

Using travel blogs to explore the image of Romania as an emerging tourism destination

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Abstract

The general objective of this study is to explore and identify the perception about Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers' blogs; we therefore aim to explore and identify the main elements of the image of Romania as a tourist destination based on these blogs. Data were collected manually during May 2021 using the search keywords "travel blogs" and "Romania" on the Google search engine (201 entries). Further, both a word frequency analysis (quantitative), and a content analysis (qualitative) were conducted to ascertain which places are most frequently mentioned in tourists' travel posts, and the words most often used to describe their experience. The results shown that both destination-specific and primary image attributes are essential to understand visitors' perceptions through travel blogs. Managerial and practical implications also emerge for tourism managers to improve the destination image of Romania.

Keywords: travel blogs; Romania; destination image; tourists' perceptions; content analysis

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1. Introduction

Opportunities for interaction are better than ever for tourists nowadays. The Internet, more precisely social media and UGC (user-generated content), has provided customers with new ways of learning, directly from other customers, on tourist destinations and their products and services (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). All these digital phenomena offer benefits not only for consumers but also for the industry. The usefulness of UGC for managers has been largely proven in terms of increased sales via the use of ratings and scores (Lee, Lee & Baek, 2021). But the Internet offers not just quantitative information to both managers and consumers, but also qualitative in terms of ways of sharing moods and emotions. These are more difficult to measure but can provide relevant information for tourism organizations. Indeed, tourists can use blogs, microblogs, and social networks to accurately describe their subjective and personal experiences or opinions and share them with friends and others. Travel blogs represent an important source for acquiring travel information (Banyai, 2010; Lin & Huang, 2006; Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Singh *et al.*, 2008). When using personal blogs, tourists share their travel experiences emotionally, and prospective tourists can search for and respond to these experiences. Focusing attention on the content of travel blogs may reveal travellers' expectation of the visits to destinations.

In this sense, blogs which contain UGC are of great interest in studying the affective component of an image or the emotions associated to a destination. It is seen as a representative source of the in-depth thoughts and feelings of tourists (Carson, 2008) and can greatly influence people who read them (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Blogs communicate experiences, which are crucial for analysing tourism phenomena, because, as is known, "experience involves personal or intersubjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities" (Wang, 1999, p. 351). Accordingly, UGC is a well-known resource due to the extend use of blogs in tourism research (Akehurst, 2008; Banyai, 2010; Magnini *et al.*, 2011). Travel blogs are becoming more and more popular as a type of eWOM media (electronic word-of-mouth). They have emerged as a modern form of classical discourse in travel writing, providing information related to the experience tourists have in the destination.

Historically, narratives on tourism experiences have always existed (Brodsky-Porge, 1981) but globalization and digitalization have made them more accessible. The first travel blog (before the term was coined) was written by the travel writer Jeff Greenwald, in 1994. Since then, "the popularity of blogs has grown substantially over the past few years as advancements in communication technology have become more accessible, thereby enabling people to engage more easily in social commentaries" (Banyai & Glover 2012, p. 265). Over the last decade, many scholars have acknowledged the importance of travel blogs: they are considered rich and meaningful data sources which give insights, especially into tourists' perceptions, thoughts, and opinions (for examples, see in chronological order: Carson, 2008; Pühringer & Taylor, 2008; Wenger, 2008; Banyai, 2010; Banyai & Glover, 2012; Çakmak & Isaac, 2012; Ayeh *et al.*, 2013; Jin *et al.* 2020; Jin & Zhang, 2022). Accordingly, travel blogs are potentially powerful artifacts, but there is a gap in the way they can be exploited through a combined approach: experientially as they elicit emotions, but also allowing aggregated data in terms of frequencies. From this dual perspective, they remain underused as data sources. Indeed, blogs can provide perceptivity into the transformational effects of tourist experiences introspectively, especially for emerging destinations where less knowledge has been accumulated. This paper thus adds value from both a theoretical perspective – adding to both cognitive and affective elements of the concept of destination image (DI) – and a practical perspective – as regards the destination image concept applied to an emerging tourism destination (Romania).

The aim of this study is therefore to explore and identify the main elements of the image of Romania as an emerging tourist destination based on travellers' blogs. Through a manual data collection using the search keywords "travel blogs" and "Romania" on the Google search engine, a content analysis based

first on a frequency approach (word count), followed by a qualitative approach (categorization) are proposed. We therefore follow Miles and Huberman (1994): quantitative content analysis provides “a means for identifying, organizing, indexing, and retrieving the data (...) [and] once organized according to certain elements should involve consideration of the literal words in the text” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 242). This combined approach is in line with the latest suggestions regarding tourism and hospitality research future trends raised by Correia and Kozak (2021, p. 13) on the growing interest of combined qualitative and quantitative methods to improve tourism and hospitality research:

“...until early this century, qualitative methods are more likely to replace quantitative methods although the proportion of the former method is still lower.... However, in terms of future implications, one can argue that the current application of mixed methods may keep the balance between these two methods in the future”.

