

The Presence and Activity on Facebook of the Informative Travel Organizations in Romania

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Abstract

In the context of a general increase in tourism activity and in the number of trips, and given that the consumption preferences of tourists are changing rapidly, the need for information becomes urgent and there is a concomitant development of public and private organizations involved in providing the necessary information to tourists who reach for the first time a tourist destination. This category includes tourist information centers (TICs), tourism promotion associations and tourism clubs.

Being intensively based on information, the activity of informative tourism organizations suffers multiple changes, often radical, proving to be a favorable environment for the implementation of new information technologies due to their role in terms of providing and sharing information. In this sense, Facebook has special implications, being considered one of the fastest and most effective tools of Social Media, especially regarding the distribution of information and the promotion of products and services.

The major objective of this research aims to highlight the stage of development of informative tourism organizations in Romania through the filter of Facebook visibility and communication. In this regard, we analysed the current state of presence and communication on Facebook of 109 tourism entities from 25 different counties of Romania: 43 tourist information centers, 44 entities with the name of association (tourism promotion association, ecotourism associations etc.), 18 travel clubs and 4 tourist information point/offices.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a dynamic field that relies on both services characterized by intangibility and communication. The number of people who believe that tourism is a pleasant way of leisure and employment recovery is in constant growth. As a result, the number of travellers is also rising and gives to the tourism industry an important role in a country's general economic system. Moreover, efforts are made at all levels to further stimulate tourism activity, information playing a fundamental role in this case.

In other words, tourism, like any other economic services branch, has two components: an informational one and a physical one, but we know that often the travel information component is dominant. Moreover, the need for information becomes urgent in the context of a general increase in tourism activity and in the number of passengers, especially given that consumers' preferences are changing rapidly. Inevitably, there is a development of public or private organizations (for profit or NGO) involved in providing the necessary information to tourists who reach for the first time a tourist destination. This category includes national tourist information centers (NTICs), public tourist information centers (TICs) and private tourist information centers (beyond the control of a local or central authority), tourist information points, association for tourism promotion or tourism clubs.

Being intensively based on information, the activity of informative tourism organizations suffers multiple changes, often radical, proving to be a favorable environment for the

implementation of new information technologies due to their role in terms of providing and sharing information. Given that the Internet is in the center of some social and economic changes that are reflected in the contemporary society, we can say unequivocally that tourist information centers and other informative tourism organizations have been and continue to be the subject of a serious challenge with the development of new information technologies. It has become increasingly obvious that modern tourism development and, thereby, the activity of the operators involved in this sector, is practically impossible without the internet connection.

2. Literature review

Tourist Information Centers are responsible in terms of tourist information and promotion of local tourism products and services, thereby exerting a direct impact on the economic and social development of the region they belong to (Ballantyne et al., 2009, p.778). For tourists, fairly large distances from the place of residence to the destination complicates their familiarization with the tourist offer of the destination in question, the role of informative tourism entities become even more important in these circumstances (Plzakova et al., 2013).

All these are entities that have a priority to present all travel offers. On their responsibility we find: tourists and other stakeholders information, providing support in finding accommodation and catering solutions, promotion and, in special cases, sale of tourist programs, providing promotional materials (flyers, posters), accompanying guests, delegations and travel journalists in tours/circuits, specific activities of internal and external marketing, market research, services evaluation and claims management, provision and development of quality tourism products and services, cooperation with the local/ regional institutions for a good management of events etc. (Hildebrandt et al., 2004).

John D'Ambra and Nina Mistilis (2009) believe that the organizations responsible for tourists information play a major role in promoting a destination, because of their unique position as information providers. But with the changes to the IT infrastructure, the coverage of these entities and how to respond to the requests of tourists are also undergoing changes.

