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Article

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Amfiteatru Economic Journal

Provided in Cooperation with:

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Suggested Citation: Teodorescu, Nicolae; Pârgaru, Ion; Stancioiu, Aurelia-Felicia; Matei, Elena (2014) : Modelling the Image Research of a Tourism Destination, Amfiteatru Economic Journal, ISSN 2247-9104, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Vol. 16, Iss. Special No. 8, pp. 1076-1088

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/168878>

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MODELLING THE IMAGE RESEARCH OF A TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract

The problematic area of the tourism destination image has a high expansion in marketing, the efforts of its conceptualization and phenomenalism being remarkable among specialists. In this context, the authors propose a systemic approach, the result of which refers to a model regarding the image research of a tourism destination, whose validation has been attained using Transalpina destination. The model created by the authors envisages morphological features and specific functional relationships, which are consistent with the marketing theory, and, in context, with the consumer behaviour theory. The conceptual-methodological solutions are magnified by applicative-experimental validations, which enhance the theoretical and practical valences of the created model. The main direction of developing the elaborated model consists in efforts of formalization and abstracting, in the perspective offered by several scientific disciplines.

Keywords: destination image; image modelling; Transalpina destination.

JEL Classification: M31.

Introduction

In the current context, in which the multitude of existing information and experiences lead to a low degree of control that marketing specialists have on the image formation of a tourism destination, it has been considered necessary to study in detail the emergence and evolution of the concept of image. The main premises of the study aim the influence of a tourism destination image regarding the consumer behavior of tourism products, as well as the manner in which it is influenced, in its turn, by consumer psyche constructions. Thus, in this context, the starting point is comprised of the definition of image and its placement in relation to other relevant concepts, considering also the complexity of its measurement process.

Starting from the main conceptualizations of specialists, using a scientific approach, that of destination image modelling, it has been aimed a better substantiation of marketing decisions, determined by the influence of the tourism destination image, considering the major implications it has in development of meso-level marketing strategies.

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Given the necessity for a measurement process, the study aims to create and validate a model of tourism destination image research, respecting the basic principles of open systems theory, so that the results describe the consumer behavior in a more precise manner. According to the structure of the model on two sides, morphological and functional, its validation has been proposed by means of studying the image of Transalpina destination, the highest road in Romania and in the Carpathian Mountains, among actual tourists.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Due to the high volume of sensations and information regarding the products on the market, implicitly filtered into a fund of impressions, which directly or indirectly affects the buying decision, it is required to measure them, in order to determine the effect of their “conglomeration” in the products’ image. The measurement process is more important as well as more difficult for tourism destinations, which are “products within which multiple products exist”, for which the image formation represents a process developed on several layers; thus, the component elements of services contribute to the service image formation, and, at the same time, to the overall tourism experience – as a combination of tourism services. Subsequently, it is necessary that the destination image, in the potential or actual consumers’ mind, is weighed with the destination identity, as an essential starting point in building the brand strategy, as well as with the desired/expected image, as an objective of the same strategy (Pike, 2004, p. 93). Admitting the fact that the destination image is a key factor in the success of its development leads thus to the idea that the destination should have a brand conferring its identity (Stăncioiu, 2004, p. 75).

The individuals develop mental constructions and representations regarding the destination image, focusing on different attributes dictated by their beliefs, ideas, attitudes, perceptions and impressions (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Rozier-Rich and Santos, 2011; Um and Crompton, 1990, cited in Nicoletta and Servidio, 2012, p. 19). The image represents an important component of the tourism destination as it influences and is influenced in return by the thoughts and feelings regarding the destination, shaping thus the consumer behaviour, by stimulating creative activities and experiences (Nicoletta and Servidio, 2012, p. 19). In the specialist literature, the role of destination image creation and management is outlined as a key element in the elaboration of positioning and marketing mix strategies (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993, p. 1), the concept of image, based on unique features, events, feelings associated to the destination, having, in the vision of the two authors, two components – one of them based on the destination attributes and the other having a holistic nature, both of them with functional and psychological sides. However, Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) highlight the fact that the pre-eminence of cognitive elements in conducted studies could lead to measurement errors, as “the meaning of a space cannot be exclusively determined by its physical properties” (Ward and Russell, 1981, cited in Hosany et al., 2007, p. 64).