Methodologically, our work follows this call for combined techniques as a means to correct this imbalance towards quantitative as opposed to qualitative studies in tourism, the former still being more common when analysing secondary information in UGC in an approach based on big data. Thus, we would like to add our work to the existing trend which highlights qualitative (pictorial or verbal) analysis on UGC, applied to restaurants (e.g. Jurafsky, Chahuneau, Routledge & Smith, 2014), hotels (e.g. Giglio, Pantano, Bilotta & Melewar, 2020), tourist shopping (e.g. Jin *et al.* 2020), female experience of museums (e.g. Jin & Zhang, 2022), and to destinations as an overarching product (e.g. Lee, Benjamin & Childs, 2020; Rodrigues, Vahid, Correia & Kozak, 2019). Moreover, Romania as a tourist destination specifically has also been the subject of interest through blog analysis (e.g. Banyai, 2010) but only through qualitative approaches and by focusing on one aspect (e.g. the Dracula’s experience, Lupu *et al.*, 2017). So, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, a combined quantitative (word frequencies) and qualitative (content analysis) approach to analysis of travel blogs has not been yet applied to Romania as an emerging tourism destination and constitutes a holistic approach to unveiling its attractiveness. Methodologically speaking, a more “interpretive quantitative approach” (Babones, 2016) could be used in the future in order to broaden the study, but this is not the case in this study.

The paper is organized into five sections beginning with this introduction and a literature review section related to destination image and blogs, eWOM and travel blogs, followed by a methodology section with the data description and data analysis. Next the results and discussion are presented, closing with the conclusions, limitations, and practical/managerial implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Travel blogs and destination image

The online travel journals, known by the abbreviation “blogs”, are publicly accessible online diaries (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). The structure of the blogs consists of familiar, frequently updated entries on a single web page (Blood, 2004). The content of a blog is often referred to as storytelling and narrative because blogs are often like diaries, created with the purpose of sharing experiences and memories through a web page (Bosangit *et al.*, 2015). In this sense, Sigala *et al.* (2012) concisely define blogs as “free, public, web-based entries in reverse chronological order presented in a diary-style format”; they hence describe tourism blogs as a digital form of journaling that gathers an individual’s experiences.

As regards the tourism literature, a similar definition is provided by Molz (2012, p. 28) as follows: “A travel blog is an online travel journal complete with travel stories, photographs and video that documents travellers’ experiences and enables them to share those experiences with friends and family members, other travellers and even strangers they meet online”.

The blogger personality and its point of view has the strongest effect in the blog nature (Hollenbaugh, 2010); accordingly, prospective tourists can search blogs to obtain information on subjective travel experiences and/or to respond to other people's experiences (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). Akehurst (2008) examines the development of UGC in the use of blogs and concludes that blogs are perceived as being more credible and trustworthy than traditional marketing communications. Destination experiences are shared by tourists in story form (Govers *et al.*, 2007), leading to blogs; these blogs consist therefore of dated entries in a "storytelling" format (Blood, 2004). According to Gretzel *et al.* (2007), reading online travel-related blogs is among the most frequent travel planning-related online activities.

As a result, it can be said that UGC has been distinguished by the importance given to the use of blogs in tourism (Akehurst, 2008; Magnini *et al.*, 2011; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Accordingly, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are increasingly paying attention to travel blogs and reviews as a potential source of consumer insights for destination marketing (Carson, 2008; Pühringer & Taylor, 2008). Managing the induced and organic image (Gartner, 1994) is a relevant way to build destination marketing intelligence (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002).

As is well known, destination image is created or formed by different components (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Gartner, 1994). The cognitive and the affective components are the most mentioned in the tourism-related research literature as being central to the formation of the overall destination image. The latter component (emotionally driven attributes of tourism destination image) corresponds to sentiments and feelings; the former (cognitive elements of a projected destination image) corresponds to rational information processed by consumers (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). Both are present in travel blogs, in terms of words, expressions, pictures and emoticons.

The tourism-related literature has examined within travel blogs contents which is relevant to destination image in general, that is, to the evaluation of destinations and tourist behaviour. These aspects are mostly related to general description of destinations such as attractions, climate, cuisine, transport, or region-specific labels (Carson, 2008; Filieri, Acikgoz, Ndou & Dwivedi, 2020; Lee, Benjamin & Childs 2020; Pan *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, tourists' personal storytelling can create and project tourist image on other tourists, and therefore serve to promote destinations, according to Lin and Huang (2006). Accordingly, perceived destination image has been analysed through travel blogs by Çakmak and Isaac (2012), Mali *et al.* (2013), Pan *et al.* (2007) and Wenger (2008). The importance of stories in blogs help create an overall image of the destination and may reduce possible doubts by sharing experiences and making the destination image clearer (Çakmak & Isaac, 2012).

