

# Instagram as a Tool for Destination Branding – Case Study on the Major Cities of Romania

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**Abstract.** *Instagram is among the most popular social network sites with more than 800 million active users worldwide (Statista 2017) and it is one of the fastest growing social platforms in Romania as well. According to recent studies the photo-sharing app plays a vital role in choosing our next destination; thus, it provides a valuable tool for destinations to reach their audience and communicate through visually appealing content. This paper examines how Romanian cities use this platform for destination branding. Out of the 21 cities, considered as relevant destinations, this article presents a comparative analysis for three major cities.*

**Keywords:** *Destination branding; Social media; Visual culture; M-tourism, Instagram.*

## Introduction

In order to stand out from their competitors, destinations such as countries, regions, cities or other places, implement branding strategies and focus their communication activities on promoting the unique values they can offer for their visitors. The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has changed the way destinations can interact with their target groups. Moreover, with the development of Web 2.0, several social media platforms emerged to provide not just a communication channel for users to interact with each other, but also an effective tool for destinations to develop, manage and distribute their offerings across travelers from all over the world (Buhalis & Law 2008). The current statistics indicate that there are nearly 2.5 billion social network users worldwide and this number is expected to reach 3 billion by 2021 (Statista 2017a).

Recently, the rise of mobile technologies gave travelers the possibility to share their experience at the very same moment they are experiencing it. These new technologies were at the foundation of a new practice gaining popularity within the industry, called mobile tourism (Latorre-Martinez *et al.* 2014). The use of mobile technologies is no longer exclusive to technology-focused businesses and consumers. A recent global study by Google asked respondents from 40 countries on their mobile use. The results showed that 75% of the respondents use social networks on their phones on a weekly basis, and the smartphone can be considered as the preferred camera for all age-groups (Google Consumer Barometer 2016). The same report also pointed out that smartphone adoption doubled between 2012 and 2016.

Instagram is one of the most widely used social networking platforms in the world. It was launched in 2010 as a mobile-only social application. As the number of Instagram users grew from 30 million in 2012 to 300 million by the end of 2014, it became a valuable advertising and marketing platform, and the number of Instagram advertisers increased from 200 000 in 2016 to one million in 2017 (Manovich 2017). According to the recent statistics, the photo-sharing social networking app has 800 million monthly active users worldwide (Statista 2017b). These results suggest that destinations should consider implementing this platform in their on-line branding strategy.

The current paper proposes to investigate the use of Instagram as a destination branding tool for Romanian cities. A total number of 21 cities were identified as relevant destinations for the analysis. The structure of the article is divided into three main parts. The first part of the paper presents the theoretical foundation of the research including social media and online destination branding theories, while the second part looks at the research methodology and the main findings of the study. Finally, the third part of the paper formulates the conclusions and provides recommendations for improved presence and higher engagement with Instagram users.

## Theoretical background

### *Social media theory*

The ICT and the Internet have changed the travel industry and the tourism-related consumer behavior as well (Liang *et al.* 2017). This change is manifested in a new type of relationship between the destinations and their visitors (Kiralova & Pavlicecka 2015). Online consumers are empowered to identify, customize and purchase products and services offered by destinations. Moreover, social media democratized the corporate communication, meaning that the power has been taken from marketing departments by individuals and communities who create, share and consumer content on different social media platforms (Kietzmann *et al.* 2011). For travelers, social media is an essential tool to preserve and express their travel experiences and share them in the form of written opinions, pictures or videos. The literature offers several definitions for the term social media. One comprehensive interpretation states that it refers to “activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios” (Safko & Brake 2009. p. 6). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provide a similar definition stating that social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010: 61). The latter definition introduces two key concepts related to social media, namely Web 2.0 and user-generated content (UGC).

Web 2.0 is the term used to describe the second generation of World Wide Web, which marks a transition from static websites to more dynamic ones. These dynamic websites rely on the generation of content by their users, as opposed to editors or dedicated content creators (Newman *et al.* 2016). Web 2.0 has made possible for online users to interact and connect with their family members, relatives, friends or acquaintances, but also with companies, institutions, brands and other entities. In addition, users can also act as suppliers, co-producers, or even innovators of certain products and services (Ansari & Munir 2010). Arguably, the content generated by their users are the central drivers of social media, also referred to as consumer-generated media (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Nowadays, there is a wide variety of social media platforms for users to choose from. One of the first classifications of these platforms is provided in the work of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) who distinguish six social media channels including blogs, collaborative projects, social networking sites, content communities, virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds. For the purpose of our current research two categories can be considered as relevant, namely content communities, which allow the creation and

sharing of different media content among the users, and social networking sites, which enable their users to create personal profiles and interact with each other.

