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Empirical Evidences on Foreign Tourist Demand Perception of Bucharest

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the most dynamic economic sectors, largely influenced by consumer's perception and overall satisfaction. Tourism destinations are very complex being determined by many attributes. They are often perceived before the visit and confirmed or contradicted as attractive places by tourists' experiences which determine their loyalty toward them. Our study depicts the incoming tourists' perception upon Bucharest, the elements leading to it and the degree into which they are satisfied and would come back. Literature research, official statistics and a survey addressed to in-bound tourists were the main sources for collecting data, further on quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed using appropriate software solutions in order to detach a before and an after visit opinion on Bucharest. The research results show the fact that a dominantly negative perception on the tourist destination of Bucharest, formed before the visit, suffers an obvious post-consume change. As a consequence of their positive experiences during the visit most incoming tourists declare their intent to include Romania on their list of future holiday destinations. These results may be used by both academics and practitioners as a valid argument for further in-depth marketing studies and better oriented branding and promotional strategies aiming tourism development for Bucharest.

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Keywords: Bucharest; Incoming Tourists; Destination Image; Perception

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Turismul este unul din cele mai dinamice sectoare economice, mult influenţate de percepţia şi satisfacţia consumatorului. Destinaţiile turistice sunt foarte complexe fiind determinate de numeroase elemente. Ele sunt adesea percepute înaintea călătoriei şi sunt confirmate sau infirmate drept atractive de experienţele turiştilor care determină loialitatea acestora faţă de ele. Studiul nostru evidenţiază percepţia turiştilor străini asupra Bucureştiului, elementele care conduc la aceasta şi măsura în care sunt satisfăcuţi şi vor reveni. Consultarea literaturii de specialitate, a datelor statistice şi chestionarul adresat turiştilor străini au fost principalele surse de colectare a datelor, ulterior analizate cantitativ şi calitativ prin intermediul unor softuri adecvate pentru a contura opinia asupra Bucureştiului înainte şi după vizitare. Rezultatele cercetării arată faptul că percepţia predominant negativă asupra destinaţiei turistice a Bucureştiului, formată înaintea vizitei, suferă o schimbare evidentă post-consum. Ca o consecinţă a experienţelor pozitive din timpul vizitei majoritatea turiştilor străini afirmă intenţia de a include România pe lista viitoarelor lor destinaţii de vacanţă. Aceste rezultate pot fi utilizate atât de cercetători cât şi de autorităţi ca un argument valid pentru viitoare studii de marketing mai detaliate şi strategii de branding şi promovare care să urmărească dezvoltarea turismului pentru Bucureşti mai bine orientate.

Introduction

More than a matter of economics the development of leisure industry through specific infrastructure and activities and through efficient tourism consumption in an international environment is a matter of perception and especially of a psychological perception of space (Lynch, 1960). At the same time international tourism demand refers to the concept of 'other' in what is called the phenomenon of 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 2002) at least when mobility across national borders or geographical boundaries' is concerned (Ong and du Cross, 2012) as tourism is focusing more than other domains on interpersonal relations and on personal comfort especially in areas outside the residential one.

A very important tool in terms of tourism marketing is the image of the destination which may be considered as "a sum of information obtained and weighted through perception" (Bucur-Sabo, 2006) and which will "influence tourists in the process of choosing a destination" (Chi and Qu, 2008). Destination image is to a great extent a perceived subjective image as "the same person may have different images on the same tourism product" (Bucur-Sabo, 2006). In fact tourist' perception on a place may change even during the visit and it depends on tourist's experiences. They are to prove or disprove pre-existent positive or negative elements of the tourist's mental images on a destination. Destination image is consequently very important as an antecedent of satisfaction and is very complex, being influenced by many attributes corresponding to both tourists' external and internal values as a result of cognition and affection processes (Baloglu and Mc Cleary, 1999, Hung et al., 2012). It is often already formed before visiting the place as a result of tourists' image cognition of the destination

(Baloglu and Mc Cleary, 1999) and of their expectations for that destination (MacKay and Fesenmaier, 1997, Lee et al., 2014) and is to be confirmed or contradicted during the real visitor experience as a result of tourists' impressions. All these factors contribute ultimately to the overall tourism image of a destination and to the way in which a tourism product is perceived by tourists. Tourists may develop in the end either a positive or a negative attitude towards a tourism destination as shown by many studies confirming relationships between image and tourist subsequent satisfaction (Sun et al., 2015) and even demonstrating the role of satisfaction in image modification (Lee et al., 2014).