Indeed, blogs are potentially important sources for people in forming destination images and as references for making travel decisions. Work by Volo (2010) addressed the value of blogs as relevant influence on prospective tourists' travel intentions; this use and its effects vary according to cultural background. Similarly, Munar (2011) finds that tourist-created content largely contributes to destination image formation and Son (2011) suggests that traveller's content blogs may be a useful means by which to understand destination images from tourists' points of view. Munar's (2011) study presents three different strategies used by DMOs in relation to tourists' content and destination branding and Son's (2011) study of Western travellers' perceptions of Zhangjiajie as a tourist destination uses content obtained from travel blogs. Moreover, work by Wang (2012) studies the factors influencing travel blog readers' behavioural intentions to travel by affecting their perceived image of the destination and Condrea (2012) studied travel blogs in Iran, evidencing they could be major factors in the future process of this country destination image formation.

Managerially, research on the influences of blogs have claimed that this kind of data offers good, up-to-date, real-time information and feedback on tourists' perceptions and experiences. They can be considered as a source of data for research on tourists' images of places and, therefore, serve as a quality measure for DMOs (Bosangit *et al.*, 2015; Munar, 2011; Marine-Roig, 2014). For example, Urry (1991) adds insights related to online publications regarding destinations with an analysis of the marketing format, these publications can provide better understanding of how destinations project themselves online.

Methodologically, different UGC has been analysed with different methods. Költringer and Dickinger (2015), for instance, researched online sources such as TravelBlogs.com, using the webLyzard crawling agent; analysis of 5.719 documents revealed information on destination brand identity and image through web content mining and natural language processing. Further, Li *et al.* (2015) gathered 1.033 verified travel blog articles from CTrip.com to analyse the destination image of Taiwan and Lee, Benjamin, and Childs (2020) worked on eliciting emotions from visitors to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in the USA using TripAdvisor travel reviews.

2.2. *Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and travel blogs*

Like much other UGC, travel blogs are relevant for assessing attitudinal outcomes related to recommendation or electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on tourism destinations. Litvin *et al.* (2008, p. 461) proposed the general concept of eWOM (electronic word of mouth) as "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers"; blogs are therefore usable to generate "informal communications" among (tourism) consumers. Indeed, eWOM is "any positive or negative online communication generated by consumers directed to companies, but visible to other users" (Kim & Slotegraaf, 2016, p. 185) and it has become a major source of information in the tourism industry.

Travel blogs depict the visitors' experiences at a specific destination, and as they elicit eWOM, they are an important source of information, influencing tourists' choice of destination (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Çakmak and Isaac (2012), explicitly considered blog posts as beneficial for word of mouth, and how this can influence destination image formation. Similarly, Liao *et al.* (2011, p. 253) state that the blogs are a "huge word-of-mouth-engine" and that is why advertisers have found blogging useful for their purposes. Similarly, Standing *et al.* (2014) showed how Travel 2.0 tools have spawned large amounts of UGC in the form of travel blogs and online travel reviews which are used to positively spread recommendations. Hence, Wenger (2008) signalled how travel blogs are getting higher importance to allow processes of exchanging information on experiences among tourists. In this regard, a blog is a social medium that carries UGC for eWOM distribution (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and blog posts may represent a type of written WOM (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Given the increasing number of Internet users, the preference for eWOM communications as travel information sources will inevitably become greater (Marine-Roig, 2014). In particular, blogs have turned out to be a popular and appreciated source (Sepp *et al.*, 2011; Volo, 2010) to spread not only positive but also negative eWOM. In this sense, work by Morgan *et al.* (2003), showed how dissatisfied tourists that share unpleasant comments regarding their experiences, can provoke an intense impact on destination image. On the contrary, viewing the trip planning process as an activity seeking emotional value (Sigala *et al.*, 2012), hedonic impact such as the enjoyment of reading blogs may as well be treated as the "usefulness" of the blog's content in producing a hedonic impact on the readers (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Kang & Schuett, 2013).

In fact, travel blogs and online travel reviews are considered of great relevance by other tourists due to their trip-diary nature of recounting travel experiences (Bosangit *et al.*, 2009; Chen *et al.*, 2014; Filieri &

McLeay, 2014; Pan *et al.*, 2007); they are written with no constraints by tourists (Jones & Alony, 2008; Marine-Roig, 2014), usually after the trip has taken place.

