Thesis

Romania's image as a tourist destination from the perspective of foreign intermediaries - comparative analysis

- Abstract -

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Key concepts

Tourist marketing is an anticipation and satisfaction managerial process of potential and existent visitors in a more efficient way than concurrent offers or destination (...) long term success depends on the interaction between the consumer and the supplier. In the same time it means ensuring the proper environment, social needs and client satisfaction, which can't no longer be seen as mutually exclusive elements (Vellas & Bécherel,1999).

Tourist destination

In tourism destination marketing, the concept is regarded as "fundamental unity underlying all complex dimensions of tourism, the basic unit of analysis in tourism, a focus point in development and delivery of tourism products and in tourism policy implementation" (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2004).

Tourist destination image (TDI)

Definition of *destination image* starts in most studies, from one of the two definitions proposed by Gartner (1986) and Crompton (1979). They have approached the concept based on different theories. Gartner (1986) defines destination image as "*a person's perception of available attributes or activities of a destination*," and Crompton (1979) as "*the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has on a destination*".

Intermediaries and their role in the formation process of destination image

Intermediaries are considered opinion leaders and the images they have about tourist destinations influences both decision making process (Lawton & Page, 1997) and induced image destination (Gartner, 1993) of their clients.

Studies have shown that non-tourists rely in their information search behavior on professional sources such as intermediaries (Bitner & booms, 1982; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling & worr, 1990), therefore, the image intermediaries have on a destination can influence, and at the same time can be influenced, by the perceived image of tourists (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001).

In conclusion, intermediary's image of a destination can be a defining element in including the destination in promoted travel packages and can be reflected in the images perceived by their customers (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001).

Concepts used for analysis results

General / specific attributes = after analyzing responses it has been decided to classify response items (words / phrases that describe specific area) into two groups: general and specific attributes. For example, **general attributes** are: Beach and Great Historical / Castles / Legends, Cities and Regions, Bucharest, Mountains, Landscapes / Nature; and **specific attributes** are: Black Sea, Dracula, Transylvania, the Carpathian Mountains, and the Danube Delta.

Keywords: **tourism destination image, the intention of recommendation, attractiveness, familiarity, overall image, SEM**

Research problem, the general hypothesis, objectives and research methodology

In the last 40 years, studies in tourism research had different concepts as central elements, but the main goal of all was to identify factors that influence tourists' decisions to visit a destination. One of these factors is *tourist destination image* (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Chen & Hsu, 2000; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Tasci, Gartner & Tamer Cavusgil, 2007; Alcaniz et al., 2009), along with factors such as *quality of service* (Chen & Tsai, 2007, Lee et al., 2005), *tourists' satisfaction* (Yoon & Uysal, 2005) and, not least, *perceived risk* (Lepp & Gibson, 2003).

Destination image was constantly introduced in studies that have demonstrated the influence of a destination choice behavior or future visitation intentions (Alcaniz et al., 2009, Beerli & Martin, 2004; Aksu et al. , 2009). For example, Aksu et al. (2009) indicate that the destination image is positively correlated with intentions of revisiting and recommendation destination.

A number of other studies aimed at determining how tourists form their image of a destination and it has been **shown that tourism intermediaries (tour operators and travel agencies) are an important deciding factor in this process** (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001), and are considered opinion leaders. Images they have about advertised (sold) travel destinations influence the decision making process of visiting (Lawton & Page, 1997) and induced image of tourist destinations (Gartner, 1993).

Based on the literature in the field, the **aim of this research** is to build a model of tourist destination image (from the intermediaries' perspective) based on factors that form the image and those who interact with it and perform a comparative analysis of these factors in a intercultural context.

The research problem is to identify the factors that compound the tourist destination image and how they influence the intention to recommend travel packages. Target of the study is formed by tourism intermediaries from Germany, Italy and France and aims, in addition, to identify the relations between overall image, familiarity and attractiveness of the destination and destination image components: cognitive, affective and conative.

The general hypothesis underlying this research is that the cognitive and affective components of tourist destination image influence the conative component (intention to recommend).

In order to achieve the objectives set and because territorial spread of respondents was decided to use online survey through self-administered questionnaire as a **research method.**

Table 1 presents the 5 objectives of the research along with analysis procedures used to achieve them.

