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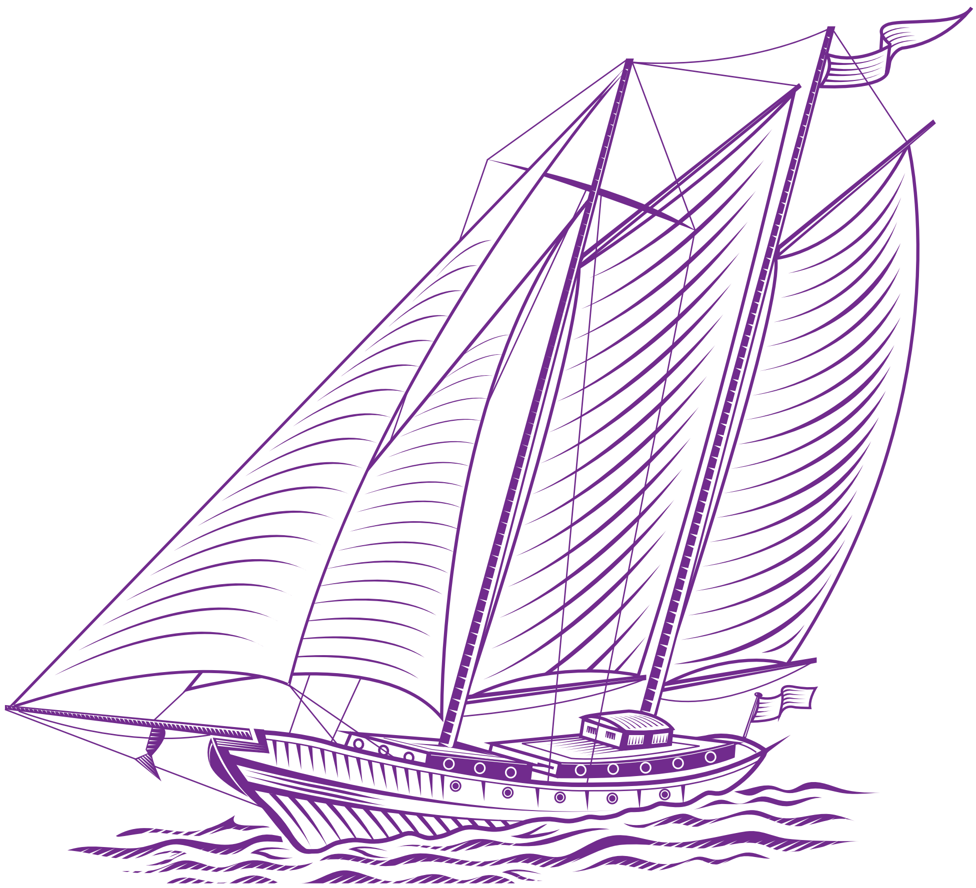

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RURAL AREAS AND WINE TOURISM: THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of the present paper is to provide an integrated approach to the development of wine tourism in Romania's rural areas. The main research question is: *are the communes hosting vineyards and wine-producing facilities and/or cellars/wineries in a better position to attract tourists, compared to the other communes*? This question was induced, first, by the fact that Romania is among the top 15 wine producers worldwide, and some of its wine brands are (well)known at least at the regional level, hence this position might influence Romania as a wine tourism destination. Second, Romanian rural tourism is still in its early stages of development at the national level and therefore a differentiation feature represented by wine-related activities might enhance the attractiveness of a rural destination. Furthermore, wine tourism is a fastly developing trend at the international level and those destinations which have the resources to establish and/or improve wine tourism should take advantage of this trend.

The findings of the current paper indicate that wine tourism is poorly developed for the group of wine-producing Romanian rural localities. The extra tourist potential of these localities (represented by vineyards and wineries) is used in an unsatisfactory and inexpertly manner for

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attracting tourists. The findings are in line with the relatively low level of rural tourism development in Romania presented by other academic works.

Keywords: vineyards, wine tourism, rural area, Romania

JEL Classification: Z32, L83, C10, R00.

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Introduction

As a tourism destination, Romania is spoiled by the too many opportunities and alternatives of tourism forms it can offer (Pop et al., 2007). Therefore, Romanian authorities spread thin among far too many proposed initiatives for tourism development; as expected, without a clear focus, the results can be appreciated at best to be modest so far since only from 2017 to 2019 has the total number of tourists over-passed 12 million arrivals, reaching, after three decades, the levels registered between 1987 and 1989. One can safely say that Romania's tourism potential is still to unfold.

Romania's potential for alternative tourism forms, mainly in rural areas, was highlighted by Turnock (2006), and the growth potential of rural tourism was emphasized by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism since 1995 (Pop & Georgescu, 2019).

According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), rural areas in Romania concentrate 45.90% of the population (by the end of 2019) hosted in 12,491 villages organized in 2,861 communes[3] (the smallest administrative-territorial unit or ATU, found only in rural areas). The same

[3] In 2019 one small town requested the status of commune and it was re-included in this category of ATU during 2019. This transformation was not considered for the present paper.

data source, NIS, shows that rural areas concentrated between 39.26% (in 2005) and 45.72% (in 2019) of the total number of lodgings. This relatively high concentration is provided by several large spa and littoral resorts[4] registered as communes (e.g., Baile Felix and Baile 1 Mai in Sanmartin, Bihor County; Voineasa, Valcea County; Costinesti, Constanta County) and several communes with a large number of lodgings (e.g., Bran and Moieciu, Brasov County, near Bran castle). However, data regarding tourist arrivals in rural areas tell a different story, indicating a rural tourism that still is in its early stages of development since the rural areas attracted less than 20% of the total tourist arrivals (between 12.30% in 2005, and 18.22% in 2019).

Wine tourism, viewed as part of rural tourism, was taken into consideration by the Ministry of Tourism when it launched the program ***Romania – Land of Wine*** in 2002/2003, with the sub-program *Wine Road/Route* aiming at reviving the Romanian countryside by promoting rural tourism (Nedelcu, 2014; Dinu et al., 2015; Ungureanu, 2015). This initiative was based on Romania's tradition as a wine-producing country and at least several (well)known wine brands (e.g., Murfatlar, Cotnari, Odobesti, Jidvei, Recas). In 2019, Romania ranked 10th worldwide and 4th within the European Union (EU) from the viewpoint of the cultivated surface (ha) of vineyards. Also, in 2019, Romania ranked 13th worldwide and 6th in the EU in terms of wine production (information based on the International Organization for Vine and Wine (OIV) statistics).

Furthermore, based on official documents (Order 1205/2018 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), a number of 37 vineyards and 41 independent wine-growing centers (henceforth all called vineyards) were identified, of which 20 vineyards (one is in fact an independent wine-growing center) have the status of protected destination origin (PDO). These vineyards are spread across 35 counties (of the total of 41 Romanian counties).

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[4] The status of tourist resort for a locality is provided by the Ministry of Tourism (or the ministry that includes the portfolio of tourism) based on a series of criteria rather adapted for urban areas than rural areas. Nonetheless, the status of resort is desired by the local authorities since it has a certain potential to increase the visibility of the respective locality and to enhance the access to some extra financial resources.

Based on these resources, Romania was included by the Council of Europe in two routes dedicated to wine: the *Iter Vitis Route* (since 2009) and the *Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route* (since 2015).

Therefore, there is a potential for wine tourism in the Romanian rural areas, as most of the vineyards are located within the countryside. An attempt was made to exploit this potential via the above-mentioned program.

Hence, the central research question for the present paper is: *Are the communes hosting vineyards and wine-producing facilities and/or cellars/wineries in a better position to attract tourists, compared to the other communes?*

In order to answer this central question, the present paper is structured as follows: a section dedicated to the literature review, followed by the section dedicated to data and research methodology, continued by findings, discussions, and conclusions.

Literature Review

The attention attracted by the development and evolution of the wine tourism phenomenon over the almost three past decades is emphasized by the papers of Sanchez et al. (2017), Gomez et al. (2018), and Amarando et al. (2019). From a niche form of tourism, often included under the umbrella of cultural tourism and/or gastronomic tourism (Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Garcia Revilla & Martinez Moure, 2021), wine tourism has managed to gain a stand-alone position as "special interest tourism" (Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021), which offers complex and holistic experiences within wine-producing regions (Correia & Brito, 2016; Garcia Revilla & Martinez Moure, 2021).

The interest towards nontraditional, less crowded tourism destinations started to grow worldwide (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009) and wine-producing regions, mostly located in rural areas, became increasingly attractive given their special characteristics which include vineyard landscapes, grape-growing and wine-producing heritage and traditions, and other cultural and gastronomic customs (Bonarou et al., 2019; Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021).

The appeal of wine-producing regions was enhanced by the inclusion of several wine-growing landscapes in the World Heritage Site (WHS) list (e.g., Portovenere, Cinque Terre and the Islands, Italy, in 1997, or more recently Burgundy and Champagne, France, in 2015, according to WHS (***, 1997-2022)). This recognition provides the respective regions with the recognition of their special status as heritage sites at a cross between natural landscapes and man-made environments (Bonarou et al., 2019; Pastor, 2021; Yravedra & Perez-Somarriba Yravedra, 2021).

Since most grape cultivation and wine-growing activities take place mainly in rural areas and, given the increasing importance of vineyard landscapes for wine tourists (Pastor, 2021; Yravedra & Perez-Somarriba Yravdra, 2021; Trisic et al., 2020), the relation between wine tourism and rural tourism is obvious within wine-producing regions (Oncel & Yolal, 2019; Corigliano, 2016), rural wine tourism being also considered a sub-sector of rural tourism (Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021).

Similar to rural tourism, wine tourism is perceived as a potential tool for those wine-producing rural areas searching for sustainable development or revitalization (Correia & Brito, 2016). This status of wine tourism derives from its potential to integrate agriculture (a primary sector) with the wine industry (a secondary sector), and with tourism (a tertiary sector), while providing or enhancing the competitive advantage of the wine-producing regions by highlighting their unique features and cultural traditions (Salvado, 2016; Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020). Furthermore, while analyzing the Italian case, Calabri and Vieri (2016), identify food and wine tourism as a genuine resource for a novel model of local development.

Wine tourism, mainly in European countries, has often been associated with wine routes (Montella, 2017; Oncel & Yolal, 2019; Trisic et al., 2020). Although most (well-known) wine routes or roads can be already considered tourist objectives, there seems to emerge a process of transforming wine routes in tourist destinations (Trisic et al., 2020). This nascent process is based on the capacity of wine routes to offer holistic experiences within a wine-producing region by connecting wine-related natural and man-made landscapes, events, and local cultural heritage (Trisic et al., 2020; Garcia Revilla & Martinez Moure, 2021). All of the above-mentioned attributes of a wine route have the ability to provide a wine-producing region with distinctive (sometimes even unique) features and (potentially) a wine-based brand (Cunha et al., 2021), which might entice and attract tourists. Furthermore, wine tourism, often via wine routes, has the power to create networks among various related economic entities via collaboration, cooperation, and coopetition (Damayanti et al., 2017) and, if properly managed, can advance the sustainable economic and social development of the respective (wine-producing) region through environmental conservation, employment opportunities, and improved living conditions (McGregor & Robinson, 2019; Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021).

While all of the above mentions regarding wine tourism and wine routes in rural areas can, overall, be applied also to Romania, the Romanian academic literature which tries to investigate wine tourism shows a slightly different picture. The studies, mostly descriptive (Soare et al., 2010; Nedelcu, 2014; Dinu et al., 2015), give some opinions regarding the potential of wine tourism in Romania based mainly on the characteristics of the wine-growing regions and on the existing traditions. Olaru (2012) and Ungureanu (2015) speak about a low level of wine tourism development and few functional wine routes but without providing valid sources of data and further details. Some studies focus on specific Romanian wine regions: Coros & Popa (2018) and Ungureanu (2015) on Alba County, Nedelcu (2014), and Nedelcu et al. (2018) on Prahova County – Dealu Mare region, and Nedelcu et al. (2015) on Vrancea County. This focus indicates that at least within the respective wine-growing regions wine tourism exists, while the extent of this type of tourism and the real functionality of the associated wine roads remains unclear. In this line, Tanase et al. (2020) point out that Romanian wineries do not offer opportunities to spend free time in the surroundings or based on local resources. One should note that none of the above-mentioned studies are dedicated exclusively to wine tourism in rural areas.

The development of rural wine tourism in Romania is hindered by the poor decisions regarding rural area progress taken during the communist period and during the last decade of the 20th Century. Nonetheless, the Romanian Ministry of Tourism identified rural tourism as a major growth segment as early as 1995 (Hall, 2000). Though, only a relatively modest rural tourism development happened "rather despite of government actions" (Hall, 2004), since numerous programs and initiatives were discarded due to political fluctuations and a chronic absence of financial resources.

While more recent studies support the idea that Romanian rural tourism potential remains high (Avram, 2020; Coros, 2020), the multiple and complex problems of the Romanian rural areas cannot be overlooked (Calina et al., 2017; Davidescu et al., 2018). Nicula and Popsa (2018) associated traditions and gastronomy with the development of local tourism by emphasizing the need of extending tourist routes to producers and to the region of origin of the resources or culinary products. A combination between rural tourism and wine tourism was taken into consideration within the program ***Romania – Land of Wine*** (2002/2003), and the sub-program *Wine Road/Route* aiming at reviving the Romanian countryside by promoting rural tourism (Nedelcu, 2014; Dinu et al., 2015; Ungureanu, 2015). However, neither the program *Romania – Land of Wine*, nor the sub-program *Wine Route* are mentioned in the Master Plan for Tourism Development, which was issued by the end of 2006. Despite declarations, rural tourism and wine tourism in rural areas seem to remain marginal and ignored, and do not find a way to become priorities for the Romanian national and regional authorities (Iatu et al., 2018). While the coordinating role of national and/or regional authorities is important, the paramount position in developing rural tourism lies on the shoulder of local authorities. Nevertheless, Romanian local authorities lack the support of destination management organizations (DMOs), as shown recently by Chasovschi (2019), while the concept of community-based tourism is also barely understood and rarely applied (Havadi Nagy & Espinosa Segui, 2020).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned problems, the present paper adds to the scarce Romanian academic literature concerning wine tourism in rural areas the following contribution: it identifies all the communes where vineyards and wineries exist, further, it relates these data with other tourist attractions (historic monuments and protected natural areas), and it puts the previously mentioned data in relation with the tourist activity reported for the respective communes. This investigation is carried out to see if the wine-growing communes attract an increased number of tourists due to their (potentially) enhanced attractiveness provided by the wine industry.

Data and Methodology

The present study is based on secondary data collected for the time span from 2005 to 2019. The covered period stops in 2019 for the following reasons: the 2020-2021 period is influenced by the pandemic lock-down and it was chosen to avoid the respective years; furthermore, some data at commune level are posted by NIS and by other authorities with important delays which can mount up to two years.

Data were extracted from multiple sources: the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for vineyards and Revino.ro website for wineries; the Ministry of Culture for the historic monuments; the World Heritage website for the Romanian WHS; the National Agency for Protected Natural Areas for natural protected areas; the National Company for Road Infrastructure Administration for road accessibility at the level of communes; from a private data source using the Ministry of Finance data for the active firms in rural areas in order to assess the economic development level of communes, and from the NIS – via Tempo Online website – for tourist accommodation and tourist flows. Most of the data were collected for the end of 2019, while the data for active firms, lodgings, and tourist flows were collected for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2019 and an average was computed for each commune. It must be mentioned that NIS neither provides data by types of tourists (e.g., wine tourists) nor provides information regarding the foreign tourists by localities.