Tourists perceptions on leisure destinations are widely recognized as an influencing element, empowered by the actual means of communication (on-line tools), for other potential tourists and especially for "prospective travelers" (Marine-Roig and Anton Clavé, 2016). In fact the images that tourists perceive are recognized as an intangible powerful element in tourism (Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016) which, translated into collective visitors' feelings, makes up the tourist attractiveness of competing areas (Chen et al., 2016). Destination image is considered an antecedent of satisfaction, attribute satisfaction and overall satisfaction which were identified as the main elements contributing to the building of destination loyalty (Zhang et al., 2014) and eventually to its success in terms of tourism attractiveness. Satisfied and loyal tourists involve lower associated costs and free WOM (word-of-mouth) promotion (Chi and Qu, 2008). The WOM (word of mouth) effect and the continuous posting online of perceived images on user-generated sites has so become undoubtedly a recognized powerful element influencing the global perception on a destination as it may "reinforce transform and deform the image of the destination" (Marine-Roig and Anton Clavé, 2016).

There are numerous agents to interfere in the process of image formation for a tourist destination, ranging from organic to induced images (Hughes and Allen, 2005) and the halo effect is one of them. The halo effect explains to a certain degree the influence produced by the overall image of a place on destinations' perception. This is at least valid for the case of unfamiliar consumers with foreign products and for specific destinations as described by the scientific literature for PCI – product-country image and TDI – tourism destination image (Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016). Less known post-communist destinations such as Romania and especially their capital cities are often identified as PCIs and sometimes unfairly reduced to general mentally perceived images through the halo effect as described by the negative labeling in Romania's case (Light and Dumbrăveanu, 1999).

In fact both the 'gaze' and especially the tourist perception may be distorted by different factors, particularly in the light of the modern global collective gaze for historically staged destinations such as the post-communist ones (Light, 2000) or the post-Mao ones (Ong and du Cross, 2012). In time a misleadingly (conceptual) homogeneity of 'postsocialist' states was formed as "many Westerners had negative Cold War perceptions of a homogeneous CEE" and the communism means "very little to new generations who have little remembrance or experience of life under state socialism" (Hall, 2011). All these elements were even more emphasized and accelerated in the light of a media induced globalized gaze especially through images

and e-channels and helping to enforce the so called halo effect on tourism destinations through labeling.

Besides the "post-communist" unfairly uniform label we also recognize in the case of the tourism product of Romania and implicitely of Bucharest the existence of a "prolonged negative image generated by chronic problems" such as the one of "economic hardship" (Avraham, 2014). It was generated after 1989 by a severe process of deindustrialization (Dumitrescu, 2008), a long and controversed process of property restitution and privatization as well as by policy instability caused by the frequent institutional changes (Lequeux-Dincă and Popescu, 2017); all these problems being largely presented by both national and international media channels.

The visual dimension of tourism products themselves becomes therefore during the visits even more important in the context of a new multivariable and more complex mobility paradigm in which the 'tourist gaze' and destination rebranding becomes an essential element for tourist perception (Bruce and Green, 1991; Leclerc et al., 1994; Urry, 2002) and for positive image restoration which may lead to possible future marketing strategies and promotional activities, destined to increase incoming tourism.

1. Aim of the study and methodology

The aim of our study was to capture for the less known but increasingly attractive post-communist tourist destination of Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, its perception as a leisure city scape by various types of incoming tourists. Lacking specific studies on tourists' perception for the particular destination of Romania, including Bucharest, our approach was based on a documentary research of relevant studies dealing with tourist perception on tourist destinations and especially on a survey research as a useful tool for this type of investigation. The conceptual frame of the survey gravitated around the concept of individual perception upon the overall image of the tourism product from which we attempted to determine if either a positive or a negative „total impression" (Whang et al., 2016) towards Bucharest was shared by tourists before coming to this city and afterwards as a result of their visit. In this case the tourist indivisible perception – satisfaction relation and an overall attitude / impression was captured rather than a detailed, separated point of view upon different attributes, parts or actors of the tourism industries that define the complex tourismscapes (van der Duim, 2005, 2007). In fact we tried to focus on both the cognitive and the affective element (Whang et al., 2016) of the tourists' perceptions of Bucharest during their visit so as to characterize their overall impression and to detach in the end the type of attitude (positive or negative) they developed toward the product. Our research had as purpose to determine tourists' overall satisfaction with the product which may lead to their possible repeat visits or informal recommendation on the destination and their further acting as free WOM advertising agents (Chi and Qu, 2008). Previous research emphasized „a direct relationship between satisfaction with the trip and the desire to return to there" (Prada-Trigo et al., 2016).

Therefore we attempted to present as much as possible an objective non-distorted point of view on the perception of the present foreign tourism demand on Bucharest

city before and during tourists' visit not focusing on, but without neglecting, the influence of the news channels and pop culture through the modern media on the making of tourist destination image (Whang et al., 2016).

Even if we undoubtedly recognize the influence of induced media and social media images on potential tourists' opinion about a destination on which they voluntarily accessed or non-voluntarily received information the analysis of media destination images didn't represent an objective of our study and it may be rather stated as one of its limits. We mainly focused instead on the comparison of foreign tourists' impressions on Bucharest before and after their visit and their revisit intention as an extension of satisfaction, aiming empirical clear results from which more extended and in-depth theoretic studies or further documented marketing policies and targeted promotional strategies may be designed.