Table 1. Methods and data analysis procedures by objective

Objective 1. Identifying the most popular elements composing the image of Romania as a tourist destination from foreign intermediaries' perspective.	Cross tabs – Multiple Response
Objective 2. Evaluation of foreign intermediaries' familiarity with Romanian specific attractions.	Variance analysis (ANOVA)
Objective 3. Identifying the factors that compound the tourist destination image.	Exploratory factor analysis Confirmatory factor analysis first and second order
Objective 4. Identifying the effect of cognitive and affective dimensions has on recommendation intention and how familiarity, destination attractiveness and overall image interact with the three dimensions of the image.	Structural equation modelling (SEM)
Obiective 5. Identifying differences, if any, in the tourist destination image perception from intermediaries' perspective, in the countries studied, visitors and non-visitors and travel agencies and tour operators.	Variance analysis (ANOVA)

The research instrument was developed through an exploratory research and based on the literature review. Preliminary exploratory research was conducted in two phases: the analysis of tourism packages and destinations promoted on the Romania's websites tourism promotion to identify the main attractions promoted and an exploratory survey by questionnaire, conducted online with a sample of Romanian experts in tourism (tour operators and travel agencies in Romania).

After the tourist destination image instrument was realized it was tested on a sample of experts in a pilot study. The measuring instrument obtained was applied through an online self-administered questionnaire on a sample of tour operators and travel agents from 3 European countries: Germany, Italy and France.

The structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of four chapters, the last of which is reserved for research findings. The first chapter summarizes the specific elements of image destination research based on two categories of existing studies: the first has as central point the image of the destination from tourists perspective (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Bosque & Martin, 2008; Tasci, 2007; Alcañiz et al, 2009) and the second category focuses on the image formation process and the types of agents that influence it (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972; Bramwell & Rawding, 1996) .

One type of agents are the intermediaries (tour operators and travel agents), which according to research can influence the tourists travel decision to a particular destination. This paper is part of second category and aims to identify how Romania's image is perceived by the intermediaries from the 3 countries.

In the same chapter are presented some models of destination image formation, elements of the construct and factors such as nationality, destination attractiveness and overall image, that have been the subject of other research studies (Kozak, 2002; Master & Prideaux, 2000; Mykletun et al, 2001, Milman & Pizam, 1995; Marino, 2008; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chen & Hsu, 2000; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Lee et al., 2005, Tasci, Gartner & Tamer Cavusgil, 2007, Alcaniz et al., 2009).

Chapter two presents the research methodology and the construction of the measuring instrument. The development of the measurement instrument was assimilated to the methodological chapter because it was considered a preparatory phase of the research that can be included in this segment.

Starting from image destination paradigms (positivist, phenomenological) and the most used research methods (qualitative, quantitative) in this section are presented the types of research methods used (online, offline).

The process of developing the measurement instrument consists of five stages: literature review, exploratory research, questionnaire development, testing the questionnaire on experts and the pilot study. After completing these steps, the English version of the measurement instrument was finalized through a double translation process into German, French and Italian.

Chapter three of the thesis describes the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation of results based on five objectives of the research. There are presented: sample development, obtained response rate and description of the obtained sample. For each objective are presented statistical assumptions, analysis results and the extent to which these hypotheses were confirmed or not.

The thesis is completed by research findings, personal theoretical contributions, managerial implications, research limitations and future research directions.

Results of hypotheses testing

Results of the study emphasize **the importance of intermediary's perceived image of tourism on a destination**, in recommending a destination tourism packages. The study also assessed general and specific attributes of Romania as a tourist destination and the strengths and weaknesses from intermediaries' perspective. These results provide important information to organizations that deal with the image, marketing and communication of Romania as a tourist destination.

One of the important results of the study is the tourist destination image measurement instrument developed and tested on the sample of intermediaries from Germany, Italy and France. This instrument can be used in future studies to measure the image and can be also adapted for samples consisting of tourists. At theoretical level, a model was developed for assessing destination image components completed by factors such as familiarity with the destination, destination attractiveness and overall perceived image. This model demonstrates the important role that destination attractiveness has on the intention to recommend, which in turn is influenced by the overall image of the destination.

Following are presented the conclusions of the study for each of the five objectives set.

Objective 1. **Identifying the most popular elements composing the image of Romania as a tourist destination from foreign intermediaries' perspective.**

The elements that describe Romania's image as tourist destinations were analyzed and 3 categories were identified: **general attributes**, **specific attributes** and **positive and negative expressions of general attributes.**

The most important (mentioned) **general attributes** that describe the image of Romania as a tourist destination are: *Beach and Sea*, *Historical / Castles / Legends*, *Cities and Regions*, *Mountains*, *Bucharest* and *Landscapes / Nature*. Compared to the 40 categories of general attributes identified, they cumulate 50% of all mentions and at the same time, represent the most known general attractions that intermediaries of the 3 countries mentioned.