Furthermore, rankings were created for vineyards and road accessibility in order to introduce the respective information as data series. For vineyards, the ranking was based on the number of communes they cover and on the presence of PDO. Since the authors were unable to establish clearly how many wine routes exist and which communes are part of these routes, this information was not included in the present study. For road accessibility, points were allocated based on the importance of the roads on or near which the communes are located, as explained by Pop & Georgescu (2020). Railway connections were not taken into account due to the sharp decrease in this form of transportation in rural areas. However, a dummy variable was created to highlight the road distance from each county residence (the main municipality, hosting the county's administrative institutions), thus, rural localities within a 20 km radius were granted the value 1.

For the assessment of the tourism potential, monuments and protected areas were considered. To these two factors, a variable called “extra-points” was added, including extra features of a commune: the presence of a WHS, the status of resort, and the presence of mineral/ thermal water resources.

The tourism intensity variable was used as the ratio between overnight stays and the number of residents.

For empirical investigations, descriptive statistics, and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) were used, since PLS-SEM allows complex investigations of cause-and-effect relations among the selected variables. The formative-reflective high-order components approach was used, comprising 12 dimensions containing 16 indicators.

In order to validate the findings, the official websites of all wine-growing communes were visited and information regarding tourism accommodation and tourist attractions, including wine-related attractions (wine-growing landscape, vineyards, wineries) were collected, where available.

Findings and Discussions

As briefly mentioned in the Introduction, despite Romania’s high-ranking position as a wine-growing and a wine-producing country within Europe, Romania is little known as a wine-based tourist destination. After the overturn of the communist regime in 1989, the authorities in the field of tourism needed more than a decade to include wine among the resources that can generate an increase in the number of (international) tourists visiting Romania. The program ***Romania – Land of Wine,*** with the sub-program *Wine Route/Road*, was launched in 2002/2003 under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism. Nonetheless, this program was abandoned or forgotten along the way since the Romanian Master Plan for Tourism Development 2007-2026 does not make any mention of either ***Romania – Land of Wine*** program or the *Wine Route* sub-program. Within the Master Plan of 2006 there is only a brief mention of wine tourism and the potential wine-based tourism activities, a counting of wine-growing regions, a mention of 9 renowned vineyards (though the mention seems rather random and not based on notoriety), and a counting of several museums dedicated to wine.

The abandonment of the program dedicated to wine should be considered in the context of the respective period. Between 2000 and the mid of 2003 the Romania Ministry of Tourism had an intense activity, launching numerous programs in an attempt to overturn the modest results of the 1990s and, therefore, spreading thin the resources and the capacity to follow up on each program. A change in government, by mid-2003, ended up with the decision to discontinue the Ministry of Tourism as a stand-alone institution (September 2003) and to integrate the tourism portfolio into the larger Ministry of Transportation, Constructions and Tourism, as detailed by Pop et al. (2007). Consequently, and due also to political reasons, an important number of tourism programs launched during 2000-2003 were discarded and/or conveniently ignored.

Since 2007 a number of initiatives at county level considered either continuing the sub-program Wine Route (as is the case of Prahova County) or launching their own projects (the identified cases of Alba, Buzau, Vrancea, Arad, and Satu Mare counties). Nonetheless, it is almost impossible to find reliable data in order to demonstrate either the fact that these wine routes at county level are functional or to assess their power to attract tourists.

A new National Tourism Development Strategy 2019-2030 was issued by the end of 2018. This strategy barely mentions wine tourism in two cases: a) a (railway) route within the Lechinta vineyard connecting several localities in Bistrita-Nasaud County and Mures County, and b) the mention that Romania is included in two cultural wine-based itineraries certified by the European Council (EC), namely *Iter Vitis* and respectively *Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route.* In neither case, details regarding the localities on these routes are provided. Furthermore, a brief investigation regarding the railway route within the Lechinta vineyard revealed (according to several media sources, the only available) that the railroad is not yet functional and that wine-based activities are occasionally organized in only one locality.

Due to the absence of reliable data regarding wine routes in Romania, the investigation proceeded with the identification of the communes registered at the national level as being related to the 78 officially registered vineyards (of which 41 are, in fact, independent wine-growing centers).

There were identified 760 wine-growing communes with vineyards and wineries and/or wine cellars. These communes represent 26.56% of the 2,861 communes. However, the number of wineries and/or wine cellars identified is relatively low, only 128, located in just 76 wine-growing communes.

Based on the available data, the communes were split into 3 categories: a) communes offering accommodation and registering tourist arrivals; b) communes offering accommodation but without tourist arrivals, and c) communes with no accommodation and no tourist arrivals. The structure of these communes compared to the structure at the national level is presented in Table 1. As one can observe, the percentage of the wine-growing communes not offering tourist accommodation is higher than the overall percentage at the national level, already suggesting that their differentiating potential is, at best, ignored by the local authorities and their inhabitants.

Table 1. The Comparative Structure for Wine-growing Communes to the Total Communes

Category	Communes		Structure	
	National	**Wine-growing**	**National**	**Wine-growing**
With lodgings and tourist arrivals	889	176	31.07%	23.16%
With lodgings and **no** tourist arrivals	103	25	3.60%	3.29%
No lodgings and no tourist arrivals	1,869	559	65.33%	73.55%
Total	**2,861**	**760**	**100.00%**	**100.00%**

Note: Of the 3rd category of communes, 5 communes are not accessible via national or county roads.

Source: authors' calculations based on NIS data and Order 1205/2018 information

The overall tourism potential of all Romanian communes and wine-growing communes is presented in Table 2 based on descriptive statistics. As Table 2 shows, the wine-growing communes have a slightly higher number of historic monuments, a lower number of natural protected areas, and a lower level of extra features captured by "extra points" (WHSs, status of resort, mineral and/or thermal water resources). The economic activity is also somewhat lower within the wine-growing communes; while the average number of active firms is close to the national average in rural areas, and the data for quartiles 1 and 3 are also close, the maximum number of active firms shows an important difference, hinting to a less intense commercial activity, despite the presence of wineries. This situation might be connected with the lower accessibility of wine-growing communes via roads.

Table 2. Tourism Potential of Total Communes and Wine-growing Communes

Total 2,861 communes							
	Monu-ments (number)	**Protected areas (number)**	**Extra points**	**Active firms (numbers)**	**Access by roads**	**Wineries**	**Vineyards (points)**
Mean	3.437	1.456	0.086	49	1.039	-	-
Median	2	1	0.000	28	1.000	-	-
Minimum	0	0	0.000	1	0.000	-	-
Maximum	46	21	3.000	1,817	7.000	-	-
q1	1	0	0.000	16	0.250	-	-
q3	5	2	0.000	52	1.000	-	-
Wine-growing 760 communes							
Mean	3.634	1.297	0.049	42	1.003	0.168	3.664
Median	3	1	0.000	26	1.000	0	4.000
Minimum	0	0	0.000	2	0.000	0	1.000
Maximum	28	10	2.000	607	7.000	8	6.000
q1	1	0	0.000	15	0.250	0	3.000
q3	5	2	0.000	49	1.000	0	5.000

Note: Since wine-growing communes represent only about 27% of all communes, descriptive statistics for wineries and vineyards were considered to be of no significance.

Source: authors' calculations

For the purpose of this study, the communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals were further investigated. Table 3 presents the tourism potential only for the communes that provide accommodation and have registered tourist flows. The data in Table 3 depict a similar situation as presented in Table 2. The wine-growing communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals have a higher number of historic monuments, a situation that might be related to buildings and installations related to wine-based activities. The number of natural protected areas is lower since the man-made vineyard landscapes are not (yet) taken into consideration to become protected areas by Romanian authorities. The extra features are less prominent for wine-growing communes in Table 3, though the vineyards and wineries could be viewed as complementary extra features.

Table 3. Tourism Potential of the Communes with Lodgings and Tourist Arrivals

National level 889 communes							
	Monu-ments (number)	**Protected areas (number)**	**Extra points**	**Active firms (numbers)**	**Access by roads**	**Wineries**	**Vineyards (points)**
Mean	4.431	2.168	0.207	83	1.300	-	-
Median	3	2	0.000	48	1.000	-	-
Minimum	0	0	0.000	4	0.000	-	-
Maximum	34	21	3.000	1,817	7.000	-	-
q1	1	1	0.000	28	0.500	-	-
q3	6	3	0.000	87	2.000	-	-
Wine-growing 176 communes							
Mean	5.324	1.767	0.125	74	1.330	0.278	3.682
Median	4	1	0.000	48	1.000	0	4.000
Minimum	0	0	0.000	7	0.250	0	1.000
Maximum	22	9	2.000	607	6.000	7	6.000
q1	2	0	0.000	25	0.500	0	3.000
q3	7	2	0.000	99	2.000	0	5.000

Note: Since wine-growing communes represent only about 31% of the communes with lodgings and arrivals, the descriptive statistics for wineries and vineyards were considered of no significance.

Source: authors' calculations

The economic activity is slightly lower for wine-growing communes than at the national level, with a lower average and a far lower maximum figure, despite the presence of wineries. Thus, the accessibility via roads is slightly higher than at the national level but it seems that it has no impact on the economic activity of the commune. Compared to Table 2, for the wine-growing communes which offer lodgings and register tourist arrivals, the average number of wineries is higher, though the maximum number is not registered in this category of communes. The attractiveness of vineyards is almost similar to that in Table 2. This situation suggests that the vineyards and the related vine landscapes do not differentiate wine-growing communes.

Table 4 presents the comparative data regarding the accommodation offered, tourist flows, and tourism intensity for the communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals.

Table 4. Comparative Situation on Lodgings and Tourism Intensity for the Communes with Lodgings and Tourist Arrivals

National level 889 communes							
	Lodgings (number)	**Arrivals (number)**	**Overnight stay (number)**	**Occupancy rate (%)**	**Length of stay (days)**	**Tourism intensity**	**Arrivals per residents**
Mean	3.178	1,521	4,010	16.9	2.374	1.178	0.471
Median	1	321	665	13.7	1.926	0.195	0.095
Minim	1	1	1	0.1	1.000	0.000	0.000
Maxim	173	148,049	831,407	100	28.167	98.793	24.185
q1	1	93	193	8.0	1.446	0.059	0.028
q3	2	1,100	2,120	21.9	2.569	0.622	0.315
Wine-growing 176 communes							
Mean	2.097	877	1,865	18.1	2.317	0.438	0.214
Median	1	273	611	14.6	1.699	0.120	0.065
Minim	1	4	6	0.5	1.000	0.001	0.001
Maxim	39	15,543	67,200	92.6	28.167	9.820	4.054
q1	1	73	173	7.9	1.281	0.043	0.019
q3	1	793	1,633	24.8	2.376	0.353	0.194

Source: authors' calculations

Table 4 points to the same negative answer as the data in Table 1 suggested. The number of lodgings in wine-growing communes is somewhat lower compared to the national level, with a maximum number of only 39 lodgings and quartile 3 indicating that for 75% of the commune there is only one accommodation unit. Within the wine-growing communes, tourist arrivals are about 42% lower than at the national level, while overnight stays are about 53% lower than at the national level. This low tourist flow is further confirmed by the tourism intensity and arrivals per resident. Thus, the length of stay is about 0.06 days lower than at the national level (suggesting that vineyards and wineries do not provide important extra attractions) while the occupancy rate is slightly higher, probably as an effect of the accommodation scarcity.

Further, the use of PLS-SEM was chosen due to the fact that this research method allows the estimation of more complex cause-effect relationship models (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2019). Moreover, while PLS-SEM measures the latent (formative and reflective) constructs, it also simultaneously allows testing the associations among these constructs within a single framework of analysis (Hallak & Assker, 2017). These features advanced PLS-SEM in being considered one of the most prominent research methods across a variety of economic disciplines (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2019), with relatively recent studies of do Valle & Assaker (2016), Ali et al. (2018), and Nunez-Maldonado et al. (2022) showing an increase in the use of PLS-SEM also in tourism and hospitality management academic papers.

The PLS-SEM used employs the formative-reflective high-order components (HOC) approach, with the latent variable "tourism lodgings and flows" being a reflective construct, while the other latent variables are formative.

The results are revealed in Figures 1 and 2, and in Table 5.

As Figure 1 shows, for all 760 communes, the influence of vineyards and wineries on tourism activity is non-existent, with a total effect of 0.018 (and a p-value of 0.755, see Table 5), while the other two latent variables (*Tourism attractions* and *Economy and accessibility*) have a stronger and significant influence (in both cases p-value is 0.000, see Table 5) on *Tourism lodgings and flows*. Looking at details, the tourist attractions represented by extra points (status of resort, a nominated WHS, mineral and/or thermal water resources) seem to play an important role in influencing the number of tourist lodgings and tourist flows, followed by the presence of historic monuments. A lower role is played by the economic activity within the respective communes, followed by their proximity to the respective county residences (the municipalities which are the main administrative centers), while their level of accessibility via roads seems to have no influence at all. Though, one must highlight that the overall influence of the constructed variables on *Tourism lodgings and flows* can be considered moderate to weak.

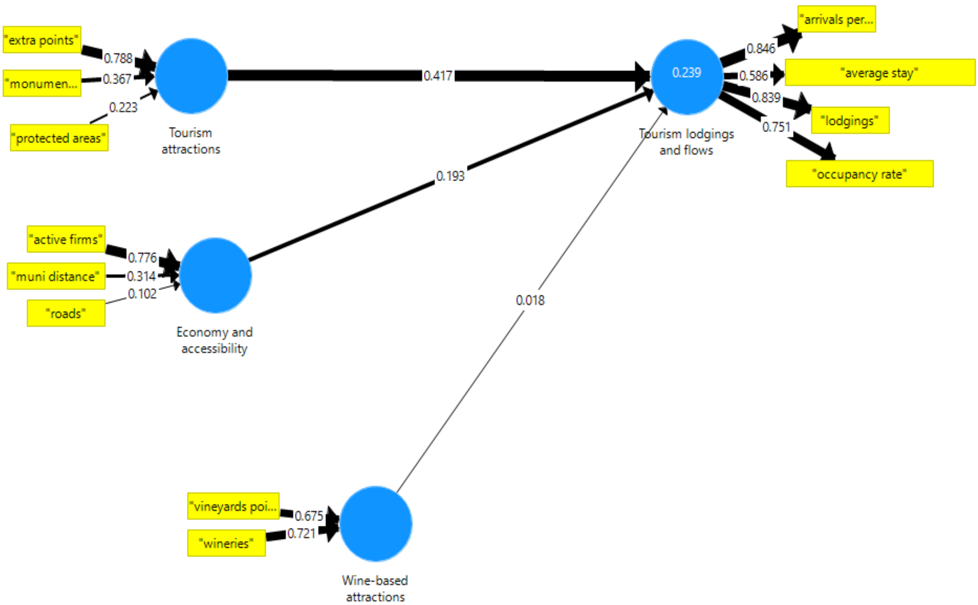

Figure 1. The Direct Influence of Vineyards and Wineries on Tourism Potential and Tourist Flows for all Wine-growing Communes

Source: authors' calculations

In the case of the 176 communes which registered lodgings (Figure 2) the situation is similar to the one presented in Figure 1: the influence of vineyards and wineries on tourism activity is non-existent. However, it is interesting to note that the total effect is negative (-0.060), though insignificant, with a p-value of 0.429 (see Table 5). Furthermore, in the case of these 176 communes, the latent variable *Economy and accessibility* has also an insignificant total effect of 0.036 and a p-value of 0.695 (see Table 5). The only variable that seems to have a significant moderate influence on *Tourism lodgings and flows* is represented by *Tourist attractions*. Considering some details: the extra-points dimension seems to be the most influential one, followed by the existence of natural protected areas, a situation confirmed by the fact that 3 of these communes have the status of spa resorts (therefore including mineral and/or thermal water resources), while other 7 communes have a natural WHS which is usually surrounded by other natural protected areas). Furthermore, while the role played by active firms seems to be important, the proximity to a county residency and the road-based accessibility have no influence on the tourism variable.