Due to the complex way in which the image is formed for each consumer, individually, conceptualizing a destination image and, subsequently, measuring it, represents a difficult task for marketing specialists. This situation is mainly determined by the fact that consumer values including may constitute antecedents of the image, highlighting thus the process of image formation as a multidisciplinary one (Kotler and Barich, 1991, cited in Ramkissoon et al., 2009, pp. 144-148); the obtained information is automatically filtered and interpreted

through consumer values, thus forming multifaceted connections and unique networks through which the tourism products – destinations – acquire a specific meaning at the basis of the buying decision process (Gutman, 1982, cited in Ramkissoon et al., 2009, p. 149). Therefore, it has been attempted in the specialist literature the definition of a relationship, at times even a superposition, of the destination image with concepts such as perception and attitude. The relationship between image and perception has been debated in the psychology literature, being demarcated two common main directions: the pictorialism (the image as a visual representation) and the descriptivism (the image as a representation in words, thoughts) (White, 2004, p. 311; White, 2005, p. 192). As far as image's relationship with attitudes is concerned, both concepts have a cognitive component – consisting of notions and ideas regarding the destination and an emotional one – related to feelings and emotions associated with a particular destination (White, 2004, p. 309). These affective associations influence to a great extent the destination image, and, implicitly, the buying decision, by means of factors such as climate, recreational activities, cultural traditions and gastronomy (Leisen, 2001 cited in White, 2004, pp. 309-310).

The effect that the visit to a particular destination has in the image formation has been investigated by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), the authors concluding that “the tourism experience contributes not only to the change of the image, but also to the change of the positioning based on cognitive/perceptual and affective variables and to the general level of attractiveness” (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999, p. 151). Therefore, it is necessary to study in a separate way the images formed among potential and actual consumers of tourism products. The perspective highlighted by the image based on the prior knowledge and information of informative-persuasive nature regarding the visit of potential consumers of a destination and on the complex image of actual consumers renders a comprehensive platform for developing the promotional strategy of the destination (Fayeke and Crompton, 1991, cited in Greaves and Skinner, 2010, p. 491).

2. Research methodology

From the presentation of the image concept and its evolution it emerges that the image is a vital dimension of the modern marketing, fact which explains the specialists' concerns in studying and using it in substantiating complex marketing decisions. In this context, as in other approaches applied in real marketing, it resorts to the research modelling, so that the obtained results are closer to the consumer behaviour processes, as they unfold in the market. Obviously, in the modern marketing, the conceptual-methodological and the applicative-experimental approach of the image research of each marketing stimulus resort to the systemic approach – superior modality in comparison to the sequential applications. The image of a marketing stimulus is regarded as a system, its components, its internal and market-environment functional relationships being structured in a scientific manner, based on a conceptual support, provided by the general system theory, respectively, the properties that can be associated with open systems, such as consumer behaviour, which includes the problematic area of the marketing stimuli image.

In order to create and validate an image research model, the authors have tested several structural and functional variants, starting from the acception given by specialists to the concept of image. Theoretical precepts proposed in the specialist literature in approaching the concept of image, in terms of marketing, which were taken into account in creating the model have been:

- the image formation,
- the image intensity,
- the image specificity
- and the image evolution, in time.

In addition, in order to emphasize the conceptual and experimental valences of the created model, the authors have shaped such approaches to a specific marketing stimulus, respectively, a certain tourism destination. In this respect, the authors' version brought to the attention of specialists is rendered, schematically, in figure no. 1. The model proposed by the authors for the research of a tourism destination image, where are the morphology and functional relationships are highlighted.