Regarding the specific attributes mentioned, Romania is described by the following elements: Dracula, Black Sea, Transylvania, the Carpathian Mountains, the Danube Delta, and East / Balkans. These attributes cumulate about 87% of all mentions. For all intermediaries from the 3 countries Dracula is in first place among mentioning.

Analysis undertaken to achieve Objective 1 includes presenting Romania as a tourist destination through the positive / negative evaluations. We conclude that the weaknesses of Romania as a tourist destination are the following: *infrastructure and transport, appropriate accommodation, access to destination, personal safety* and *economic development* and the strengths are: *hospitality, good prices* and *landscapes / nature*. These elements were identified also in the study Chasovschi, Năstase, & Hildebrandt (2008) conducted on a sample of intermediaries and German tourists.

Objective 2. **Evaluation of foreign intermediaries' familiarity with Romanian specific attractions.**
The purpose of this objective was to identify the most popular specific attractions with the aim to provide important information about the contents of the tourist packages that Romania can develop/ promote in Germany, France and Italy. Within this objective all eight hypotheses that were established were confirmed.
H1a-h: Intermediaries' familiarity from the 3 countries differs in the case of the following attributes: *Monasteries in Bucovina*, *Peleş and Pelişor Castle, Dracula / Bran Castle, Danube Delta, SPA/ health resort, Black Sea resorts, medieval towns* and *Fortified citadels from Transylvania*.

For all evaluated specific attractions, intermediaries from Italy are most familiar; the biggest differences between their familiarity and those of Germany and France appear for the following attributes: *Fortified citadels ns from Transylvania, Medieval town*s and *Monasteries from Bucovina*. The least familiar with specific attractions are intermediaries from Germany, which for all attractions have the lowest cumulative averages of familiarity.

***Objective 3*. Identifying the factors that compound the tourist destination image.**

After the statistical analysis was performed to identify the factors that compose the complex construct of destination image, we conclude that destination image construct is formed of 3 dimensions: cognitive, affective and conative, and that the cognitive dimension of destination image is composed of three factors: tourist attractions, the perceived value and tourist infrastructure.

The same cognitive and affective components were obtained by Byon & Zhang (2010). Tourist attractions factor is also reflected in the results of studies conducted by Lee et al. (2005), Chalip et al., 2003 and Baloglu & McCleary (1999). The tourist infrastructure factor is identified in studies conducted by: Fakeye & Crompton (1991), Aksu et al. (2009) - described by two components (transport and accommodation) Beerli & Martin (2004). Value factor can be fund also in the following studies: Lee et al. (2005) and Chalip et al. (2003). Identifying the factors that compose tourist destination image is the last step of the process of creating a measurement instrument of image dimensions. The instrument passed the test of convergent validity, divergent and reliable test.

***Objective 4*. Identifying the effect of cognitive and affective dimensions has on recommendation intention and how familiarity, destination attractiveness and overall image interact with the three dimensions of the image.**
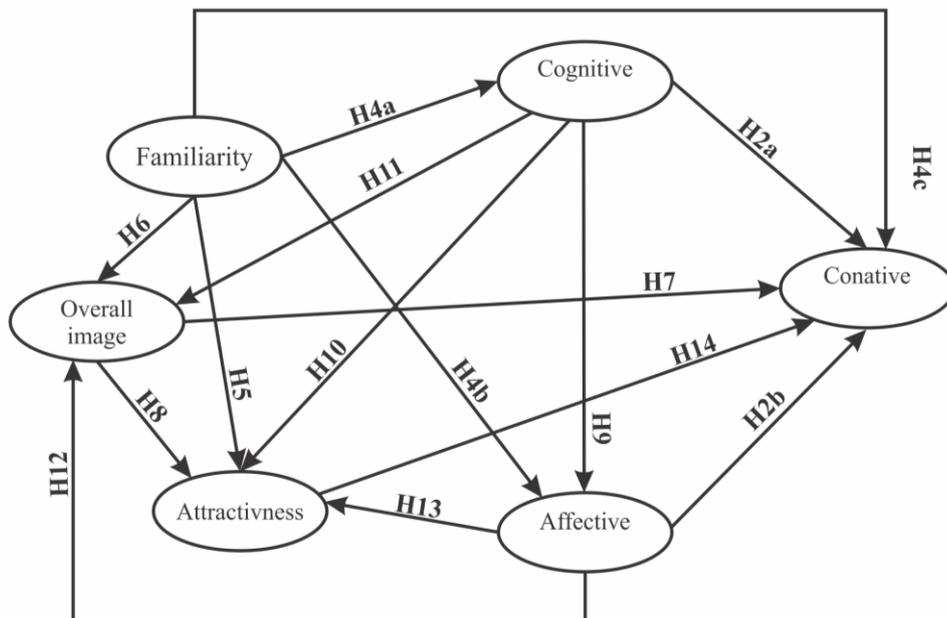
Figure 1. Structural model of tourist destination image