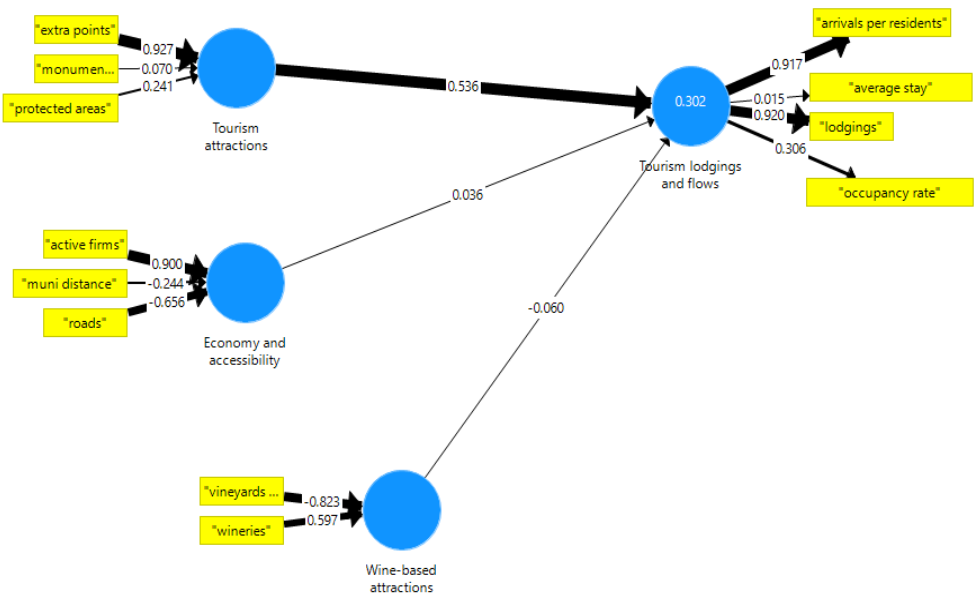

Figure 2. The Direct Influence of Vineyards and Wineries on Tourism Potential and Tourist Flows for the 176 Wine-growing Communes with Lodgings and Tourist Arrivals

Source: authors' calculations

The findings from the above figures and Table 5 (below) concur with the data in Tables 1 to 4 (above). The lack of influence of wine-based activities (for all the 760 communes and for the cluster represented by the 176 communes with lodgings) suggests that tourists visit wine-growing communes for other reasons than their wine-related tourism potential. The contact with wine-based attractions seems to be triggered by chance encounters.

Table 5. PLS-SEM and Bootstrapping Results

Total 760 wine-growing communes							
Variables	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**rho_A**	**Composite reliability**	**Average variance extracted**	**Links between variables**	**T-statistic**	**p-value**
Tourism attractions (LV1)		1.000			LV1-LV4	4.495	0.000
Economy and accessibility (LV2)		1.000			LV2-LV4	4.132	0.000
Wine-based attractions (LV3)		1.000			LV3-LV4	0.311	0.755
Tourism lodgings & flows (LV4)	0.764	0.826	0.841	0.577			
Wine-growing 176 communes with lodgings and arrivals							
Tourism attractions (LV1)		1.000			LV1-LV4	5.438	0.000
Economy and accessibility (LV2)		1.000			LV2-LV4	0.393	0.695
Wine-based attractions (LV3)		1.000			LV3-LV4	0.791	0.429
Tourism lodgings & flows (LV4)	0.579	0.842	0.677	0.445			

Source: authors' calculations

The investigation of the official websites of all wine-growing communes for the ones (at least) mentioning tourist accommodations and attractions, and also the mentioning wine-related attractions, yielded results that support the lack of influence of the wine-based variable within the PLS-SEM model.

Of the total of 760 wine-growing communes, only 19 communes (2.5%) have a dedicated page for tourism, also presenting wine-based tourist attractions. Further, for 17 communes (of 760), their tourism potential, including wine-based attractions, is described in written form, usually within the general presentation of the respective localities. Additionally, 96 communes (of 760) mention in passing, most commonly in the economic section, the presence of vineyards, grape production activities, and, occasionally, the presence of a winery.

When the category of wine-growing communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals is considered, the situation is the following: only 5 communes out of 176 (2.8%) have a dedicated page for tourism, presenting also the wine-based tourist attractions; furthermore, 8 communes of 176 (5%) describe in written form their tourism potential, including wine-based attractions (usually within the general presentation of the respective localities); 30 communes of 176 (17%) mention in passing, usually in the economic section, the presence of vineyards, grape production activities, and, occasionally, the presence of a winery.

Moreover, none of the official websites mentions a wine road and/or route related to the respective commune. This situation makes one wonder whether there is a proper communication process between the authorities at the national, county, and commune levels when it comes to managing and implementing complex projects like wine routes which require collaboration among a wide variety of stakeholders. For the moment, at Romanian wine-growing commune level, the suggested answer is also a negative one.

All the undertaken investigations for answering the central research question of the present paper (*are the communes hosting vineyards and wine-producing facilities and/or cellars/wineries in a better position to attract tourists, compared with the other communes?)* point towards a negative answer. This negative answer is generated either by the lack of awareness exhibited at the local (commune) level by the authorities and local population regarding the potential of wine-based tourism or by the unwillingness of the locals to open their communities towards tourism. Further investigations are necessary for clarifying these situations.

Conclusions

The results presented above clearly show that the Romanian wine-growing communes do not attract a higher number of tourists based on their differentiating feature represented by the wine industry. Furthermore, the study of their websites' content shows that the majority of these communes ignore (voluntary or not) their wine tourism potential.

At a two decades distance from the launching of the ***Romania – Land of Wine*** program and of the *Wine Route/Road* sub-program, wine tourism in rural areas can be considered in its very early stages of development since the program and sub-program did not manage to yield any important results, mainly due to the lack of appropriate communication between the various levels of public authorities. While some exceptions might exist (e.g., wine-growing rural regions of Prahova, Alba, and possibly Vrancea counties), for the majority of the rural wine-growing regions, the wine tourism potential is largely ignored due to the complex networks and constant efforts and implications it requires.

The findings of the present study are in line with the findings of Coros & Bode (2019) showing the modest economic results of the wineries/wine cellars of Transylvania and with Iancu et al. (2022), which shows the complex problems of Romanian rural areas and the low performance of non-agricultural entities, including tourism-related services. Furthermore, the findings are also in line with the previous findings of Pop & Georgescu (2019) regarding the limited capacity (or willingness) of rural destinations to exploit their tourism potential.

However, there is a certain level of wine tourism. Informal discussions with various wineries' representatives reveal that their locations are visited mainly by groups, often for business reasons; the visits are short, not including overnight stays. An estimation of these day-visitors is almost impossible to make since they are considered confidential information and wineries are not really willing to answer sensitive questions. Despite the fact that the number of day tourists visiting some of the wine-growing communes is high, the reported tourist arrivals suggest that these day visitors seem not to be willing to repeat their visit for a longer period of time. This suggested behavior is also in line with the results presented above.

Therefore, wine tourism in Romanian rural areas currently has a low profile, being underrated. Although, the development potential is high, if and when local communities will open their eyes and comprehend that in order to establish a wine tourism destination, there is needed a high level of understanding of local characteristics, combined with a sustained effort to build the needed complex links for cooperation, coopetition, and sustainability.

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ADAPTIVE FACEBOOK COMMUNICATION OF ORTHODOX ENTITIES IN COVID-19 CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT. A generalized migration of the consumers to digital channels was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. In this context, the purpose of the research was to analyze the online options the consumer of religious services had and the way Church adapted its communication at the new circumstances. Questions regarding the intensity of communication, posts' type or frequency, and reactions were investigated through a longitudinal retrospective study focused on Facebook platform. More than 6,150 posts and 1.6 million reactions were included. Distinctive profiles were observed: monasteries vs. urban parishes vs. rural ones. The study suggests that the pattern of consumers' reactions was influenced by the type of the posts. The impact that online messages have, advocates for a professional approach or support in communication. The results may serve as informational input for a future unitary communication strategy of religious entities.

Keywords: religious communication, adaptive communication, Facebook, Orthodox, COVID-19

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Introduction and Review of Literature

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 medical situation as pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The new global health emergency affected most of the business ecosystems and led to even more changes in human life. The pandemic represents both an opportunity for innovation or optimization and at the same time, a major threat to all entities in terms of their strategic organizational capacity and resilience in their efforts to ensure business continuity. The need for organizations to survive forced companies to operate in different ways to successfully cope with supply chain disruptions, changes in customer demand, and health risks to their own workforce (Margherita & Heikkilä, 2021). The difficult pandemic contingency obliged companies to mitigate threats and take advantage of newly created opportunities. Four critical macrotrends shape the new business models on the market: economic impact, digital growth, erosion of confidence, and the new home hub (KPMG, 2020).

While the first 50 'Fortune Global 500' companies were investigated by Margherita and Heikkilä in terms of business continuity in the context of COVID-19 outbreak (Margherita & Heikkilä, 2021), there is a lack of research in investigating the strategies, models, and efforts that non-profit or no commercial purpose entities adopted or made. The need and desire to effectively adapt to the current global context and to continue the ordinary or traditional activities were also felt and experienced by religious entities, severely impacted on their traditional way of being.

Between March 15 and May 14, 2020, due to COVID-19 pandemic, Romania was like all other countries, under emergency state (E.S.) and the religious services were allowed only without any non-essential participants, thus the believers were not-included as attendees. Under these circumstances, many of the religious services were transmitted online. In Romania, Facebook (FB) is the most popular social media platform, with a weekly usage rate of 82% in 2020 (Statista, 2021). The migration to the online environment was a mass phenomenon, especially for parishes, both urban and rural ones.

The communication between Orthodox religious entities and their believers via Facebook platform was considered for the research. To gain a better understanding of how online religious communication is conducted, the first concern of the study was to identify an existing standardized framework for online communication of different religious entities. Also. the authors assumed that offline notoriety can be replicated online, and in this regard, the number of followers was analysed.

The research objectives of the paper are to identify if: O1 During the state of emergency the phenomenon of online communication has intensified; O2 The type of post messages - original or shared - determines the active involvement of consumers on digital communication channels; O3 The frequency of posts influences the number of online reactions; O4 Posts that contain video and photos generate more reactions online.

Religion and Religiosity

Religion continues to play a significant role in contemporary society. The religious experience has profound personal echoes. The individual, familial, and social backgrounds modulate the perspective, expectations, development, commitment, and intensity of personal religious life (Hood et al., 2009; Paloutzian & Park, 2005) at such an extent that some scientists considered religiosity as a study field reserved to the faithful researchers (Luke of Crimea & Chiriac, 2018). At the same time, the impact of the religiosity can be perceived at community level but also in narrow areas as organisational performance and optimisation (Mathew et al., 2019).

This is why the scientific study of religious phenomena is not a common area of interest for researchers in Central or Eastern Europe. In a 2022 report of Institute for Scientific Information, focussed on 11 countries recently admitted to the European Union (EU), only Poland was mentioned in the top of article production on this topic, despite the fact that by being part of EU, all of them had access to the same research funding sources (Adams et al., 2022).

The transformative role of the Internet on religion received limited attention in scientific research. The use of social media in the religious area before the COVID-19 pandemic has been controversial. Despite the slightly increasing number of religious entities engaged on social media platforms in recent years, the debate over their role, effectiveness, and merits remains (Nyland & Near, 2007). Digital technologies had an impact on all aspects of human life, transforming the concepts of life, identity, time, and space; and religion is no exception (Volkova, 2021). Most people still define themselves as religious, even in an increasingly secularized society (Verschoor-Kirss & College, 2012). At global level, a major trend is represented by the Christian believers without affiliation to any religious organization, e.g. up to one third of the entire US population (Smith, 2021).

The consumer / the believer

At the same time, the reality for the consumer changed. A new client has emerged in the pandemic, with new behaviours and decision-making criteria. Marked by the decrease in interpersonal interaction and focused mainly on personal health and safety, new consumers have found digital channels as a main solution for continuity. The process of adopting digital channels has grown rapidly in the new reality. One third of clients who used mainly in-person channels before 2020 to contact brands for assistance, especially from non-food retail and banking, are now switching to digital channels. Both digital channels (18%) and digitally enabled contact channels (10%) increased rapidly in 2020 (KPMG, 2020). The same trend occurred in the religious field. Lövheim (2008) showed that in Sweden, young people seek religious experiences rather through the Internet than through local religious communities (Lövheim, 2008).

Through their affiliation to the Orthodox Church, the believers accept the official perspective on what Church is. As a theandric body of Christ, both human and divine, Church represents community, communion, and communication (Todoran & Zagrean, 2009). The communication process is a bidirectional one, from humans to deity (e.g., prayer) but at the same time with a descendent direction (e.g., The Grace). The core element of the Christian community is the Eucharist or the Holy Communion, that presumes an active presence to a Liturgy/Mess as co-participation of the believers to the Lord's Last Supper (Staniloae, 1996). This is why the restrictions enforced during the emergency state of COVID-19 pandemic influenced in a negative way the religious life of the believers (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021). A more equilibrated point of view is formulated in a study focused on South Tyrol (Italy), that highlights the fact that digital media is perceived as having both positive and negative effects of the relationship between believers and Church (Isetti et al., 2021). In a recent study, Hodøl conclude that social media's role is to physically bring people to the church, not an arena of religious manifestation (Hodøl, 2021).

Communication

The way consumers communicate has changed dramatically. Physical distance and reduced physical contacts imposed by many countries, forced the adoption of various communication tools for everyday life. The use of online communication through social media platforms increased for social reasons. An innovative application of social networks by locating and tracking contacts was implemented due to the pandemic (Wong et al., 2021). In addition, there was a dependence on social media/networks for work and learning, highlighting the associated limitations. Even traditional services for face-to-face interactions were forced to move online (schools, universities, professional congresses and conferences, religious entities, some medical services, etc.). Various platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom™, and Microsoft Teams™ had an exponential increase in the number of users during this time (Wong et al., 2021).

According to the Romanian National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications, during 2020 vs. 2019, the total number of Internet connections had a positive evolution of +8% for fixed connections and +3% for mobile ones. The average monthly Internet traffic per capita increased by +51%, up to 44 GB/month for fixed

Internet, and by +30%, up to 4.9 GB/month for mobile Internet. The 2020 Report also mentions that, in the pandemic context, the gap between urban and rural areas narrowed, due to the fact that the growth rate of the number of new rural connections was much higher than for urban ones (+8% vs. +1%) (ANCOM, 2021). These data demonstrate that the online environment is a ubiquitous reality, with an increasing penetration rate across all demographics.

The influence of the tool on the communication content represents a point of interest for scientists. Volkova explored the transformations associated with the digitization of the Eastern Orthodox religious discourse in more than a quarter of a century, focusing on the attitude of the biggest Orthodox Church toward digital technologies. The research concluded on the need to adapt to the modern digital environment and emphasizes the benefit of the online environment to target and influence a large number of new digital consumers (Volkova, 2021).