### *Online destination branding*

Branding, and more recently online branding, continues to be a high-priority topic for academics and practitioners as well. Interacting with social media sites allows online users to experience certain destinations without actually visiting the physical location and leads to the formation of a prior destination image (Molinillo *et al.* 2018). The concept of destination image is closely related to destination brands and branding. Empirical research has demonstrated that branding enhances destination image among visitors (Blain *et al.* 2005). Moreover, the literature also points out that a place becomes a destination through the narratives and images communicated (Morgan *et al.* 2011). One of the earliest definitions of the term destination brand is provided in the work of Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) who state that a destination brand is a “name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that identifies and differentiates the destination” (Kladou *et al.* 2017, p. 428). A destination brand delivers the promise of a memorable travel experience associated with the destination. Baker (2007) provides a more consumer-focused definition for the term, considering that a destination brand “is the totality of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that customers hold about a place” (Baker 2007, p. 25). Destination brands can also consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasing memories.

As earlier studies in the field (de Chernatony 2001) pointed out, the online environment does not require a new theory of the branding concept; however, certain distinctions should be made between the offline and online channels. De Chernatony (2001) suggests that organizations should focus more on how the increased involvement of consumers and brand communities can be exploited to co-produce more value for the brand. Rowley (2004) points out that it is difficult to differentiate, both practically and theoretically, between offline and online branding, especially because of the integrated communication approach organizations tend to recognize and implement in their branding strategies. Social media offers the possibility for brands to build a connection with their users and promote a sense of belonging through engagement (Yan 2011). The online interactions between the users and the brands can help the organizations find and maintain their competitive advantage. Furthermore, social media sites also provide valuable and cost-effective channels for destinations to reach their target audience. In order to serve as branding tools, these platforms should be integrated into existing branding or marketing strategies and activities. Numerous studies have examined the use of social media platforms in tourism both from the perspective of travelers and destinations. From a destination perspective, these articles investigate the branding and communication activities of national, regional, or local Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)

considered the strategic leaders in the development of a certain destination. Earlier research showed that DMOs are not utilizing social media to their full effectiveness and social media sites are still not considered a widely recognized tool in marketing strategies; thus, they are frequently underfunded or even neglected (Hays *et al.* 2013). Mariani and his colleagues examined the use of Facebook as a destination branding tool for Italian regional DMOs and found that there is a top-down approach in the use of the social platform which allows for little spontaneous user-generated content (Mariani *et al.* 2016). A recent study (Molinillo *et al.* 2018) investigated the performance of different online platforms in the image formation process of destinations and found that Instagram is an effective social media channel for building and promoting the destination image without requiring a high level of involvement from its users. Instagram obtained higher values in terms of perceived image and intention to visit a certain destination, compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube.

Mobile applications make another dimension in the field of online branding and social media marketing. The term mobile social media is defined in the work of Kaplan (2012), who argues that it refers to a group of mobile marketing applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. As mobile devices are becoming the primary information source for travel-related information (Stienmetz *et al.* 2012), destinations and tourism-related service providers focus their attention and branding efforts in order to exploit the possibilities these new technologies and communication channels provide for them. Mobile social media sites, such as Instagram, provide travelers a platform to share their travel experiences. The shared images can be considered the social representation of a specific place, which add to the collective imagination of a destination (Latorre-Martinez *et al.* 2014). Image-based social media sites became popular with the rise of smartphone photography. Pictures and videos have a central role in the current social media experience as they have become the primary social currencies (Rainie *et al.* 2012).

## **Methodology**

### *Identifying the cities to analyze*

This paper investigates how Romanian cities are using the image-based mobile social media platform Instagram as a destination branding tool. For the purpose of the current research the major cities already considered as popular destinations were identified based on the assumption that these cities have a more visible presence on social media sites. In order to determine these destinations, multiple sources were used including the public data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE), and information from the official website of RomaniaTourism (romaniatourism.com). In 2015 the most visited cities, more precisely county seats,

including the capital were the following: 1) Bucharest, 2) Constanța, 3) Brașov, 4) Cluj-Napoca, 5) Timișoara, 6) Sibiu, 7) Oradea, 8) Iași, 9) Târgu Mureș and 10) Arad (Analyze Economice 2016). Further major cities as popular destinations are provided by the RomaniaTourism non-profit organization including: Alba Iulia, Baia Mare, Brăila, Craiova, Deva, Galați, Satu Mare, Sighișoara, Suceava, Târgu Jiu and Tulcea. Thus, a total number of 21 major cities considered as relevant tourism destinations were selected for the analysis.