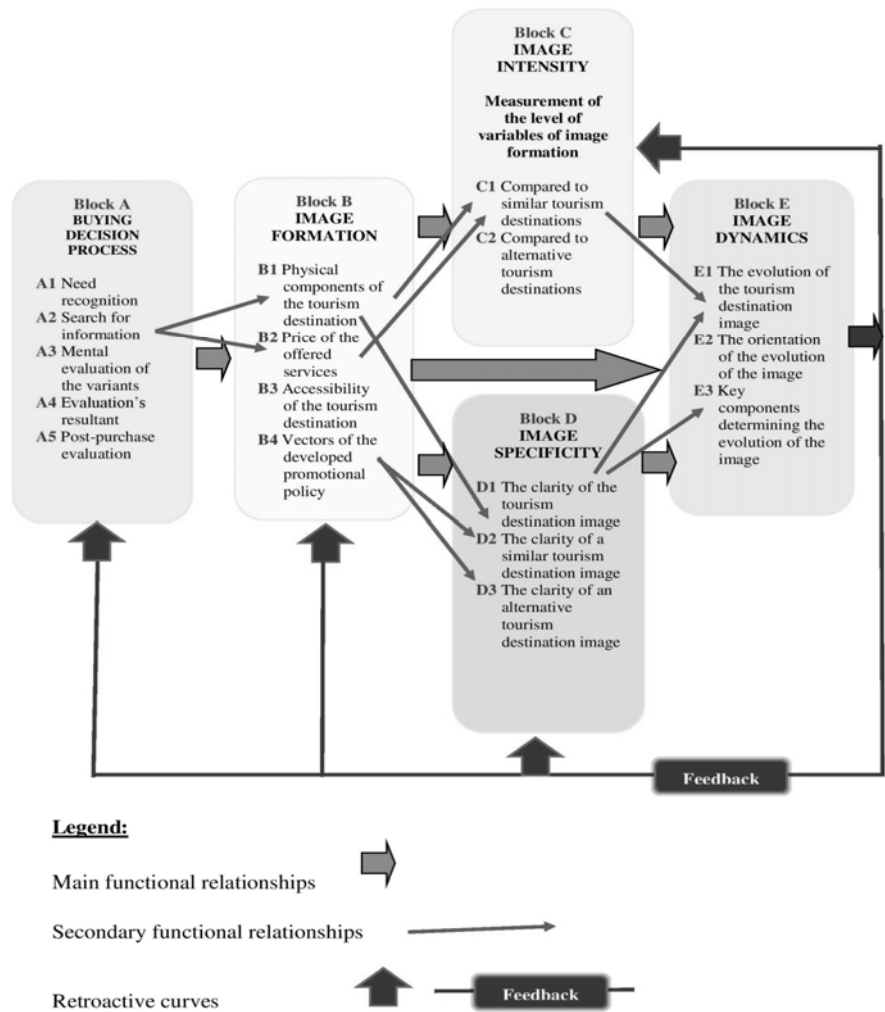


Figure no. 1: The model proposed by the authors for the research of a tourism destination image

The model proposed by the authors is structured on two main layers (morphological and functional), respectively, on the one hand, the strict respecting of the requirements associated to open system function, and, on the other hand, the expressly conducted research of a marketing stimulus – the image of a tourism destination – so that the conceptual and experimental valences associated to the created model are easily validated.

Regarding the morphology of the elaborated model, this implies the existence of five functional/constitutive blocks, each with specific components, that are subsumed in the overall system functionality, respectively, the research of a tourism destination image and the use of the results in fundamenting the basis of marketing decisions, plans or programs.

In order to ensure the functionality of the constitutive blocks of the model, there have been considered several aspects arising from applications in the social sciences, among which, of the highest importance, the properties of open systems (as is the consumer behaviour), respectively, the equifinality, the stability, the sensitivity to modify only certain parameters and the non-linearity (the open systems contain retroactive curves).

