

THE IMAGE OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS REPRESENTED IN TRAVEL BLOG PHOTOGRAPHY. CASE STUDY: ROMANIA'S IMAGE REFLECTED IN FRENCH BLOGGERS PHOTOS

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Abstract

Given the global economic crisis that affected the entire network information society, the image is an asset that contributes to a distinct and favorable positioning of tourist destinations in the tourism macro-network. This is why being aware of Romania's image as a tourist destination is important. To identify its representation on travel blog photography I undertook a quantitative analysis on a sample of 518 photos on French travelers' blogs. The results show that the best represented tourist attractions are of local specificity (64, 10%), followed by cultural attractions (25, 77%) while tourist destination attributes such as sports and spa activities were found amiss. The representation of the national network of tourist destinations is incomplete and disproportionate.

Key words: *Image of tourist destination, Travel blog, Photo analysis, Economic crisis, Network information society.*

JEL Classification: L83

1. INTRODUCTION

The global economic crisis rooted in America fully affects countries' economies without bypassing the tourism sector. The macroeconomic effects of the recession are manifested by a lack of money that primarily affects the poor and the middleclass. This phenomenon leads to a shortage of customers in tourism and lower occupancy of the accommodation units (Smeral, 2009; Smeral 2010; Enea and Enea, 2009; Enea and Tanasoiu, 2009). Even in the luxury segment there was a decrease in bookings and an increasing number of cancellations (Cernuşca and Dima, 2010). For instance, in European countries with well developed foreign tourism networks like Spain there were significant decreases in the added value and employment (Clement, Pak et al, 2009).

One of the many effects of the global economic crisis was the increasing competition on the tourism market. Given these conditions it is highly important to have an efficient communication strategy and to create an attractive image for the informational product (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Along with tourism resources, the image is one of the important factors that determine consumer decision on holiday spending (Ispas and Saragea, 2011).

One of the main roles of *Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs)* is to facilitate marketers' access to information regarding the evolving market. Evaluating a tourism destination's image is a priority in this sense. Studying a country's image as a tourist destination is a difficult and expensive undertaking,

but mandatory both in understanding tourist behavior and in developing strategies and plans (Carson, 2008). After studying several international research results Ban and Ozdogan (2010) conclude that the image of tourist destination holds a key-role in a vacation's decision making process.

Travel blogs are communications tools with a double blade: on one hand they picture a sincere, unsolicited and uncensored expression of the image perceived by the traveler. On the other hand, their visibility on the internet grants them a participant role in creating and disseminating the image of tourist destinations. Although travel blogs drew researchers (Carson, 2008; Pan, 2007; Wenger, 2008) and practitioners' attention in the past few years, they still remain a lesser explored source of information. Pühringer and Taylor (2008) conducted a research on *Kitzbühel Tourism* operators that showed that only 28% of them used the strategic analysis of blogs and forums. Yet, the same research reveals that practitioners mostly use these communication tools in order to monitor their business, their competitors or their partners.

Both tourism practitioners and theoreticians are interested in blogs' potential of being, at the same time, a tool of investigation and a tool of promotion for travel destinations. A recent Technocrati study reveals that when it came to the question "Why do you write on the blog?", bloggers showed a particular interest in travel (20%), more than in celebrities,

games, health, economy, film, television or the environment (Sussman, 2009). At a global level, 22.5% of the blogs' followers and internet consumers expressed their preference for travel blogs (Mc Cann, 2009).

Therefore, given the fact that the Ministry of Tourism official website's data regarding Romania as a tourist destination, which is designed to serve foreign travelers' information need, is old, fragmented and based on ad hoc studies, while being aware of the increasing development and importance of the blogosphere, we assume that analyzing Romania's image as tourist destination based on the information provided by foreign visitors' travel blogs may be a relevant method of acknowledging Romania's image as tourist destination and at the same time, an accessible means to oversee the international tourism market.

In this regard we intend to contribute to a better understanding of Romania's image as a tourist destination. This research could provide a tool for marketers and researchers to better understanding of positioning Romania in the global network of tourist destinations. In conditions of a global economic crisis that directly affects tourism activities, this study could contribute to the efficient use of Romania's image in DMOs positioning actions in the informational network.

From an academic perspective this study contributes to refining the means of travel blogs particularly and blogs generally. At last, but not least, this study may be a scientific proof for competent authorities that tourism blogs' analysis could be a significant tool of research in terms of evaluating Romania's image as a tourist destination.