Images formed already before visiting the destination in a continuous process via different kinds of medium (newspapers, TV news, commercials, social media, friends and relatives) (Hung et al., 2012), as a result of the growing power of social media campaigns and online marketing (Ketter and Avraham, 2012) or due to tourists' past experiences and even to their common beliefs (Lee et al., 2014) are confirmed, contradicted or replaced during their real experience within the destination and this is an aspect clearly revealed in the case of Bucharest city. The role of the media and government tourism advisories was mentioned by the scientific literature for shaping tourism images in case of different destinations such as Fiji (Lexow and Edelheim, 2004). On his turn Avraham (2013) mentioned the governments' usage of "services of international public relations firms to improve their image among foreign audiences" (Manheim and Albritton, 1984). In order to explain this complex process of altering and then of restoring place images for foreign public a conceptual framework describing a multistep model focusing on source, message, audience as main elements was developed and illustrated in the case of Middle Eastern countries (Avraham and Ketter,2008; Avraham, 2013).

In fact one of the elements that limited our study to adopt such an approach and to develop an in-depth analysis on the product image was determined by the fact that Romania and Bucharest, even if "laboring under negative images" (Avraham, 2014) or shadowed by the halo 'post-communist' label, didn't develop after 1989 serious media strategies meant "to restore a positive image" (Avraham, 2014) and to win a competitive advantage on the international tourist market.

The punctual, repetitive and costly governmental efforts to create a national brand, but lacking extensive market studies, generated rather political debates and press scandals than a real increase of foreign demand for Romania and were far from producing any affects on "stereotypes which are not easily changed or dismissed" (Avraham, 2013).

On the other hand one should remark the efforts of large Romanian cities, among which Bucharest makes no exception, to attract 'spotlight events' as an old strategy to improve place image (Avraham, 2004). They compete hard with one another in order to attract these kinds of international hallmark events, aiming a clear gain of image capital and an increase of cultural, creative, leisure and hospitality activities, which should further determine a raise of tourist attractiveness and their economic revitalization. An illustrative example is the tight competition for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2021 for which, initially, 14 Romanian cities were inscribed as

candidates. In the end Timişoara won the title after having been shortlisted next to other three cities (Bucharest, Cluj Napoca, Baia Mare) among which one should remark the presence of the capital city of Romania.

Therefore through its aim and methodology our paper is an exploratory study that may serve as an introductory stage of a further in-depth analysis which may focus as an objective also on the destination image or may surpass more subtle and various nuances of tourist perception on Bucharest as an overall or as a theme tourism product according to its different market segments and to its numerous attributes which characterize its complex cultural tourismscape.

2. The case study

Bucharest city was chosen as an ideal location for our study verifying the halo effect produced by the overall image on a place perception for a less known post-communist destination. The capital city was strategically chosen as it is definitely perceived as one of the most representative destinations in the country, at least by international tourists visiting a post communist European state and it is one of the most visited destinations in Romania by incoming tourists. This is especially due to its administrative role and because of the importance of institutions to be found in the city and of their capacity to generate business tourism but also due to its very high accessibility for international travelling compared to the rest of the country at least as far as air travel is concerned. Bucharest consequently outstands with an important share of the Romanian incoming tourism market, displaying continuously growing figures for both business trips and for city breaks as part of leisure industry. The number of plane arrivals to Romania increased over 5 times after 1990 (statistici.insse.ro, 2017) and Henri Coanda Airport Bucharest alone comprised half of the total number of embarked passengers in Romania and almost half (48.4%) of the number of flights landing and taking off from Romanian airports in the 1.01 – 30.09.2016 period (INS, 2016).

If the market share of different types of foreign demand for Bucharest is concerned an US aid study showed a percentage of 38% business tourists in 2006 and indicated them as the major segment of incoming tourists for this destination. It was followed by an important proportion of 23% for each of the other segments namely leisure tourists and visiting friends and relatives (USAID, 2006).

The capital city of Romania developed its tourism infrastructure and increased considerably its number of visitors in the last two decades displaying as well a growing proportion of foreign tourists in its overall tourism demand. Bucharest doubled its existing accommodation capacity (number of bed places) between 1996 and 2016 while continuously increasing its accommodation capacity in function (no bed places / days) as a sign of its developing tourism activities and consequently of the efficient yearly usage of its tourism infrastructure. However its demand fluctuates and doesn't respect a pattern from a year to another as the business segment and the fluctuating number of congresses and conferences may influence to a great extent its monthly tourist demand. It is however the increasing importance of business tourism, especially of events but also of business trips, and to a less extent of city breaks that contributes

