

Country Branding: Romania as a Tourist Destination

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Abstract

The topic of tourism motivations has been debated for decades in various destinations around the world. Romanian's economy is booming starting with end of 2013 as stated by one of the most powerful voices on the subject – "The Economist". Furthermore, Bucharest is acknowledged as the cultural, industrial and financial center of Romania. Bucharest is becoming lately more and more popular amongst city destinations in Europe, being also known as a budget friendly destination. People are influenced by many factors in choosing their destination. Country-branding is maintained on a top position when it comes to decision's influences. The main objective of this paper is to identify the main motivational factors that attract tourists to visit the Romanian capital. The research will look on how the Romanian brand is perceived by foreigners, at how people get information about Bucharest before they travel, how their experience in Bucharest is and which possibility would be to recommend the Romanian capital to others, as a tourist destination.

Keywords: *tourism, marketing, country branding, tourist motivation, Bucharest*

Introduction

The idea of country branding has been widespread around the world in the last few years, as an idea which would bring success and development to the countries which would approach it. Country branding could be successful in many ways and many areas, such as: tourism, investment, diplomacy, culture, communication, etc. Country branding generally represents the image of a nation perceived by other people. As in any marketing sector, branding plays an important role in the evolution and development of a self-image that would bring benefits and advantages for those who promote it.

In this paper, I would like to analyze the country branding issue in the tourism area, which is of great interest in the context of a globalized world in continuous evolution. I decided to analyze the concept on my beloved country, Romania, with the concrete example of the capital city – Bucharest. The research questions I would like to follow are: What positive

effects would country-branding bring to our country? ; What motivates tourists to come to Romania?; Would Romania be recommended as a tourist destination by those who already experienced the journey to our country?

Since there has been no research made before on the chosen topic - "Motivation of tourists visiting Bucharest"- I will assume the role of the researcher and I will have to embrace the literature by doing research into tourism motivation factors and other touristic-destinations that studied and debated this topic. Moreover, primary data will be gathered using semi-structured interviews in order to leverage the information gathered from data analysis on other destinations and it will be applied to Bucharest. Other destinations will also be shortly analyzed, by looking at tourist motivations in choosing a certain country; the research will follow similar destinations and cities with a rich culture and heritage, having a population of around three million people. Prague, in the Czech Republic, represents a good example of tourism destination with a steady increase of visitors in the last 20 years:" The Czech Republic's market profile is strongly grounded in its rich historical and cultural heritage. Prague is a major attraction and accounted for almost a half of all foreign overnights".¹

The choice of this particular city in Romania – Bucharest - was mainly influenced more by a personal factor, rather than objectivity; the idea that this kind of research has never been made in such a popular area is intriguing for me. The study aims to show what types of people are visiting the capital, when they visit - so a basic seasonality will be established - and what they are interested in when they decide to come from abroad; sightseeing, entertainment, cultural and traditions seeking, heritage tourism, religious tourism, sport events related to tourism and many more aspects to be discovered.

Research Methodology

For this research, primary data will be collected, by using semi-structured interviews, as this method is a popular way of data collection, especially for big enquiries². The interview methods were chosen because they offer a personal approach, without the risk of not getting any

¹ Williams, A. M. and Balaz, V. (2000) *Tourism in Transition*, Available at: <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/19837/>; Accessed on 20th March, 2016

² Kothari C. R. (2011) *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*. 1st edn. New Age International.

responses, as other data collection methods could have, as for example phone or e-mail questionnaires. This type of data collection enables the researcher to get various responses from different people with different backgrounds. Moreover, the researcher can observe the body language of the person interviewed, which is another important way of interpretation. These discussions are the perfect method to get a lot of people involved and to maximize the accuracy percentage of the research. Using semi-structured interviews, a great number of responses is expected. The questionnaires will have structured questions and also opened questions, where the person interviewed will not have any answering options and they will need to express their point of view. An open questionnaire, will be a better option because “ rather than controlling variables, these studies are open-ended and set up research opportunities designed to lead the researcher into unforeseen areas of discovery within the lives of people investigated”³

Secondary data will also be gathered in order to look at different destinations and their studies on tourists’ motivation. The research will be done for other cities, as I was not able to find anything in the academic world that relates to the motivation of foreign people visiting Bucharest. This method was chosen in order to emphasize how other destinations looked in their visitor’s eye as an attraction, to look at their accommodation and entertainment facilities and how the specific destination studied the tourist’s motivation in key places around the tourist sites.