In the context of informatization and popularity of the online environment, the objective of the information centers (regardless of their nature and type of promoted tourism) is to provide integrated, attractive and interactive services and to meet the demands and expectations of tourists (Tsekouropoulos et al., 2012). The phenomenon has a fulminant evolution, especially with the innovation in the field of internet, which was the emergence of the concept of Web 2.0, which implies that the information be transmitted on the channel many-to-many (more specifically, the content is generated directly by users, for users) and not on the channel one-to-many (typical Web 1.0 concept represented especially by the emergence and development of websites) (O'Reilly, 2005).

We have witnessed an exponential growth of social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Google+ or Instagram, under a common concept - Social Media. At a first glance, this had no relevance for tourism organizations due to unstructured and informal content, but today more and more organizations with tourism profile use the Internet or social networks to communicate with the external environment (Stanciu & Costea, 2012).

Social Media, and therefore Facebook, is a media channel through which the tourism organization strengthens its reputation on the market, in a period in which tourists are becoming more sophisticated (Popescu & Grefenstette, 2011). At the same time, as revealed in the study of Gretzel and Xiang (2010), Social Media plays a very important role, becoming a source of information for tourists and generating considerable challenges for informative tourism organizations.

3. Research methodology

A starting point in the realization of this research was the expansion of TICs, tourist information points and offices, and tourism associations in the recent years; besides the fact that

their number has increased considerably, we can say that their involvement in the promotion of Romanian tourism is undoubtedly much higher.

The major objective of the present study aims to highlight the stage of development of informative tourism organizations in Romania through the filter of visibility and communication on Facebook and, therefore, to highlight their familiarization with the techniques and methods specific to this online instrument. A subsidiary objective is trying to estimate the importance which tourist information centers and other similar organizations dedicate to the integration of certain items of social media (like Facebook Like Box, buttons for "Sharing") on their websites, and to determine the Facebook page updating level, and also the degree of popularity on the social network of the organizations mentioned above.

In this regard, we analysed the current state of presence and communication on Facebook for 109 informative tourism entities located in 25 Romanian counties, selected on the basis of tourist traffic indicators for the period between 2007 and 2013. The structure of the 109 organizations analysed is: 43 tourist information centers (39.45%), 44 entities with the name of the association for tourism promotion, ecotourism promotion, mountaineering promotion etc. (40.36%), 18 tourism clubs (16.51%) and 4 tourist information points/offices (3.67%) (Figure 1).

Note that for the target group formation we collected data published by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration on www.mdrt.ro website, data from the National Tourism Authority and National Institute of Statistics and based on information obtained empirically by successive searches using the Google search engine and various travel portals.



Figure 1. Selected Romanian counties in order to strengthen the target group of tourism organizations with informative role
Source: authors

Specific objectives and hypotheses around which the whole research approach articulates are presented below:

Objective 1: Determining the online visibility of tourism entities with informative role from Romania, including their presence on Facebook;

Hypothesis 1: More than half of all informative tourism organizations have their own presentation website. The presence of these entities on social sites is quite shy, tourist information centers and other organizations with similar role not being familiar enough with Facebook.

Objective 2: Estimating the importance of integrating Social Media elements (Facebook Like Box type buttons, "Sharing" buttons etc.) on informative tourism organizations websites;

Hypothesis 2: The vast majority of the organizations under investigation do not have as a priority the implementation of Social Media elements on their websites.

Objective 3: Determining the update level of Facebook pages and the popularity on this social network of the Romanian travel organizations with informative role;

Hypothesis 3: We appreciate that less than half of the analysed entities attach a great importance to updating their Facebook pages, hence the relatively low degree of popularity for the vast majority of the investigated organizations.

4. Results of research

Before planning their presence and activity in Social Media, travel organizations with the role of information and tourism promotion must ensure their online visibility through a website, because the website development is the first step in gaining online success, especially in the context of an increasing information demand of tourists, individual or organizational (Rosca et al., 2004). Thus, in terms of efficiency in cyberspace, a website is the starting point in defining objectives and strategies on medium and long term.