to the more and more pointed shape of shoulder seasons which appear in the autumn and late spring months in the yearly profile of tourism demand for Bucharest city. In fact its tourism demand overall and its foreign tourism demand in particular obviously increased in parallel with the development of hotels and other types of accommodation units which on their turn also adapted to recent increasing tourist segments such as the city breakers and backpackers. If in 2001 there were about 470000 tourist arrivals in Bucharest, in 2010 they over passed 1 million and even 1.5 million in 2014, clearly indicating the development of this tourism destination. In parallel the percentage of foreign tourists within the total demand increased from approximately 37% in 1996 to over 57% in 2016 (statistici.insse.ro, 2017). Even if maintained at a small percentage, on a market clearly dominated by business tourism, the absolute figures for arrivals in hostel units multiplied 4 times between 2001 and 2015 for Bucharest. They clearly reflect an increase of backpackers and low budget tourists coming to Romanian capital city for leisure, cultural visits or cultural events and considering Bucharest an option among other city break destinations in Europe. All these elements emphasize in the end an improving tourist destination image for Bucharest, in spite of the labels effect, too often with negative implications after 1990 upon the product country image and implicitly the capital city image as previously explained. These statistics alone motivate as well the necessity for studies on the topic of foreign demand perception upon this tourism product envisaging further marketing studies and better oriented and adapted promotional policies for Bucharest.

2.1. The method

a. Data set

The field research consisted in the application of a survey, comprising a set of 20 questions, on tourists' impressions on Bucharest before and during/after their visit. The survey was conducted in October-November 2014 and took into consideration the constant peak season for incoming tourism demand in Bucharest on the one hand and the available human resources (selected students) who could support the research team as survey operators on the other hand. The survey was performed both during the working days of the week and on weekends within the city center and was chosen as a research method in order to capture the opinion of all possible segments of international tourists on the tourism destination image of Bucharest. This was inevitably connected before the visit with the product-country image because of the halo effect of the post-communist label on the country capital city and often with negative images seen, heard or read by tourists from different sources about Romania or its capital city.

After an intensive two week surveying period, which followed the two week pretesting and surveys' correction period, 80 valid responses were gathered. The surveys were performed on a random sample in 5 selected points within the historic center of Bucharest. So it randomly comprised people of different ages, countries of origin or with different motivations as shown further in our sample (Table 1).

The place for the surveys was strategically chosen for several reasons. First of all the historic center of Bucharest, comprising important cultural heritage buildings and museums, is also the area where numerous pubs and restaurants appeared in the last

years and consequently outstands as the most attractive area for foreign tourists who walk or spot a nice place to have dinner within the city. Not dominated by an important hotel unit or by a specific type of accommodation (e.g. hostels, big hotels) and displaying a growing dominant gastronomic function, the area comprised between the old Royal Court and University square, known as the historical center of Bucharest, is also a hospitality and entertainment area for residents and consequently the place where one may possibly meet foreign tourists of all ages, accommodated in different parts of the city and having come to Romania for different purposes (including business, VFR etc.) as our random sample suggestively illustrates. No matter their main reason for visiting Bucharest, however, most visitors are curious to discover or rediscover the city and in the selected locations we had most of the chances to meet people who had the time to answer willingly our questions. So not only topic related but also practical reasons made us choose this survey area which concentrates an important number of tourists come on purpose to spend some time on the place and so more probably willing to grant survey operators few minutes than in other circumstances.

The surveys with both closed-ended and open-ended questions corresponded the aim of our study which is rather an introductory stage for empirically exploring this vast topic of foreign tourists' perception on the tourist destination of Bucharest. The closed-ended or multiple choice questions allowed us to easily obtain a fix set of information (e.g. about the number of times tourists visited Bucharest or about the mean of transport they used). They also helped us to underline the positive or the negative impressions tourists had about Bucharest city before and after their visit (we simply asked if they had a good or bad impression about Bucharest before their visit and after it and if they would come back or recommend Bucharest as a tourist destination to their friends and relatives). Certain questions regarding the perception they had about Bucharest before and after their visit were open-ended questions allowing tourists to freely describe the positive or the negative images they had about the city before and during their visit and so enabled us to cover as many opinions as possible. Answers to open-ended questions were later classified and codified within SPSS based on identification data (e.g. country of origin, age, length of stay).

Questions focused on several aspects addressing our study objectives which attempted to catch the foreign tourists' perception of Bucharest before and after their visit, the elements that determined them to form their opinion, their overall impression about the tourism product of Bucharest and the intention to revisit or recommend the city as a tourism destination to friends and relatives.

b. Data mining

The answers were codified within SPSS 20 software and further on descriptive analyses and Pearson correlations were made based on them. The answers, clearly addressing tourists' opinion upon the destination before and during/after their visit, were used as a text in order to make word clouds through Tagxedo program. There is a variety of Internet resources available for lexical data extraction. They permit constructing the thematic field of the text, mapping the concepts behind the sense and making lexical units. The alternatives are word clouds, text clouds, tag clouds, data tags, keyword

extractors etc. (Platonova, 2016). Tagxedo provides an opportunity to create an image map and the size of the words represents the frequency of the use of each term; larger words correspond to the terms that are used more frequently (Castro-Codesal, 2017). By the help of Tagxedo program we managed to notice the frequency of key words used by respondents and we were able to visualize the way in which foreign tourists perceived Bucharest before and during their visit. The word cloud reflects the most used words and the word dimension is given by their occurrence.