Online religiosity phenomenon

Online technologies are perceived as a convenient tool for expanding religious influence (Campbell, 2020) and for reaching the hearts and souls of believers and also 'to make the religious picture of the world more expressive and plausible' (Volkova, 2021). The rise of religious phenomena in the online environment is linked to offline religious structures and practices. The consumers' adherence to the online dimensions of religion reflects their efforts to personally combine online activities with offline existences. Religious experiences were offered through a growing number of websites, chat rooms, and e-mail discussion groups. Cyber-churches, cyber-temples or online rituals (such as electronic prayer and virtual pilgrimages) have continued to emerge over the past three decades (Campbell, 2005). A 2004 report found that the Internet represented a significant environment for religion among Americans, and 64% of the surveyed population used the Internet for religious purposes. However, the results showed that their use of the Internet cannot overlap with the expectations expressed by religious entities (Hoover et al., 2004). The extensive adoption of online tools for religious purposes allowed believers to test new optical experiences, visual representations of faith realities, facilitating a new way of participation and interactivity (Andok, 2021).

Social networks currently offer a conventional channel for religion, bringing a new dimension for religious entities, believers, parishioners, and the public to communicate virtually, maintain and support their community. Online religion generated wide flows and networks of resources, audiences, communities, and connections in search of valuable spiritual and social encounters (Hutchings, 2011). Verschoor-Kirss and College suggested that technology opportunities, such as social networks (e.g., Facebook) can be used by religious individuals and institutions not only for religious purposes, but also for community building (Verschoor-Kirss & College, 2012). In 2017, Lim investigated several Christian churches in south Australia and determined several effective ways to use social media, given the purpose and values/metrics of Facebook posts (Lim, 2017). A study conducted by Radde-Antweiler and Grünenthal on the mediatization within the Roman Catholic Church concluded that communication practices differ depending on the recipient. Communications within groups are slightly mediatized, but individuals mostly use the media to communicate with outsiders or people who might express interest in their message (Radde-Antweiler & Grünenthal, 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic, the primary sources of information available were via the Internet and social media. In this respect, the original content and sharing were mechanisms to provide information by social media users and to reach a wide audience (Wong et al., 2021). A Scandinavian study based on more than seven hundred Norwegian congregations, concluded that social media is often used for strategic purposes and especially for information of the believers (Hodøl, 2021). But the general perception of the religious followers is that despite the effort Church made for digital migration, they perceive the digital communication not as efficient as the direct communication they were used to (Isetti et al., 2021).

The national Orthodox churches are perceived as conservative institutions, characterized by low levels of acceptance in terms of innovation and technology and manifesting distrust regarding new digital technologies (Volkova, 2021). Still, the message His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church addressed to the First

International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care (Athens, 2015), shows the interest and the prudent openness that the Church has towards new communication technologies:

> *Our church has the duty to understand the functioning of the informational society of nowadays in order to wisely use the means of communication so as to communicate the orthodox values and enter into the social networks in pursuance of meeting the human being of today who has become a user of new communicational technologies in the Areopagus of modernity. The use of digital media in the pastoral and missionary work requires ecclesial responsibility and pastoral wisdom, because even though a new technology offers new development opportunities to people, it can also bring new challenges or dangers as regards preserving the traditional spiritual cultural and social values of persons and people.* (His Beatitude Daniel, 2015).

The official communication channels of the central structures, for example television, radio or news agency, are supported at a local level by online communication tools: blogs, web pages, and Facebook accounts/profiles. The present paper investigated online communication between Orthodox churches and their believers on Facebook.

Material and Method

After the restrictions imposed on the services of the Church due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence and the development of technology and social media platforms make it possible for people to participate online at religious ceremonies and to access religious content in an easier manner.

The aim of the research is to underline and analyse the changes in the communication process regarding the digital transition caused by the coronavirus pandemic for Romanian Orthodox religious communities in Cluj area. The main aspects took into consideration were the context of the communication, the type of content and the frequency of delivering content to the community. The study creates an overview regarding how often the religious entities are posting new content on social media platforms, what kind of content they are transmitting to their community and how engaged is the community with different types of content they received.

The present research is based on a longitudinal retrospective study, focused on communication, via Facebook, between Orthodox religious entities and their followers, before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency. A number of 25 monasteries, 78 urban and 79 rural parishes in the Orthodox Archiepiscopacy of Vad, Feleac and Cluj (one of the biggest orthodox dioceses in Romania, with more than 750.000 members) were the subjects of the study. The data were collected for three periods: December 2019 – March 2020 (120 days before the state of emergency); March – May 2020 (60 days of emergency state due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and May – November 2020 (180 days after the end of emergency state).

The analysed urban and rural parishes form the two Orthodox Deaneries of Cluj-Napoca, the second most important city in Romania. The 25 selected monasteries for monks and nuns represent all the monasteries in the Orthodox Archiepiscopacy of Vad, Feleac and Cluj, 15 of them being located in Cluj County and 10 of them in Bistrița-Năsăud County, as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Profile of monasteries included in the study

County	Type		Total
	Monks	Nuns	
Cluj	9	6	15
Bistrița-Năsăud	4	6	10
Total	**13**	**12**	**25**

Source: authors' calculation

The research relied on one main data source, the Facebook pages of each entity, this channel being the most important tool for communication, during this period of time, being, as well, the most accessible environment for the members of religious communities. Only the entities found active on Facebook were included in the final analysis. Data regarding the frequency and type of posts (text, photo, video or live broadcasts), and consumers' feedback (comments, sharing, reactions) were automatically collected from public pages, using the Facepager application, which is based on Facebook Graph API (Application Programming Interface), this being the primary way to get data out of the Facebook platform, to query data, for three successive stages: 120 days before the state of emergency, 60 days of emergency state due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 180 days after the emergency state, this last stage divided into three periods of 60 days each, as mentioned in the following table.

Table 2. Time periods of the study

Periods	From	To	Duration
Before	15.11.2019	15.03.2020	120 days
Emergency State (E.S.)	16.03.2020	14.05.2020	60 days
After 1	15.05.2020	13.07.2020	60 days
After 2	14.07.2020	11.09.2020	60 days
After 3	12.09.2020	10.11.2020	60 days
Total	**15.11.2019**	**10.11.2020**	**360 days**

Source: authors' calculation

More than 6,150 posts and 1.6 million reactions were included in the study. The data was gathered from Facebook using Facepager (Facebook Graph API) and quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS-Windows version. Spearman correlation coefficient was calculated with an acceptable error threshold of $p<0.05$.

Results and Discussions

The study investigated how religious entities used social media for communication before the emergency state, during the emergency state and after this period, what type of content they published (text, photos or videos) and what type of information they posted (original or shared).

The Facebook pages of the analysed entities, from the perspective of their digital presence or absence and of their activity or inactivity, is very diverse. They range from an extensive presence, but with high levels of inactivity (monasteries), to a moderate presence with a higher degree of involvement (parishes), as shown in Figure 1.

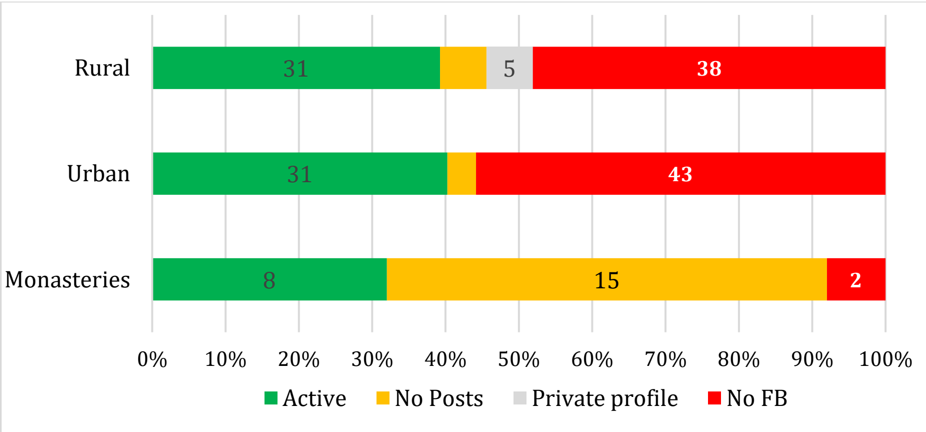

Figure 1. The Facebook (FB) profile of the entities

Source: authors' calculations

The evolution of the average number of the posts of an entity before the emergency state and during it, shows an increase of 62% for rural ones and of 54% for urban ones, as it is mentioned in Figure 2. There is a weak correlation between the type of the religious entity (monastery, urban parish and rural parish) and the frequencies of their posts (r =0.10), directly proportional and statistically significant (p=0.01). This could be relevant for each religious entity independency and for the own vision regarding digital communication.

The average number of reactions for each post, before and during the emergency state increased for every type of entity. The variation in the average number of reactions was very different, from an increase by 65% (68%) for urban (rural) parishes to an increase by 681% for monasteries' posts, as shown in Table 3.

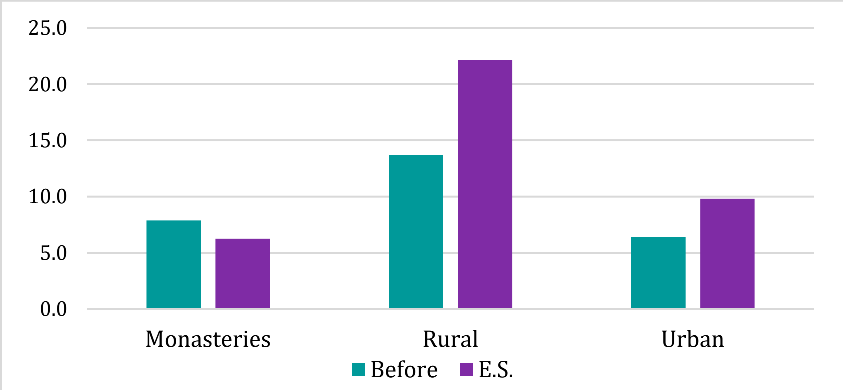

Figure 2. Average number of posts of an entity / 60 days

Source: authors' calculations

Table 3. Average number of reactions / posts

Entity	Before	E.S.	Variation
Monasteries	1.120	8.755	**+681%**
Rural	22	37	**+68%**
Urban	98	162	**+65%**

Source: authors' calculations

The dynamics of the number of posts, reactions, and the average reactions/ post for all five periods is mentioned in Table 4. A higher level of reactions of the consumers can be observed for the monasteries' posts. The correlation between the type of the religious entity (monastery, urban parish and rural parish) and number of reactions for their posts is weak (r =0.02), directly proportional and statistically significant (p=0.01). There could be other factors involved in making people reacting and being engaged in what religious entities are posting.

Table 4. Data regarding the number of posts, reactions, and averages

		Type of entity		
		Monasteries	**Rural**	**Urban**
Before	No. posts	7.9	13.7	6.4
	No. reactions	8,822.6	303.5	624.2
	Average reactions/post	**1,120.3**	22.2	98.0
E.S.	No. posts	6.3	22.2	9.8
	No. reactions	54,719.1	828.5	1,584.2
	Average reactions/post	**8,755.1**	37.4	161.5
After 1	No. posts	5.1	16.4	5.1
	No. reactions	37,041.3	514.3	897.6
	Average reactions/post	**7,227.6**	31.3	177.2
After 2	No. posts	6.3	14.2	3.8
	No. reactions	35,726.5	506.4	669.5
	Average reactions/post	**5,716.2**	35.6	177.4
After 3	No. posts	3.1	17.7	4.0
	No. reactions	30,243.8	412.2	486.1
	Average reactions/post	**9,678.0**	23.3	121.5

Source: authors' calculations

A similar pattern of the average number of reactions for each post can be observed for both types of parishes, showing the fact that the implication of the consumer became more intense during the emergency state. It remained at high levels and immediately after, for the urban parishes, as can be seen in Figure 3. There is a weak to moderate correlation between the type of the religious entity (monastery, urban parish and rural parish) and the number of reactions generated by their posts ($r = 0.29$), directly proportional and statistically significant ($p=0.01$).

From the total number of 6,155 posts 5,070 are original, representing 82.37% and generating 94.98% from the total reactions' number. In 'After 3' period, 94% of the reactions to the shared posts (36,000) are connected to the posts of a single monastery. These results showed that the original messages collected much more reactions than

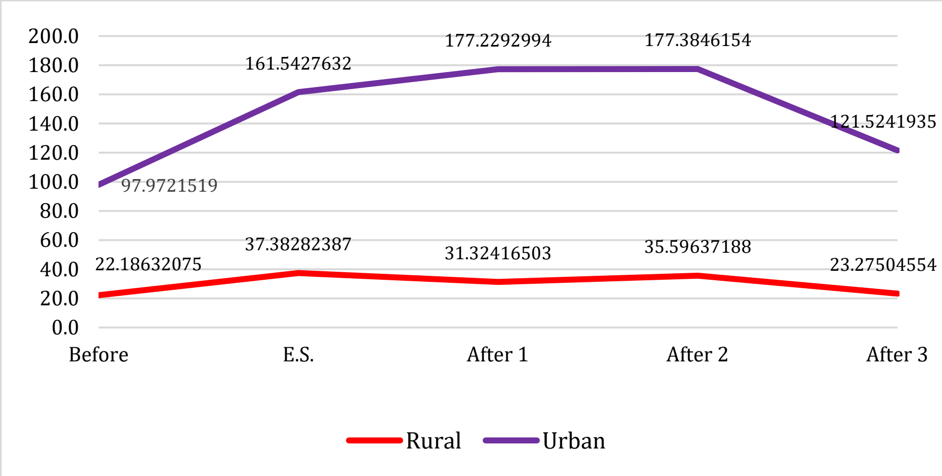

Figure 3. The average reactions/post for parishes

Source: authors' calculations

the shared ones (Figure 4). The correlation between the type of the posts (shared and original) and generated reactions is weak (r =0.12), directly proportional and statistically significant (p=0.01). Moreover, using the t-Tests for Unequal Variance in this situation provides a statistically non-significant result (p>0.05) meaning a difference in the structure of reactions for original and shared posts, the users being more interested about the content itself.

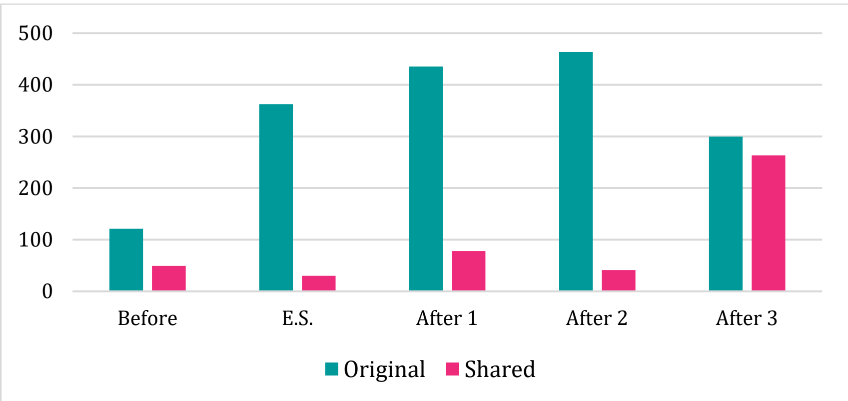

Figure 4. Average no. of reactions for each type of posts

Source: authors' calculations

An analysis that took into consideration the reactions to each type of the post revealed the fact that the videos are by far the posts that induce the highest level of reaction, as seen in Figure 5. There is a weak to moderate correlation between the content present in the posts (photo, video, text) and the number of reactions for these posts ($r = 0.24$), directly proportional and statistically significant ($p=0.01$). Moreover, the correlation between the entity type and the content they use is weak($r=0.06$), directly proportional and statistically significant ($p=0.01$). Trying to validate the structure of the reactions based on the content used in posts by applying t-Tests for Unequal Variance, provided a statistically non-significant results ($p>0.05$) meaning a difference in the way the social media users relate with different kind of content, this being a very personal and subjective aspect, without a common rule. The content types identified were: information regarding the operation of the churches, the schedule of online religious ceremonies, live broadcast of religious events, biblical quotes, and other life advices.

