

ONLINE VISIBILITY - OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS. THE CASE OF THE HOTELS ON THE ROMANIAN SEASIDE VERSUS THE BULGARIAN SEASIDE

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Abstract. *The rapid development of the Internet and of the new informational technologies has a major impact on the tourism industry, thus the destinations with the highest growth rhythm in this sector are the ones ready, at any moment, to seize the opportunities specific to the online environment. The proof of the Internet's and the new informational technologies' importance in the tourism activity is that the World Economic Forum included the IT&C (The Information and Communications Technology) component among the 14 basic pillars of the Tourism Competitiveness Index. Under these circumstances, this research paper aims at analyzing comparatively the online visibility of the hotels from the Romanian seaside with that of the hotels situated on the seaside of the neighboring country, Bulgaria. The reasons for selecting the two countries were that both Romania and Bulgaria have many economic, geopolitical or historical similarities. Despite these similitudes, in the last two decades, the seaside tourism from the two countries had divergent evolution. Presuming that one of the determiners of the lower competitiveness and, implicitly, the lower conversion of tourists that the hotels on the Romanian seaside have in comparison with the hotels from the Bulgarian seaside is represented by the minimization of the Internet as a tourism promotion and communication environment, we considered appropriate an analysis through which we followed the familiarization of the hotels situated in these resorts with the latest terms, techniques and strategies specific to the virtual environment. We found that in terms of visibility and communication in the online environment, the hotels on the Romanian seaside have many strategic and organizational deficiencies, in comparison with similar hotels from the Bulgarian seaside.*

Keywords: *Romanian seaside; Bulgarian seaside; tourism competitiveness; online visibility; website; Facebook; Twitter.*

Introduction

Well integrated into the sphere of the tertiary sector due to the diversified range of services that are part of its activity, tourism can be considered as being one of the economic sectors that went through a fulminating development in the last decades. The dynamism of the industry and the freedom of the specific markets favor the fresh infusions of capital. These, combined with a series of elements of strategy, with a favorable legislation, with a marketing policy adapted to the market whose tendencies are rapidly changing, finally lead to an increase of a destination's tourism competitiveness.

Hapenciuc, Stanciu, and Costea (2014) consider that nowadays the hospitality industry gains new dimensions due to markets' complexity and to the growth of the tourism services consumers' exigency. In the conditions of the markets' globalization, according to Hapenciuc et al. (2014, p.22), the hotel industry becomes constrained to make strategic plans oriented towards obtaining results, trying at the same time to estimate the change, in order to adapt to an environment in a continuous transformation.

As the development of the tourism sector of the last years was simultaneously made with the consolidation of the virtual environment and the diversification of the communication system on the Internet, today, we can say that tourism represents a global phenomenon that constantly follows the trends of technology and uses these vectors willingly (Stanciu & Costea, 2012, p.46).

It is generally accepted by the whole society that the new informational and communication technologies (IT&C) are in the center of some irreversible economic and social transformations that affect all countries. However, as Grossek argued (2006), by far, the greatest economic and social impact on the hospitality industry was that of the Internet. It is global, accessible to a large audience by its communication valences, interactive, flexible and full of resources of any kind.

The evidence of the importance of the Internet and of the new informational technologies in the tourism activity of a public or private organization, tourism destinations or even countries, is that the World Economic Forum included the IT&C component among the 14 basic pillars of the tourism competitiveness. Practically, the variables of this pillar are not represented only by the telecommunications' infrastructure, but also by the capacity of the tourism organizations and other organizations to use the new informational technologies and to offer online services (World Economic Forum, 2015).

Kinkhan (2002) found that the metamorphosis the Internet imposed on tourism had an impact difficult to estimate exactly, from the moment in which it started to have the capacity to revolutionize all business' types, including the creation, the promotion and the distribution of services. Many of the interactions with the clients are now managed on the Internet, and the tourism agencies are depending on each another in terms of cooperation for the achievement of benefits, by using the same communication environment - the Internet.