The descriptive analysis – SPSS frequency is used in order to make the numeric description of variables. The descriptive statistic analysis represents a type of analysis which makes possible data description, outlining and resuming in a form which allows observing certain patterns regarding the analyzed data. The correlation coefficient is a numeric index which shows the power and the orientation of the link between two variables. The most used and useful is Pearson correlation coefficient which helps us to find the extent to which a variable is related to another or the association degree between two variables. Beside Pearson correlations we also used frequencies and percentages in order to emphasize the answers sets for the multiple choice questions.

3. Results and discussion
3.1 The sampling

The random sample used in the present study comprised mainly young tourists (60% of respondents were under or 30 years old) who were mainly students visiting Bucharest for a longer period (e.g. Erasmus students) or for a shorter period (e.g. backpackers or visiting friends and relatives tourists). Equal percentages of adult and old tourists (about 20% each) who came for business but also for leisure or visiting friends and relatives reasons complete our data set (**Table 1**).

Table 1: The respondents profile according to their country of origin, age, length of stay and the main reason for coming to Bucharest

Country of origin		Age		Length of stay		Reason of coming	
Germany	11.30%	under 20 years	2.50%	1-3 days	16.70%	business	19.00%
Spain	10.00%	20-30 years old	57.50%	3-7 days	32.10%	conference	6.00%
Turkey	10.00%	30-50 years old	20.00%	7-14 days	10.30%	cultural visit	35.00%
Czech Republic	8.80%	over 50 years olc	20.00%	over 14 days	41.00%	other	40.00%
Italy	8.80%						
Netherlands	5.00%						
France	5.00%						
Belgium	5.00%						
America	3.50%						
other European countries	20.00%						
Africa	20.00%						
Asia	6.30%						
Australia	1.30%						

Source: Data computed by authors

The sample is very well balanced between the respondents staying less and over 7 days. An interesting fact is that about 40% of visitors are not on their first visit which shows the fact that Bucharest owes its foreign arrivals to an important segment of revisiting tourists coming back both for business but also for leisure purposes. In fact 10% of the respondents declared that they visit Romanian capital city almost every year. Obviously one should notice the existence of a loyal tourism demand and an important revisiting rate in the case of Bucharest, influenced both by tourists motivation (business and VFR tourists are normally revisiting destinations) but also by the overall impression and satisfaction towards the product which transform them in real WOM informal promoters of Bucharest in the absence of effective marketing policies which should present an attractive tourism destination image for a greater percentage of leisure tourists as first time visitors. This aspect is reconfirmed if further analyzing tourists' reasons for coming as a quarter of respondents in our sample came for business reasons (75% of them for business meetings) and most tourists came for other reasons from which half of them for studies. The important percentage of foreign tourists motivated by cultural visits is explained by the fact that the surveys were performed within the historic center of the capital city. However the fact that half of tourists are not at their first visit shows an important potential for Bucharest to generate revisiting for leisure purposes and city breaks. If the country of origin is considered, the sample shows as well a very mixed profile of respondents helping us to depict a more objective overall image of Bucharest perception by incoming tourists who may sometimes be influenced by media induced images or a collective common ground of perceiving a territory based on their local and/or national culture (Jandt, 2013).

3.2. Foreign tourists' perception on Bucharest before and after their visit

Pre-existent mental images on a destination are an important factor influencing in the first place the choice of a destination and are influenced by numerous sources of information and sometimes past experiences of tourists (Hung et al., 2012, Lee et al., 2014). However they are classified as secondary images in comparison to the primary images, built after the visit to the destination (Gunn, 1988 in Lee et al., 2014) and the gathering of complex elements resulted after cognitive and affective evaluations (Baloglu and MacCleary, 1999) relying on the first-hand on-site experience as a major source (Lee et al., 2014). Our study tried to surpass and confront both sides of the tourism image for the destination of Bucharest as synthesized below.

The word cloud (**Figure 1**), qualitatively synthesizing foreign tourists' perception on Bucharest before their visit, displays as most important words in terms of their use frequency positive or neutral nouns and adjectives such as: *beautiful, city, Bucharest, people, country* clearly overlapping the product-country image with the destination image in the case of the capital city of Romania. The presence of words such as *heard* or *Romania* reflects the fact that tourists searched and asked for information about Bucharest city or the country or the fact that they received information appealing to WOM source, from their friends or relatives who had already visited the country or

Bucharest. Therefore most of the surveyed tourists were already aware about the destination image before their visit.
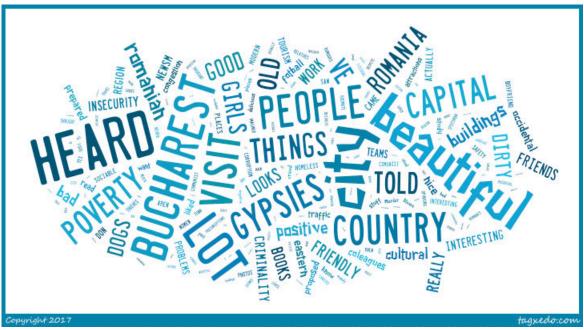