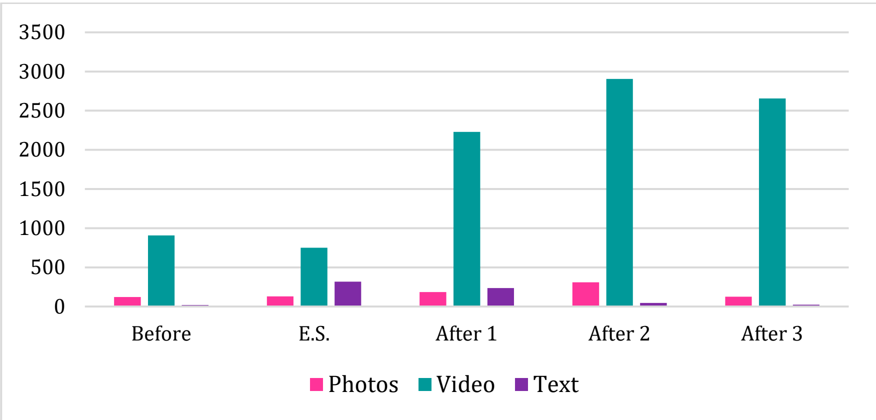

Figure 5. Average no. of reactions / type of the post

Source: authors' calculations

Regarding the offline/online notoriety, the Monastery of Nicula, the most famous one in Transylvania, is by far the leader of the online environment both as number of followers and as number of collected reactions, as shown in Figure 6.

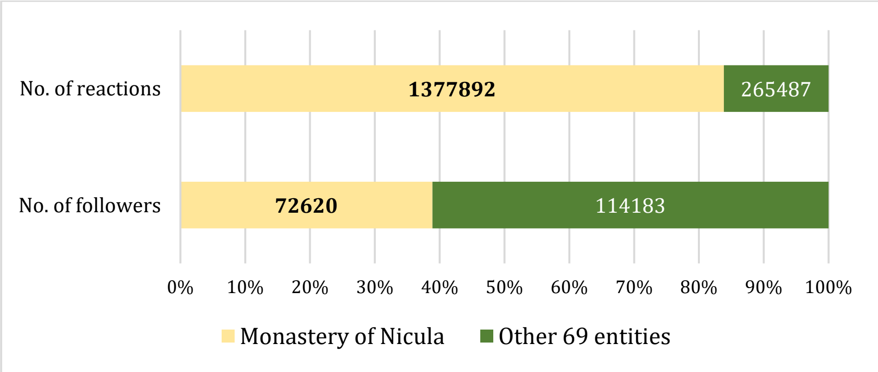

Figure 6. Monastery of Nicula vs. all other (69) entities

Source: authors' calculations

For both monasteries and urban parishes, the frequency of the posts after the emergency state is smaller than before it. The monthly average number of the posts created by each type of entities in all five periods of the study is mentioned in Figure 7.

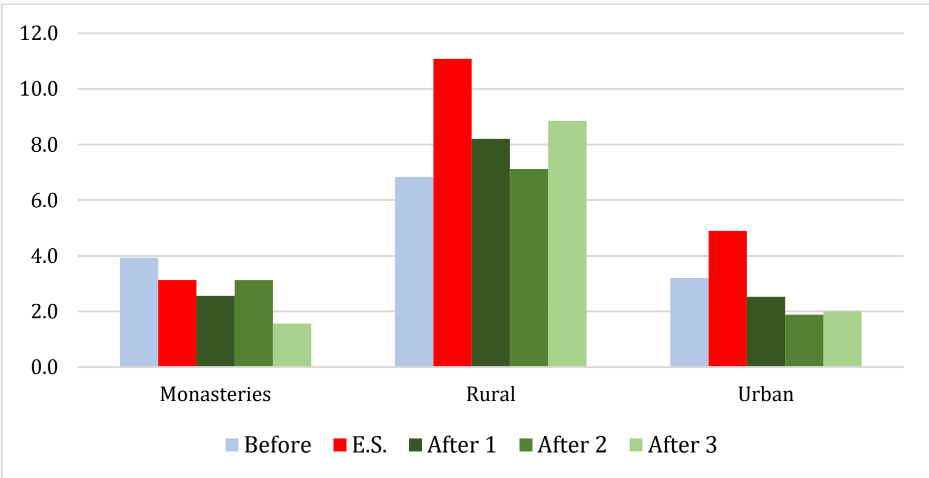

Figure 7. Monthly average number of posts

Source: authors' calculations

The polymorphic pattern of entities as Facebook actors, both in terms of their online presence and their activity, as well as the disparities between them, could be explained by some factors. First of all, the lack of an official online communication strategy of the Romanian Orthodox Church applied at the very basic level of monasteries and parishes, makes the digital communication (Facebook) a very subjective and provider dependent one. At the same time, there is a risk of misunderstandings about the importance of online communication. Orthodox national churches are often seen as traditional and conservative institutions, that do not easily embrace new trends and technologies. The average age of clergy and church believers makes them digital immigrants rather than digital natives, which raises questions about their ITC skills and capabilities. However, in the pandemic context, the main actors on the religious stage are not the central structures of the Church, but the local entities, as previous studies highlight (Cooper et al., 2021).

The study revealed that in respect with the posts' frequencies of the religious entities during the periods studied, for the number of reactions received by posts based on the used posts type (original or shared) are obtained very weak correlations. Contrarily, other relationships such as posts' type (original or shared) and religious entity, posts content (photos, videos, text) and religious entity and posts' type and posts content demonstrated strong statistical signification. The research showed that using photos and videos in social media posts would increase the number of reactions, while the use of text posts would bring a slightly lower number of reactions. These results could be explained by the diversity in term of posts' type (original or shared), used content (photos, videos, text), and the posts frequency fluctuations, among these types of entities (monasteries, urban and rural parishes). Also, no intentional marketing strategy focused on audience engagement for generating reactions and interactions was identified.

The paper concludes that only parishes, both urban and rural, increased the number of posts during the emergency state and, thus, the level of activity. At the same time, the reactions to the posts increased significantly for all types of entities, with average values between +65% (for urban parishes) and +681% (for monasteries). An insightful observation is that, although the monasteries did not intensify their activity, the level of reactions to their posts reached record levels. The fact that each post of the monasteries generated a reaction ten times higher than the posts of the parishes, entitles us to state that the religious consumer perceived the monasteries as the guiding lighthouses during the emergency state.

The study showed that the type of message influences the level of consumers' involvement. The original messages determine a much higher level of implication in comparison with the shared posts in all the studied periods. In half of the four-time analysed intervals, excluding 'After 3', the reactions were ten times more intense for an original message than for the shared ones. During this period, a shared message attracted on average only 8% of the reactions that an original message attracted. These findings highlight the high expectations of followers or believers regarding the originality, relevance, and customization of the posts. For the public, the legal interdiction of attending the religious services in the emergency state of the pandemic, was reflected in such a record level of involvement. When face-to-face interaction is prohibited and religious tourism and pilgrimage cannot be practiced, it seems that social media communication can be a tool for 'business continuity' even in the religious field, especially valued by consumers of the phenomenon.

According to the research results, the frequency of posts did not directly influence the number of online reactions. It seems that believers were significantly more looking for qualitative rather than quantitative communication.

On average, for the complete 360 days of the period studied, a video generated 1,377 reactions, much more than about 150 reactions for photos or text. Even though the number of the posts decreased after the emergency state, the average level of reactions increased from 750 reactions/video message during the emergency state to more than 2,500 reactions/video message after it. The result can be interpreted in the light of the fact that, after the end of the lockdown, the number of believers who physically attended the public religious services in churches did not increase to pre-pandemic levels. Consequently, believers remained connected to the online medium, seeking information, connection, and belonging in a secure environment.

Even if the involvement patterns of religious believers in communicating with different religious entities have specific profiles and frameworks, the results of the study allow us to state that the monasteries remain the most followed religious entities in online environments and with the highest level of reactions. Religious entities with a high notoriety offline, such as the Nicula Monastery (Cluj County), continue to have the largest number of followers online and with a high level of involvement.

To our knowledge, there is a lack of research on the online communication of these Orthodox religious entities, especially in Romania, so that a comparison with similar studies could not be established. All these aspects highlight the innovative nature of the study and its originality.

Conclusions

The results of the study contribute to a more proper understanding of the involvement of local Orthodox religious entities in Facebook communication and of the reactions the believers manifest in the online environment. The findings of this research are congruent with the previous studies in some aspects: the speed of digital transition was accelerated during the COVID-19 emergency state, technological opportunities previously unnoticed become main tools for communication and at the same time for maintaining the feeling of community between the members of the Church. The lack of a unitary digital communication follows the general trend of resolving the pandemic situations rather at local level than at central one.

The study provides data to sustain that the offline notoriety of a monastery is duplicated in the online environment. Due to the importance of monasteries as influential entities, the need for a professional approach, business-like training or at least professional consultancy is strongly recommended for PR/online communication, with an extension to all local religious entities. At the same time, in the context of artificial intelligence development and its future ubiquity, priests, monks/nuns and other church employees should actively improve their digital communication skills.

A similar analysis from an interconfessional perspective could reveal at the institutional level, some differences in communication behaviours, both for organisations and for online followers. A content analysis of the posts and comments could highlight the dominant themes, concepts and ideas posted on the Facebook platform and the relationship between them.

The study has its limitations, due to the regional studied area and the mono-confessional group. The limited sample size does not allow an extrapolation to a national scale. Predominantly in the case of monasteries, there is the risk of multi-pages followers, that has not been taken into consideration.

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HUMAN RESOURCES AS THE MAIN VECTOR OF COMMUNICATION: THE CASE OF MOBEXPERT GROUP

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ABSTRACT. Owners and employees represent those stakeholders who substantially shape the organisational culture. In fact, their values, their expectations, significantly influence the company's performance. Moreover, customers see a brand through its employees, through the owner. This paper has the following objectives: to explore the expectations/possibilities – as basic pillars of an effective collaboration – both from the point of view of the employees and from the point of view of the owner of the Mobexpert Group, and to identify those values that are appreciated by the employees of the Mobexpert brand, which also define the owner of the Mobexpert Group. In order to achieve the proposed objectives, content analysis was conducted based on the show 'Empire of Lions', Season 3, i.e. regarding the experiences and opinions of employees posted on YouTube (Mobexpert People section). Following the analysis, it was found that: (1) the success of the brand is summed up in the set of expectations, outlined values, (2) trust, self-confidence, perseverance and creativity representing the foundation/stone of the employee-brand relationship, and of possible collaboration between the owner of the Mobexpert Group as investor and potential business partners.

Key words: Mobexpert Group, communication, brand essence, employees, owner

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Successful companies are managed by leaders, noting that organizational success is due to the existence of a superior and competent human resource (Saputra & Mahaputra, 2022). In fact, employees (besides owners, managers) are among the most important stakeholders. Based on the above, employee motivation is a cardinal point for smart organizations, which are constantly looking for new ways in order to increase employee satisfaction (Chanda & Goyal, 2020). Consequently, knowing the factors which determine job satisfaction is paramount, because they influence employee performance (Dugguh & Dennis, 2014; Razak et al., 2018), implicitly the firm's performance, and there is a causal relationship between consumer satisfaction and employee satisfaction (Kurdi et al., 2020).

Increasing employee satisfaction can be achieved by creating an environment that supports trust, cooperation and creativity (Abraham, 2012). According to research conducted by Gupta et al. (2014, p. 79) "organizational values and a sense of community are the most important in terms of the job satisfaction level of employees." Another source of satisfaction is given by leadership (Mugira, 2022): moreover "the organizational climate and work style complement and fully mediate the relationship between leadership style and job satisfaction" (Moslehpour et al., 2018, p.1). Given the current context, it should be emphasized that employee attitudes towards work can be influenced by changes in the macro-economy (Cahill et al., 2015). However, employee attitude is a sensitive topic that requires a careful approach because it influences the satisfaction of service consumers (Simon et al., 2009; Wampande & Osunsan, 2020), while reflecting the organisation's morale (Sageer et al., 2012): as such, service providers communicate with consumers through employees (Olins, 2010).

The opportunities to involve employees in communication are very diverse. Regardless of the technique chosen, companies/ organisations communicate – via employees – those values that represent the essence of the brand, thus contributing to the creation of brand identity. With the development of technology, ways of communication have become extremely diverse. Online presence and appearances in various media represent common means of communication both nationally and internationally.

'Empire of Lions' (the Romanian version of the 'Dragons' Den' franchise) is a show present in several countries around the world. The essence of the show, on the one hand, is to support those entrepreneurs who present a business idea with a high potential, and on the other hand, through the show, investors have the opportunity to communicate the values that define their business. Among the investors ('Empire of Lions' Season 3) are Cristina Bâtlan, Dragoș Petrescu, Dr. Wargha Enayati, Sebastian Dobrincu and the owner of Mobexpert Group: Dan Șucu. The success of the Mobexpert brand has attracted the interest of both practitioners and theorists. The name Dan Șucu and the Mobexpert brand have been mentioned in several scientific articles. The gist of what is mentioned in these scientific papers is shown in the table below (Table1):

Table 1. Key aspects of the Mobexpert brand

Key aspect	Sources
Customer relations: diversity of consulting services, keeping promises. Communication with clients: the company's website.	Brutu & Mihai, 2015
Respect for (1) the external audience (consumers), (2) the expertise and professionalism of the internal audience (experts).	Cmeciu, 2010
Diversity of offer.	Ioras et al., 2006
High quality of services related to delivery and assembly of purchased products.	Meghișan & Meghișan, 2007
High quality of the (1) manufacturing process, (2) purchasing process, which allows access to/purchase of high quality components, materials.	Militaru & Şerbănică, 2008

Source: authors' compilation based on sources mentioned in the table

Material and Method(s)

The objectives of this paper include the following: capturing

(1) the opportunities offered to employees by the Mobexpert Group,
(2) values, which are appreciated by Mobexpert Group employees,
(3) the expectations stated by the owner of the Mobexpert Group regarding the possibilities of investing in a business/ idea,
(4) values, which define the owner of the Mobexpert Group.

A. Content analysis was used to collect data. Content analysis was carried out by the same individual.

B. The overview of the possibilities offered to employees by the Mobexpert Group, the values appreciated by the employees were identified on the basis of the values communicated/displayed on the YouTube website under the name Mobexpert People.

- Source: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list= PLObl4r9vg6NHu6d1A833ETk03_wtIFJiR
- 20 videos were included in the analysis, in which employees express their opinions and experiences within the Mobexpert Group.
- Data were collected during the period: 04. 08. 2022 - 14. 08. 2022.

C. Identifying the values[3] that define the owner of the Mobexpert Group, respectively his expectations regarding the possibility of investing in a business/idea were based on the TV show: the 'Empire of Lions'. Thirty-four pitches[4] from Season 3 of the private Romanian commercial TV channel PRO TV were included in the analysis.

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[3] It is based on the premise that an investor is interested in those businesses/ entrepreneurs whose values are similar to the values that define themselves.

[4] Avocado, Kidprenor, SOLO, Sugar Couture, Muma Pădurii, Seed, Cat shop, Dizainăr, Investory, Baza7, Nuntana, MATCA, SisShoes, Dentix Millenium, Queen's Delight, Sophie's Choices, L'AMANDE, Infinity Software, Nemțeana, Concrete Concept, Papanașu,

• The data collected after watching the show were structured according to the following variables:

(1) the sector in which the business is to be launched or the sector in which the presented business is already active,
(2) proposed investor's share of the deal,
(3) percentage proposed by the investor,
(4) weaknesses,
(5) strengths/differentiation opportunities,
(6) the values that define entrepreneurs (if the values that define entrepreneurs were not specifically mentioned by the investor, they were not identified through content analysis).