As Balaure, Cătoi, and Vegheș (2005) stated, the activity of a tourism organization must concentrate on the internal, but mostly on the external communication. It is unthinkable to gain success in tourism in the absence of communication through which useful information are transmitted to the consumers, users, but also to the large public, concerning both the characteristics of the offered tourism products and services and also regarding the events in which the organization is involved, the promoted brands etc.

Nowadays, the presence on the Internet of any tourism destination becomes not only necessary but also imperative, especially in the conditions in which tourism is an extremely dynamic and sensitive field, based both on services and on communication. In addition, in tourism, the efficient communication with the clients is an essential condition for a business to become competitive, which is why it must respect the truth and accuracy, these being the most important features that must characterize the messages transmitted both through the website and through the Facebook, Twitter pages or other Social Media vectors.

Review of the literature

The Internet, as means of communication and promotion, is widely approached in the literature, thus there are many opinions and theories on this topic. The opinions are also shared by the practitioners in the hospitality industry because the outstanding manner in which the Internet and the informational technologies are evolving scares some managers and entuses others. We can say that two antagonistic groups arose, with different perceptions regarding the utility of the tools specific to the online environment in defining as coherent as possible the strategies of the tourism competitiveness growth: the sceptic ones, that are willing to admit the qualities of the Internet and would like to return to the traditional communication and promotion methods in tourism and, on the other side of the barricade, the enthusiast group, that constantly enjoy the advantages of the online instruments.

Authors like Andreescu (2011), Bădău (2011) and Momoc (2014) point out, in detail, the particularities of the communication mediated by the new informational technologies, demonstrating the importance of this phenomenon in the framework of the inter-human relations, but mostly in the business relations. The topic of the communication in the virtual space is also tangentially approached by Rotariu, Muntean, and Danciu (2010). Cureteanu, Isac and Lile (2010) consider absolutely necessary the full use of all the advantages generated by the new informational technologies, through additional efforts from economic entities in order to develop the web infrastructure and through the permanent exposure to the best practices worldwide.

To a great extent, the same ideas are also shared by Hociung and Frâncu (2012), which consider that the development of the web infrastructure facilitated the direct communication of the tourism operators with the potential clients and, implicitly, the accessibility of the latter to various information.

The literature approaches, through numerous studies, the virtual space, pointing out different specific instruments like the website as part of WEB 1.0 era with its one-to-

many communication, the Social Media and the leaders in the field (Facebook and Twitter), as late extensions of WEB 2.0 era with its many-to-many communication. For the Social Media and its importance in the tourism sector, many authors have shown their interest, among them being: Tussyadiah and Kim (2013), Hsu (2012) and others. Obviously, there are numerous research concerns regarding the tourism phenomenon, in terms of the presence and communication in the online environment; other authors that marked this niche are Fensel, Leiter, and Thalhammer (2012), Almeida, Silva and Mendes (2012), Verma, Stock and McCarthy (2012), Egger (2013), Munar and Jacobsen (2014).

The systematic approaches regarding the comparative analysis of the online visibility of various entities were achieved by many researchers, like Michalska and Lilleker (2011), who focused on the use of the Internet by the members of the European Parliament and analyzed their activity in the Social Media, or Bastida and Huan (2012) who aimed at a comparative analysis of the stage of the communication in the virtual space, through a website, of four tourism destinations from Asia (Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Taipei). A similar research approach was done by Ting, Kuo and Li (2012), but, this time, the analysis focused on the message sent by the websites of the hotels from China and Taiwan. Other authors had more or less focused concerns for the evaluation of the online competitiveness, such as: Escobar-Rodriguez and Carvajal-Trujillo (2013) in the hospitality industry from Spain, Tropea (2014) in the hotel industry from France, Vidovic (2012) regarding the hotels situated in Vienna or Stavrakantonakis, Toma, Fensel and Fensel (2013), whose wider research approach aimed at the phenomenon of the online visibility, from the point of view of the hotels on the entire territory of Austria.