In short, a (travel) blog is a many-to-many and asynchronous tool, which favours a personal and interactive process for communication and eWOM exchange (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). It also produces interpersonal influences (Sigala *et al.*, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012) through social media platforms (Kang & Schuett, 2013). In this vein, Magno and Cassia (2018) studied the credibility and quality of information generated by travel blogs on consumers' behavioural intention; blogs do have an effect on making travel-related decisions, as tourists tend to adopt travel bloggers' suggestions. Also, Xu and Stephen (2018) found a positive relationship in travel blogger–consumer congruence between visit intentions toward the endorsed destination.

In both scholarly and managerial terms, travel blogs are of great interest for tourism research as their information is geographically and temporally classified and its content is highly trustworthy by users, as they are perceived as not controlled by any organization (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016). This places travel blogs within the scope and construction of tourist images; they can be objects of direct image projection from the very moment they are read (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016).

3. Methodology

Content analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, and narrative analysis (Banyai & Glover, 2012) is the most popular research methods for the analysis of travel blogs which will also be used here. They will also be used here, in a dual qualitative-quantitative approach.

The general objective of this study is to explore and identify the perception about Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers' blogs. This general objective is reflected in the following research questions:

RQ1: What words are most frequently associated with perceptions of Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers' blogs?

RQ2: What are the main image dimensions and their corresponding items associated with perceptions of Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers' blogs?

In this exploratory study, blogs were subjected to content analysis to determine what bloggers were communicating about their travel experiences in Romania. The text contained in blogs was extracted and analysed using word frequency and content analysis (e.g. Pan *et al.*, 2007; Jani & Yeong-Hwang, 2011). Content analysis was applied as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorff, 1980). Related to this, "photographs, videotapes, or any other item that can be made into text are amenable to content analysis" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 240). As Krippendorff (1980, p. 23) stated "we, too, demand content analysis to be predictive of something that is observable in principle, to aid decision making, or to help conceptualize that portion of reality that gave rise to the analysed text". Content analysis allows the researcher to validate theoretical considerations to strengthen comprehension of the data and has come into wide use in tourism studies in recent years. The analytic procedure was grounded on the general stages of the content analysis procedure in Krippendorff's (1980) six steps (design, unitizing, sampling, coding, drawing inferences and validation). A mixed interpretative-quantitative approach of content analysis to measure the information was adopted (in this case extract the image items of blog content), as well as the nature of the topic under study (destination image of Romania). As argued by Jani and Yeong-Hwang (2011, p. 344), "content analysis seemed to be a suitable means to capture the destination image communicated through

electronic word of mouth”. In the content analysis, the collected data is unstructured, such as interviews, diaries, observations, or a combination of different methods (Neuendorf, 2002) and hence qualitative content analysis is usually applied to verbal data such as interview transcripts, in this case blogs in UGC (Schreier, 2012, Elo et al., 2014).

In terms of content analysis, a direct approach was undertaken where “the researcher uses existing theory or prior research to develop the initial coding scheme prior to beginning to analyse the data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1286). In this case, the codebook relied on destination image categories from Beerli and Martin (2004) and Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) was used: that is, the choice of the variables was pre-determined beforehand as part of the study, among relevant literature (in this case on destination image). The result is a search of high number of similarities, but not an exact matching of each destination image category (Elo et al. 2014). Furthermore, this study followed the rational by Rodrigues (2015) and Rodrigues, Correia, Kozak and Tuohino (2015) that supports the idea that these two scales are dully complementary; as shown in Table 1, together they provide a more comprehensive destination image assessment.

Table 1. *Destination image scales used in this study*

<i>Authors/Year</i>	<i>Theory/Scale</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Beerli & Martin (2004)	<p>Framework based on nine DI dimensions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>natural environment.</i> - <i>social environment.</i> - <i>general infrastructure.</i> - <i>natural resources.</i> - <i>tourist infrastructure.</i> - <i>tourist leisure and recreation.</i> - <i>culture, history and art.</i> - <i>political and economic factors.</i> - <i>atmosphere of places.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Classification based on dimensions or components provided the categorization schema for this study . Provides more detailed information about the destination supported by DI theory: allowed to identify perceptions of Romania from the blogs . DI scale more focused on a supply side/projected image: however, it helps to cross with the demand perspective from blogs
Echtner & Ritchie (1991, 1993)	<p>Destination image based on three continua</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>functional/psychological</i> - <i>common/unique,</i> - <i>holistic/attribute</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Shift from a unidimensional to a multidimensional concept of DI: aids in identifying more intangible perceptions about Romania from the blogs . DI ratings include more measurable perceptions or more abstract impressions; . An item-by-item evaluation or a more holistic impression about the destination: it was possible to extract item-by-item or a more holistic perception about Romania . DI can include ordinary or more unique and special attributes: in this case unique attributes were extracted about Romania from the blogs . DI scale more focused on a demand side/perceived image.

Source: Own elaboration, adapted from Rodrigues (2015).