The objectives of this research are: identifying elements that compose the tourism destination image, which the analysis of travel blog photos can bring out; the evaluation of the quantitative analysis of photographs posted on blogs as a means of knowledge of the tourist destination image; assembly the image of Romania as a tourist destination from its photographic representation in blogs.

To fulfill our purpose and achieve our goals we undertook an exploratory research on Romania's image in French bloggers' photos.

In this context we intended to answer the following research questions:

- What areas and tourist destinations are most photographed by French bloggers?
- What are the categories of information about the image of tourist destinations that could be analyzed in photo content?
- What is Romania's image represented in French bloggers' travel photos?

The importance of the study lies in the fact that most researchers of tourist destination image produced and broadcasted by travel blogs recommend combining text and photo analysis. The study completes recent research that targeted the

quantitative content analysis of personal travel blogs' texts of French authors (Tudor, 2010; Tudor, 2011). These confirmed the data published in the 2007-2026 Master Plan that shows that the French who visited our country have a predominantly positive image of Romania, compared to those who never visited it.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The economic crisis in the informational network society and the tourism

An explanation of the globalization of the financial and economic crisis in tourism can be found in the network model of networks proposed by Emanuel Castels (2008). In the eyes of the Spanish sociologist, the network of networks is dominated by the one that imposes its values in society at a given time. In present time, which Castells (2001) defines as global capitalism, the dominant network is the economic one which imposes capital accumulation as a fundamental value of all the other networks including the tourism network. Networks not only communicate with each other but compete for power and communicate with the outside. We can say that the network where there is tourism activities occupy a position of power in the macroeconomic network because of its performance. "*Studies in the field already demonstrate that tourism can be considered the main industry in terms of contribution to gross world product, number one in terms of employment assimilation and largest capital investor*" (Enea and Enea, 2009, p.159).

The network in which tourist activities run interconnect destination networks, places, regions, countries, consumers, producers of tourism services, communication networks, local and global actors. Social and economic actors as network nodes or centers are governed by the principle of exclusion. This stipulates that the network's logic marginalizes or bypasses activities, territories and people who doesn't add value to the network or don't help its maintaining till exclusion (Castells, 2008; Fairclough and Thomas, 2004). The economic recession manifests itself in all interconnected networks and therefore leads to tightening the competition for a position in the network configuration, under capital flux pressure. The value of a network actor is given by the ability to interconnect and interact. The actors that assert themselves as centers in the network are able to influence nodes and other centers of their own network, as well as those of other networks that these communicate and interact with. Nodes are linked across the network and represent the location of strategic positioning around a key role through activities and located organizations. Therefore, tourist destinations compete as nodes in their network and are perceived as centers in the tourism network. This privileged position stems from the connections a

tourist destination has with tourist services producers and consumer networks, as well as from the role of the interface between these. From this point of view, tourist destinations have a key role in an globalized informational economy, which becomes increasingly interdependent. On one hand it supports the crisis pressure that occurs in all macroeconomic networks, while on the other hand it's exactly their high degree of interconnectivity that offers them the position to protect their interests. In a networked economy places are not fixed but are determined by flux. Therefore, the position of a tourist destination largely depends on the ability to generate and exchange streams of information. From this theoretical perspective the role of communication is fundamental in placing a tourist destination in a marginal side of the network, or in the centre.

"The emergence of a new technological paradigm organized around new information technologies, more powerful and flexible, allows information itself to become the product of the production process. The industrial products of a new information technology are ways of handling information. New information technologies act on all areas of human activity and allow the establishment of countless connections between different areas" (Castells, 2008, p.110). Positioning a tourist destination on the global market in the information society depends, to a large extent, on the communicator's ability to claim and use new information technologies. Among the eight anti-crisis measures Cernuşca and Dima (2010) propose, five of them list the use of new communication technologies: websites, social networks, microblogging sites, blogs, promoting the brand through new technologies. An important intangible value circulated by information flows which link tourism networks is the tourist destination image. As an informational product, the tourist destination image flows between the networks of tourist organizations – *Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs)*, a network of destinations regarded as places capable of adding extra-value, the consumer network and the communication network by which links economic actors, destinations and consumers. Therefore one of the marketers' tasks in this sector is to create a distinct and favorable positioning of the destination they promote.