### *Data collection*

The first step in the data collection process was the identification of relevant online sources for destinations. In terms of destination branding for cities in Romania, local public administrations can be considered as the responsible entities for the initiation and the implementation of the branding process as well. Cities usually communicate their destination brand through offline and online channels managed by local tourist information centers operating as a subordinate institution for the city hall and local council. Preliminary analysis showed that 90% of the cities from the research sample have a tourism-related promotional website, though only 52% of them were linked to the local tourist information center and local public administration. Out of the 21 cities 16 have a Facebook page (76%), dedicated to the touristic promotion of the place; however, on the basis of the information provided only 38% of them are actually managed by the local public administrations. The identification of tourism-related online communication channels, such as the official websites and Facebook pages provided little information about the presence of these destinations on Instagram; thus, further data collection was carried out on the platform itself, using keywords such as the *name of the city*, *visit + name of the city*, *discover + name of the city*.

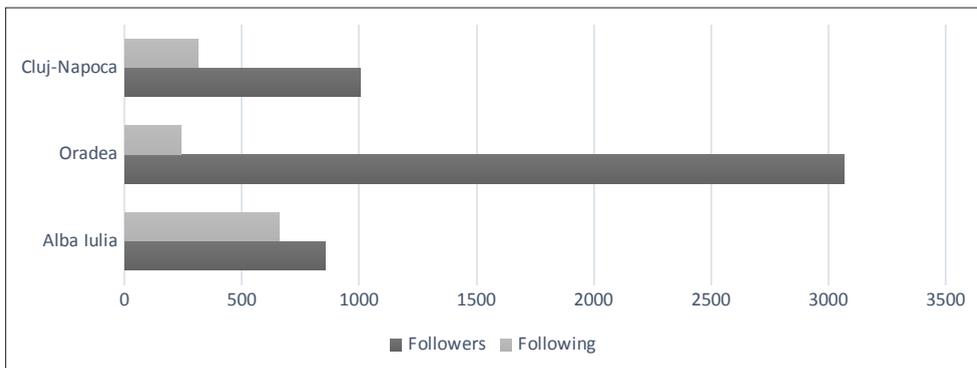
### **Results**

Instagram is a social media platform created for a straightforward reason: to allow mobile users to take photos of their everyday life and share them with others. Until 2012 the mobile application was available for iOS users only, and only a limited number of brands were present. However, the year 2012 was an important turning point for Instagram, and not only because the app was released for Android users as well, but more importantly because it was the year when Facebook acquired the platform and started to transform it into a valuable marketing and branding tool.

Although Instagram became a popular platform for users and brands as well, cities and public institutions seems to neglect this social media site when speaking of tourism-related communication and promotion, at least in Romania. Out of the 21 cities 12 (57%) have a certain kind of online presence on the platform, but only

three cities (14%) have a public page associated to the local tourism center based on the external links from other official channels, profile pictures and descriptions provided on Instagram page. Out of the three cities Oradea (@visit\_oradea) was the first to join the platform in January 2016, followed by Cluj-Napoca (@visitclujnapoca) in August 2016, and Alba Iulia (@visitalbaiulia) in February 2017.

One of the indicators for the success of an Instagram page is the number of followers. The network on Instagram is asymmetric, meaning that if user A follows user B, user B does not need to follow user A back. This model is also used on other popular social networking sites, such as Twitter, or Pinterest. Figure 1 illustrates how the official tourism sites of the three destinations compare to each other in terms of followers and number of users followed by them.

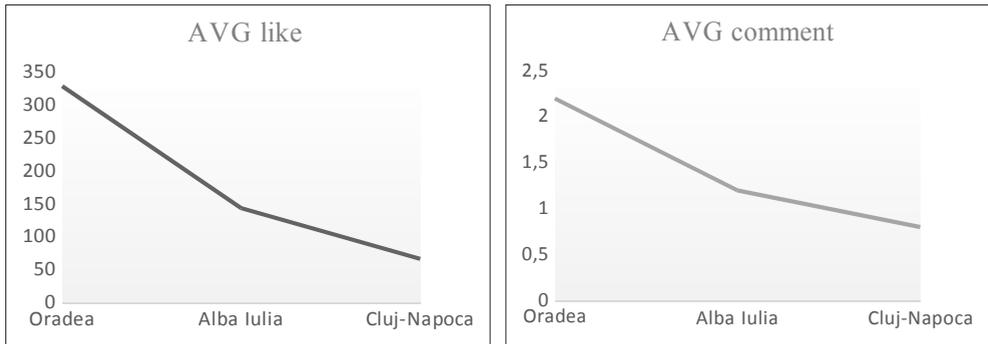


**Figure 1.** The number of followers and following users

Source: own creation based on the results of the study

The official Instagram page of Oradea can be considered the most successful page indicated by the number of its followers (3068). It has three times as many followers as Cluj-Napoca (1004). At the time of the analysis the page of Alba Iulia had 857 followers. The asymmetry of the social network also presents significant differences. On the one hand, in the case of Alba Iulia there is a 23% difference between the number of followers and that of the following users; on the other hand, this percentage is 92% in the case of Oradea, and 69% regarding the page of Cluj-Napoca.