Results and Discussions

As a first step, we identified those aspects that were appreciated by the employees behind the Mobexpert brand: which help clients:

✓to furnish homes according to personal needs and wishes,
✓to transform their houses into their homes (https://mobexpert.ro/pages/cariera-si-oameni).

Based on the information below (Figure 1), it can be concluded that the Mobexpert Group offers the opportunity to develop, both professionally and individually, since (in the case of the analysed brand) there is the possibility:

CAZE, Vine Street, Rulotika, Acusut mama, Infinite Gaming (e-sport), Vecinu, Andreea Coman, A@SNegulescu, Sorin Alexandru, Vlad Colceriu and Nicu Negură, Laurette, Iuliana Catană, Clara and Emanuel.

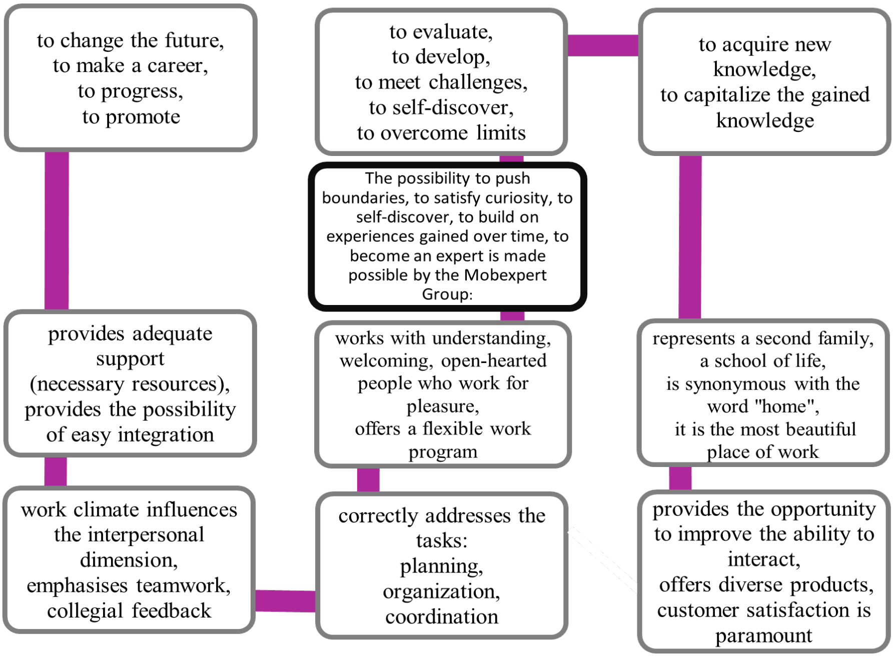

Figure 1. Possibilities offered to employees by the Mobexpert brand

Source: authors' compilation based on disclosed information
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLObl4r9vg6NHu6d1A833ETk03_wtIFJiR

The aforementioned can be achieved because the basic pillars on which the Mobexpert brand is built include (Figure 2):

Values	trust, self-confidence, support, encouragement, respect for people/work/products
	quality, performance, perseverance, style, innovation, creativity/imagination, professionalism, diversity, dynamism

Figure 2. Values defining the Mobexpert brand

Source: own source based on disclosed information
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLObl4r9vg6NHu6d1A833ETk03_wtIFJiR

Next, those values were captured through the show 'Empire of Lions', Season 3, 2022 which were appreciated, and sparked the interest of investor Dan Șucu[5] (Figure 3):

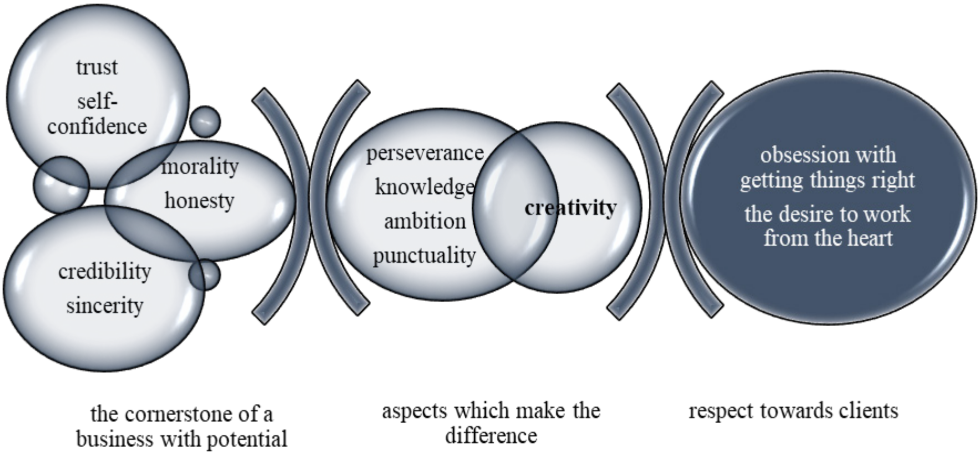

Figure 3. Crucial values for the Mobexpert brand owner

Source: authors' compilation based on the pitches observed: 'Empire of Lions', Season 3, 2022

On the other hand, following the pitches, it was found that the owner of the Mobexpert brand generally showed interest, invested in the presented/proposed businesses if they: already exist/are on the market, are present in the online environment, respectively present special strengths/characteristics: product quality is superior, products are local/national. The concrete presentation of the strengths and differentiation opportunities that have aroused the interest of the investor Dan Șucu, are presented by the figure below (Figure 4):

[5] Regardless if he invested alone, with another investor/investors, or was not chosen by the entrepreneur/entrepreneurs.

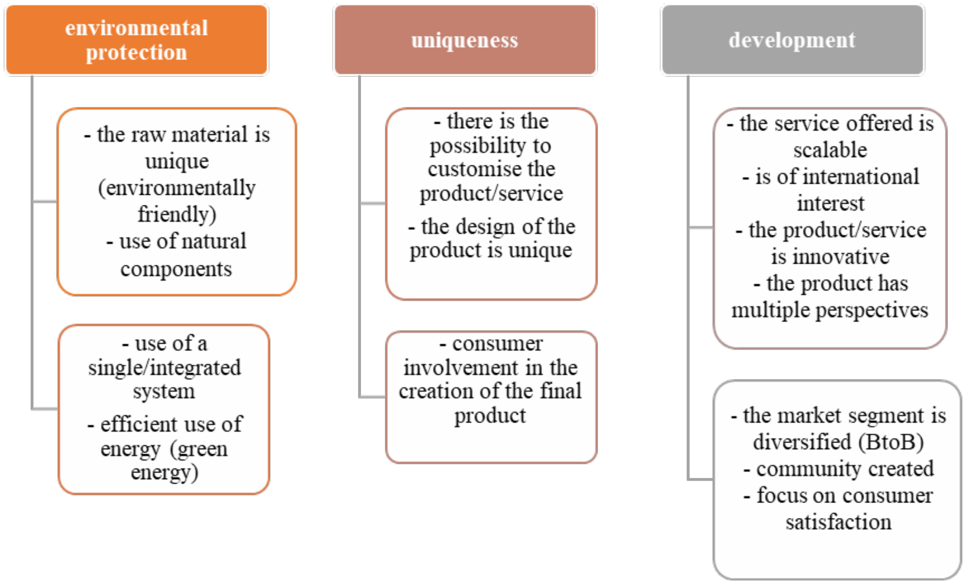

Figure 4. Aspects appreciated by Mobexpert brand owner

Source: authors' compilation based on the pitches observed: 'Empire of Lions', Season 3, 2022

Considering what is presented in Figure 4, the following can be formulated. The owner of the Mobexpert Group is interested in those businesses which:

- ✓ place great emphasis on protecting the natural environment,
- ✓ offer the possibility to personalize the offered product/service,
- ✓ involves aspects that include the prerequisites of value-adding to the offered product/service on a large scale.

The brand owner Mobexpert did not invest when the following was found in case of businesses/entrepreneurs (Figure 5):

Weaknesses	product is prototype/not tested/validated, the business is overpriced, the market has not been sufficiently investigated (required human resource not available), maintaining authenticity is not possible, the proposed technique is too complex, knowledge of consumer behaviour is superficial
Differentiation opportunities	it is not/is not innovative: it already exists on the national/international market no added value regarding certain service technologies
Features	superficial preparation, poor expression, overconfidence, business plan not properly developed, lack of credibility, insecurity, arrogance, entrepreneur's desire to eliminate certain phases of business start-up/development

Figure 5. Aspects not appreciated by Mobexpert brand owner

Source: authors' compilation based on the pitches observed: 'Empire of Lions', Season 3, 2022

In the light of the findings identified and presented in the figure above (Figure 5), it was concluded that the investor Dan Șucu did not invest in businesses in which:

- ✓ the product is not marketed[6], or requires development, market research, consumer behaviour research has not been properly carried out,
- ✓ the proposed business is not innovative: it already exists on the market,
- ✓ entrepreneurs are not adequately prepared.

Besides what has been stated above, the following aspects of the Mobexpert owner's behaviour as an investor have been noted:

- ✓ accepts the proposed offer,
- ✓ demands a larger share of the proposed deal,
- ✓ offers the possibility of redemption,

[6] It should be noted that if the sector in which the proposed business was to operate was known to the investor Dan Șucu, or if he considered the entrepreneurs to be *moral*, *pure-hearted*, market presence did not present a preliminary criterion for investment.

- ✓ agrees to partner with other investors,
- ✓ if the amount requested is substantial, but the service is innovative, shows interest, provided another investor in the field joins,
- ✓ invests in businesses that have not attracted the interest of other investors,
- ✓ offers help without actually investing in the proposed business,
- ✓ the areas of interest include: furniture industry, home/office decor sector, medical/dental industry, brewing industry, renovation services sector, dessert industry, perfume industry, construction sector, fashion industry, IT.

Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis, it can be concluded that the owner of the Mobexpert Group places a particular emphasis on (1) social responsibility, (2) the valorisation of national/autochthon potential, and (3) those dimensions that form the brand attachment pyramid[7] (Figure 6):

Figure 6. Mobexpert brand essence
Source: authors' compilation based

[7] The Brand Attachment Pyramid was developed by McEwen (2008).

Although globalisation is making a positive contribution to the furniture industry, valorisation of national potential is a factor of differentiation from international competition. More specifically, the values that determine a particular nation[8], contribute to a remarkable extent to meeting the needs of consumers[9], because:

(1) on the one hand there is the segment of those consumers for whom the desire to buy local/domestic products is paramount (Törőcsik, 2006), and on the other hand,

(2) the desire to buy something special, something authentic, something different, something specific (Törőcsik, 2006) is a global trend.

Consequently, the success of the Mobexpert Group is due to the fact that it believes in the national potential, and builds the brand on national values; it valorises the opportunities that arise in a specific/ particular way on an international level; and the communication process is coordinated in such a way that the message remains the same[10]. Also in this context it should be noted that the relationship between brand – consumer is built on the foundation of Trust (a trusted name) and Integrity (providing solutions). But it is very important to note that this foundation can only be built if Trust can also be captured within brand-employee or employee-brand relationship. In the case of the Mobexpert brand, Trust is mutual[11]. In relation of brand attachment, Pride dimension can also be identified, as the Mobexpert Group shows respect to both customers and employees, with the caveat that respect to customers can only be achieved if the employee is respected. Consequently, within the Mobexpert Group, the first are the employees, with the remark that employees are treated in such a way that they contribute to meeting the

[8] The success of South Korean brands that have conquered the international market is given/determined by national identity (Szász, 2022).

[9] The offer is diversified both as regards exported products and products "Made in Romania".

[10] Confused consumers don't buy (Randall, 2000).

[11] "I trusted the brand evolution and the brand trusted my personal evolution" - this is the statement that best sums up the 'two-dimensional' side of trust within the Mobexpert Group, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EggysxLs7dU&list=PLObl4r9vg6NHu6d1A833ETk03_wtIFJiR&index=10

needs, desires of customers at a higher level. If the customer feels respected "Pride is a reflection not only of the pride felt by the customer, but also of the pride a company feels and expresses towards its customers" (McEwen, 2008, p. 120).

Besides Trust, Integrity, Pride, in our opinion, one can also capture Passion, because the Mobexpert Group is a better rather than good (even perfect) choice for employees. Given the above, the essence of the Mobexpert brand is (1) defined in detail, (2) communicated to the target segment, and (3) coherent.

In regard to the limitations of the study, the following have to be mentioned. The analyses included:

(1) only the experiences, opinions of the employees "behind Mobexpert",

(2) only those shows which were aired during Season 3 of the 'Empire of Lions'.

The present study can be further developed by widening the scope of the research in order to identify the variables that define the success of the Mobexpert Group.

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THE ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN THE BUYING DECISION PROCESS. A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT. Within the consumer behaviour literature, there are few studies in the consumer behaviour literature dealing with the relationship between consumer self-esteem and its role in the buying decision process. This paper explores the influence of self-esteem throughout the five stages of the consumer buying decision process. The first aspect for consideration is getting a clear picture of the definition and dimensions of self-esteem. The second element of the study concerns the five stages of the decision-making process, with special focus on how the process takes place depending on the level of self-esteem.

The results show that impulse purchasers have more often than not a low level of self-esteem and do not go through the stages of the decision-making process in the usual way. With respect to managerial implications, the study indicates that organizations have to pay more attention to customer self-esteem when making customer segmentation, as, at the moment, the focus is only on demographic differences (age, gender, background, education) which do not always provide sufficient information. The evidence shows that self-esteem plays an increasing role in explaining consumer behaviour and sheds light on how individuals make decisions which mould their existence.

Key words: self-esteem, consumer behaviour, extended self, buying process

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Today's society undergoes ongoing development. Needs, as presented by Abraham Maslow, continue to mould people's life. More and more people today seek to satisfy the needs in the upper levels of the pyramid (ego needs and self-actualization) (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). The infinite variety of ways to satisfy these needs has become a growing feature of the present economy. Companies change their vision and strategies to match people's desires. People's progress continues to challenge organizations to identify new ways of satisfying consumers' needs and desires.

Economically, marketing has always had as goal the consumer satisfaction (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Thus, people were divided into samples according to criteria allowing a precise segmentation: age, income, pursued or completed education, gender, etc. (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Marketing research has shown that these are not the only segmentation criteria. In reality, there is very little information obtained through the use of the above-mentioned criteria.

Differences between individuals are currently explained using more profound criteria related to people's personalities, the attitude they adopt according to the marketing stimuli to which they are exposed and how they react to these aspects. Therefore, the concept of self-esteem has increasingly come into sharp focus in the last years. Maslow included self-esteem on the fourth level of the pyramid of needs, together with prestige and status, in the category of ego needs as early as 1943 (Maslow, 1943; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). However, self-esteem has crossed the borders of psychology, where it was initially used (James, 1893), and is also referred to in economics, particularly in the field of marketing. To satisfy people's needs and desires, marketers have to know the behaviour of existing customers and that of prospective consumers. Consequently, the concept of self-esteem is being found more and more frequently in the study of consumer behaviour (Solomon, 2018). The concept of self can account for the differences between individuals (Plăiaș, 2011) (people's needs, character, knowledge) and the result thereof is seen in the buying process.

The analysis of the buying process considers the five stages that a consumer goes through: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). Self-esteem exerts influence on each stage and determines the individual's level of involvement.