2.2. Tourist destination image

The tourist destination image is a vague concept to which different researchers give various meanings, from travel opinions to the perception of potential destinations (Jenkins, 1999; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Moreover, various sciences deal with image study and hence the variety of angles they approach. The most cited definition of the tourist destination image is provided by Crompton

(Crompton 1979 cited in Jenkins, 1999): *"The sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has about a destination."*

From a psychological perspective, the image is responsible for behavior, which leads to the importance attached to it by marketers, as long as they are interested in factors that play a role on the purchase decision (Martineau, 1958). And the decisions to travel and to choose a destination are rather influenced by the destination's image than by the objective reality (Obenour, Lengfelder, et al 2005).

Jenkins (1999) believes that an appropriate way of analyzing the image of the tourist destinations is a combined approach – quantitative and qualitative, as well as a structured review of the attributes of a destination that should start from studying targeted groups for further researching those attributes that are relevant to them.

An important role in choosing a destination is played by the mental image a tourist has about a particular area, which takes into account the interests, the beliefs and the attitudes of that person but is influenced by the common mental and public image of the destination (Obenour, Lengfelder et al, 2005).

Echtner and Ritchie (2003) propose a three-dimensional model of the tourist destination components which include, on an axis, a variation of functional components to psychological characteristics, a second axis of attributes to imagery and a the third axis of elements that confer the common or unique aspects of a destination.

Based on the three moments of tourism behavior: the previous travel experience – affected by collective mental image and preconceptions – the moment of the journey and the third moment – the post-experience, assessment of the degree of satisfaction –, Chen and Tsai (2006) highlighted the chain composed by the destination image – quality travel – perceived value – satisfaction – behavioral intentions. The research has led to the idea that destination image has direct and indirect effects on behavioral intention (Chen and Tsai, 2006).

In the context in which on a competitive market Eastern-European countries are making efforts to promote a unique and attractive image (Ban and Ozdogan, 2010), Romania as a tourist destination hasn't yet managed to create and enforce a clear, unique and positive image; in 2009 it was rated 81st among 102 countries analyzed in the Country Brand Index report (Popescu and Corboş, 2010).

Given the importance internet users generally, and those who travel in particular, give to travel blongs (Sussman, 2009; eMarketer, 2008; McCann, 2009; Joppe and Waalen, 2001; Johnson, Kaze, 2004) and given the low level of knowledge regarding Romania's image as a tourist destination, we find that research in this medium provides possibilities both for analyzing and promoting an image.

3. METHOD AND CORPUS

In this research we applied qualitative and quantitative content analysis of a corpus of 518 images. Photos are included in the 162 posts out of a total of 30 blogs studied. These 30 blogs were selected from the touristic websites because, as the literature in the field shows, the internet consumers create interest based communities (Schmallegger and Carson, 2008) and, as a consequence, the persons interested in private travel experiences will look for them on specialized blog websites. At the same time, we have excluded the sponsored blogs from our sample based on credibility criteria (Carson, 2008). The blogs' sample has been created using the Google search engine, French pages. Using the key words "sites blogs voyage", the engine returned the following results: uniterre.com, enroutes.com, travelblog.fr, voyages.net, enescale.com, expedia.fr, tour-du-monde.net, tourismevoyage.com, govoyages.com, globeblog.com.

To answer the question: "What are the areas and tourist destinations photographed by the French bloggers?" I applied quantitative content analysis to the corpus, choosing photography as reference unit.

To find out which are the categories of information regarding the image of tourist destinations that can be analyzed in the content of the photos we did visual analysis of photos. Categories were compared with the list of tourist destination attributes developed by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) and adapted to it. Subsequently, we used a grid for the quantitative analysis of the tourist destination's image.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Representation of the areas and the tourist destinations in travel blogs photos

In order to find out which are the most photographed areas and tourist destinations I've observed photos and correlated observation with indications of the photos titles and accompanying texts. Out of the 518 images analyzed 13 could not be located because the content was not particular of a zone or destination, it could have been placed anywhere without the location indicated in the text. These I have not included into any Romanian tourist area because they don't bring any information about the image of the tourist area or attraction at any level of tourist area attraction or of destination attribute. Categories excluded from the analysis include: photographs taken from the Internet, portraits, detailed objects photography which were not placed in any context that would show an amount of useful information for the destination image analysis. The most present area in French bloggers photos is Maramureş – 19.6%, followed by Transylvania and Romania with a rate of 14.3% each. In the Romanian

tourist area we included those photos that have useful information for the destination image analysis but could not be located. Tourist area least represented in photos is Oltenia (0.8%).