There are a lot of sampling techniques available; they can provide sensible alternatives to select cases to answer to any research question. In this research, the study of a non-probability sampling will be used for the contribution of purposive sampling. The technique of non-probability sampling is based on the assumption that the pilot will be statistically chosen at random. This type of piloting provides a range of alternative techniques based on subjective judgment; moreover it will be the most practical in this kind of situation⁴.

With regard to the selected topic, the non-probability sampling has been used to get a hint at the motivational factors of people with different cultural backgrounds. The aim of the research during the piloting period

³ Holliday A. (2002) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. 1st edn. Sage Publications LTD. London.

⁴ Holliday A. (2002) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. 1st edn. Sage Publications LTD. London.

was to have an open conversation with tourists of all ages regarding their overall experience as a visitor. It was a pleasant surprise to notice people's desire to participate and to provide constructive feedback on how Bucharest can be improved, as a tourists' destination. What I have noticed among the participants during the piloting was a push and pull factor, because most of the visitors read an article, saw a commercial online or "found cheap flights to Bucharest". The sampling was done in five days (not consecutive days) and for this sampling, I, as the research conductor, have spent 3 hours per day in key tourist places in Bucharest: The Old Town, The Revolution Square, The Union Square, around The Romanian Parliament (top attraction in Bucharest, INS, 2013).

The piloting revealed that Bucharest is being advertised overseas, both directly (commercials) and indirectly (news articles, word of mouth). However, I have noticed that the motivational factors were very diverse and they started from business travelers to travelers who came for a sporting event or to couples coming for a city break. The piloting was useful in terms of constructing the semi-structured interviews that ultimately could be near to answer the research topic.

The Case Study

The semi-structured interviews used in this research study were a one to one basis with 56 individuals of different nationalities, from American, English, Portuguese, Spanish, German, and Hungarian to Romanians coming from different parts of Romania. The age varied as well from 19 to 58. The respondents were informed that they can interrupt the interview at any time and it is a free conversation and if they do not feel comfortable with any of the questions, they can refuse to answer with no further obligation in continuing the interview. However, every person interviewed was really open and engaged in the conversation, being willing to contribute to the development of Bucharest, as a touristic destination. Furthermore, the majority saw potential in Bucharest and in order to help with the improvement, people answered all the questions asked and none of them interrupted the interview. All the interviews were recorded and despite my fear that by recording the answers, the respondents might feel uncomfortable, most of them enjoyed being recorded and embraced this method of data gathering.

Discourse analysis was used to examine and to determine how Bucharest was presented to its audience before coming to the destination

and how tourists formed an opinion of the cultural and social representations of Romanian's capital. Romania and Bucharest in particular, were targeted by international publications. In international media, the country with the particular example of the capital city had been covering the first pages in the past four years, from the following perspectives: political, social, cultural or touristic subjects. One of the most important publication which covered Bucharest, in an informative and promotional article, was National Geographic with "Top 10 Things to do in Bucharest"⁵, where the writer, Mark Baker presented the House of Parliament, The Old Town, The Museum of the Romanian Peasant and many more attractions and Romanian traditions.

Another text that promoted and presented information to a potential target market – the American market - was the New York Times; Lionel Beehner wrote an article exploring Bucharest's nightlife and gastronomic tourism. "Bucharest District Struts Again" is describing, "the laid-back vibe of the neighborhood's night life is a welcoming alternative pretentious, overprices clubs found in other areas of Bucharest"⁶.

Another example is a publication from the United Kingdom, written by Mark Hillsdon, who wrote an article about Bucharest's tourism, providing specific prices of accommodation, facilities and activities. Moreover, the tourist destinations in Bucharest along with restaurants, bars, and other information about flights and internal transportation were included in the famous English newspaper – The Telegraph.⁷

There were more and more promotions made by international websites and blogs, all related to Romania. For example, a famous blogger from Denmark – Victoria Flamel posted a video on Youtube, entitled "Romania and the Romanians", where she promotes Romania socially, culturally, historically and presents the main attractions and curiosities.⁸

⁵ <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/top-10/top-10-things-to-do-in-bucharest/> (last accessed on 12th of May)

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/travel/30surfacing.html?_r=0 (last accessed on 12th of May)

⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destination/romania/170227/A-weekend-break-in...-Bucharest.html> (last accessed on 12th of May) – see Annexe 1

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVJ1zpBhIMo> (last accessed on 12th of May)

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Specific themes were formed based on a vital dialogue between the “subject” and the “researcher”, and this helps in clarifying the findings and to provide structured results of the research. According to Holiday⁹, in other studies, “the data is taken as a whole and then organized according to themes, but themes themselves are partly emergent and partly influenced by questions or issues that the researcher brought to the research.” In the present study, I tried to start from objectives questions and to be impartial in the way the questions were addressed. Thus I decided to analyze and to interpret the data by looking at specific themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews previously discussed. After analyzing the data, I was able to define the type or the themes of tourism discovered. Furthermore, I assessed all of the ideas as a potential tourism motivator for future tourists by establishing a possible customer market and a behavioral segmentation of the people interested in visiting Bucharest.