According to research results (Figure 2), almost 68% of the entities with tourist information and promotion role own a proper site for the presentation of the work, while 18.35%, most probably do not realize in pragmatic terms the usefulness of such promotional tools. The situation can be cataloged as quite worrying, especially if we consider that today, due to the fulminant development of smartphones, more and more tourists choose to seek information on the Internet, even during their trip to a new destination (Wang et al. 2012).

No doubt that an activity, even prolific in the offline environment, of a travel information center or tourism association can be dimmed and therefore directly affected by the lack of online presence. It is worth mentioning that some of the organizations that were the subject of this research (13.76%) choose for various reasons (financial, organizational or legal) to promote their activity through the municipality or county official website (the City Hall's website or the County Council's website). This category typically includes tourist information centers founded and operated by local authorities, with a lack of financial autonomy and thus online autonomy.

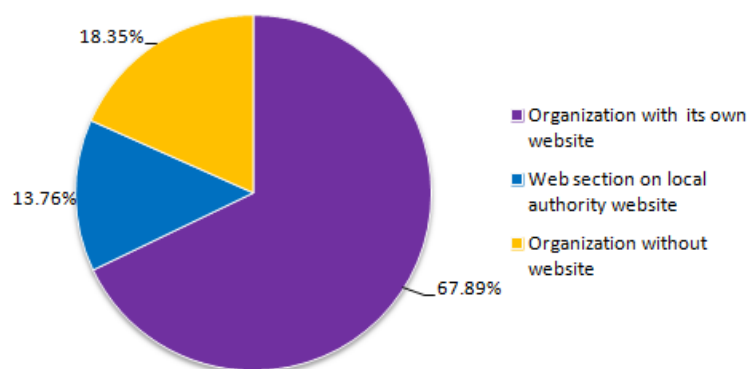


Figure 2. Online presence through a website of Romanian tourism entities with informative role
Source: authors

Regarding the integration of Social Media elements (Facebook Like Box, "Sharing" buttons) on the official websites, according to the study conducted, only 42.05% of the organizations that were the subject of research, understand how these elements work and how they can help improve the activity, the remaining approximately 58% neglecting these essential aspects of Social Media popularization process.

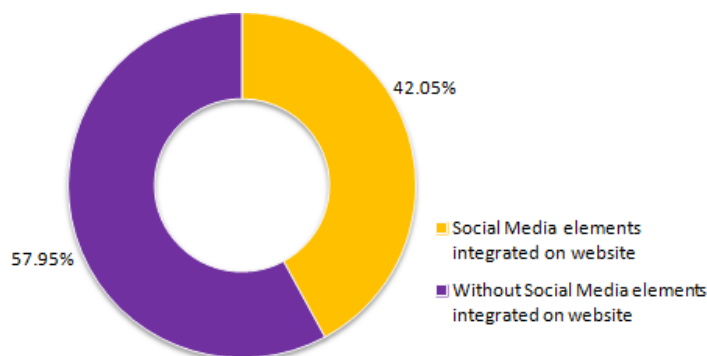


Figure 3. Integration of Social Media elements on tourism organization's websites
Source: authors

Currently, in Romania there are about 8 million Facebook users (Facebrands.ro). In the recent years there has been a spectacular increase of this phenomenon, which shows how important is the use of social networks for an economic and even for a non-profit entity in order to make the brand known or to promote an activity (DailyBusiness.ro).

Also, according to Facebrands statistics of 15 October 2015, the Facebook penetration rate in the population is 39.76% and in the total number of Romanian Internet users is 82.97%. The statistics affirm the preconceived ideas of skeptics that the websites of socialization have no relevance for tourism organizations because the contained information in these websites is unstructured, inconsistent in terms of content and irrelevant for tourism, or newer, the ideas of those who believe that the majority of Facebook users are young and very young (under 18). From Figure 4 we can see that the segment of major users (over 18 years) totals 88.3% of the total number of Facebook users and these users may have at any time the quality of tourists.

