects of the online activity that is specific to this social network, where they post photos with tourists on excursion, with accommodation establishments in Romania and abroad, with destinations in our country and abroad, if they promote Bucovina as a tourist destination, the consistency of promotional offers, the number of likes they received, whether they received positive reviews from tourists, the posting frequency of tourism images, how quickly they respond to the messages they receive from tourists and which are the most promoted destinations.

Champion Tour travel agency has a constant activity on Facebook. They upload photos daily or at least every two days. The main promoted destinations are Antalya (Turkey), Zakynthos (Greece) and Golden Sands (Bulgaria). They Upload photos of Last Minute promotional offers, All Inclusive stays in accommodation establishments of the countries mentioned above. We found that they do not promote destinations in Romania or Bucovina as a tourist destination. They also promote promotional offers with 15% discount on flights of Blue Air. They intensely popularize the direct flights from Suceava to Antalya (charter) and from Suceava to Milan (low cost).

The Agency constantly interacts with the tourists and answers their questions within a few hours. It enjoys a good reputation and demonstrates professionalism, a fact supported by the large number of likes received 4976 and several positive reviews: *"I recommend it as the best travel agency that meets tourists with a flawless perfectionism and professionalism"* (follower on Facebook and anonymous client of the agency).

Moreover, Champion Tour also introduced on the local market in Suceava a Tourist counseling service at the client's office and the provision of tourism services for the Corporate segment. The following are included in

these services: booking tickets for flights of line and low-cost, hotel reservations in the country and abroad, rent-a-car services, private transfers to / from the airport, issuance of travel insurance (medical, baggage or Storno), booking train tickets for domestic and / or external flights, VIP services, incentive programs and team-building.

*Simply Travel* agency promotes online, on Facebook, several Last Minute Deals for destinations such as Antalya (Turkey), Crete, Santorini, Zakynthos, Corfu, Rhodes (Greece), Bulgaria, Mamaia, Neptun (Romania); tours / pilgrimages to Israel, Mount Athos (Greece), Spain and promotes special offers for line or low-cost air flights.

In order to preserve a permanent interaction with tourists and provide them with information about the tourist offer, travel agents of the unit communicate via the network and respond to messages during the day. So, at the end June 2016, the page of the Simply Travel Agency has a number of 1,396 likes.

*Monny Travel* agency is loading daily on Facebook promotional offers specific to accommodation units in tourist destinations such as Antalya (Turkey), Golden Sands (Bulgaria), Rhodes, Zakynthos, Thassos (Greece); Early Booking for pilgrimages to Israel, Greece; Last Minute for accommodation establishments in Crete Island, exotic holidays in Maldives, Dubai - Abu Dhabi tours. The Agency promotes national tour packages for accommodation units in Romania, for instance All Inclusive hotels in the Jupiter area. In June 2016, the Facebook page of Monny Travel Agency had 1,382 likes.

*Bilco Travel* agency meets potential tourists with various tour packages promoted within the Facebook social network. The most attractive destinations included in the online offer of the agency are: Antalya (Turkey), Thassos (Greece) and Punta Cana (Dominican Republic). In terms of marketing policy, the agency deals with a pragmatic promotional offer, like, pay for one person and the other goes for free. At the end of June 2016, the Agency counted a number of 439 likes on Facebook.

*Dream Travel* agency predominantly posts Early Booking offers with discounts of up to 35% for destinations in Greece - Thassos, Zakynthos, Rhodes and Bulgaria; exotic vacations in Punta Cana (Dominican Republic), Maldives; special offers on accommodation units in Romania (Mamaia and Felix thermal baths ) and cruises in Asia. However, the agency's online activity was reduced significantly since January 2016. The page of the Agency had at the beginning of July 2016 a total of 2717 likes.

As a marketing strategy, all 5 agencies use photos with tourists on holiday, immortalized in comforting poses or involved in various activities with an active character. The sea, the beach, the sun and the tourists are the strongly promoted elements in the Social Media area, by the 5 travel agencies in Suceava that are active on Facebook. Except Dream Travel Agency, all other four agencies have direct and constant interaction with their Facebook followers (friends) / their potential tourists.

Unfortunately, none of the five agencies, active in the online environment, promotes Bucovina as a tourist destination. We believe that this represents a loss for local tourism as Bucovina can offer a lot in terms of tourism. Pragmatically speaking, the national tourist destinations, so including Bucovina, are not sufficiently attractive financially considering the fact that the commissions obtained from the sale of standard domestic voyages cannot be compared with those obtained from the sale outgoing voyages.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Promoting tourism services via social networks is important for travel agencies in Suceava, which is confirmed by the majority of people participating in the survey. At the same time, it has an influence on the decision to purchase travel packages and, as expected, the most interested segment of age, with such a promotion is between 20 and 30 years. The motivations behind this interest are manifold, but the most obvious are those relating to the constant activity of young people on social networks and being aware of everything that the online environment means.

Currently, social networking offers many opportunities to travel agencies in Suceava. They should use all the tools provided by Social Media and also to combine classical promoting that is specific to the hospitality industry with the modern one, the online in order to make their tourist offer as visible as possible and attract more buyers.

On the other hand, not all travel agencies in Suceava have a Facebook page, while some of them have active accounts, but do not post anything. We believe that travel agencies in Suceava should consider online promotion because the costs are significantly reduced compared with conventional versions and online visibility among potential buyers of travel packages is much higher.

Even though the demand for summer destinations such as Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria is growing, we consider that travel agencies in Suceava should promote the National tourism offer with greater intensity and support the specific consumption of destinations such as the Romanian seaside, Danube Delta, Transylvania and Bukovina.

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