Figure 1: Foreign tourists' perception on Bucharest before their visit
Source: Computed by authors

Usually before visiting a destination, tourists voluntarily and non-voluntarily search and receive information on it having already formed some impressions on the place before the visit itself. The applied survey shows the fact that an important role in influencing their perception on the destination before their visit is played by the information they accessed from both media and social media sources. Consequently tourists selectively mentioned a series of elements they associated to the future tourist destination and which influenced their individual projection of their future on-site experience. Consequently the most frequently mentioned terms were *heard, city, Bucharest, visit dogs, people, things, beautiful, country, gypsies, capital, poverty* (Figure 1). The high importance of the word *heard* shows the fact that tourists often appealed to informal sources (friends and relatives) to ask for information before visiting an out of the beaten track destination, less known or promoted or even with an altered image on the international market. This term also underlines the importance of the message reaching the audience in their countries of origin. The words *Romania* and *Romanian* show the natural association of Bucharest tourist destination with the product-country image due to its role (the national capital city) but also to less existing promotional information on the destination and its regions and cities. Less frequent negative terms mentioned by respondents were *dogs* and *criminality* (Figure 1). These research results are in line with the theoretic background described in the first part of the present paper and reflect also the possible halo effect of the media induced images on collective perception, associating sometimes distorted images with less known destinations, globally labeled by umbrella terms (e.g. "Eastern Europe", "post-communist"). The topic and problems generated by stray dogs in Romania for instance generated public debates and national scandals regarding Stray Dogs Euthanasia law

which pervaded also the international press in the early 2000s. The topic was highlighted by media also in the 2013 when the law was signed by the Romanian Presidency and finally adopted.

Figure 2 emphasizes obvious changes regarding foreign tourists' perception on Bucharest determined by their experiences during the visit. If before coming to Romania tourists were predominantly associating to the city image elements like *stray dogs*, *gypsies* and *poverty* after their visit the dominant terms were *beautiful, nice places*, *friendly*, *kind people* as well as *interesting buildings* or *parks.* The words *nice, beautiful* and *interesting* clearly emphasized by tourists were further on used to encode their positive answers (**Figure 2**).
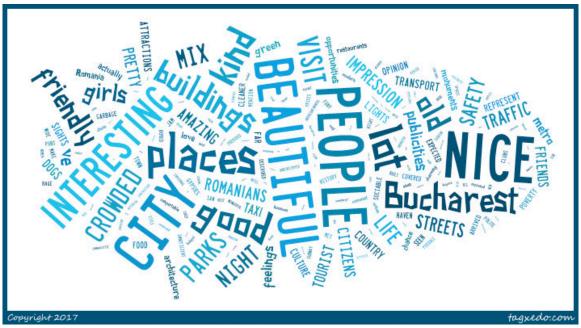

Figure 2: Foreign tourists' perception on Bucharest during/after their visit
Source: Computed by authors

Many other terms describing a positive attitude such as: *impression, amazing, pretty, sights, attractions, culture* appeared in their freely formulated answers but on a less frequent basis. This shows the fact that the image tourists discovered during their visit was somehow better than what they had expected and underlines the role of induced or a priory formed images on the perception of a tourism destination and consequently on its attractiveness.

There were however a few negative aspects that were mentioned by tourists also after their visit but less important as number and frequency in comparison to the positive aspects and if compared to the image they had about Bucharest before their journey. Among the elements that made tourists form a negative impression on Bucharest before their visit and which was also maintained in their answers after it the *stray dogs* should be mentioned. This is an allusion to stray dogs tourists met in Bucharest but even in this case their answer clearly appear smaller in the second image. A new negative element observed and mentioned by tourists after their visit which didn't appear in the first figure is the *traffic* described frequently by the term *crowded*. In fact Figure 2 displays more obviously than Figure 1 a clear dominance of positive

characteristics which may be connected especially to people hospitality as well as to the city's appearance. Among the most frequent terms mentioned by respondents in order to describe Bucharest city and their on-site experience one should mention words like *friendly, girls, safety, friends, attractions* or *pretty* which clearly reflects the friendly, safe and relaxing atmosphere of the place. In fact one may state that the visit experience tourists had in the capital city of Romania led in the end to positive changes on the image they envisaged on this destination or reconfirmed the positive expectations for those revisiting it (Figure 1 and 2).

Further on the correlation between the motivation of choosing Bucharest as a tourist destination and its perception before tourists' visit was done using SPSS 20 software (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Pearson correlation between the reason for coming to Bucharest and the opinion about Bucharest before the visit.