Through the morphology and the functional relationships, the proposed model subscribes to S3 Class, respectively, it involves three types of loops for adjusting the operation of the system, such as main loops, secondary loops and retroactive loops (feedback).

According to the scheme of the elaborated model, the five functional blocks include morphological elements which shall be described below.

- Block A – Buying Decision Process – refers to those aspects of the marketing environment which contribute directly to the image formation of a tourism destination. Practically, all five components of this block generate the image, because the decision-making process related to a tourism destination, although very complex, it has clearly defined components established by the specialists, which have proven to be useful in understanding the way in which the decision is fundamented. The composition of this block is relevant for the image formation of a tourism destination, as well as for other parts of the image study, namely, its intensity, specificity and dynamics. Among the many examples which are obvious in this context, it can be iterated, as an illustration, the role of post-purchase evaluation: if a user is satisfied by the experience in a tourism destination, then, there are significant, measurable chances, that he/she will repeat the visit in that specific tourism destination; otherwise, the user shall search for another destination in order to satisfy his/her needs.

- Block B – Image Formation – has in its structure the traditional components associated to the marketing mix, respectively, the physical components of the tourism destination, the price implied by the access and offered services in the tourism destination, the degree of accessibility of the tourism destination and the vectors related to the envisaged promotional policy specific to the tourism destination. In other words, although other aspects that are, for instance, specific to the area of services can be considered, they can be reduced to one or more of the components B1, B2, B3 or B4. For example, the service quality from a particular tourism destination (related to the personnel's professionalism) is strongly reflected in the price (B2) etc.

- Block C – Image Intensity – proposes the measurement of the constitutive elements associated to the image formation on two layers:

- Compared to similar tourism destinations;
- Compared to alternative tourism destinations.

Regarding this block, the services' specificity is obvious, in the sense that consumers may consider similar tourism destinations, if possible (e.g., two or more exotic destinations at the seaside) or alternative tourism destinations, where direct comparisons cannot be possible (e.g., unique-type destinations, related to which nothing similar exists, but which may be considered as alternatives to a particular tourism destination).

It is possible, in this context, the comparison of the image intensity of a tourism destinations with the intensity of the most powerful image, associated to the consumer segment in view. This thorough and subtle approach responds to broader possibilities of assessing the place of tourism activities in the aggregate of Activities, Interests and Opinions associated to the consumers (by placing, in context, psychographic variables).

In order to measure the intensity of the components which determine the image formation, a scalar analysis is applied, respectively, measuring the components B1, B2, B3 and B4, both for the considered tourism destination, and for similar and alternative destinations. Comparing the observed levels shall clearly set the extent to which the image is strong in the potential and/or actual consumers' mental.

- Block D – Image Specificity – brings to attention, by means of its components, the extremely complicated issue of image clarity (of the tourism destination, in our case). The intensity levels of the image suggest, through the measured values among the users, the extent to which it is clear. In addition, the mandatory comparison to the image clarity of similar and/or alternative destinations is likely to enable the avoidance of erroneous or distorted perceptions.

Also, in order to elucidate the issue of image clarity, it is necessary to make a comparison between the image clarity of a tourism destination and the strongest image associated to the considered consumer segment, similar to the specifications from Block C, above.

- Block E – Image Dynamics – contains elements related to the evolution in time of the image, so that its monitoring becomes effective, in order to seize, in a timely manner, the need for possible adjustments, by means of appropriate tools from the arsenal of marketing. The key element of Block E is represented by the monitoring of the components which have a decisive role in the evolution of image, components having as starting point the formative elements of the image described in block B. Obviously, in this context, there are useful and inherent some comparisons between the considered image dynamics and the image of some specific destinations – similar or alternative – or the dominant image / images associated to the consumer.