3.1. Data collection

In the present study, data were collected from travel blog entries obtained from the Google search engine using the search keywords “travel blogs” and “Romania”, from which a total of 201 travel blogs

were collected with the following variables: title, main description of the travel blog post (only entries written in English were included) and the link source. The period of data collection was one week in May 2021. Therefore, the content of travel blogs that was taken into consideration was collected only for five months (from January to May 2021, when the data was collected) and the process of extracting was done manually with Excel software. After this step, the data corpus was imported into NVivo 12 software and the analysis was carried out.

As aforementioned, a content analysis codebook was developed to categorize destination elements in the visitors' blogs, specifically those aspects that were involved in the image formation of a destination adapted from Beerli and Martin (2004) and Echtner and Ritchie's studies (1991, 1993) (see also Rodrigues, Correia, Kozak and Tuohino (2015)). Further, a qualitative content analysis was applied to reveal the main themes that bloggers addressed in their posts. Their interests and preferences were outlined from the analysis of the travel blogs, providing valuable marketing implications for Romanian DMOs and helping them to construct a destination profile and positioning in the future. Also, the visitors' postings demonstrated how they made judgements about the Romanian cities and the attractions they visited.

This kind of data collection process is similar to other research (e.g. Marine-Roig, 2014; Chen *et al.* 2014; Sun *et al.*, 2014; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016; Cakmak & Isaac, 2012; Alrawadieh *et al.*, 2018) and from a theoretical standing it tries to fill a gap related to the destination image concept applied to Romania as a tourism destination. It also adds new insights about the behaviour of tourists when visiting Romania and how they perceive the country overall.

3.2 Data analysis

Content analysis is the method chosen: it is a valuable tool for this type of data, as used to analyse travel blogs (Banyai & Glover, 2012) and for studying destination image through similar type of data (Tse & Zhang, 2013; Sun *et al.*, 2015). Thus, as suggested already in our literature review, data collected from blogs are expected to be more reliable to study of destination image than conventional questionnaires and interviews (Law & Cheung, 2010). Usually, qualitative studies such as content analysis of traveller's blogs outlines information based on bloggers' meaning-based experience, and thus their output is valuable for different tourism actors involved in the creation of a tourist destination image (Winsky & Dickow, 2021).

In contrast to the quantitative content analysis approach (word frequency), the subjective interpretation of textual content is used in the qualitative content analysis approach, to manually extract destination image elements from a small number of tourists' narrative descriptions (Sun *et al.*, 2015; Tegegne *et al.*, 2018).

Encoding the destination attributes in a systematic classification process and therefore identifying attribute categories are at the core of the qualitative content analysis approach in destination image studies (Lian & Yu, 2017). The categorization of travel blogs content offers important insights for tourism marketers involved in the promotion of a destination (Lian & Yu, 2019).

The text data was content analysed with NVivo 12 software using coding tools and the results were represented using the same program, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package. In order to achieve accurate results, some technical operations were needed, such as excluding some stop words (e.g. just, many, then, etc.) and correcting the words that were incorrectly spelt.

In order to answer RQ₁, an open-coding style was used to identify topics and contents found in the image formation literature, as well as to capture emerging themes which are unique to the studied destination. The frequent word list was made based on the content of travel blogs and reveals the words most used by tourists in describing their tourist experience. A word cloud visual representation emphasizes these topics for the 50 most used words. Aiming to answer RQ₂, a coding schema was developed using NVivo 12 to identify the main destination attributes, based on Beerli and Martin (2004) and Echtner & Ritchie's (1991;1993) studies.

4. Findings and discussion

Our findings provided adequate insights to answer both research questions. Regarding RQ₁ (i.e. What words are most frequently associated with perceptions of Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers' blogs?), Table 2 shows the most frequent words extracted from the data to give a first insight into perceptions of Romania.

Table 2. *Word frequency analysis based on content of travel blogs*

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
Romania	7	363	2.68
Bucharest	9	130	0.96
city	4	110	0.81
time	4	106	0.78
Transylvania	12	95	0.70
country	7	93	0.69
trip	4	85	0.63
visit	5	80	0.59
castle	6	78	0.57
beautiful	9	75	0.55
travel	6	74	0.55
Dracula	7	73	0.54
like	4	72	0.53
Romanian	8	70	0.52
Europe	6	68	0.50
many	4	68	0.50
Brasov	6	63	0.46
mountains	9	62	0.46
people	6	60	0.44
first	5	54	0.40
road	4	54	0.40
things	6	52	0.38
town	4	52	0.38
best	4	50	0.37
much	4	48	0.35
capital	7	46	0.34
back	4	44	0.32
region	6	44	0.32
days	4	42	0.31
place	5	42	0.31

Source: NVivo 12



Figure 1. Word cloud representation based on the 50 most frequent words from the corpus of travel blogs

The Romania travel blogs were analysed by tabulating the sentences that the tourists wrote during their experience, using word frequency analysis. The results emphasize that the most frequent words used by the bloggers are “Romania”, “Bucharest”, “city”, “time”, “country”, “trip” and “visit”, among others; and these aspects denote that the tourists write more about the country as a new destination for a tourism trip: as examples, see some of the collected extracts:

“Romania is one of those European countries that still don't get as much attention as they should yet it is a wonderful destination to travel to...”;

“A charismatic country in the Balkans, with a landscape of rugged stone churches and jaw-dropping castles ripped straight out of the Middle Ages, Romania is one of Europe's best kept secrets”.