The online visibility of the hotels on the Romanian seaside versus the Bulgarian seaside, in the context of tourism competitiveness analysis

Research motivation

By simply comparing Romania to Bulgaria, many similarities can be observed: both countries were part of the communist regime and left it at the same time, the climate is similar, the types of tourism allowed by the landscape are, to a great extent, the same, and, in both countries, there are conditions for seaside tourism. Nevertheless, even despite some competitive advantages that Romania has, it did not succeed to prevail on the tourism market, at least, at the level accomplished by Bulgaria. For example, according to the last World Economic Forum Report from 2015, on the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), Romania stands in the 66th position, among 141 countries, as opposed to Bulgaria, which is a direct competitor and stands in the 49th position. After analyzing the data of the same report, we find that Bulgaria, unlike Romania, managed in the last years to adopt new viable strategies regarding the legislative and regulation framework of the tourism sector, the business environment, and the infrastructure, in order to capitalize efficiently the natural, cultural and human resources. Many differences are to be observed between the two countries in terms of branding strategies, attractivity to tourists or financial performance (Dinu & Zbucea, 2010).

The gap between the two countries is also determined, to a certain extent, by the IT&C component - as an essential pillar in the analysis of the tourism competitiveness. On this chapter, Romania obtained 4,4 points from a total of 7, thus placing 59th worldwide, while Bulgaria occupies the 47th position, with 4,8 points from a total of 7. In this context, one of the premises we took into consideration when we initiated this research approach was that a possible explanation for the low competitiveness and, implicitly, the smaller conversion of tourists that the hotels on the Romanian seaside have in comparison with the hotels on the Bulgarian seaside is represented by the minimization of the Internet, as a promotion and communication environment in tourism, both by the decision makers, at the local, regional and national level, as well as by the private organizations in the industry.

The research methodology

In order to analyse the tourism offer of the destinations from the Romanian and Bulgarian seaside, in general, and to establish the level of visibility on the Internet of the hotels from the two above-mentioned destinations, within the period September - October 2015, we conducted a research, which aimed at 614 hotels on the Black Sea coast, these being presented in Table no. 1, according to their classification category.

Table 1. Classification of the hotels subject to the research

Destination	Classification					TOTAL
	*	**	***	****	*****	
Romanian seaside	12	104	123	35	7	281
Bulgarian seaside	0	10	141	157	25	333

Source: the authors' processing, according to the data provided by the Romanian National Authority for Tourism and the National Statistical Institute from Bulgaria

It is important to specify that the study aimed at analyzing all of the hotels, both on the Romanian and the Bulgarian seaside. The first phase of the research consisted in strengthening a database with all hotel structures of the two coastal areas. On the target group formation, there were taken into account the absolute data extracted from the list of the classified tourist accommodation establishments in Romania, published by the National Authority for Tourism (ANT, www.turism.gov.ro), and the data provided by the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria (www.nsi.bg) and by the Official Tourism Portal of Bulgaria (www.bulgariatravel.org).

With the list of hotels, we started the second phase of research that consisted in analyzing the hotel's online visibility through a website (2.1) and Social Media (2.2). Likewise, the analysis was based on the data obtained empirically from the analysis of the websites, Facebook and Twitter pages of the establishments taken into account. Basically, for each hotel structure identified in the first phase of research, we analyzed online presence through a website. The websites were determined by successive searches on the Google search engine and have entered in a process of evaluation of content, design, and functionality on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, measuring the degree of online satisfaction (1 representing the minimum appreciation, and 5 the maximum appreciation). In order to ensure the objectivity of the analysis, the opinions of two online tourism marketing specialists from the Travel Marketing Studio Company were consulted. Subsequently, we determined the average scores of each hotel and we

centralized them in order to determine the statistical gaps between the two collectivities considered (the Romanian seaside hotels versus Bulgarian seaside hotels). We also aimed to identify the hotel units which:

- own a website available in a foreign language;
- implemented on their website specific Social Media elements (buttons to disseminate information such as Facebook like a box or other sharing buttons), price offers (prices for accommodation and /or food, special offers) or virtual tours to enhance the effectiveness of the messages sent to customers.