		1. Reason of coming to Bucharest	10. Which was your opinion about Bucharest before this visit?
1. Reason of coming to Bucharest	Pearson Correlation	1	-.232[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.041
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	100.000	-17.000
	Covariance	1.282	-.221
	N	79	78
10. Which was your opinion about Bucharest before this visit?	Pearson Correlation	-.232[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.041	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	-17.000	53.797
	Covariance	-.221	.690
	N	78	79

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Source: Data computed by authors

The result was a negative relation between the two variables (r=-0.232, p<0,001) showing the fact that tourists who accessed less information about Bucharest before their visit were also the ones who manifested more obviously their intention to visit it during their stay (business tourists, VFR). This may be determined by the nature of their travel motivation on the one hand or probably, for an important proportion among them, by the fact that they already visited Bucharest and had rather a good impression on it or had an idea about what to expect in terms of city attractiveness on the other hand. In fact tourists coming for leisure purposes would naturally be the ones more likely to inform themselves about different aspects of the places they will visit and within this segment we will find most of the first time visitors within our sample, also more easily influenced by media images or people's opinions on the area.

According to the descriptive analysis tourists who didn't look for information on Bucharest and Romania before their visit (31.6%) as well as those who had a slightly positive perception on the city before their visit (36.7%) were the most motivated in their choice for Bucharest as a tourist destination (obviously lacking an appropriate promotional strategy). The first figure naturally describes business or VFR tourists with an obvious strong motivation to visit the destination while the second one would also include leisure tourists who naturally chose to visit a place based on an a priori positive attitude towards it.

3.3 Elements helping foreign tourists to form their attitude about the tourism product of Bucharest

According to respondents' answers the overall impression produced in the end by Bucharest tourism product and its image on incoming tourists was a good one (almost 90% of answers were positive - **Table 3**).

Table 3: Types of perception developed or consolidated during the visit

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	A good one	71	88.8	89.9	89.9
	A bad one	8	10.0	10.1	100.0
	Total	79	98.8	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.3		
Total		80	100.0		

Source: Data computed by authors

Foreign tourists brought as reasons in order to support their affirmations aspects related to buildings, cultural heritage or other places they saw or visited (*I was impressed by the old buildings and also by the green and nice parks*; *there is a kind of urban mix between modern buildings and the old ones, built in the communist style*) or related to people they met (*people are very nice and kind, they make you feel as comfortable as possible*; *friendly people*). Through their own words and reasons many of them revealed the fact that they had rather a negative a priory cognitive image or shared a collective bad opinion on Bucharest and Romania under the influence of

different sources (*people were very friendly, despite the prejudices of others*; *Bucharest is much cleaner than I would have expected*; *safety in the metro*).

The negative impression after the visit was stated only by 10% of respondents within the total. In fact for most tourists part of their expectations and of the a priori envisaged images for the Romanian capital city were not confirmed during their trip. This obviously reduced percentage compared to 32% respondents who declared that they had an a priori bad opinion on Bucharest before their visit clearly proves the dynamic nature of destination image and the fact that it was modified during the on-site tourist experience also for our case study as already shown also for other destinations (Lee et al., 2014). In fact most of respondents, including two thirds of the ones declaring having had a bad opinion on Bucharest before their visit, admitted they reconsidered their opinion and changed it into a rather positive one during their travel experience.

The negative elements noticed by the incoming tourists for the city of Bucharest during their visit were less numerous and less frequently mentioned compared to the bad aspects they heard, were told, read about Romania and Bucharest before their visit. However among the most important ones *traffic* should be especially mentioned. It was a newly mentioned element describing tourists' after visit impressions and clearly showing tourists active presence and interest to visit and move around the city. Few already mentioned elements such as the stray *dogs* or the *garbage* were also negative elements noticed during their visit (**Table 4**).

Table 4: Aspects disturbing tourists in the center area of Bucharest.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	stray dogs	24	30.0	30.8	30.8
	garbage	14	17.5	17.9	48.7
	insecurity	5	6.3	6.4	55.1
	traffic congestion	29	36.3	37.2	92.3
	another	6	7.5	7.7	100.0
	Total	78	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	2.5		
Total		80	100.0		

Source: Data computed by authors

3.4. The intention to revisit or recommend Bucharest (Romania) as a tourism destination to friends and relatives

As it was expected the favorable image incoming tourists formed about Bucharest during their visit and their positive on-site experience determined also an important potential degree of loyalty towards this destination translated into a clear intention to revisit it, recommend it to others or into favorable word of mouth (Lee et al., 2014) as expressed by many of our respondents. The dominant positive attitude, developed by incoming tourists during their visit to Bucharest city, is reflected by a high percentage

(58.8%) of them who affirm they will probably come back in the future (**Table 5**). Most of them also declare they intend to spend a future holiday in Romania accompanied by friends and relatives.

Among the motives foreign tourists mentioned that would make them come back, the most frequent one (45.7%) was to revisit Romania and other places/regions in the country. This reconfirms the good overall impression and satisfaction they had during their visit, not necessarily motivated in the first place by leisure purposes, and the unavoidable overlapping in the case of Bucharest of the tourism destination image on the product-country image. However during their visit many tourists perceived the important diversity of Romanian tourist products which raised their interest and curiosity to discover other regions (e.g. Carpathians, Black sea coast) during a possible future visit.