Regarding the functional relationships of the elaborated model, they are dependent on the model class (number of retroactive curves) and on its morphology. As shown in the scheme, the functional relationships of the elaborated model are subscribed in three classes or categories as it follows:

- Main functional relationships, highlighted in the presented scheme by blue, right arrows, which refer to the fundamental connections between the blocks.
- Secondary functional relationships, presented in the scheme through lines, which illustrate structural connections between some components of a block with components from other blocks.
- Retroactive curves (feedback) which connects the image dynamics (Block E) to all other blocks, in the systemic view adopted in order to construct the model.

Considering the morphology of the elaborated model, its functional relationships describe the modality in which the model becomes operational, as it follows:

- The Buying Decision Process (Block A), through its five components, determines The Image Formation (Block B). A specific role within these complex relations of conditioning appertains to the consumer's search for information (A2), which directly determines the physical components of the tourism destinations (B1) and the price of the offered services (B2). In this context of determination, neither of the relationships between A1...A5 and, respectively, B1...B5, however, should not be neglected.
- Image Formation (Block B) has a central role within the functional relationships of the model, because it effectively determines the other components of the image/blocks. Among the main functional relationships (blue arrows) which dominate the relationships of determination of the other blocks, some secondary functional relationships, respectively, specific connections are obvious, such as:
 - B1 (The physical components of the tourism destination) and B2 (The price of the offered services) in determining the configuration C1 (Image Intensity in comparison with similar tourism destinations);
 - B1 (The physical components of the tourism destination) and B4 (Vectors of the developed promotional policy) in determining the configuration D1 (Image Clarity of the tourism destination) etc.
- Image Dynamics (Block E) is determined by the other blocks:
 - on the line of main functional relationships,
 - as well as regarding the secondary functional relationships, highlighted in the model scheme (e.g., C1 – Image Intensity in comparison with similar tourism destinations and D1 – Image Clarity of the tourism destination in determining the component E1 – The evolution of the tourism destination image etc.).
- Retroactive curves generated by Block E, in return, through the evolution, in time, of the image, reconfigures all the other blocks of the model in the sense that it determines:
 - reconsiderations associated to the consumers,
 - as well as different levels of measurements for different components of each block.

3. Results and discussion

In order to validate the model of image research regarding a tourism destination in the case of Transalpina tourism destination, there have been tested, following the logic of the model, some relevant variables from the existing blocks, applied according to the specific of the destination and to the relationships between the blocks. As a complex image can be formed strictly in the case of tourists who have visited the destination until the moment of the research, by means of the specificity of their knowledge and experiences (Fakeye, Crompton, 1991), the nature of the research, with a sample of 161 persons (52.8% aged 18-25 years, 16.8% aged 26-35 years, 24.8% aged 36-45 years and 5.6% aged 46-65 years) among actual tourists, is a quantitative, descriptive one.

The recognition/identification of need (component in Block A), as a starting point in the buying decision process, has been analyzed in terms of the motives which have determined visiting Transalpina. Among the most important motives (table no. 1) there are included: the specificity of the place (39.7% of the total sample) and accessibility (18%). The history of the area recorded 12.4% of the total motives, the wide range of activities which can be developed, 7.5%, and other reasons, such as curiosity, special landscapes and desire for relaxation totalled 22.4%. The leading position of the specificity of the place, among the other motives, indicates that history and natural beauty have deeply imprinted this

mountain-based route. Regarding the groups of age which have been constituted, some differences are recorded. For example, the accessibility has been mentioned in proportions higher than the average for the entire sample by respondents in the groups of age 18-25 years (21.2% of the total) and 26-35 years (25.9% of the total).