And globally, the statistics show that Facebook has relevance, especially if we take into account factors such as: the total number of Facebook users - 1.4 billion (an annual increase of approx. 13%) and an utilization rate of Facebook on mobile devices - 87% (socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook), or the age of the users - 30% represents people in the age segment of 25-34 years, as the situation registered in Romania.

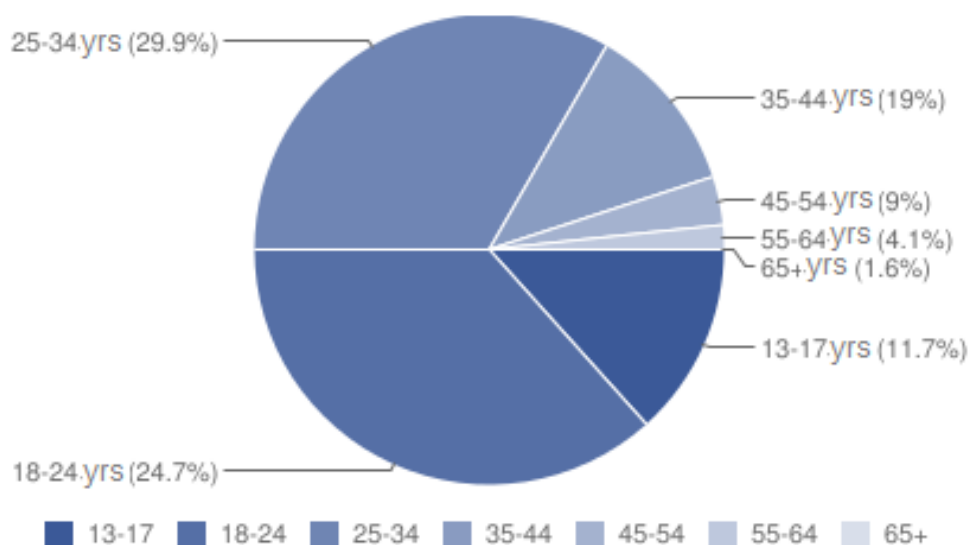


Figure 4. Facebook adoption rate by age group in Romania
Source: Facebrands.ro

As we can see in Figure 5, the presence on Facebook of the organizations involved in information and promotion of tourism activities (54.12%) is lower than the rate of online presence through a website (67.89%), which broadly confirms that Social Media visibility is the second step in the strategy of online business promotion of entities that were subject of this research. The fact that 99% of the tourist organizations present on Facebook already have a website that promotes their own work confirms the previous statement.

It is true that in the current economic environment, the presence of an organization on social networks has become prerequisite to ensure competitiveness, but is not far enough. We consider more important an active communication in social media, where the tourist information center or other entity with similar functions can communicate with tourists interested in a particular tourist destination. According to the research, 81.35% of the analysed entities have understood the role and the opportunities of this communication medium, frequently updating their Facebook pages with new information, photos, and offers, and constantly communicating with the users.

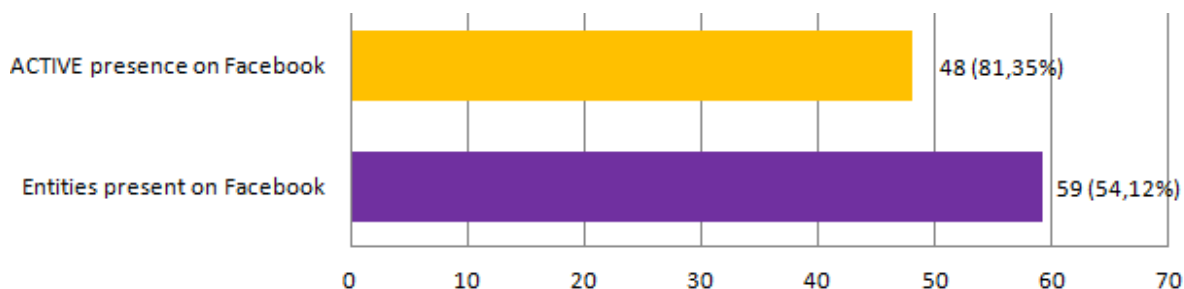


Figure 5. The attendance rate and active communication on Facebook of the Romanian tourism organizations with informative role