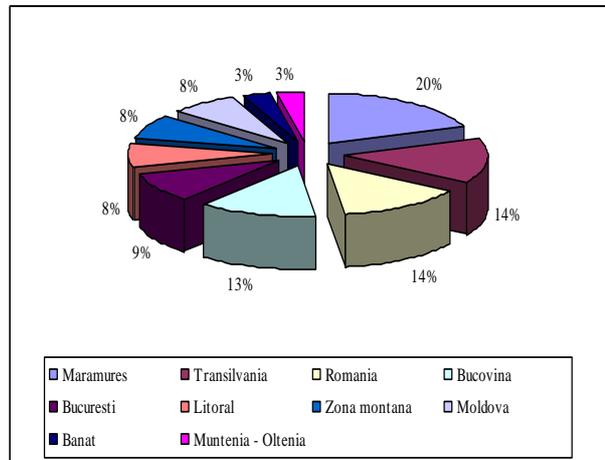


Figure 1 - The most photographed tourist areas

In terms of tourist destinations, Romania (14.3%) as a whole is most present in photos. This finding confirms that French bloggers who visited Romania want tours containing multiple destinations. While traveling from one destination to another and from one tourist attraction to another are discovered aspects that deserve to be captured in photos but not associated with a particular destination or goal.

Table 1 - The most photographed destinations and tourist landmarks

Tourist destination	Frequency	Valid Percent
Romania	72	14.3
Valea Izei	68	13.5
Bucovina	67	13.3
Bucureşti	46	9.1
Moldova	39	7.7
Braşov	26	5.1
Sibiu	25	5
Danube Delta	22	4.4
Prahova Valley	22	4.4
Southern Carpathians	16	3.2
Sighişoara	16	3.2
Danube Gorge	16	3.2
Săpânţa	12	2.4
Vama Veche	11	2.2
Harghita - Covasna	11	2.2
Churches of Maramureş	8	1.6
Constanţa	7	1.4
Cluj	7	1.4
Maramureş	4	0.8
Buzău	3	0.6
Transilvania	3	0.6
Fortified Cities	2	0.4
Mountain Area	1	0.2
Olt	1	0.2
Total	505	100.0

The most represented tourist destination in photos is the Iza Valley (13.5%), with the highest rate of photographs taken in the Maramureş area. The most visited tourist attraction in the area is the unique Merry Cemetery at Săpânţa, with 2.4% of all photos related to tourist destinations. On the third place among the tourist destinations photos is Bucovina (13.3%). The most photographed monuments in Bucovina are the monasteries Voroneţ (19 photos), Suceviţa (8 photos) and Moldova (6 photos). From the text analysis we observe that the exterior painted churches from Bucovina are not visited and there is nor other reference made to them. The Capital is represented in 9.1% of all photos. The most photographed landmarks here are the Palace of the Parliament and Bucharest's Old Town. Although the Romanian Peasant Museum is nominated in the texts, it is not represented in any photo.

4.2. The categories of information about image tourist destinations contained in photos

The photos were analyzed visually in the order to achieve a classification in terms of image information which contain tourist destinations. I initially started from the most common photographic genres as they are defined by photography theorists: portrait, landscape, still life, specifying that portrait are shot from the foreground to a more general angle in which characters are present (Feininger, 1965). Thus in the first instance the following categories were found: characters, architecture and historical monuments, cityscapes, rural, religious and industrial, still life and a wide range of other content: means of transportation, food and entertainment, accommodation etc. In the category of the urban landscape I included photographs which represent aspects of cities which are not obviously related to a monument. In the religious landscape category I included those images presenting architectural elements with obvious religious utility included in a landscape context (a crucifix on the road, a lonely church on a hill, a monastery courtyard or annexes etc.).

I compared these categories with the list of attributes set by Echner and Ritchie (2003) to evaluate the tourist destination image: tourist attractions, transport infrastructure, accommodation, food and traditional restaurants etc. Tourist attractions have been grouped into eight categories: entertainment (bars, clubs, dance halls etc.), sports, spa activities, cultural attractions, natural attractions, local specifics (traditional patriarchal lifestyle in rural areas and specificities of urban areas), folk art and mountain tourism.