Table no. 1: Motives of visiting Transalpina destination, by groups of age
% of total column

| | Total sample | Groups of age (years) | | | |
|--|--------------|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 18-25 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-65 |
| <i>Basis</i> | 161 | 85 | 27 | 40 | 9 |
| Accessability | 18.0 | 21.2 | 25.9 | 10.0 | 0.0 |
| Specificity of place | 39.7 | 40.0 | 40.8 | 35.0 | 55.6 |
| Wide range of activities which can be developed | 7.5 | 10.6 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 0.0 |
| History of the area | 12.4 | 7.1 | 11.1 | 25.0 | 11.1 |
| Other | 22.4 | 21.1 | 18.5 | 25.0 | 33.3 |

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors

Referring to the sources of information used by tourists regarding Transalpina, it can be noticed (table no. 2) that the most important of them are the Internet (59% of the total sample) and friends (55.9%). Concerning the structure by age, some significant differences can be ascertained. For example, young people aged 18-25 years have collected information, mostly from the Internet, friends, and television. The ones aged 26-35 years have collected the information, primarily, from friends, Internet or newspapers. Respondents aged 36-45 years have also collected information from the Internet and friends, as well as from television, and those aged 46-65 years have particularly appealed to the Internet and friends.

Table no. 2: Sources of information, by groups of age
% of total column, multiple choice

| | Total sample | Groups of age (years) | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 18-25 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-65 |
| <i>Basis</i> | 161 | 85 | 27 | 40 | 9 |
| Books | 4.3 | 4.7 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 0.0 |
| Magazines | 5.0 | 5.9 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 0.0 |
| Newspapers | 4.3 | 3.7 | 7.4 | 5.0 | 0.0 |
| Films | 0.6 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Brochures | 3.7 | 5.9 | 3.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Radio | 2.5 | 2.4 | 0.0 | 5.0 | 0.0 |
| Television | 14.9 | 18.8 | 3.7 | 15.0 | 11.1 |
| Family | 8.7 | 14.1 | 3.7 | 2.5 | 0.0 |
| Friends | 55.9 | 57.6 | 66.7 | 42.5 | 22.2 |
| Internet | 59.0 | 70.6 | 44.4 | 42.5 | 66.7 |
| Tourism agencies | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Other sources | 4.3 | 4.7 | 7.4 | 2.5 | 0.0 |

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors

Considered as physical components of the destination (appertaining to Block B) in the performed study, the attractiveness degree of the main tourist attractions from Transalpina has been approached (table no 3). The presented information allows establishing the following hierarchical order of the considered tourist attractions:

1. Vidra Lake (an average of 4.2 on a scale of 1-5)
2. Obârșia Lotrului (4.1)
3. Rânca (4.1)
4. Urdele Gorge (3.9)
5. Oașa Dam (3.8)
6. Voineasa (3.8)
7. Tău Dam (3.7)
8. Muntinu Gorge (3.6)

Significantly, the top of the tourist attractions related to Transalpina is dominated by Vidra Lake, Obârșia Lotrului and Rânca resort, destinations which have gained notoriety among most of the tourists. However, the tourism potential of the other attractions mentioned is significant as well, the average associated to their assessments being relatively high.

Table no. 3: Attractiveness degree of the main tourist attractions on Transalpina

% of total column

| | Rânca | Voineasa | Vidra Lake | Urdele Gorge | Muntinu Gorge | Obârșia Lotrului | Tău Dam | Oașa Dam |
|----------------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Very unattractive | 2.5 | 0.0 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 1.2 | 0.6 | 0.6 |
| 2. Unattractive | 3.7 | 5.6 | 1.2 | 0.6 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 1.9 | 1.2 |
| 3. Indiferent | 10.6 | 26.1 | 15.6 | 37.3 | 45.9 | 21.2 | 37.2 | 34.8 |
| 4. Attractive | 44.7 | 50.3 | 40.4 | 36.0 | 34.2 | 36.6 | 43.5 | 43.5 |
| 5. Very attractive | 38.5 | 18.0 | 42.2 | 25.5 | 16.8 | 38.5 | 16.8 | 19.9 |
| Average 1-5 | 4.1 | 3.8 | 4.2 | 3.9 | 3.6 | 4.1 | 3.7 | 3.8 |

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors

The journey duration on Transalpina road inarguably discriminates the tourists' preferences for various available activities (table no. 4). For this purpose, two different preference structures are clear:

- Some associated to the tourists performing journeys of 1-2 days, respectively, in a chief manner, hiking, photographing and recreation
- And other associated to the tourists performing journeys of approximately 7 days, which, considering the fund of nominated activities from the former structure, prefer in higher proportions activities such as fishing, bird watching and climbing.