They are also impressed by the cities of Romania such as Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj-Napoca, Sighisoara (*“Sighisoara and its UNESCO-protected Historic Centre is a must-see”*). The capital city of Bucharest is the most frequently mentioned in blog descriptions as it is also a hub for transit to the other cities in the country:

“The tours depart from Bucharest or Brasov”; “The capital of Romania is an exciting and beautiful destination, with a rich history, a vibrant nightlife and lots of things to do. It's the perfect destination for a fun weekend getaway”.

“Castle”, “beautiful”, “travel”, “mountains” and “Dracula” are words related to the tourism resources Romania has in terms of natural and urban attractions (i.e. the Carpathian Mountains, often mentioned in the tourists posts: *“The Carpathian Mountains are often compared with the Alps, because of the beautiful, breathtaking landscapes”*). Bran Castle, known by tourists as Dracula’s castle, is also an iconic attraction mentioned in the blogs:

“For many, Bran Castle may be synonymous with vampires or horror stories but in reality it is more of a beautiful medieval castle than a haunted place” or Corvin Castle: *“Corvin Castle, also known as the Hunyadi castle is one of the most beautiful and well-preserved medieval castles in Transylvania”.*

The region of Transylvania is the most visited by tourists that posted travel blogs from Romania and the most mentioned cities from this region in the posts are well known for their architectural tourism potential and the richness of the countryside *“Transylvania and the countryside of Romania called to us, and the road we'd take there was the Transfagarasan Highway (Transfăgărășan in Romanian)”*.

The general impressions that tourists have regarding their trips to Romania are outlined by words such as “beautiful”:

“From beautiful nature and abundant wildlife to spectacular castles and exciting history and culture, this is a country with so much in store. And if that wasn’t enough to convince you, you should know that Romania is incredibly affordable”.

Regarding RQ2 (i.e. What are the main image dimensions and their corresponding items associated with perceptions of Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers’ blogs?), Table 3 shows the main destination image dimensions and their corresponding attributes, extracted from the content analysis.

Table 3. *Coding scheme of destination attributes used by tourists in their travel blogs postings*

Name	Files	References
Atmosphere of the place	0	0
Luxurious	0	0
Mystic & mystery	1	12
Place with a good reputation	1	20
Attractive or interesting	1	22
Culture, history and art	0	0
Customs and ways of life	1	2
Festivals	1	1
Folklore	1	2
Gastronomy	1	8
Museums, historical buildings, monuments, castles, etc.	1	23
Religion	1	3
General infrastructure	1	1
Development and quality of roads, airports and ports	1	4
Development of telecommunications	1	1
Extent of building development	1	2
Private and public transport facilities	1	8
Natural resources & environment	0	0
Attractiveness of the cities and towns	1	23
Beach	1	2
Beauty of the scenery	1	30
Lakes, mountains, deserts	1	11
Pollution	1	1
Protected natural reserves	1	3
Variety and uniqueness of flora and fauna	1	1
Wealth of countryside	1	4
Weather	1	1
Safety	1	2
Social environment	0	0
Hospitality and friendliness of the local residents	1	9
Quality of life	1	1
Underprivilege and poverty	1	1
Tourist infrastructure	0	0
Unique components	1	4

(Adapted from Beerli & Marti, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991;1993)

destination image components; the rest of themes indicated in the formation of image theory were identified along with unique components of it that emphasize the authenticity of Romania as a tourism destination.

Using descriptive data can be challenging due to the fact that the diversity of experiences cannot be controlled and bias cannot be prevented. Hence transcribed text should be carefully examined so that the researcher's own actions can be assessed (Elo et al., 2014).

Table 3 shows the coding scheme of the content analysis; six main themes emerged with 28 sub-attributes. The most frequent topics are the ones meant to have an influential impact on travellers and thus are the ones most likely to reflect the destination image. As regards the "Atmosphere of the place", tourists describe their experience in relation to the attribute of mysticism and mystery when they share their visit to Dracula's castle and recommend or emphasize tourism attractions from the cities of Romania which they describe as "attractive or interesting" and as a "place with a good reputation" (Sibiu, Brasov, Cluj-Napoca, Sighisoara). Related to the second theme "Culture, history and art", the sub-category "Museums, historical buildings, monuments, castles, etc." is the most frequently present in the description of the travel blogs as tourists outline their visits to some famous castles in Romania and are impressed by their beauty and architecture. Romanian gastronomy is also an element that catches tourists' attention. Hence, the projected destination image by travellers' blogs on Romania reveals dynamic destination attributes (Bui et al., 2021; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016), mainly related to the richness of cultural and natural tourist resources that Romania possesses.