The purpose of the study is to identify the influence of self-esteem in each stage that an individual goes through during the buying process, as well as to point out the differences stemming from different levels of people's self-esteem. The author also seeks to contrast the regular with the impulsive buying behaviour, and analyses the factors leading to the latter, as well as the changes in self-esteem.

Defining self-esteem

„Are We What We Buy?" is the question which has made the object of many studies conducted by marketing professionals over the years. How customers choose a product, the choosing criteria and the significance of the purchased articles differ across individuals, and marketing research has not been able to provide a unique answer concerning the reasons behind people's choices. By analysing the members of a society and drawing homogenous samples according to the most used segmentation variables (age, income, education, background, etc.), marketing professionals have noticed that there is something more profound in the differences between individuals as these are correlated with the individual's personality and his or her self-regard. Recent studies (Solomon, 2018) have shown that the "value" of an individual does not depend on the quality or the price of the purchased products and is not reflected in the individual's possessions. Therefore, differences between individuals are explained by each person's self-esteem and by the level of such self-esteem.

Self-esteem includes "all beliefs a person holds about his own attributes and how he evaluates the self on these qualities" (Solomon, 2018, p. 201). The complexity of the concept led to specialists having difficulty in their attempt to define the term and to determine its scope and influence. Over time, some researchers have associated self-esteem with the concept of "identity", a label according to which people are categorized and assessed by how they think, look, feel or behave, these being defining attributes (the image of a housewife, a student, etc.) (Reed et al., 2012).

Given the significance and the complexity of the concept as well as its effect on consumer behaviour, self-esteem has been the research theme of many marketing studies. Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) have identified four components of self-esteem:

✓ *"Actual self*: the image consumers have of themselves;

✓ *Ideal self*: the image people wish to have of themselves;

✓ *Social self*: how individuals are perceived by other people;

✓ *Ideal social self*: how individuals wish to be perceived by the other members of society" (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015, p. 110).

Depending on the level of self-esteem, each person has a prevailing component. In some situations, depending on motivational factors, the position in an individual's hierarchy can change (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). In the case of purchases, for example, if their value is high, the emphasis is placed on the social or the ideal self. And conversely, in the case of regular purchases, such as basic necessities, greater emphasis is placed on the immediate satisfaction of needs and, implicitly, on the actual self.

Individuals can be identified according to the level of self-esteem they achieve, which enables making succinct observations about the differences between persons with a high level and persons with a low level of self-esteem. For example, persons with a low level of self-esteem usually avoid taking risks as they try to sidestep challenging situations (Solomon, 2018). These individuals lack confidence in themselves and in the knowledge they have acquired. They are perplexed by situations with a high level of uncertainty and avoid making decisions which may have a major effect on their everyday life. Differences in the level of self-esteem are also reflected in people's buying behaviour. Usually, people with a high level of self-esteem are willing to allocate larger amounts of money to purchases because they believe they deserve those products (Rucker et al., 2011). They analyse the pros and cons of each purchase and, if the purchase carries a big risk, people with a high level of self-esteem are willing to take it.

Knowing the level of self-esteem of people belonging to a sample is the first step that enables marketing professionals to target these people and design products that can satisfy consumers' needs and desires. Based on the differences in the level of self-esteem between individuals, specialists have identified a process of social comparison. Marketers usually use advertisements to bring their products to consumers' attention. The purpose of social comparison is to draw consumers who believe that their own image projected in society is similar to the characteristics exhibited by the people featured in the ads (Häfner, 2004). Individuals want to belong to a group and pursue social acceptance. Under such circumstances, it is important for them to adopt the characteristics that define the community to which they wish to belong.

The role of self-esteem in the buying process

Consumers make purchases daily. Naturally, such purchases differ in terms of complexity and the amounts of money allocated. Specialists attempt to identify the stages consumers go through when they make a purchase. Theoretically, the buying process (the decision-making process) consists of five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018) (Figure 1). Thus, it can be seen that the decision-making process starts before the actual purchase and continues for a longer period after the purchase is made.

The attention of marketing professionals must be equally devoted to all five stages of the process so that they may identify the factors influencing consumers during each decision they make. Naturally, product purchasing is a daily process which sometimes becomes fairly repetitive due to a greater number of products being bought. Many studies have been conducted over time to identify the influence of self-esteem on the stages of the decision-making process. The studies have been premised on self-image congruence, a model according to which people choose products with characteristics that they identify at the time when they analyse their own behaviour (Aaker, 1999; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Aaker, 1997). Thus, a correlation exists between the product image, the individual's characteristics and, implicitly, his or her image. Choosing a product promoting positive attributes and helping improve the individual's image generates a feeling of satisfaction and increases self-confidence (Townsend & Sood, 2013). An individual's possessions reflect his or her identity—"we are what we consume" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018, p. 169). Understanding the relationship between purchases and self-esteem is the key to understanding consumer behaviour and the decision-making process.

Need recognition: The buying process starts with the individual's identification of a problem or a need. Recognition may be triggered by internal stimuli—the appearance of the sensation of hunger or thirst—and by external stimuli—opinions of members of the reference group, and exposure to the ads of companies (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018).

Information search: This is a stage that consumers sometimes bypass. Brand loyalty, loyalty to a company or the routine buying process are some of the reasons why consumers avoid going through this stage. If the consumer is familiar with a particular product, at the moment of a new purchase, he or she will not seek further information to back up his/her decision. Consumers appeal to many sources in their search for information, such as acquaintances (family, friends, and neighbours), commercial sources (advertising, sellers), public sources (the mass media) and even experimental sources which allow the in-store testing of products (Plăiaș, 2011).

Evaluation of alternatives: Once consumers have enough information about the products they may buy, they weigh the advantages and the disadvantages of each product and distinguish a set of alternatives containing two or three brands from which the product will finally be selected for purchase. Individual characteristics and logical thinking are criteria which consumers take into account when selecting a product.

Purchase decision: During this stage, the consumer buys the product which was evaluated positively in the previous stage because he perceives the product as having the greatest benefits following the analysis of the available alternatives. It is at this stage that specialists (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018) make a distinction between purchase intention and purchase decision.

Post-purchase behaviour: The decision-making process does not end once the product is purchased, but when the consumer assesses whether his expectations are met by what the product promises. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product after it was purchased and used is, in the opinion of marketing professionals, what determines whether the consumer returns to the store and purchases again the same product in the future.

Specialists have also discovered that the buying decision process takes place differently according to the type of purchase, the buying behaviour and the shopping circumstances (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). For instance, in the case of basic necessities, consumer involvement is low as he does not analyse the available alternatives every time, but is loyal to a single product brand which occupies the position “top of mind”. If the previous purchases were satisfactory, the customer will choose the same product every time, building up “immunity” to ads and retailers’ sales promotion campaigns. Consumer involvement gets higher in the case of averagely-needed purchases. As they want to satisfy more than a physiological need, individuals are more careful in the choice of the desired products, being aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each brand. Both the specialists and the consumers take into account the five-stage decision-making process when a new, complex purchase takes place. Consequently, purchases deemed riskier and calling for greater amounts of money will have consumers make a more thorough search for information, analysing both the potential benefits and the losses they might suffer by purchasing a superficially chosen product.

Going through the decision-making process also depends on consumers’ financial standing. For example, having an extra amount of money may lead to new purchases which were not planned in the daily schedule. This entails searching for more information, which will help the individual choose the best product alternative. On the other hand, a reduction in income or the appearance of unforeseen expenses may determine a re-evaluation of the products to be purchased. This holds true even with basic necessities.

Materials and Methods

Research Question: The term “self-esteem” has been analysed in depth in both psychology and marketing. However, many unknowns continue to exist concerning the precise definition of the concept and its scope and components that should enable its categorization in one of the aforementioned fields (Bejan, 2019). The literature has repeatedly shown how complex this term is, standing at the crossroads between marketing, psychology and sociology and carrying increasingly visible implications in people's everyday life. Self-esteem has generated a significant impact on people's needs and on how they perceive such needs as well as on their motivation, personality and behaviour (Campbell & Lavallee, 1993).

This paper is the result of documentary research conducted in databases such as JSTOR, Springer, EBSCO, Emerald, Web of Science, accessed by the author through the university library's subscription. The search for key words ("self-esteem", "self-esteem in consumer behaviour") in the databases allowed the identification of many articles in the field of marketing and psychology. The complexity of the term and the great number of retrieved results are strong arguments showing researchers' interest in and a general concern for this issue. Drawing on the said aspects, the paper revolves around the following question: "How does self-esteem influence the stages of the buying process?".

Research gap: The analysis of the literature has shown that there are many definitions of self-esteem which, in time, have undergone changes and expanded their scope. Their commonality is researchers' view of self-esteem as the image individuals have of their own self. Thus, many studies reflect the influence of self-esteem on people's attitudes, personalities or lifestyles—elements which help explain consumer behaviour.

The analysis of the literature has revealed issues insufficiently dealt with and issues which have not been dealt with at all so far. Although the literature explains the influence of self-esteem on the major factors that define consumer behaviour, no paper was found to approach theoretically or practically the influence of self-esteem on the decision-making process.

Research novelty: This paper refers to the buying process as analysed by researchers over the years, which includes five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour. The novelty of this paper lies in expounding the influence of self-esteem in each of the aforementioned stages. The author attempts to draw a contrast between people with low self-esteem and people with high self-esteem and set forth their behaviour in each stage of the buying process.

Results and Discussions

The analysis of each stage of the decision-making process allows the identification of the influence exerted by individuals' self-esteem and how it contributes to creating differences between people.

Need recognition: Triggered by internal and external stimuli, need recognition may take place as a result of changes in the individual's current or ideal state of affairs (Solomon, 2018). In the current state, individuals pursue the immediate purchase of products to satisfy their physiological needs. Thus, they seek the products that project in society the actual self-image and the representation of their currently possessed attributes. In the ideal state, the appeal is made to the ideal self. The ideal state an individual wants to attain is a desire, with a lot more ways to satisfy it (Phau & Chang-Chin, 2004). An individual's ideal state is usually shaped by the image he wants to project in society while he pursues the attributes he wants to possess. Studies have shown that individuals with low self-esteem tend to be easier influenced by other people due to the lack of confidence in their own skills and the desire to be accepted by other members of society (Campbell & Lavallee, 1993).

Information search: People with an average level of self-esteem pay more attention to the opinion of intimates. They believe that ties of kindred or the long period during which they have interacted with persons in the reference group have fortified the feeling of confidence so that the experiences of people in the reference group are decisive in the information search process (Mittal, 2014). As individuals place great trust in intimates, marketing specialists find it difficult to contradict their opinions as any attempt to change their perception of some products is more often than not doomed to fail. According to the opinion of these consumers, the intimates' having bought and tested the product reduces the risk and avoids uncertainty.

On the other hand, people with high self-esteem want to be thoroughly informed about the available alternatives before purchasing a product (Solomon, 2018). Thus, consumers are willing to look for more information and consult various sources to get relevant data, especially in the case of averagely needed and luxury products which follow a much more complex buying process. Consumers have developed critical thinking which allows them to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative so that the risk associated with the purchase of a potential product may be as low as possible.

Evaluation of alternatives: Many specialists have, in process of time, adopted the idea that brands and products have personality, and customers should choose the products whose promoted attributes suit the traits they want to highlight (Solomon, 2018). In like manner, products reflect an individual's status, an aspect taken into account when establishing the evoked set (Plăiaș, 2011). For brands reaching this stage of the buying process, the consumer usually sets a minimum expected level of product performance. Failure to meet this minimum expected level leads to the removal of the brand from the evoked set and, implicitly, to its being rejected by the consumer (it is no longer purchased). The expected minimum level of product performance depends on the level of self-esteem of the individual making the comparison. For example, people with low self-esteem have significantly lower expectations of the products they purchase. There are cases when such criteria have not even been established. Lacking confidence in their own self and in their thinking ability, these consumers view the disappointment at a product which fell short of the promises in the promotion campaign as a normal thing. This is further evidence of the lack of personal abilities, which underlies the feeling of frustration.

On the other hand, people with high self-esteem have a sense of appreciation which allows them to better appraise the quality of a product. In light of the effort made during the information search stage, their expectations are correlated with the collected data and with the companies' promises concerning product performance. Thus, the accepted minimum level of product performance is higher as individuals with high self-esteem do not accept compromise. A possible small evoked set at the end of this stage will not frighten consumers, but, quite the opposite, will act as encouragement as to the correctness of the decision made.

Purchase decision: Some factors influenced by an individual's level of self-esteem make the distinction between purchase intention and the actual purchase of a product. One of the major factors is the attitude of third persons. If people deemed important by the consumer do not accept the consumer's selected product, the chances for the product to be purchased will decrease significantly (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). This is where the level of self-esteem becomes essential. If consumers give primacy to the desire for social acceptance and group integration, they will purchase the product preferred by the reference group. Consumers' desire to be in tune with the group's consumption habits and opinions becomes significantly stronger, channelling the purchase in the direction proposed by the people from whom acceptance is expected. People with high self-esteem will make the purchase decision based heavily on the objective information collected in the previous stages because they have confidence in their analysis capacity and place less importance on the opinion of others. In other words, it is not the ideal self the factor triggering the purchase of the product but the actual self, seeking the satisfaction of an immediate need. The second element making a distinction between the two aspects of the purchase is unexpected situations or unforeseen factors. For example, a consumer plans a purchase but shortly thereafter he experiences a drop in income, which prevents the purchase of the previously selected product.

Post-purchase behaviour: For many consumers, the use of a product acts as a symbol and a way by which they convey something about themselves to other people. Product visibility (its public consumption) may help the individual attain the ideal self (Sirgy, 1982). In the first place, it tells something about the image a person wants to convey in society. In the second place, the purchase of a product is the go-ahead for the consumer who wishes to replace the current reference group with an aspirational group. Projecting an image similar to that of the community to which he belongs facilitates the consumer's integration and acceptance by the persons he appreciates.

The positive end result of the post-purchase behaviour is the satisfaction felt by the consumer. This is the key to customers' returning to the store where they have purchased the product and to their selecting the same product during future purchases (Evans et al., 2009). The satisfaction felt by people with high self-esteem with the use of a product confirms the correctness of the decision made and fosters confidence in their own self and in their abilities. The course taken during the buying process is viewed as an experience during future purchases. Conversely, people with low self-esteem are more indifferent to the satisfaction they feel as they believe the effort made is not worth rewarding. Although the decision taken in this case proves to be correct, people's indifference continues, which is reflected in their maintaining the same level of self-esteem.

Similarly, going through the five stages of the decision-making process takes a different course in the case of impulsive buying behaviour. Thus, consumers do not feel a need that must be satisfied as shortly as possible, which translates into peoples' not getting involved in an information search process. Therefore, consumers choose products on account of marketers' marketing efforts. For instance, in-store promotions or ads may lead to the purchase of a product which does not satisfy an immediate need. Price drops may prompt consumers to buy products that satisfy a need occurring in a near future.

Conclusions

Some authors (Solomon, 2018) believe people develop miscellaneous self-esteem, which varies depending on people's situation or condition. People's behaviour towards family differs from the behaviour in the workplace or that exhibited during the interaction with a group of friends. In light of these aspects, it has been noticed that self-esteem is a factor increasingly present in an individual's buying process, much more present than factors such as demographic characteristics.

The importance attached to and the emphasis placed on self-esteem over the years proves that it is a significant element in explaining the consumer behaviour and individuals' distinct mode of action. Consequently, this paper may give an impetus to organizations to change the segmentation strategies and the criteria used throughout this process.