As far as the accesibility is concerned (component of the Block B), Transalpina is mainly accesible, regarding the means of transport, by road, the options traced by the surveyed people recording the following proportions:

- Novaci – Obârșia Lotrului – Vidra Lake – Voineasa (54% of the respondents)
- Novaci – Urdele Gorge – Șugag – Săsciori (27.3% of the respondents)
- Novaci – Jina – Poiana Sibiului – Tilișca (8.1% of the respondents)
- Other routes (10.3% of the respondents)

Table no. 4: Activities preferred by the respondents on Transalpina, by journey duration

% of total column, multiple choice

| | Total sample | Journey duration (days) | | |
|----------------------|--------------|-------------------------|------|------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| <i>Basis</i> | 161 | 120 | 139 | 47 |
| Hiking | 23.2 | 14.2 | 30.9 | 23.4 |
| Fishing | 2.3 | 0.0 | 2.2 | 8.5 |
| Climbing | 1.3 | 0.0 | 2.2 | 2.1 |
| Photographing | 40.5 | 51.7 | 34.5 | 29.8 |
| Bird watching | 3.3 | 0.8 | 4.3 | 6.4 |
| Recreation | 27.1 | 30.0 | 25.2 | 25.5 |
| Other | 2.3 | 3.3 | 0.7 | 4.3 |

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors

Another important objective approached within the research refers to the journey duration, depending on the modality in which it was organized (Table no. 5). Thus, it can be ascertained that most journeys on Transalpina road last a weekend (49.7% of the total sample) or one day (39.1%). In context, it appears that longer-duration journeys are mainly organized with family and/or group of friends/colleagues.

Table no. 5: Journey duration, by organising modality

% of total column

| | Total sample | Organising modality | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------|
| | | Alone | With family | With group of friends/colleagues | Other version |
| <i>Basis</i> | 161 | 10 | 62 | 75 | 14 |
| A day | 39.1 | 70.0 | 40.3 | 34.7 | 42.9 |
| A week-end | 49.7 | 30.0 | 46.8 | 53.3 | 42.9 |
| A week | 11.2 | 0.0 | 12.9 | 12.0 | 14.2 |

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors

Regarding the awareness of events annually held on the touristic route, as vectors of the developed promotional policy in Block B, it has been noticed that the most renowned event is the "Coastal Rally Transalpina", evoked by 51.6% of respondents, followed by "Transalpina Bike Marathon" (31.7%), "Royal Hunt" (13.7%) and "Roman camp of Alpina legion" (11.8%). Considering the attractiveness of these events, the respondents think they are generally attractive (score of 4.2, on a scale 1-5).

The awareness of the nominated events is highlighted through the manner in which these have been covered by the existing media channels. Thus, annually, information is transmitted through a series of means of communication, regarding the most renowned events, respectively "Coastal Rally Transalpina" and "Transalpina Bike Marathon". Events such as "Royal Hunt" or "Roman camp of Alpina legion" are more rarely known among the respondents, due to the fact they are targeting a niche market and not the general public.

Referring to the image intensity, in Block C, the associations made by tourists with regard to Transalpina road have the following configuration:

- 65.8% have associated Transalpina with the highest paved road from Romania,
- 16.8% have associated Transalpina with the highest road from the entire Carpathian Mountains chain,
- 13.7% have associated Transalpina with the road connecting Transilvania with Oltenia,
- 3.7% have associated Transalpina with other elements, such as, the most spectacular road, the most beautiful alpine route or with Râncea resort.