The "General infrastructure" theme has two main subcategories that prevail, related to the "Development and quality of roads, airports" and "Private and public transport facilities". Some tourists complain about these and add additional information regarding the best routes/itineraries to some destinations in Romania. The theme of "Natural resources and environment" discloses the beauty of the scenery and is the most prominent subcategory identified in the travel blogs as tourists explain the richness of the natural tourism resources what the main strength of Romania is as a tourism destination. The attractiveness of the cities and towns gives tourists memorable tourism experiences due to the architecture of the buildings and museums and the tourist activities that may be done during the trip. The "Social environment" theme mainly gives an overview of the "Hospitality and friendliness of the local residents" that enabled tourists to have a pleasant experience in the cities of Romania or in the countryside. The unique components mentioned in the tourists' blogs are about some destinations in Romania such as the Bucovina region:

"Bucovina is famous throughout the world for the charm of its monasteries and churches, but also for the natural beauties and the unique traditions that the locals respect since centuries ago".

Another statement emphasizes the uniqueness of Romania's tourism potential:

"Romania has a big tourist potential, with its mountains, castles and legends, but the salt mines are the ones taking tourists to surprising places below ground, offering them unique experiences".

The results are in line with extant works, both in a general way and in more specific aspects. First, travel blogs are understood here as a clear manifestation of travel experience, in both its cognitive and affective components, as proposed early by Pan et al. (2007) and also by Bosangit et al. (2015) and reveal the meaningfulness of tourists' personal travel experiences. More precisely, and specifically for Romania, our results highlight the authenticity mentioned by tourists in other works (Banyai 2010) but

offer a broader set of authentic insights than the Dracula experience (gastronomy, local culture, dark tourism).

Second, as Marine-Roig (2014) recommends, the use of several blogs at the same time has allowed a more holistic approach, not specific to one source, but to many. Third, this holistic view of the tourist experience is somehow also granular and many-sided, as shown in other works: Jin *et al.*'s (2020) study on (Chinese) tourist shoppers revealed how UGC data (e.g. travel blogs) help to study tourist activity (shopping) by having interconnected elements; and Marine-Roig and Clavé (2016) highlight the perceived image of multiscale tourism destinations as multifaceted and with interconnected perceptions and experiences, as our results also revealed (see Table 2 and Figure 3).

Further, other studies such as Alrawadieh *et al.* (2018), Cakmak and Isaac (2012) and Mak *et al.* (2017) use UGC data (e.g. narratives data, photos, travel blogs) in order to analyse the destination image from different viewpoints. These previous studies confirm our results and ascertain the utility of travel blogs in tourism research, especially in the evaluation of the tourism experience and this outlines the fact that destination consumption experiences can be understood through this kind of data.

In sum, our research fills a gap in the existent literature both theoretically and practically: theoretically by the way in which it relates to the consideration of the perspective of travel bloggers that share their tourist experience using social media, and practically from the methodological standpoint regarding word frequency and content analysis of blogs. Also, it has practical contributions for different stakeholders involved in promoting Romania as a tourist destination (tourist managers, tourist marketing agencies, DMOs) as it offers new information about tourists' perceptions of Romania. Furthermore, this study adds new insights to the scientific literature about online destination image and an understanding of how Romania is perceived through the use of travel blogs. The use of UGC content (photos, reviews, comments) created by tourists emphasizes their mental image related to the destination; it is mostly the cognitive component of DI that plays a significant role in projecting it.

5. Conclusions, practical implications, and future research

This study addressed, explored, and identified the main elements of the image of Romania as a tourist destination based on travellers' blogs. Its aim was to contribute to the academic debate about the use of travel blogs to assess destination image (Pan *et al.*, 2007; Marine-Roig, 2014; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016; Alrawadieh *et al.*, 2018; Cakmak & Isaac, 2012), in this case applied to Romania; additionally, the intention is to guide destination marketers to define a positioning strategy for Romania in the future. This study indicates that travel blogs are an authentic and important source of data to understand destination image (Mak, 2017).