Following the comparison I carried out a regrouping of certain categories of photo content and a refinement of others. Thus, I refined the category of characters in subcategories: locals, tourists and locals and tourists in the same photo. I equated the landscape

attractions with the natural attractions. I regrouped historical and architectural monuments and religious landscape together in cultural attractions category. The still life category, as it offered no information about the tourist destination image, was abolished and photographs contained in it were reviewed in terms of content and redistributed. The local specific category included photos of countryside, urban and industrial landscapes. From the initial categories of others, still life and the reanalysis of photographic portraits and landscapes, photos were redistributed according to the list of attributes in the following categories: transport, accommodation, traditional cuisine and catering, and according to the list of attractions in categories: entertainment, sports, spa activities, folk art and mountain tourism.

At the end of the qualitative analysis of the content, of the categorization, of the comparison with attributes list of tourist destinations the categorization of photo content in accordance with the criterion of informational input on tourist destination image was obtained.

4.3. Romania's image as represented in French travel bloggers' photos

Based on previously designated categories, I elaborated the quantitative content analysis grid.

Characters are present in 38.8% of the photos. Out of these photos, locals are present in 119 photos (59.2%), and in 12% of them locals are accompanied by the tourists.

Most photographs include landscapes (58.8%). Monuments are represented in 32.0%, and still life is least present (9.2%). It is worth mentioning that the vast majority of photographs with monuments are missing a character in the frame (80), in only six photographs locals are present and in only one the tourist is present. Rural landscapes are most frequently represented (29, 25%), followed by religious landscape (25.17%) and industrial landscapes (24.49%). A much lower interest enjoyed by travel bloggers landscapes containing nature (11.56%) and urban landscapes (9.52%). In 67.35% of the photos landscape is represented lacking a human presence.

The content analysis of the photos judging by the tourist attractions grid revealed that local specificity is most represented (64.10%). Cultural attractions are also extremely present in French bloggers' photos (25.77%) but it must be made clear that religious landscapes are 59.39% of the total number photos considered in this category and of 80 photos representing monuments 60 are churches, monasteries or cemeteries. Thus, of the cultural attractions a vast majority (89.85%) are religious. By comparison, the Transylvanian fortified cities are present in only two photos and there is no photo that shows any museum, show room or statue.

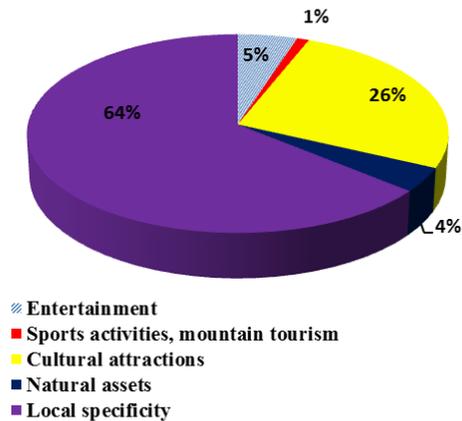


Figure 2 - Tourist attractions represented in photos

It is interesting that two thirds of the photos relate to the local specific, a quarter to the cultural attractions, especially religious ones, and all other tourist attractions including entertainment, nature, sports and mountain tourism are less than 10%. There are only five photos containing sports and mountain tourism and any photos to refer to spa activities. The category of tourist destination attributes most frequently represented in the analyzed travel blogs photos are the tourist attractions which have a percentage of 67.96%. There is a very big difference to the next attribute represented, 17.81% of the photos have locals as their center of interest. Photos on the subjects of transport, accommodation, traditional cuisine and catering account for 14.22%.

5. DISSCUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The results of the quantitative analysis of the representation of areas and tourist destinations show that the West area of the country is most present in photos, followed by the historical region of Moldova. The South of the country, except for the Capital and its mountain region, is almost inexistent. This shows not only that area is less visited but that in terms of imaging it is considered unattractive or uninteresting by tourists.

Romania, as an area and as a tourist destination is represented in the photos at the same level like the Bucovina region – where a concentration of UNESCO monuments are located, surrounded by an attractive landscape, traditional patriarchal lifestyle with a rustic feel. The uncertainty of localization, that led to the creation of Romania as a category and its important share between areas and tourist destinations leads to the hypothesis of the tourists' poor knowledge of the areas and tourist destinations they should visit. The pictures' content analysis from this eclectic category leads me to believe that this is a subjective and lack-of-information supported choice of images with some level of the exotic or of the unique. Also, the tourist potential of the mountain and coastline areas is quite

modestly presented in the French travel bloggers' photos. This may denote a low level of interest in those areas, but also a modest imaging potential or a very limited knowledge of the attractions of these destinations. This latter fact may explain the stereotyped subjects photographed in these areas: beach, fun in Vama Veche, a mountain landscape that could be placed anywhere from the Alps to the Apennines, the Peleş and Bran castles.