It is observed, thus, that the tourists most often associate Transalpina road with the highest paved road in Romania. This aspect is due to the high degree of media coverage of the touristic route as well as to the beautiful landscapes which can be admired from the mountains' peaks. On the second place, in a much smaller proportion, the tourists associate Transalpina with the highest paved road in the entire Carpathian Mountains chain. The given conclusion concerns the fact that a complete promotion of this touristic route should communicate all the significant associations regarding Transalpina, depending on the target audience, finally emphasising the unique features which truly define this route.

Regarding the image clarity, in Block D, a thorough analysis on this route has been conducted, this road being compared with its main competitor, Transfăgărășan. Thus, the respondents who were interviewed are represented by tourists who visited both routes. The research revealed that tourists prefer Transalpina, both in terms of accessibility, history, wildlife nature and environment. This aspect is largely due to the degree of novelty of this route, as well as to the high degree of media coverage in the recent years.

Another objective of this research has been to identify the most appropriate theme for the legend of Transalpina, as a psychological element of destination image composition, with contribution to its clarity. Thus, the respondents have mentioned the following topics:

- 37.3%: Transhumance on the picturesque fields to The Country Beyond the Mountains,
- 35.4%: The Roman Legions Road on the Strategic Corridor IV to the undefeated Sarmizegetusa,
- 27.3%: The Road of King Carol the Second.

Concerning the association of Transalpina with one of the existing roads in the world or in the country, the respondents considered that it may be best regarded as a road attracting many tourists (score of 6.7, on a scale 1-10), closely followed by the statement according to which this is a road with many facilities (score of 6.5, on a scale 1-10). These appreciations emerge exactly from the image the actual tourists have regarding this mountain-based route. Moreover, the respondents consider as inappropriate the association of the road with a well-known road in Europe (score of 3.9, on a scale 1-10).

In the specialist literature, the buying behaviour has been examined, usually from two perspectives, namely, the intention of (re)visiting and willingness to recommend the destination to third parties (Baloglu, McCleary, 1999). In this regard, from the surveyed respondents, 54% mentioned that they would recommend this route to friends, and 50.9% of them intend to cross this route again in the near future.

Conclusions

The main conclusion of this gnoseological intercession consists in the fact that modelling the image research is a very useful instrument in its scientific study, respectively, a superior modality of approaching this area, compared to other possibilities of knowledge. In the conditions of market economy, the image presupposes taking strategic decisions such as brand image/corporate image and modelling such processes is likely to increase the contribution of specialist studies in substantiating complex marketing decisions.

Based on such goals of global importance, the model proposed by the authors in order to investigate the image of a tourism destination highlights, among specialists, conceptual and experimental valences related to a systemic approach, intended not only to facilitate the marketing research of tourism phenomena and processes, but also to enhance the practical results of research in the real marketing area. The research model presented by the authors organizes, in a pragmatic manner, the research efforts, the component blocks and the functional relationships of the model – circumscribed to the general theory of social systems – allowing the achievement of synergistic effects maximizing marketing efforts and actions.

In context, the validation elements of the proposed model are meant to highlight its conceptual and experimental valences, distinguishing the modalities in which the specialist research could be optimized – in our case, referring to a tourism destination. It is obvious that the validation aspects – iterated within this article – cover only some aspects of the created model, in order to illustrate facilities and approaches in terms of actions related to the marketing practice. The development of such approaches is able to open new possibilities for marketing research, the necessary efforts being structured and optimized in a scientific manner.

The model proposed in this article is also meant to answer in a scientific manner the researcher's dilemma – sequential or systemic approach – the arguments in favour of the systemic approach being preponderant and pragmatic, even in the case of sequential studies which can be conducted in a broader context of understanding the marketing phenomena and processes.

The future of marketing research modelling, in general, is clearly related to modelling and systemic approach. In addition, the elaborated and partially validated model lends itself very well to abstracting and formalization, namely to the use of mathematical and statistical relationships, meant to augment the conceptual and applicative valences of the created model. The future research direction involves multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, that may lead to results and conclusions, which, nowadays, cannot be iterated never so much as hypothesis.

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