Regarding the presence in Social Media, it was quantified taking into account the existence of a Facebook and Twitter page, and communication in these social networks was quantified taking into account the average number of messages posted by a hotel unit (Twitter) and the existence of at least one post/message of any kind (video content, photo or text) in the last three months (until the moment of research) for each hotel from the two coastal areas (Facebook).

The last phase of the research continued with the determination of Pearson correlation coefficients between two important variables: the number of stars (classification of hotels) and the quality of websites. It is worth mentioning that the data obtained were entirely centralized and processed using Microsoft Excel software program.

In this study, we examined the familiarization of the hotels situated in these resorts with the latest terms, techniques, strategies specific to the virtual environment, as we consider that the Internet is nowadays an internal and external promotion and communication environment, which takes increasingly more from the share of the other channels. Therefore, our main objective consists in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the online visibility of the hotels on the Romanian and Bulgarian seaside, including their presence and activity in the Social Media. The main hypothesis is that the hotels situated in the resorts of the Romanian seaside are less present online through a website, as compared to the hotels from the Bulgarian resorts. The presence of the Romanian tourist accommodation establishments on the social networking sites is, also, quite shy, the local tourism operators being less familiarized with Facebook and Twitter, in comparison with the Bulgarian operators.

The main hypotheses on which this research approach is based are:

Hypothesis 1: The majority of the websites that belong to the hotels on the Romanian seaside are available only in Romanian, the fact that leads to a communication barrier between the tourism service provider and the potential foreign clients. The situation is totally opposite when it comes to the Bulgarian hotels, which grant a greater importance to the optimization of the sites in as many foreign languages as possible. In other words, the rate of availability of websites in an international language is greater in the case of Bulgarian seaside hotels.

Hypothesis 2: We estimate that the Bulgarian hotels pay much more attention to the implementation on the website of the Social Media elements or of the virtual tours, but also in terms of constant price updating and providing the possibility for online booking.

Hypothesis 3: Unlike the situation in Romania, the image created and communicated on the Internet by the hotels on the Bulgarian seaside is more professional, the quality standards being higher in terms of website's design and functionality.

Hypothesis 4: As opposed to Romanian hotels, the hotels from Bulgarian seaside have more activity in Social Media, in terms of the number of updates and messages posted on Facebook and Twitter pages.

It is important to note that the whole analysis will be conducted annually, in the sense that, including in the next years, a number of about 600 tourist accommodation establishments will be analyzed/supervised on the seaside areas of Romania and Bulgaria.

Presentation of the research results

In the hotel industry and not only, a starting point in defining the objectives and the strategies of the online communication, is the presence of the hotels on the Internet, through a website. In terms of the interest and preoccupation manifested towards this segment, the signals sent by the hotel industry from the resorts on the Bulgarian seaside are more positive than those of the similar companies from Romania, because, according to the conducted study, 67.27% of the hotels situated on the Bulgarian seaside have their own site of presentation, unlike the situation from our country, where just over 60% of the hotels understood the utility of a website for the proper functioning of the external communication process and, implicitly, the tourism activity (Figure 1).

Undoubtedly, it exists the probability that the potential tourists obtain clipped information on the hotels without a website, from other sources - friends, tourism agents, and tourism web portals - and without a sustained presence in the online environment, even under other forms, the online communication between the company and the possible client becomes practically inexistent.

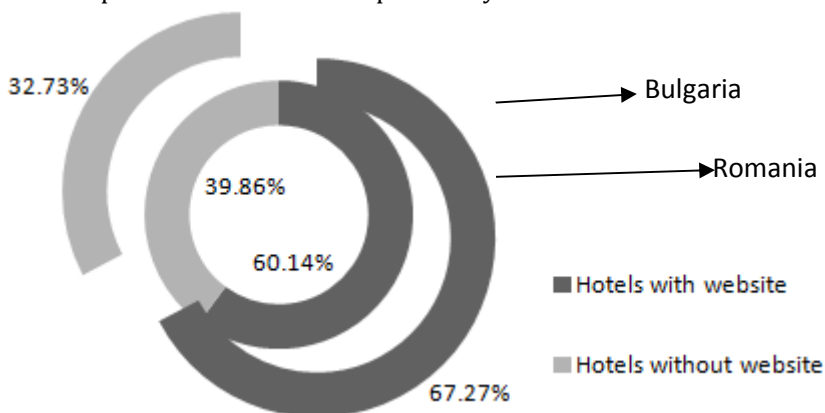


Figure 1. The online visibility through a website of the hotels from the Romanian seaside resorts vs. those situated on the Bulgarian seaside