Another variable that indicates the success of an Instagram page is related to the interactions generated by the published posts. The platform offers two basic possibilities for users to interact with the content: like and comment. The share function is not included in the native app, but third-party application like Repost offer the possibility to share content posted by other users. In order to test the level of interaction, a random sample of 20 images was selected for each destination.

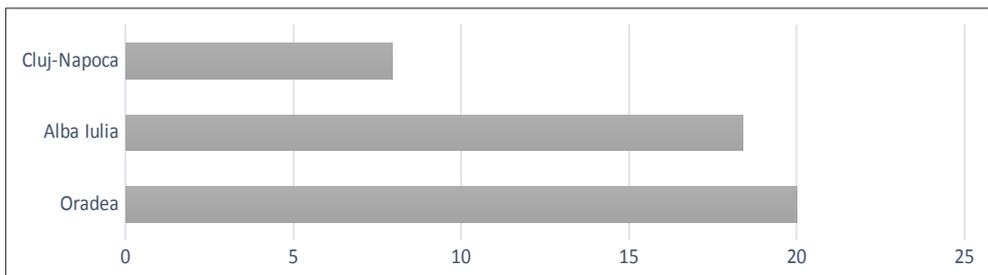


**Figure 2.** The average number of likes and comments on published posts

Source: own creation based on the results of the study

Figure 2. shows the average number of interactions on the published posts. The highest number was obtained by the page of Oradea with an average number of 329.15 likes per post, followed by Alba Iulia (144.15 likes/post) and Cluj-Napoca (66.95 likes per post). The different costs in terms of time required to perform the action and cognitive effort affect the nature of interactions; thus, users tend to like images on Instagram more as opposed to commenting on them (Ferrara *et al.* 2014).

Hashtags are tags or words used to indicate the content of a picture or video. The basic role of hashtags is to organize knowledge and facilitate access (Gianoulakis & Tsapatsoulis 2016). Users and brands tend to use hashtags in order to increase the visibility of their posts. Our research seems to confirm that – emphasizing the role of hashtags for destinations to promote themselves and reach wider audiences. *Visit Oradea*, the page with the highest average number of interactions on their posts, uses on average 20 hashtags per post. The Instagram page of *Visit Alba Iulia* came close with an average of 18.4 hashtags per post. *Visit Cluj-Napoca* uses just 7.95 hashtags per post on average; thus, it can be considered as one of the reasons to account for the lower engagement rates.



**Figure 3.** The average number of hashtags used in published posts

Source: own creation based on the results of the study

In its essence, Instagram was designed for mobile users as an amateur visual blog. Its users produce data as they navigate their everyday lives with their smartphones in their hands (Boy & Uitermark 2016). Nevertheless, Instagram remains a visual medium, where the best content strategy for users, brands and destinations alike, is the creation of visually appealing content. Instagram images communicate besides their content through their techniques, styles and visual choices as well (Manovich 2017). In terms of content quality, a high level of consistency can be observed in the case of *Visit Alba Iulia*, where a single professional photographer provides the content. The Instagram feed of *Visit Oradea* combines the pictures taken by photographers providing service for the local tourism information center, with mobile snapshots from local people including bloggers, photographers, digital content creators with a high level of influence and engagement on the platform. Most of the content from the *Visit Cluj-Napoca* Instagram page is reposted, shared user-generated content. The feed also contains promotional materials, such as digital posters of local events.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The present paper gives a first insight into the online presence of Romanian cities considered as relevant destinations. The research investigates the use of Instagram as one of the most popular and fastest growing social media networking-site and mobile-based social platform. Of the 21 destination cities included in the research sample, only three cities have an official tourism page on Instagram, which indicates that the use of the platform is still in its infancy. Several success factors including the number of followers, the average number of interactions per post, the average number of hashtags used per post, the visual content quality and visual content type were identified and analyzed.

One of the limitations of the current study is that the content analysis is based on only 20 randomly selected pictures and/or videos from each Instagram page. Thus, the conclusions should be treated accordingly. However, the results confirm some of the earlier findings related to Instagram research and in this sense offer some valuable guidelines on the use of the platform for destinations.

This article suggests local administrations involved in the creation and implementation of destination branding strategies to consider using the visual medium of Instagram in order to share pictures and videos with potential visitors from all over the world. High-quality visuals, user-generated content, and a proper use of popular hashtags are among the most important aspects of a successful online presence. Destinations should always be prepared for new possibilities in terms of provided functions, as Instagram is a continuously changing medium. Recently, the most notable innovation regarding the platform was the introduction of Instagram Stories, a feature previously used exclusively by Snapchat, which enables

users to post images and videos that disappear after 24 hours. Moreover, Instagram has also introduced its Live function, which lets users broadcast video to their followers in real time. Destinations that act as early-adopters and use these new functions accordingly, can have a competitive advantage over their rivals.

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