# THE ONLINE VISIBILITY OF THE ROMANIAN HOTELS. EMPHASIS ON THE HOTELS FROM THE NORTH-EAST REGION OF ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of the present research is to analyze the online visibility of Romanian hotel websites and what mistakes are identified once we analyze the hotel content. At the same time we want to provide a complex overview of how Romanian hotels use the Internet for their business. The research method used for creating this article is documentary study and content analysis. We have carried out the content analysis of all hotel websites categorized between 3 to 5 stars in the North-East region of Romania. The main mistakes identified consist in the use of websites just for information purposes, the information are often not up to date which promote hotels that no longer exist, and not allow reservations/payments in real time. Many links and services that apparently exist on the website are inactive.*

## Introduction

Technology is considered a major driving force for service innovations and there are facts suggesting that it can further enhance the accessibility, attraction and standing for custumers. (Damanpour *et al.*, 2009; McLoughlin*et al.*, 2007; Nielsen and Liburd, 2008; Pastuszak*et al.*, 2012).

Technology plays different roles in hospitality and tourism, creates and enhances the tourist experience. (Stipanuk, 1993) The same researcher, Stipanuk, 1993, illustrates the roles of technology in tourism: contributor, creator, protector, enhancer, focal point but also destroyer of the tourism experience. At the same time many researchers believe that the highest impact of technology on the industry is the way in which the product/service is sold. Electronic distribution channels, particularly those offered by the Internet, have changed forever the way of interaction between consumers and the travel provider.

The "new" tourist relies more and more on the Internet when he intends to search or to purchase tourism products/services. Thereby, the Internet is recognized as one of the most influential technologies available today and has impacted so significantly that changed the structure of the tourism industry (Buhalis and Law, 2008).

Taking into consideration the importance of the web page content in stimulating customer interest (Law and Hsu, 2006) and generating income for a specific hotel (Jeong, Oh and

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Gregoire, 2003), there were attempts made by hospitality researchers of assessing hotels website functionality.

Along with reviewing the literature, a content analysis of hotels websites is considered to be essential. Content analysis is a formal approach of the qualitative data analyze. According to McNeill (1990), content analysis is a method of systematic analysis of the content of the non-statistical materials in such a way that it is possible to extract statistical inferences. Reviewing the literature we conclude that this technique has found applicability in tourism research. In tourism industry, through content analysis we can study materials as: travel agencies brochures, promotional materials of selected destinations, travel packages available on the Internet, TV or radio, websites, etc.

This paper deals with the impact of the Internet and social media on the hotel industry. In particular, it points out how the rules of the game have changed in today's dynamic and global environment and how hotels need to operate if they are to succeed from a long-term perspective. Likewise, it outlines how activities on both the buy-side and sell-side can be enhanced through the implementation of internet-enabled technologies. Furthermore, the paper highlights barriers that might inhibit further development of e-business.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the present research is to analyze the online visibility of Romanian hotel websites and what mistakes are identified once we analyze the hotel content. At the same time we want to highlight how important it is for a hotel to own a functional website. We want to produce data and information that can be used by small and large hotels to evaluate their current actions and develop further strategies.

The objectives of this research are:

•To identify the number of hotels, rated three to five starts, from the North-East region of Romania, that utilize the Internet;

•To provide managerial implications and also suggest recommendation for hoteliers to improve the usefulness of the site and their Social Media accounts.

•To identify the major mistakes made by hoteliers when using the Internet.

**1. Methodology**

We carried out content analysis of all hotel websites available categorized between 3 to 5 stars in the North-East region of Romania. We analyzed 80 webpages; this was the number

of hotels that have a functional webpage out of a total of 84 hotels. Each website was verified, we focused on 7 criteria's: the existence of a website, an e-mail address available, Social Media presence (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), online booking possibility, the number of foreign languages available, in order to analyze the online presence of each hotel. We used the information obtained after the content analysis to create a bigger picture of the online hotels presence in the North-East region of Romania.

Data were collected through web observation, by visiting hotels websites by using Google Chrome browser, analyzing a series of criteria's and by using a specialized software instrument (Microsoft Excel) to analyze the gathered data. For each website we took under consideration the following criteria's: the existence of a functional website (C1), a way of contact/e-mail address (C2), analyzing the presence of hotels in the Social Media environment (Facebook (C3), Twitter (C4), YouTube (C5)), the possibility to realize an online reservation (C6), number of available languages on site (C7).

The presence and visibility of each of the 84 hotels was assessed at the end of the year 2014. In all the situations, the official presence of each hotel was searched on each channel assessed. Where the official presence was not immediately found, the first three pages search results were examined to try to establish the hotels official webpages. Instantly, one possible study limitation can be that the official page may have been missed as it did not feature in the first three pages search results. The worst part is that the same mistake would be made by the potential customers searching for that hotel that is why we considered this error an acceptable one. To collect the data, both manual and automatic techniques were used, with a team of three researchers cross validating the findings. Data was tabulated and afterwards analyzed using Microsoft Excel program.