In terms of the tourist accommodation establishments of the hotel type that do not have or operate a website of their own for external promotion and communication purposes, the situation is relatively different between the two analyzed seaside areas. While in Romania, most hotels without a site are those classified by the responsible ministry at 2 and 3 stars, in Bulgaria the hotels of 3 and 4 stars prevail; in fact, this situation was expected, especially because, in general, the structure of the hotels is

dominated by those classified at 2 and 3 stars in the case of the Romanian seaside, and at 3, respectively 4 stars, in the case of Bulgaria's seaside.

The tourism operators from the Romanian seaside are rather interested in attracting Romanian tourists and less interested in optimizing the site in an international language in order to attract foreign tourists. Thus, only 37.27% of the total analyzed sites present information in English or, exceptionally, in German and / or French (Figure 2). On the other side, the Bulgarian hotels emphasize more on the external tourism component and the communication with it - German, Russian, English, Romanian tourists - increasing the tourism attractiveness of the hotels and, also, of the resorts. The Bulgarian hotels conduct an online communication policy sufficiently oriented towards foreign tourists, because from the 92.4% representing the optimized sites in a foreign language, no less than 77% present information translated in, at least, three foreign languages (usually, German, English, and Russian or Romanian). In these conditions, hypothesis no. 1 is confirmed.

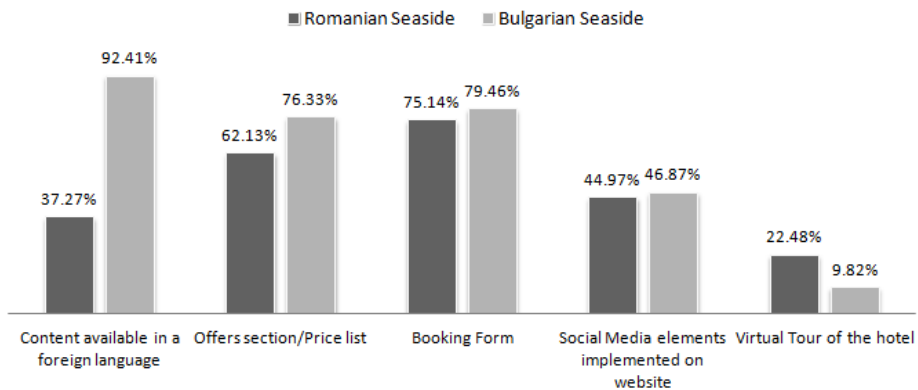


Figure 2. Elements of a website that define the openness of the hotels for an external communication in the virtual space

We notice that just over 62% of the total number of hotels situated on the Romanian Black Sea Coast present on their own website the offer / the updated prices' list, while, again, the similar hotels on the Bulgarian seaside (76.33%) show that they have better understood the importance of communicating a clear image of the tariff plan practiced. Although at the moment when this research was conducted, the 2015 tourism season was to a great extent closed, there were still many hotels, especially in Romania, which chose either not to refer to the tourism offers or the tariffs for different periods of the season or of the off-season or this information were not updated for the season which had just been closed.

An interesting aspect and, also, worrisome is the fact that much more hotels (75.14%) situated in the Romanian seaside resorts offer the possibility for users to book online through a form, although only 62.13% of the total of the analyzed hotels conduct a clear and on time communication policy of the practiced prices. This slightly paradoxical situation is also encountered in the case of the hotels on the Bulgarian seaside, but, in this case, the difference is much smaller, just over 3%. We agree that by publishing on the site some modern methods of booking, it can be obtained an increase in the number of tourists, and implicitly, in the returns from the online service sale, but

we consider that it must be closely correlated with a clear communication of the offered services and the related charges.