As concluded by Pan *et al.* (2007), travel blogs can also be a useful tool since they provide valuable tourist feedback about their travel experiences in richer and more detailed ways than a solely quantitative approach, such as Likert response survey measurements. Our findings allow to highlight that travel blogs can reveal relevant in-depth information about the characteristics of a destination in general and on the tourists' perceptions in that destination. In this case, tourists' blogs posts emphasize their impressions related more to the atmosphere of the places they visited in Romania, the culture, history, and architectural buildings experienced in the cities of the country, the natural resources and environment, offering them reasons to recommend the country as a good tourism spot to visit. This is in line with the most recent destination image studies that highlight the importance of the affective dimension apart from the cognitive (e.g. Martin & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). Also, tourists were impressed by the hospitality and friendliness of the local people who helped them in different situations

and gave them advice on the attractions they should visit. The unique components of Romanian tourism were also outlined by tourists and associated with some thematic destinations and tourism activities, e.g. the Bucovina region, known for its painted monasteries and authentic rural life, salt mines and the castles, offering memorable experiences.

The relevance of the current study lies in its academic and practical contributions. From a scholarly standpoint, the aim of the paper was to fill some gaps related to the study of the consumption of the tourist experience, which in this case is outlined through narratives in the form of travel blogs (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010). Our work can thus help serve research both conceptually and methodologically. Conceptually, our topic (image through digitally driven experiences) used a classical understanding of tourism destination image (from Beerli & Martin, 2004 and Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 1993) applied to the specific case of an emerging destination in a more contemporary context, 30 years after these seminal papers. The choice was made to use a codebook which relied on destination image categories, which suits present-day tourists' experiences. But it is not only application of the topic (tourist image through travel blogs) to Romania which is innovative, because this kind of analysis using travel blogs as a data source has not yet been applied. In this study it is important also to highlight the fact that methodologically, a combination of approaches in content analysis was applied: a) quantitative content analysis based on the frequency of words with the help of qualitative software, and b) qualitative content analysis, based on the interpretation of the words and sentences (units of analysis) used to describe perceptions about Romania. The intention of taking this approach was to highlight the link between travel blogs and destination image management. Thus, in a more situation-specific perspective, acknowledging that DI is a fully contextual variable (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002), the analysis of travel blogs for emerging destinations such as Romania adds knowledge to existing works, on both scholarly and managerial levels.

From a practical standpoint, the study gives insights for Romanian DMOs on how tourists perceive the country as a tourism destination based on their online blogs, which cities and tourist attractions are most appreciated and capture their attention during their stay in Romania. Thus, an important practical implication that this study may have for the Romanian tourism authorities is that tourists are sensitive to the public and private transport facilities which sometimes make their itinerary difficult to pursue and their destinations difficult to reach. Hence, the authorities should act to improve transport facilities for tourists. In addition, the findings might have implications for the tourism destination marketers and in helping policymakers to design effective strategies based on tourists' blogs in order to best promote the cities in Romania which, despite their increased tourism potential, remain largely unknown (e.g. Timisoara, Craiova, Hunedoara) and to update their advertising.

Moreover, enlarging the scope of what the paper offers to academia, the work is also in line with the latest works on service research priorities, which highlight the interest in "technology and the customer experience" (Ostrom *et al.*, 2021, p. 329). The technology-consumer interface is endless, analysed here regarding the use of blogs as a form of interaction among consumers via the Internet. Romanian DMOs could further pursue this path, with mixed approaches and combining secondary data (as here) with both qualitative (e.g. sentiment analysis) and quantitative primary data (e.g. surveys).

6. Limitations

This paper has some limitations. First, the study is descriptive, and the qualitative nature of the content analysis might lead to subjectivity in tourists' feedback. Another limitation is that in this study, only the content of the tourists' blogs written in 2021 (content of blogs for four months) was used, with no information related to their demographic profile; other additional information (and therefore a

different study design) could enrich the analysis related to the destination image of Romania and how it is perceived as a tourism destination using this kind of source data. The relatively small sample of the blog entries and the fact that only those written in English were included could also be considered a limitation as a larger sample and a multilingual approach might give a wider perspective of tourists' perceptions about the country.

Destination image is just one of the vast number of fields of research into travel blogs as they are a cost-effective means to gather rich, authentic, and unsolicited visitor feedback (Pan *et al.*, 2007). This research could be reinforced with frequency and content analysis related to more specific behavioural outcomes for consumers, such as perceived value (as a trade-off between benefits and costs): positive and negative adjectives could bring insights into what the main competitive advantages of Romanian places and attractions are. Moreover, in further research, a more focused perspective could be envisaged, such as the one proposed by Marine-Roig (2014) on Catalonia, where profiles of tourists are highlighted according to their comments on travel blogs (demographic approach). Indeed, adding tourists as individual participants (not in an aggregated approach, but on individual basis) would allow a better appraisal of the destination image according to segments of consumers.

Further, exploring the gap between the destination image that is projected by national DMOs and the organic destination image created by tourists' perceptions, by using other sources of data, might add a valuable contribution to this topic. Also, considering further the projected online destination image of Romania could improve the findings with different perspectives. Nonetheless, inquiry into blogs as a source of information can be introduced as a best practice to help monitor the image of Romania.

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