The Danube Delta is recorded only on two blogs that contain all the photos, this indicating that out of the 30 tourists who have posted their blogs on the Uniterre platform, having Romania as a subject, only two have actually visited it.

The representation of areas and tourist destinations in studied photos create the image of an unbalanced development of the country's tourism network.

So as to explain the representation of areas and tourist destinations in the photos published on travel blogs, a simultaneous analysis of text, photos and interviews with authors would be necessary, which we intend to cover in a future research.

At this purely quantitative analysis and only the photos can be concluded that Romania's tourism network is incomplete and disproportionately represented in the sample studied.

The qualitative study of the photo from the database demonstrated that a classification according to criteria derived from the analysis of tourist destination image can be done. But major problems occur at the time of the coding. Although categories want to be exclusive, given the characteristics of visual communication, there is always the risk of subjective choices. For example a photo of the historical center of Sighișoara may be included in the cultural attractions category if the researcher considers cultural attractions throughout the old town as a historical and architectural monument or in the local specific category if the researcher considered that the urban landscape is unique in the country and in Europe, or has a certain atmosphere and reflects a specific lifestyle. Obviously, concomitant analysis of photos and text that includes them is liable to obviate this inconvenience, but it is still a degree of subjectivity that may influence the reproducibility of research. In any case, the coding method of two different people on the same criteria and a specifically discussion of the inconsistencies may be a solution. Quantitative analysis of the sample studied photographs show that the tourist gaze is directed primarily to the monuments, landscapes and objects. Furthermore, when characters appear in the photos, they are often locals and not expected members of the tourist group, an uninvolved spectator attitude is attested by the small number of photographs in which tourists are with the locals. This detached view that focused more on the destination than on the personal brings questions on tourist blogger reporting of travel and destinations, on travel motivations and blog

writing. A further research based on text analysis and semi-structured interviews may provide answers to these questions. Content analysis results indicate a religious and rural landscapes Romania in which the industrial landscape is more present than urban and natural landscapes. The quantitative analysis in terms of the evaluation criteria of tourist destination images denotes the bloggers' interest for local specificity and cultural attractions and a lack of interest for nature and opportunities for entertainment, sport and mountaineering. The under-representation of natural attractions can not be justified by the lack of potential imaging, but rather by the lack of previous images of traveler visits, the image likely to attract attention on that must be seen and appreciated properly. Lack of health tourism photographic representation does nothing but confirm the status of this network. The same explanation is valid for the under-representation of others attractions. The most represented attributed of Romania as a tourist destination in studied photos are tourist attractions and locals; transport, accommodation and traditional cuisine being underrepresented. But representation of tourist destination attributes is biased by the visual communication specific. Such things as odors, touch, can not be represented visually but can be described in text. Others are difficult to photograph because of the lack of advanced equipment, lack of time to search for technical solutions to capture an image in difficult conditions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The photos analyzed in the foreign travelers' blogs can bring information about the representation of the national areas, destinations and tourist objectives network. This method also provides information about the representation level of attractions and tourist destination attributes.

The quantitative analysis of the photos has the capacities of a complementary analysis method of the tourist destination image as represented on travel blogs. So as to be taken a maximum advantage of, it is well wished that these were made part of a methodological mix consisting of the qualitative analysis of the photos' content, a technical and artistic analysis, interviews with authors and blog text analysis.

Only a few of the tourist areas benefit from the contribution of bloggers as producers and image broadcasters.

Romania represented in the studied photos is a rural and deeply religious country in which the natural landscape is polluted by the industrial one. Romania is reflected as a country that has no cultural life except for the Orthodox beliefs. Romania is a country with many religious monuments and a very few historical and architectural ones; a tourist destination with little amusements, no sports, no spa or mountain tourism; a country that deserves to be visited and photographed for its locals and for its traditional patriarchal lifestyle.

This study reveals that Romania's image as a tourist destination in the analyzed French blogs' photos has a distorted representation, incomplete and unbalanced. This confirms the need to develop a strategy of improving communication to its content and distribution starting from the pre-existing image.

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