The situation regarding the integration on the website of the Social Media elements of Facebook Like Box, Social Media Tabs with different keys of *Sharing* that help the distribution of the messages sent by the companies is relatively balanced, because 44.97% of the total of the tourist accommodation establishments on the Romanian seaside and 46.87% of the Bulgarian ones understood the way in which these elements function and how they can help the improvement of the activity.

Practically, the obtained results confirm, to a great extent, hypothesis number 2, according to which the hotels on the Bulgarian seaside become aware, pragmatically, of the usefulness of the implementation on their site of the elements from the Social Media sphere and the importance of updating the price offers and offering the users the possibility to book online, to a much greater extent than the hotels from Romania. The hypothesis is partially rebuffed, if we refer to the situation of the integration on the sites of the virtual tours, these being one of the most efficient instruments of online communication of the provided services and of the material basis of a hotel. As it can be seen in Figure no. 2, the hotels from the Romanian seaside are much more familiarized with this instrument, as compared to those from the Bulgarian seaside.

Undoubtedly, the design of a site may communicate, at least at the level of perception, much information about a company. An agreeable design means, above all, an attractive graphic design and, subsidiarily, efficiently structured pages and accessible information. From this point of view, there must be a balance between the creation work and the marketing one.

In the tourism field, many times, people have the tendency to judge a tourist accommodation establishment according to the website design, and, as it is the best invitation for a future client to be in contact with the business itself, we considered opportune enclosing all the 393 identified sites on a Likert scale (from 1 to 5) that measures the degree of online satisfaction (1 representing the minimum appreciation, and 5 the maximum appreciation). In order to ensure the objectivity of the analysis, the opinions of two online tourism marketing specialists from the Travel Marketing Studio Company were consulted.

Thus, subsequent to the comparative research, we found that 15.38% of the total of the Romanian hotel websites are entirely unsatisfactory in terms of design and functionality, being appreciated with a minimum score 1; 20.71% have an unsatisfactory design - appreciated with 2 points; 20.71% have a satisfactory aspect, but present some deficiencies related to the systematization of the information and upload problems, while 27.21% of the sites have a pleasant aspect and were appreciated with 4 points. It is interesting that only 15.97% of the total of the analyzed sites obtained a maximum score (5), the fact that proves that improvements must be achieved in this respect, in order to reach a competitive level regarding the online communication and promotion instruments. If we refer to the Bulgarian sites, we can also see in Figure 3 (left), their superior graphic quality, from the point of view of the general appreciations: 3 points (31.25%), 4 points (26.78%) and 5 points (23.21%).

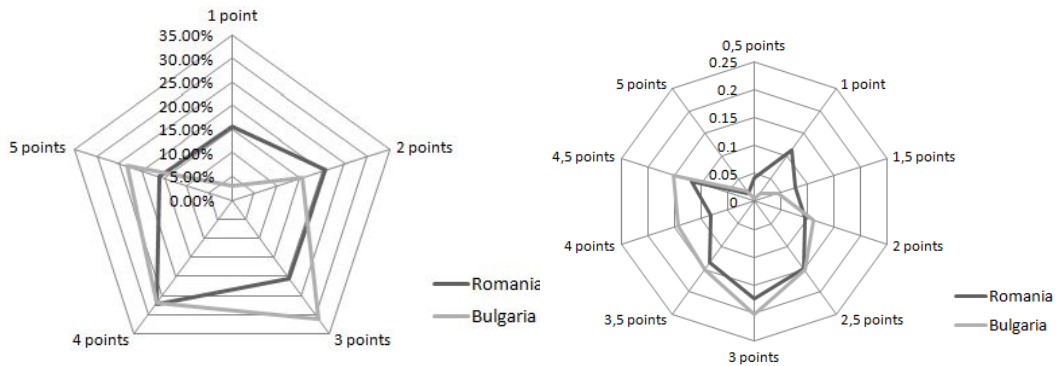


Figure 3. Evaluation of the design and functionality of the websites (left) and the general evaluation of the websites (right) of the hotels on the Romanian and Bulgarian seaside