## 2. Population and sample

The services offered on hotel websites were registered through an extensive web search. Searching the Internet to study and identify online practices it is very common in the literature. (Sigala, 2003).

The investigated population is represented by accommodation structures from hospitality industry. The sample is represented by hotels, rated three to five stars, located in the North-East region of Romania. The study was made on the entire studied population, namely the 80 hotels that currently have a website, out of 84. We have selected the hotels to analyze from a public

data base provided by the National Authority for Tourism for Romania. According to ANT, in 2014, in Romania there were 1071 hotels rated three to five stars.

### 3. Results

Following the analysis made by Maha, 2015, it was observed that North-East's hotel units own in a 95% proportion an online presence. We cannot say the same thing about their presence on the Social Media platform. Surprisingly, most of the hotels we have analyzed have a functional website, 80 out of 84 hotels.

We also noticed that the presence in Social Media is at the opposite pole (compared to the number of existing web pages), so that only 48 hotels have a Facebook page, 10 hotels have a Twitter account and 10 hotels have an YouTube account. Of the three networks we notice that Facebook is the most used network by hoteliers in the North-East region of Romania, Twitter and YouTube are apparently not that popular.

Most of the hotel units use the website not only for presentation and promotion, but also as a tool in order to conduct online reservations and payments. We can observe that the hotels analyzed have not completely embraced online reservation system and that most of them do not employ booking engines to streamline reservation processes. 67% of the observed hotels provide online booking opportunities though they do not offer real-time reservation payment. The websites that have a more complex content are those that are part of a national or international chain hotel (such as Hotel Ramada, Best Western Bucovina, Continental etc.) (Maha, 2015).

**Figure 1 – Results of the Social Media activity of the analyzed hotels**
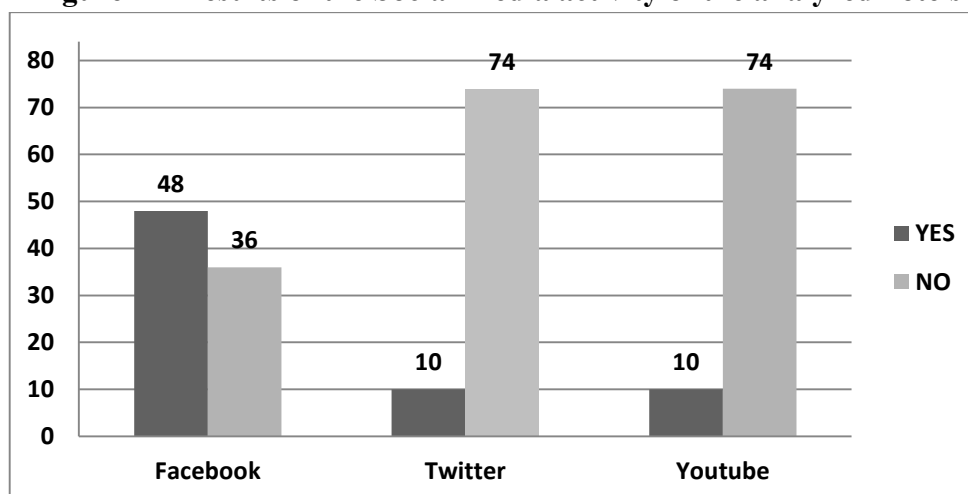


Source: Maha, 2015

Being present online represents the first step in order for a hotel to be successful it has to be noticed by consumers. Every channel (even we speak about the website or the Social Media platforms) has a way to indicate support or just to keep in touch with their clients. A site can have a newsletter where the client can sign up, on Facebook we can count the number of Likes, on Twitter the number of Followers and YouTube has the number of Subscribers (Miller, 2010).

Independent of the level of the visibility, to be successful hotels also need to interact with their current and potential clients. Social Media channels provide a unique opportunity to contact the interested groups in the field – because those consumers already chose to follow your brand. It is very important to be visible and present, but the most important is to keep generating activity in the form of posting, tweets, add/share videos and photo submissions.

From the research made, we also observed that 43% of the webpages analyzed have the language on site Romanian and 51% have more than two languages (usually next to Romanian is English language). It is well known that every site will be more visible of the content can be translated in an international language.