At the end of the case study I was able to identify three main themes, three main reasons for tourists to visit Bucharest, which emerged from the semi-structured interviews: cultural tourism, business tourism and tourism generated by sporting events.

Cultural Tourism

The interviews and the pilot study were conducted in key touristic areas, most of them being cultural and heritage sites. It was more than expected to receive a high number of responses related to culture, history and heritage, because of the location where the study was conducted. The majority of the people interviewed at the cultural sites, were visiting Bucharest for three to five nights with the sole purpose of exploring a new city, which also included the opportunity of low priced accommodation and transport. There was also an increased trend of people interested in Bucharest as a city-break destination.

Looking back at the discourse analysis, the promotional articles were promoting Bucharest as a city-break destination, with no more than 4 nights spent in the Romanian capital. Thus the international publications that covered Bucharest and promoted it indirectly managed to inspire and to convince tourists to choose Bucharest as their holiday destination for a city-break.

⁹ <http://www.hrpub.org/download/20140205/UJER11-19502022.pdf>, last accessed on 20th of May

Analyzing the topic of slow tourism and globalization, most of the respondents appreciated the fact that Bucharest remains faithful to its roots, even in such a unified global environment. The tourists seem to appreciate the traditions displayed at the National Peasant Museum for their originality and specificities and the People's Palace, which seems to be an icon for the communist heritage in Bucharest also for tourists, was the main attraction for the majority of the people I have interviewed.

Business Tourism

During the pilot and the research study, I could notice that there was also an increasing trend in people visiting Bucharest for a secondary activity, after culture and heritage. People are coming to the Romanian capital with business activities. Usually the tourists were organized in small groups with a Romanian tour guide. The case study showed that the companies were organizing informal tours of Bucharest after office hours, for the foreigners interested in knowing Bucharest and finding out more about what it has to offer. However, what I was able to observe was that smaller companies did not organize such tours, but on the other side they offered valuable information on which places people should visit, the opening hours of main attractions and also recommendations for traditional Romanian restaurants.

Although business activities, meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions are the prime reason of being in Bucharest for some foreigners, they are also very much interested in exploring Bucharest's heritage, traditions and last but not least – in food. Most of the tourists that fell into this category said that it is not their first time visiting Bucharest and every time they visit they try to extend their business trip with one or two more days in order to visit as much as possible.

The case study shows that business tourists got their information even before coming to their destination, and they knew exactly what they want to visit and what they want to do in their spare time. Social media is an important tool of information regarding tourism infrastructure (restaurants, attractions and many more). The concept of slow tourism is again debated, the visitors mentioning that Bucharest is different from other European capitals not being influenced that much by the effect of globalization. The visitors appreciate how the Romanian capital remains loyal to its traditions.

Tourism Generated by Sporting Events

Next to the business tourism, the existing tourists in Bucharest, who came for sporting events, are visiting the Romanian capital as a secondary activity. The primary motivation of their visit is firstly related to an attendance to a sport event; the majority came as supporters of their favorite teams and sports, but there were also some athletes, martial arts sportsmen and football players as well. During the case study, Bucharest was hosting a range of international competitions; and I met many supporters of various specific sports from different countries. I have noticed some similarities with the business tourism, and this is the reason why I consider that visiting Bucharest is a secondary activity.

With the purpose of gaining more insights of foreigner's calendar during their stay in the Romanian capital, I attended one of the competitions. The event was a marathon called "The color run"¹⁰ or "Happiest 5k on the Planet" which is being host in over 200 cities and 40 countries every year¹¹. It was interesting to see people coming from different cities around the globe just to support and to promote healthiness and social causes in Romania. Besides the competition itself, tourists also planned a few days of visiting and getting to know Romanian culture and traditions practiced in the Romanian capital.