The obtained results determined us to study thoroughly this problem, by extending the research sphere and scoring the sites based on the average between the scores related to the graphic design and the scores obtained subsequent to the evaluation of meeting the 5 criteria presented in detail in Figure 2. The comparative analysis (Figure 3, right) also reveals an indisputable superiority of the sites of the hotels situated on the Bulgarian seaside, especially in terms of their preoccupations to communicate in a manner as efficient as possible with the public. Under these conditions, hypothesis number 3 is, also, confirmed.

The gaps highlighted subsequent to the qualitative analysis are reaffirmed by the calculus of the average of the scores for design and functionality (3,076 in Romania, compared to 3,513 in Bulgaria) and the average of the general quality of the communication process through a website (2,751 in Romania, compared to 3,189 in Bulgaria). Comparing the average scores with the appreciation of the standard hotels from the two tourism destinations, we can see the evident disparity and the heterogeneity of the preoccupations for online communication of the analyzed hotels.

The determination of the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r \in [-1,1]$) in the case of the Romanian hotels ($r = 0.42$) denotes a strong relationship between *the number of stars* variable and *the general qualitative level of the sites*. Therefore, the higher the classification (number of stars) of a hotel, the bigger is the qualitative level of the administered websites. At the level of the hotels from the Bulgarian resorts, the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.36$) points out a moderate link, which demonstrates that there are still hotels with an inferior classification, yet which have a qualitative website, both from the point of view of the design and from the point of view of the quality of the information or their updates etc.

Social Media is considered to be the most rapid and efficient method of the communication and distribution of information that has developed in the last years. Nowadays, there are 1.6 billion Facebook users in the world (Statista, 2016), a figure that shows how important it is for an economic entity the use of the social networks, in order to communicate with clients or potential clients. Twitter is another extremely important social network, which has no less than 310 million users (statista.com).

At a first glance, the hotels on the Romanian seaside seem to give more importance to the presence of the Social Media, in comparison with the tourism operators from the Bulgarian seaside (Figure 4). It is true that in this economic context, the presence of a business on the social networks became a compulsory condition in order to ensure competitiveness, but it is not, by far, enough. We consider that an active presence in the Social Media is much more important since the business communicates not only with the existing clients but also with their friends and contacts. Thus, although the simple presence in this environment is superior in the case of the Romanian hotels, we can find that the hotels on the Bulgarian seaside have a much more active presence both on Facebook and Twitter, updating their pages frequently with new information, photos, offers, and constantly communicating with the users, both within the season and in the off-season. For example, the superiority of the communication degree on Twitter of the hotels from the seaside area of Bulgaria can be demonstrated inclusively in terms of the average number of messages posted on this social network by the hotels. Therefore, generally, a hotel on the Bulgarian seaside posted / sent, as an average, until the conduction of this study, 214 messages (tweets) to the users, while a hotel on the Romanian seaside transmitted, as an average, 170 such messages. Consequently, on the basis of the obtained results, we can appreciate that hypothesis number 4 is confirmed.

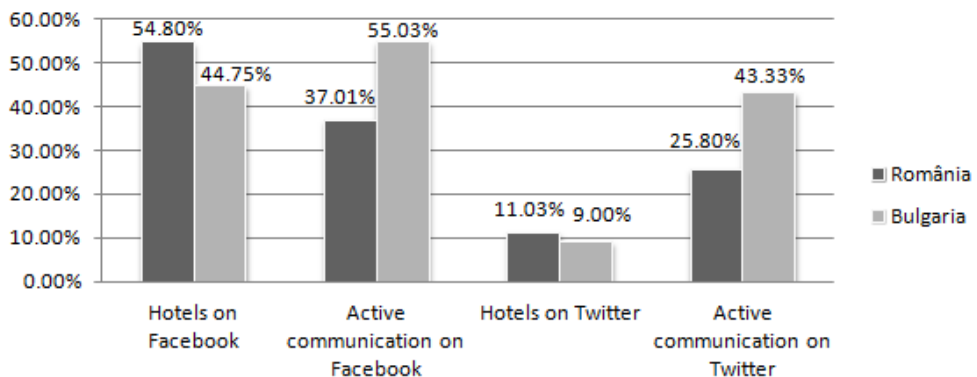


Figure 4. Communication in the Social Media of the hotels on the Romanian seaside versus the Bulgarian seaside