Table 5: Foreign tourist intention to revisit Bucharest / Romania in the near future

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	47	58.8	58.8	58.8
	no	5	6.3	6.3	65.0
	I don't know, it depends on the business	12	15.0	15.0	80.0
	I cannot estimate	16	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Source: Data computed by authors

Some of respondents freely expressed the fact that they had an a priori bad opinion on Bucharest (e.g. *despite of what I heard about Romania, I really liked Bucharest, and I would love to see the rest of the country too*) which was changed during their visit as a result of their positive experience within the city. Many of them mentioned names of the regions and places that would motivate them to return for a holiday to Romania, possibly in the company of their friends and family, clearly showing the fact that they already had an idea about what it's worth a visit in the area and that they gathered during their stay cognitive elements about a future leisure travel they may plan in the future, possibly on this territory.

As it was expected *Transylvania* and *Dracula* were the top mentioned leisure attractors by foreign tourists, naturally connected by the pop culture consumers with Romanian land which benefited passively by a powerful, taken for granted and unfortunately unexploited and almost not at all promoted international brand.

Other places mentioned by respondents were *Iron gates*, *Carpathian Mountains*, *Maramures* and *the Black Sea*. All of them describe tourist regions with great natural and/or cultural resources that may have been already sonorous geographic names with a certain attractiveness or holiday destinations recommended by their friends, colleagues during their stay in Romania.

The small percentage of only 6.3% foreign tourists that declared their intention not to come back to Bucharest/Romania avoided to offer reasons for their answer which they motivated rather vaguely and superficially (e.g. *I don't have any plan*; *it's too far*).

These answers don't reveal necessarily a bad attitude on Bucharest destination as we should be aware of the fact that a large number of respondents in our sample traveled for business reasons and we don't know their tastes and patterns of leisure consume.

In this context the percentage of those declaring that they wish to come back to Bucharest/Romania for a weekend break or holiday accompanied by friends and relatives (about two thirds of respondents) appears even more surprisingly high. It clearly reflects the great experience and satisfaction incoming tourists unexpectedly had during their visit as opposed to the secondary images they had been induced by different media sources on this destination before their arrival and confirming the fact that "a positive image of the destination enhances both immediate and future intentions to return" (Assaker et al., 2011 in Lee et al., 2014).

The results of the present study, applied on a relevant random sample which comprised different types of incoming tourists in terms of age, country of origins, occupation and reason for traveling, clearly indicates Bucharest as a tourist destination where the positive on-site experiences and the unexpectedly high visitor satisfaction changes the a priori perception, produces image modification and generates loyalty and the intention to recommend and revisit the area in the future.

Conclusion

The image and the way in which a tourist destination is perceived by tourist demand are essential for its success. Influenced by many attributes, destination image is perceived before the visit and is confirmed or contradicted during the on-site tourist experience which ultimately determines the attitude towards a tourist product and its future consumption.

The foreign tourists' perception on Bucharest before their visit shows the fact that both the positive and the negative aspects, media advertised or collectively perceived about this destination, made them have a distorted image on the city. Negatively perceived before the visit by an obvious higher percentage of incoming tourists than during the on-site visit, Bucharest was a positive surprise for many tourists who discovered its impressive built heritage, friendly people, hospitality and safe environment. All these elements obviously oppose to the negative aspects they associated to this destination before their journey such as: dirt, insecurity, poverty etc. In fact tourists mainly associated other negative aspects to Bucharest image after their visit compared to the ones envisaged before their visit as a result of their observations on the place (e.g. traffic congestion).

As a consequence of the positive experience incoming tourists had within the city of Bucharest, which entirely changed for some of them their perception on it, many of them expressed their intentions to revisit the capital city or other regions in Romania as holiday destinations. Despite the high proportion of business tourists in our sample almost all respondents were interested in cultural visits within the city and declared they would recommend Bucharest and Romania as a holiday destination to friends and relatives.

The results of our study showed the power of the on-site tourist experience to change an initial media or WOM induced negative perception into a positive one and ultimately to offer a real dimension to a destination capable to generate future tourist demand through informal promotion. In this context the potential of Bucharest for tourism development was underlined as well as its need for appropriate promotion of its cultural heritage and for a consistent branding and promotional strategy.

The present study wants to be an exploratory phase for a complex but less researched topic regarding the relatively recent transformation of Bucharest into a city break leisure tourist destination. In parallel with the punctual but less effective efforts of local authorities of promoting tourist resources of Romania and of its capital city, Bucharest attracts an important number of business and VFR tourists and more and more leisure tourists interested to discover a less known, accessible and affordable destination. The obtained results may be used by both scientists and practitioners and are to encourage further in-depth theoretic studies on the tourist product of Bucharest and its potential international markets. They may be a departure point for local and national authorities to initiate coherent market oriented promotional policies which should start from analyzing the real state-of-art of the tourist environment of Bucharest capital city, based on quantitative and qualitative, extensive complex studies which should focus more on tourist demand and its future estimated trends.

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