Most of the tourists were scheduled to have a tour of Bucharest in their last day of competition, if the competition lasted more than one day, or they planned one or two extra days - in case the competition lasted just one day - as it was the case of the event I have attended. In these extra days, tourists planned to visit specific sites, such as the "People's Palace", the "National Peasant Museum" and/or the "Old Town". Beside the marathon, I could interact with the interviewees during their free time, while they were actually enjoying the capital's attractions. Therefore I decided to attend also the last activity of the day - the visit in the old town, to find out what did the athletes and which was their opinion about Bucharest and if they are willing to return on a leisure visit to the Romanian capital. I was positively surprised to see that the majority of the respondents were very communicative and willing to offer feedback, most of them visiting many countries before with similar sport events. Having a broad travel experience, most of the interviewees mentioned that Bucharest is very different from other cities that they have been to, but it is "a very

¹⁰ See Annexe 2 – "The color run" organized in Romania

¹¹ <http://thecolorrun.com/about/>, Last accessed on 22nd May 2016

beautiful city with a lot of occidental and oriental influences". Moreover, they were intrigued by the fact that Bucharest is not advertised in their countries for their age range, most of the athletes being between 18 and 24. Bucharest is well-known for its nightlife and diversity for free time activities, as well as for the low prices when it comes to relaxation and fun. This is what the majority of foreigners stated, adding that they would definitely like to come back especially to visit and to enjoy what Bucharest has to offer.

"Bucharest – the City of Contrasts"

After the 56 interviews, the most used expression when describing Bucharest by the interviewees was "it is a city of contrasts, where the old meets the new". I have found different themes and different motivational factors, but most of the tourists appreciated Bucharest for its unique culture and for the positive feelings they had while visiting.

The respondents stated that they believe that Bucharest is a city of contrasts, firstly because Bucharest is not advertised in their specific source markets and so it is considered a "secret destination", which appears to be highly different than what they were actually expecting. Most of the tourists also mentioned that the image of Romania in Spain, Italy and also in the UK in particular, is not very positive, as we already know. This might be an important factor of Bucharest not being on the touristic map of Europe. But even this was considered to be "in contrast", because the bad image does not have anything to do with what Bucharest really is and with what it has to offer.

Conclusions

Overall, all of the previous chapters have provided a detailed insight about the tourism motivations in Bucharest. It has been highlighted that motivations can be very different, but could be categorized in specific themes. Using both semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis represented an advantage, because both together offered a complete overview of the tourists' journey: pre-booking, traveling and the experience itself and post-traveling. By analyzing the discourse analysis, I could notice how the "push factors" were supplied and the preconceived idea of Bucharest was also observed when the interviews were conducted. However, the preconceived ideas were usually different from the reality as most of the respondents mentioned the fact that they were surprised of

Bucharest in a positive way and many of them have highlighted the idea that the Romanian capital is not advertised at its fully potential.

The research questions that I have been following are: What positive effects would country-branding bring to our country? ; What motivates tourists to come to Romania?; Would Romania be recommended as a tourist destination by those who already experienced the journey to our country? After primary data has been gathered by using semi-structured interviews, I was able to find an answer to almost all of my questions. Starting with the positive effects that country branding would bring to Romania, I would say that firstly it is a powerful way of differentiation, in a world where all the other countries are trying to come forward. Then, country-branding should establish a correct image of Romania in tourist's mind and make it achieve recognition for its qualities. What I was able to notice during the case-study was that the country-branding process for Romania is not the best in order to attract tourists. This was expressed by the majority of the interviewed people who were surprised about the contrast between what they were expecting and what they actually "received". This was the case especially for tourists who arrived in Bucharest for other reasons rather than actually visiting and getting to know the capital.

This idea will bring me further to the next question from my research study: what motivates tourists to come to Romania? Summing up, after interviewing 56 tourists in Bucharest, I was able to identify three main reasons why foreigners are visiting the city. The first reason is the culture of the Romanian capital, which influences tourists to come and explore. The culture along with the heritage, the capital's natural or build-up beauties and the surroundings it has. Besides this, there are also other reasons why people are coming to Bucharest and one of them is sport. People's willingness to come and to support their favorite kind of sport became a reason for foreigners to visit, but what is the most important is that this only opens the gate for future visits. Furthermore, people's motivations for coming in Bucharest are also related to another main idea, and this is the business area. The majority of the interviewees, who came to Bucharest for business purposes, are willing to come again for leisure activities.

The last research question that I wanted to "investigate" was the following: would people who have already visited Romania further recommend Bucharest as a tourist's destination? After the experiences people had in Bucharest, I received lots of positive feedback and also lots of

complaints. But the complaints were related to the fact that Bucharest is not advertised enough and it is not advertised at its full potential in foreign countries. People were pleased to find here beautiful sightseeing's, appetizing food, good prices, comfortable places and warm Romanians to welcome them. As confirmed by the majority, they would gladly recommend Bucharest and were interested in returning and in visiting even more than the capital city. Even if there is still work to do to develop the Romanian tourism and the image we have in foreigner's mind, the best part is that we will be able to do it. We have what to offer and if we know how to do it, the results will be mainly positive.

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