Possible correlations between the activity of the hotels in the Social Media, as an independent variable of explanatory or factorial type and their popularity on the social networks (from the point of view of the number of likes, in the case of Facebook, or followers in the case of Twitter), as an effect variable, of explanatory or resulting type, are only partially confirmed, because the popularity in the Social Media is also determined by other factors like how old the pages are, the paid advertising campaigns or the circumstantial environment. In any case, from a statistic point of view, there is a link between the two variables, but not of direct proportionality.

Conclusions

On the basis of the carried out analysis, we found out that, in terms of the online visibility and communication, the hotels on the Romanian seaside of the Black Sea present many deficiencies, both strategically and from an organizational point of view,

when compared to the similar hotels situated on the Bulgarian seaside. The Romanian managers' expertise on the communication in the sphere of WEB 1.0 (website as a part of it) and WEB 2.0 (with Social Media as a part of it) is minimal; consequently, there are few tourist establishments that made a coherent communication strategy in these environments.

Although, our country and the neighboring country, Bulgaria, can be proud of a rich tourism potential, similar to a great extent, the major differences mainly resulting from the methods of administration, promoting and developing this various patrimony that both countries possess. A possible explanation for the high degree of awareness of the importance of the online visibility, as a dynamic factor of the tourism competitiveness, in the case of the Bulgarian tourism operators is a change of the mentality and a significant openness of the economy, and, implicitly, of the tourism industry, after the fall of the communist regime, towards the beginning and development of strategic partnerships with the big international tour operators - TUI, Thomas Cook, Neckermann, Dertour or ITS. Although they did not invest directly in the hotel industry from Bulgaria, they gave credits for hotel renovations, guaranteed important flows of tourists, offered consultancy regarding the introduction of all-inclusive packages, changed mentalities by imposing some high standards, regarding the quality of services, the activity of promotion and communication etc., which also explains, to a large extent, the differences regarding the structure of the hotels on classification categories, presented in Table no. 1, or the indices of competitiveness, respectively of tourists' flows.

Research limits and development perspectives

Like any scientific research, this study presents, undoubtedly, a series of inherent limits that we identified, but without significant effect on the conclusions obtained from the conducted analyses and evaluations. Of course, the quantitative analysis methods, and especially the qualitative ones and, implicitly, the scientific research are inevitably influenced by the subjectivism of the researcher and of the specialists in online marketing tourism, whose opinions were consulted, by their cultural-scientific level, respectively by possible errors of perception and reception of information.

This research does not pretend to present exhaustively the whole problematic of the communication of the hotel industry in the online environment, especially in the context of this phenomenon's complexity. This work is only constituted as an argument that convinces the actors in the hospitality industry from Romania to systematically begin the study of the communication phenomenon on the Internet, in a continuous manner, and, especially, in a professional one. The theories and the proposals of practical models of qualitative analysis of the stage of online communication can be developed and improved by new elements from the sources of the theory of business communication or even, why not, from the experience of the researchers and practitioners in the field.

We can identify a series of perspectives of subsequent development of this study in the directions like: formulating and implementing an adjacent research based on a questionnaire type instrument, through which possible correlations between the stage of the communication in the virtual space and the opinions of the decision factors from

the private environment could be determined, regarding the importance and the usefulness of the online communication, the resumption of the study with an annual or even bi-annual periodicity, simultaneously with widening the research sphere towards the analysis of the online communication stage considering other elements from the Social Media sphere or consolidating the research approach by resorting to other methods of qualitative evaluation of the online presence.

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