This objective pursued was to identify a model that measures the destination image components by analyzing the interaction between the components with factors that influence them: familiarity with the destination, destination attractiveness and overall image.

On the basis of this model stood the 17 hypotheses presented in Table 2 of which 15 were confirmed. The following are the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the relations between variables.

Tabele 2. Confirmation/rejection of hypotheses and studies that formed the basis

H2a-b	C	Baloglu, 1999; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Stern & Krakover, 1993; Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001
H3	C	Bigne et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2005; Castro et al., 2007; Alcaniz et al., 2009; Byon & Zhang, 2010; Baloglu şi Mangaloglu, 2001
H4a	C	Marino, 2008
H4b	C	Marino, 2008
H4c	R	
H5	C	Hu & Ritchie,1993
H6	C	
H7	C	Alcaniz et al, 2005
H8	C	
H9	C	
H10	R	Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Chen & Hsu, 2000; Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Kim & Perdue, 2011
H11	C	Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Kim & Perdue, 2011; Pavlić & Kesić,2011
H12	C	Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Kim & Perdue, 2011; Pavlić & Kesić,2011
H13	C	Kim & Perdue, 2011; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Chen & Hsu, 2000
H14	C	
H15	C	Kim & Perdue, 2011

R- rejected / C – confirmed

The following conclusions were drawn from the analysis of the results obtained:

▪ Although the results show a small influence of cognitive component on intention to recommend, there is a much stronger influence of attractiveness on intention, attractiveness, in turn, is influenced most strongly by the overall image.

▪ Of the five factors model that evaluated intention to recommend of tourist packages, only 4 relations were significant (familiarity does not significantly influence intention), the strongest influence is exerted from attractiveness of the destination.

▪ The 5 factors explained 78% of variance intention to recommend.

▪ Cognitive component of image is influenced by intermediaries' familiarity with the destination; it explains 23% of the variance of cognitive dimensions.

▪ Affective dimension variance is explained in proportion of 57% by familiarity and cognitive dimension, which exerts a strong influence on it. So, the better are the evaluations on a destination, the attractiveness will increase, increasing the intention to recommend, because affective dimension influence intention more than the cognitive dimension.

▪ Overall image of the destination is influenced by cognitive dimension of image, familiarity and affective dimension, the greatest influence being exerted by the last one.

Obiective 5. **Identifying differences, if any, in the tourist destination image perception from intermediaries' perspective, in the countries studied, visitors and non-visitors and travel agencies and tour operators.**

H16: The perception of the image and affecting factors differ depending on the country of residence of intermediaries

H17. The perception of the image and affecting factors differ depending on visitors (intermediaries who visited or not Romania)

H18: The perception of the image and affecting factors differ depending on the type of intermediaries (tour operators/travel agencies)

Previous studies showed that destination image varies depending on the country of origin of the respondents (Chen & Kerstetter,1999; Rittichainuwat et al., 2001; Hui & Wan, 2003; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Bosque & Martin, 2008). In this case the hypothesis (H16) is confirmed and we concluded that:

- Attractiveness has the strongest influence on intention to recommend. Intermediaries from Italy, for which it was obtained the highest average for attractiveness, are most willing to recommend travel packages to Romania.

- As regarding the *intention to recommend* there is significant difference only in the group of intermediaries from Germany and Italy, as well as in the case of *cognitive dimension* and *overall image*.

- Romania as a tourist destination is considered more attractive by the Italian intermediaries compared to the intermediaries from the other two countries.