**Figure 2 - The number of languages used by hotel websites**
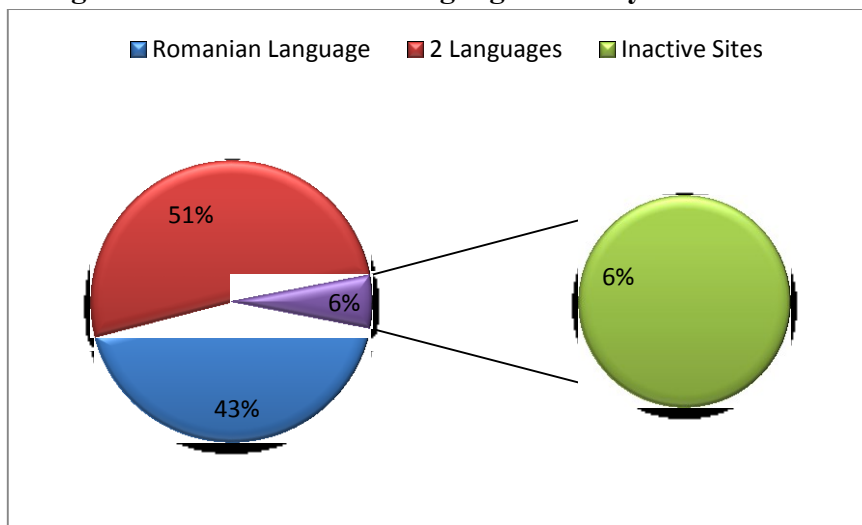


Source: Author's own compilation and adaptation based on the content analysis of the websites

The main mistakes identified consist in the use of websites just for information purposes, the information are often not up to date, and less to make reservations/payments in real time. Many links and services that apparently exist on the website are inactive. Social Media accounts are not used at their full capacity and from the total number identified on each segment, not all have a direct reference from their own site, for example in case of Facebook 31 out of 48 can be identified, with Twitter 7 out of 10 hotels and on YouTube 7 out of 10.

The identified mistakes represent a weak point for the Romanian tourism because electronic tourism represents the easiest method to promote ourselves over the borders. Even the General Secretary of UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), Taleb D. Rafai, specified that Romanian tourism has to be promoted especially through Social Media channels, and also through participating at fairs and conference in the field.

## 4. Limitations of the research

The most important limitation is considered to be the consistency of the sample we used. We only investigated the hotels (rated 3 to 5 stars) from the North-East region of Romania. A sample including all the hotels from Romania would have given a more realistic view of the online presence. Also a quantitative approach would be recommended. Another possible study limitation can be that the official page may have been missed as it did not feature in the first three pages search results. The worst part is that the same mistake would be made by the potential customers searching for that hotel that is why we considered this error an acceptable one.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Using electronic tourism by hotels can bring them more benefits. Previous research has shown that tourists who searched the Internet tend to increase the length of stay compared with those who consult other sources of information. Also, the Internet allows their consumers to interact dynamically with the hotel. Rapid transfer of data over the Internet accelerates the time of response and the result is that both hotels and consumers save time and money. (Babaita, C. *et al.*, 2010)

The purpose of this study was to provide useful information both for the website developers and for the hotel products (services) providers. We believe that being present online, it represents, without doubts, a competitive advantage. The public institutions, as the National Authority for Tourism (ANT), will be able to fill in their data base with a more updated data and also they can extend their field of information adding next to the name of hotels: the official website, the e-mail address, the official Social Media accounts and so on. It is well known that potential tourists will take into consideration an official authority and this can increase the confidence in Romanian tourism.

The interested parties involved: companies, consumers, the government and even the social culture.

Recommendations for the decision makers, entrepreneurs and practitioners in the Romanian tourism industry:

- The Government should develop a national vision, a strategic plan and suitable policies for e-tourism activities;

- Both policy makers as well as the entrepreneurs should work together to increase the awareness of electronic commerce through training and education for the interested parties, employees and consumers.

Through this paper we aim for the hotelier managers to:

• be able to select the load of information provided by the website they manage, keeping or adding only relevant information;

• be capable to improve their competitive position;

• positively influence consumer purchasing behavior.

The most frequent Mistakes identified:

- incomplete information left on the website: for example there were parts of the web page filled with the "Lorem Ipsum" text instead of having the necessary information; also old posts were left on the site not updated;

- we came across several websites with errors or actually that were not working;

- "blog" sites were identified, with non-attractive design;

- websites domain name was not related with the hotel name, which made our search very difficult in search for the official webpage (for example Zimbru Hotel was finally identified on the web domain: ww.rarau-turism.ro);

We recommend that Romania has to start investing in promoting its values, traditions and the areas with touristic potential. Compared to other parts of Europe, in Romania we have quality touristic products, so we need to promote ourselves so that the world may get to know our country.

Our country should identify the competitive advantages of its touristic destinations, opportunities and challenges for the development of a better tourism strategy. Romanian tourism must be promoted especially through Social Media, at trade shows and conferences in this field.

We also recommend that in the future Romania should focus on attracting tourists from European countries, such as Hungary, Germany, Poland, but also those from Russia, Asia or

America. Promotion should be done primarily through Social Media, taking into account that 1 in 3 people choose their holiday destinations from the Internet.

**Further research**

Necessary for improving the importance of the present study, an expansion of the sample is required, because analyzing the online presence of all 1071 hotels from Romania, rated three to five stars, will provide a complete picture of the online visibility of Romanian hotels. Another area of interest would be a comparative approach of the online presence by regions of Romania. Interesting to approach is to evaluate the performance of Romanian hotel websites.

**Acknowledgement**

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