Source: authors

In terms of the number of likes/fans on Facebook, the most popular 10 organizations involved in tourist information and in the promotion of various tourism activities are presented in the table below. We find that in the top of Facebook popularity there are entities from almost all areas of the country, which demonstrates that there is not a pole of popularity in Social Media constituted in a specific area, developed in terms of tourism activities (Brasov, Bucovina and Maramures etc.). However, we can notice that the most popular organizations in terms of number of likes on Facebook are very active in this medium of communication. Moreover, these entities also have their own websites, where specific social media elements are integrated to help the information distribution directly to the users.

However, it should be noted that any correlation between the activity of the tourism organizations in Social Media, as the independent and factorial variable and their popularity on social networks (in terms of number of likes), as the effect variable, cannot be determined, because the popularity on Social Media is also determined by other factors including the age of the Facebook pages, the paid advertising campaigns, specific conjectural environment etc.

Table 1 - Top 10 most popular TICs/associations/tourism clubs on Facebook

COUNTY	TIC/ASSOCIATION/ CLUB	WEBSITE	WEB ADDRESS	SOCIAL MEDIA ELEMENTS	LIKE	ACTIVE ACCOUNTS/ PAGES
Neamț	TIC Piatra Neamț	YES	viziteazaneamt.ro	YES	26246	YES
Argeș	MIRAMONT Touristical-Ecological Association Turistic-	YES	miramont.ro	YES	19602	YES
Argeș	Montana Carpati Association	YES	carpati.org	YES	10328	YES
Alba	TIC Alba Iulia	YES	apulum.ro	YES	7813	YES
Vâlcea	"Kogayon" Association from Costesti-Valcea	YES	kogayon.ro	YES	6501	YES
Cluj	Youth Tourism Association ADEONA Cluj-Napoca	YES	adeona.ro	YES	5485	YES
Sibiu	Sibiu County Tourism Association	YES	sibiu-turism.ro	YES	4912	YES
Timiș	"Concordia" Tourism Club - Lugoj	YES	concordialugoj.ro	YES	4827	YES
Brașov	TIC Făgăraș	YES	fagaras-turism.ro	YES	4713	YES
București	Ecology and Tourism Club ECOTUR	YES	club-ecotur.ro	YES	4344	YES

Source: authors

5. Conclusions

This research does not claim to present in an exhaustive manner the whole issue of social media (Facebook and its importance in the tourism industry), especially given the complexity of this phenomenon. Anyway, the promotion strategies of the tourism organizations with informative role in Social Media should not be limited to Facebook, because today, in cyberspace, there are other social networks, whose number of users is also in constant growth.

This paper aims to be a starting point for future research and, at the same time, an argument to convince the stakeholders of the tourism sector in Romania to begin a systematic study of the internet communicational phenomenon in a continuous and professional manner, because the undertaken analysis reveals that a large part of the organizations involved in informing the tourists have minimal knowledge about Facebook and its usefulness. Therefore, they do not yet have a coherent communication strategy in this environment.

There are still many units under the administration of public authorities, which can cause a number of management inefficiencies in these organizations with informative role, especially given the lack of financial and decision-making autonomy, which leads further to a lack of online autonomy. This type of inefficiencies combined with a lack of management responsibility and motivation undoubtedly represent the premises for the loss of competitiveness, both offline and online, resulted in poor visibility on social networks and in the absence of presentation websites.

It is important to note that similar situations, in terms of extremely low online competitiveness, are common also in the case of some private organizations. It is therefore imperative for urgent action to allow creating and implementing coherent strategies to improve all aspects related to the presence and activity in cyberspace, including Social Media. Given that this communication medium can be considered the fastest and most effective tool in distributing information, promoting products and services, we believe that a presence on social networks is the next step that all tourism organizations must do.

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