- The most familiar with the destination are the intermediaries from France, but the difference is not significant compared with the familiarity of those from Italy. The lowest level of familiarity is revealed by the intermediaries from Germany. This result supports the result of the model relationship analysis that the familiarity strongly influences the cognitive dimension of image.

- Regarding the affective dimension of the image, no significant differences emerged between intermediaries from three countries.

The largest differences occurred between intermediaries from Italy and Germany. We know that Italy and Germany are described by different cultures and cultural distance between the two countries and Romania differs, Romania is a Latin country, much closer to Italian culture. We can say that the differences in image perceptions are influenced by culture / country of residence of intermediaries and that image perception is better as the cultural distance between the destination and the country / countries studied is smaller. H17 and H18 hypothesis is not confirmed, so the tourist destination image perception does not differ significantly according to the type of visitors and type of intermediaries.

Personal contributions to scientific research

This study is a confirmation of the existing theory that the image destination construct consists of 3 dimensions: cognitive, affective and conative, where the first two influences the third. In addition, from the items used to measure cognitive dimension resulted three factors obtained also by Byon & Zhang (2010).

The original elements of the research:

- A measurement instrument of tourist destination image from the intermediaries' perspective, which can be used in future image studies and can be adapted for samples consisting of tourists.

- A model of tourism destination image formed from its three dimensions (cognitive, affective and conative) and the factors: familiarity, attractiveness and overall image.

- Testing the structural model relationships between variables that were not previously tested on samples of tourists or intermediaries.

- The analysis of tourist destination image from intermediaries' perspective in evaluating structural relationships between model variables simultaneously.

- Assuming that intermediaries are tourists imaging agents (Granter, 1993) the study demonstrates the relation between cognitive and affective dimensions of the image and intention to recommend travel packages.

- An intercultural approach has not been applied before in studies of the destination image for the purposes of analyzing the image of destination from the perspective of intermediaries from different countries.

- The study analyzed the relations between the overall image and destination attractiveness, between familiarity and intention to recommend, between familiarity and overall image, and between attractiveness and intention to recommend. Only the relation between familiarity and intention to recommend was not confirmed.

- It has been demonstrated that destination attractiveness is a determinant of the intention to recommend, which in turn is influenced by the overall image of the destination.

Regarding the assumptions based on previous studies, the thesis partially confirms the results obtained in previous research, most of all conducted on samples of tourists. Hypotheses that were not confirmed are H10 and H17.

Although the hypothesis which states that that cognitive dimension positively influences attractiveness was not confirmed, the overall image has been identified as a strong determinant of attractiveness.

Managerial implications of the research

The research presents Romania as a tourist destination from Germany, Italy and France intermediaries' perspective, the first 3 countries from which Romania receives most tourists. These results can be used by tourism organizations to promote Romania as a tourist destination and tourism offices of Romania in the three countries to promote the destination.

The results demonstrate that the intention to recommend a destination is most influenced by the affective component of image, attractiveness and overall image of the destination. Direct effects of cognitive component are reduced on intention to recommend, but the indirect effects mediated by the variables mentioned above are great. At least three important conclusions drawn out that should be considered in the process of promoting Romania as a tourist destination.

- First, tourism organizations efforts should focus on including Romania as a tourist destination on the "cognitive map" of more intermediaries.

- Second, efforts of tourism organizations together with government authorities should focus on reducing the weaknesses identified: infrastructure and transport, accommodation, access to destination, personal safety and economic development.

- Third, destination promotion messages should include, in addition to existing landscapes and natural elements, the other two strengths identified in respondents entries: hospitality and good prices. Although intangible, and difficult to promote these elements should be included in the description of Romania as a tourist destination.

The research results show that Bulgaria is the main competing destination of Romania. In order to identify the position of Romania as a tourist destination compared to Bulgaria is recommended future research.

In conclusion, the study provides important information that can be used in developing a marketing and management strategy of Romania's image as a tourist destination. This strategy must be created by government tourism organizations and, perhaps more important, must be supported by the entire administrative system of the country and equally by each of us.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

One of the main limitations of the study is given by the small sample obtained, especially the one with intermediaries from France (25 responses). For this reason, the results for this country should be interpreted with caution. It is recommended resumption of research with the same population, with the national and / or European support to achieve a higher response rate.

Another limit was the lack of studies that use the intermediaries as sample. It was a limitation because conative scale was adapted from models tested on samples of tourists.

Value factor, component of the cognitive dimension was measured only with two items, which could influence the results. Kline (2005) recommends using at least 3 scales items to measure constructs.