

Chapter 15

An Exploratory Study of Online Destination Images via User-Generated Content for Southeastern Rural Transylvania

Androniki Kavoura

Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece

Florin Nechita

Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania

ABSTRACT

The advent of new technologies has brought forth an incredible power to online users of social media who may act as active contributors and co-creators of the tourism communication and promotion of the areas that have visited, influencing in that way the online image that is created for an area, a region or a country. The user-generated content (UGC) that is created and uploaded, text and/or travel photos allows research to examine tourists' behavior. How can this be depicted with the use of photos taken from visitors for a rural area? The present chapter aims to (a) examine the destination image of Brasov County's (Romania) based on UGC created via photos uploaded on Facebook by a selected group of visitors in the area; (b) to examine the projected image and strategy in official Brasov County's websites and strategic documents and (c) to create a set of recommendations for the promotion of the Brasov County's rural area on the international tourism market.

INTRODUCTION

Definitions related to destination brands give emphasis on the differentiation element, the existence of physical attributes but also the intangible values existing in the imagination of the customer or the visitor when we speak about a tourism destination (Balakrishnan, 2009; Kim, 1990; Kotler, 1988). What does the destination image include? It incorporates the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person

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has of a destination which may be subjective and includes emotional attachments (Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008).

Research on the official promotion of heritage and differentiating elements of a region or an area illustrated the indifference of states to promote it (Kavoura, 2013), or the emphasis that is put upon world renowned sites rather than all heritage of a country, a place or a county (Kavoura & Bitsani, 2013), while tourist images aimed at international visitors (see the case of Taiwan, Chang, 2012) have not put emphasis on the role of user generated content created by tourists who visit an area and is associated with their perceived image.

Communication strategies on places, sites and destinations are usually based on the official tourism boards' statistics that promote specific and limited attractions while other attractions that are not considered from official organizations to be worthwhile to be promoted are not so intensively communicated (Leung, Vu, Rong, & Miao, 2016). The development of place marketing plans is an issue of the research agenda (Deffner, Metaxas, & Arvanitidis, 2013).

Text and visuals have been employed to such communication. Destination photography is a communication tool that can promote a destination. Visitor employed photography has been used to determine tourist destination images. Different aspects in photography have been searched. Colors in photos and the way destinations in the photos are perceived by respondents have been examined (Greaves & Skinner, 2010). Further, brochure photographs have been related to the tourists' own photographic choices (see the case for Australia, Jenkins, 2003). This is not though what always takes place. Although research has long proposed that tourist photography can be integrated in promotional efforts (MacKay & Couldwell, 2004), nonetheless, this has not been fully implemented. In fact, research has shown that the promotion of tourism destinations needs to take into consideration the way visitors perceive the destination based on online visitor generated photography so that discrepancies are avoided between what is posted online by tourists for a destination and what marketers promote on the Internet (see the case of Taiwan, Michaelidou, Siamagka, Moraes, & Micevski, 2013) or the different image representations presented for Macau by different web information sources while the management of a desired image is in search (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). This coupled with the fact that destination images of rural destinations haven't appeared very often in the tourism literature (Royo-Vela, 2009; Zhou, 2014) make this research's aims interesting to shed light on both the supply and demand side in regard to the way Brasov County is depicted.

Research in regard to online photography and destinations usually focuses on Flickr, a social photo sharing site and cultural related issues between the host and the guest cultural background; online photography posted on social network sites reflects the way tourists perceive the host culture and influences destination images (Dotan & Zaphiris, 2010; Stepchenkova, Kim, & Kirilenko, 2015). Much more limited research has taken place for the most commonly used social network sites, that of Facebook and UGC that is associated with a tourist destination, while it is needless to mention that social network sites that are continuously being employed by visitors, are not fully implemented by tourism organizations. Which is the case for rural areas? The present chapter aims to:

1. Examine the destination image of Brasov County's (Romania) based on UGC created via photos uploaded on Facebook by a selected group of visitors in the area
2. To examine the projected image and strategy in official Brasov County's websites and strategic documents

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