The role of self-esteem in the stages of the buying process shows that it is an important criterion, spanning psychology and marketing, according to which the marketing mix and the promotion strategies in particular, should be adjusted. Thus, by shaping consumer's attitudes and personality, self-esteem influences need recognition by exposing individuals to external factors. It also affects information search through the sources consulted, the criteria considered in the evaluation of alternatives, the motivations behind the buying decision and, in the end, the interpretation of the satisfaction felt in assessing the post-purchase behaviour.

The author's study shows the steps taken by a consumer who makes an averagely-to-highly complex purchase calling for consumer involvement. Based on these considerations, the author notices differences in the case of impulsive purchases in the sense that the buying process does not follow the same steps and does not go through all mentioned stages. One cannot state with certainty what are all the elements determining the appearance of impulsive behaviour or if this is the regular habit of some individuals. Likewise, no studies are showing that the adoption of impulsive behaviour in some situations rules out the consumer's going through all the stages of the decision-making process when making a riskier purchase.

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A MEASUREMENT OF RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS' COMPETITIVENESS

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ABSTRACT. The trend of rural tourism is growing and is becoming increasingly significant for most nations. Rural tourism is believed to have the potential to revive traditional approaches and perspectives on tourism and provide new dimensions to sustainable growth. Romania is regarded as one of the main destinations with a high potential in sustainable tourism development, due to its beautiful, unspoiled rural landscapes, traditions, and rustic lifestyle.

Tourism, as a development tool, in rural communities, is one of the major concerns. The scarcity of case studies on rural tourist competitiveness, particularly in Romania, is what inspired the current research. This study attempts to investigate the factors that impact Romania's rural tourism's competitiveness and develop a conceptual framework for measuring it. In conducting our research, there were employed both exploratory and descriptive approaches. Secondary data from statistical and published research and studies were gathered, and it were collected primary data through surveys and personal interviews.

The objective of the current research was to introduce a distinct and exclusive method of evaluating tourism in rather small regions with unique characteristics and applied and test the proposed model to Maramures region.

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The paper concludes that measuring and understanding rural tourism competitiveness and dynamics is essential for supporting sustainable development in rural areas, and it is of great importance for practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

Keywords: tourism competitiveness, rural destination competitiveness model, rural tourism, rural destinations

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Introduction and literature review on understanding rural tourism

Present-day, the tourism industry is currently experiencing an active growth and remarkable resilience, after the global health crisis of Covid-19, which unexpectedly interrupted its development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the direct contribution of tourism to global GDP increased from 10.2% in 2016, showing consistent progress of 10.4% in 2017, 10.6% in 2018 to 10.8% in 2019. These figures indicate that the tourism and travel industry was growing steadily before the pandemic, making it one of the most dynamic sectors. Based on the UNWTO barometer, the industry was a significant contributor to global trade and economy, creating jobs, both directly and indirectly, and income.

Experts in the tourism industry, such as the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and WTTC, along with most analysts, consider that with this expected recovery, rural tourism has the potential to be among the first sectors that show growth again. This potential is mainly due to the shifting behavior of tourists. Whatever the reason, by choice or limitation, over the next few years it is expected that more people will redirect their interest towards destinations less visited, closer to nature, but also closer to their places of origin (Marti, 2022).

Therefore, tourism development represents a significant opportunity to generate economic activities and employment opportunities in rural regions.

UNWTO considers "tourism is a leading economic sector in many rural areas, which contributes to the income and employment of the local residents in a significant manner". To improve the quality and sustainability of rural tourism destinations, it is crucial to measure their competitiveness and identify areas for improvement. This information is essential for developing effective strategies to enhance rural tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2020a).

Rural tourism encompasses a large variety of tourism-related activities that take place in rural **places.** It also refers to leisure activities that occur in rural settings but are not necessarily linked to agriculture. These activities may include engaging in sports, cycling, hiking, exploring natural and cultural heritage sites, visiting traditional markets, participating in cultural events and festivals, and more. UNWTO (2020a) understands rural tourism as being "a type of tourism activity in which the experience of tourists is connected with a wide range of products linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/ culture and sightseeing".

The concept of "rural tourism" is frequently associated with the terms „**agrotourism**" and „**ecotourism**", but both are actually sub-components of tourism in rural areas. One speaks of agrotourism (or agritourism in English) when the purpose of the trip is to discover the agricultural feeling and sense of the place and, by extension, the culture, traditions, landscapes and gastronomy resulting from agricultural practices.

Agrotourism, according to Romania's Ministry of Tourism, has to do with tourists staying in guesthouses and participate in traditional household activities or crafts and being offered meals that are prepared using mostly natural ingredients that come from the same household or farm or from other local farmers. During their stay, tourists participate in at least one activity that is related to agriculture, farming, harvesting or traditional crafting and the guesthouse owners, as hosts, will offer direct support and guidance throughout the traditional activities or crafts.

Ecotourism, on the other hand, is a form of tourism which has as the main tourist motivation, nature observation and nature related activities. According to the UNWTO's definition, "ecotourism refers to different tourism forms described by following features: all nature-based forms of tourism in which the observation, appreciation of nature and the traditional cultures especially from natural areas are the main tourists' motivations". It has educational aspects because it helps to minimize negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment. Additionally, it promotes awareness about natural and cultural asset conservation among tourists and locals, while offering alternative income and employment opportunities for communities living in the area (*UNWTO, 2020b).* Fennell (1999) sees ecotourism as a "sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism, ethically managed to have low-impact, non-consumptive and locally-oriented (control, benefits, and scale)". As it usually takes place in natural environments, it has the responsibility to aid in the preservation and conservation of these areas. (Fennell, 1999). The specialists from the Global Ecotourism Network (GEN) believe that through the interpretation and education of visitors, staff and the visited destination, ecotourism is a form of "responsible travel that creates knowledge and understanding" (Global Ecotourism Network, 2016). The local community is often an integral part of the ecotourism product. Along these lines, ecotourism facilitates environmental and cultural understanding, recognition, awareness, and respect.

Many destinations have identified rural tourism as one of the most attractive segments for long term sustainable development. UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and UNWTO (UNEP& UNWTO, 2005) consider **sustainable tourism** is that form of tourism that focuses on multidimensional impact (current and future economic, social and environmental), responding to the needs of all those involved: visitors, industry, environment, and host communities. For ensuring a long-term sustainability, it is essential to establish a suitable balance among these three aspects (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). The development of sustainable tourism requires the collaborative input of all stakeholders, in addition to strong political guidance that guarantees comprehensive involvement and general agreement. Attaining sustainable tourism is an ongoing procedure that needs consistently evaluating impacts and implementing suitable preventative or corrective measures as needed. Sustainable tourism acts to guarantee that visitors have a satisfactory and significant experience while also raising awareness regarding sustainability challenges and promoting among them sustainable tourism practices (UNWTO*, 2020).* Sustainable tourism deals with the use of sustainable methods within and by the tourism sector.

Responsible tourism, also known as responsible travel, refers to the actions and choices made by individual travelers who are committed to practicing sustainable tourism. *Participants at the Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, organized within the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in 2002, signed a Declaration on Responsible Tourism, stating that* „responsible tourism is tourism that minimizes negative social, economic and environmental impact; generates greater economic benefits for the local population and improves the well-being of host communities; improve working conditions and industry access; involves residents in making decisions that affect their lives; leads to positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, stimulating diversity; provide enhanced experiences for tourists through interactions with locals and a better understanding of local cultural, social and environmental contexts; it provides access to people with physical disabilities and is culturally sensitive, encouraging respect between tourists and hosts and building local pride and confidence*."* (Goodwin, 2014).

Rural tourism has gained popularity in recent years as it has the potential to promote sustainable tourism development and supports the growth of local economies. Rural tourism is considered to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly than other types of tourism. To accomplish responsible and sustainable tourism, all the stakeholders involved, such as tourism companies, associations and local authorities, need to play a significant role. They must develop destination management strategies and guidelines that are designed to create better places for both host communities and tourists.

UNWTO designated 2020 as the Year of Tourism and Rural Development. For sustainable tourism in rural areas to be successful, it is essential to adopt and implement a comprehensive and inclusive planning strategy. This strategy should be based on a participatory approach involving multiple stakeholders and action plans.

Some rural areas possess such remarkable natural attractions like mountains, landscapes, caves, waterfalls, hiking paths or skiing slopes that can make up for other issues. This can motivate both the industry and tourists to overcome these challenges. However, developing rural tourism in many areas will require a combination of creating an appealing product and addressing issues like accessibility and training. Effective marketing and rapid transportation connectivity can transform a charming area into a popular destination for short or longer trips.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increasing of the number of tourists looking for new experiences in rural and natural settings, away from crowded locations. This trend aligns with the increasing desire for more authentic experiences enhancing connections with local communities, their habits and cultures, products, and environmentally sustainable travel options. As a result, opportunities for revitalizing rural areas through tourism have expanded exponentially, creating positive impacts on the economy, society, and the environment (UNWTO, 2020b).

However, measuring the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations can be a challenging task that requires a deep understanding of the socioeconomic and environmental factors that contribute to their success. Measuring the competitiveness of rural tourist destinations has not received much attention from researchers until now. The present study investigates relevant indicators and variables and propose and test a framework to reshape the assessment of the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations.

Research methodology for measuring rural tourism competitiveness

Measuring the competitiveness of rural tourism is a key element in promoting sustainable development of tourism in rural regions. This can be achieved by identifying and analyzing key factors and indicators. Stakeholder involvement is also crucial to ensure accuracy and relevance in the data collection process. In the first part of the research, a framework to measure the level of competitiveness of small, mainly rural destinations was developed. The main emphasis was on selecting relevant indicators for smaller tourist destinations. To determine the most and least advantageous aspects, a model was developed for evaluating the competitiveness of tourist destinations. This model was tested on Maramures, a predominantly rural area, that is widely recognized and valued in Romania.

For this purpose, after an intensive literature review, analyzing the competitiveness models, both conceptual and empirical: Hassan (2000), Ritchie & Crouch (2003), Dwyer & Kim (2010), Heath (2003), Enright & Newton (2005), Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto (2005), Crouch (2011), Barbosa et al. (2010), Goffi (2022), Dwyer et al. (2004), WEF (2022) and many others, a set of key factors and indicators that best suit the rural tourism destination have been chosen. There designed a model for measuring the competitiveness at the micro level and it was tested among tourism stakeholders. Effective stakeholder participation in both data collection and analysis is essential for rural tourism. This is because rural tourism is more than just an industry; it represents a way of life for many individuals residing in rural communities. By incorporating the knowledge and input from local residents, it was ensure that the data collected is both accurate and relevant to those who live and work in these areas.

In conducting the present study, both exploratory and descriptive research were employed. Secondary data were gathered from statistical and published research and studies, and through extensive analysis of websites. Additionally, primary data were collected through surveys, personal interviews and comprehensive analysis. It also taken into account a standard destination that was assessed at an intermediate, moderate level.

To assess the competitiveness of rural tourism effectively, it is important to carefully evaluate multiple factors and indicators, that play an essential role in determining and measuring the competitiveness of a destination. The factors that contribute towards this assessment are: Tourism attractions, Tourism assistance, General infrastructure, Accessibility, Marketing, Public policies, Monitoring, Cultural aspects, Environment and Performance. These factors can be grouped under four main categories, namely: Resources, Infrastructure, Destination Management and Sustainability.

A. Resources

- *1. Attractions*
- *2. Tourist assistance*

B. Infrastructure

- *3. General infrastructure*
- *4. Accessibility*

C. Destination Management

- *5. Marketing*
- *6. Public policies*
- *7. Monitoring*

D. Sustainability

- *8. Cultural aspects*
- *9. Environment*
- *10. Performance*

The model proposed consists of 4 main categories, which are further divided into 10 key determinants, that are further subdivided into 50 indicators and 14 sub-indicators. The present research was centered on recognizing the factors that contribute to a successful rural destination. Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from very poor to excellent (1-5), these indicators were included in a survey, that was accessible via an online platform (formplus.us) and was distributed to more than 350 stakeholders.

The second part of the study dealt with collecting data from the tourist supply side, with a total of 111 responses received from accommodation owners, stakeholders, restaurants, tourism associations, travel guides, travel agencies, tourism attractions managers, tourist information centers, tourism authorities, museums, universities.

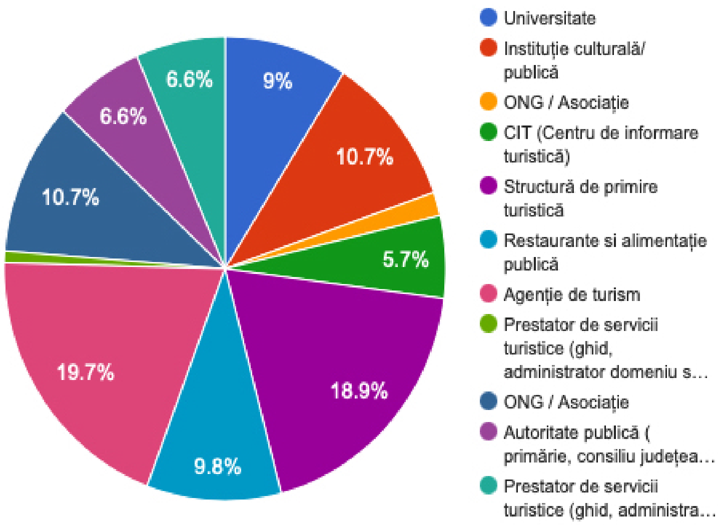


Figure 1 – Distribution of respondents

Source: authors' elaboration

Results and discussions

The objective of the current research was to identify the most important factors influencing the success of tourism destination, and to determine the criteria used to evaluate the competitiveness and performance of rural destinations.

The proposed model was applied to Maramures, a region in North-West of Romania that encompasses 2,64 % of Romania's territory and is ranked 15th out of 41 counties in terms of land surface. Nearly 39% of Maramures is designated as protected areas, with the county having the second biggest surface of protected areas in Romania after the Danube Delta. As per the 2022 statistics, Maramures has a populacion of 452,475 residents, with 56% of them living in urban areas and 44% residing in the rural parts.

Maramures, one of the most notorious Romanian tourist destinations, is famous for its customs, traditions, wooden churches or unique attractions and museums, rural lifestyle and gastronomy, handicrafts and leisure activities. The variety of tourism options available include cultural, rural, religious, ecotourism, active tourism, winter sports, wellness and business tourism.

According to the Ministry of Tourism of Romania (2022), there are 888 accommodation units, with a total of 14.032 beds. Out of these units, 60% are classified as having a medium level of comfort, with a 3-star rating. Furthermore, 70% of these accommodation units are guesthouses situated in rural areas, such as villages or small towns. In terms of arrivals, overnights, and length of stay, counting 276.064 arrivals in 2019 and 518.696 overnights, Maramures ranks third in the North-West region. However, when it comes to the net occupancy rate of accommodation capacity, it is placed fourth out of six in the region (based on Tempo online provided by the National Institute of Statistics). In 2019, the average length of stay in Maramures was 1,88 days, which is slightly less than the national average of 2,2 days in Romania. Additionally, the net occupancy rate of accommodation capacity in Maramures in 2019 was 22,3%. The year 2019 was used as a point of reference due to the pandemic's impact on tourism in the subsequent years.

Regarding the evaluated destination, the study revealed that out of the four main components of the model, Resources got the highest score of 3,3 followed by Infrastructure and Sustainability, both with a score of 3,1. However, Destination Management scored the lowest, which was even below the standard average of 3, obtaining a score of 2,8 as shown in Figure 2 – Tourism Competitiveness Index.

The total Competitiveness Index for Maramures was 3,1. The obtained result was compared with the standard average. After careful analysis of the results obtained for Maramures, one can conclude that as the overall score for Maramures surpasses the average score, considered as average, it is considered an advanced destination in terms of competitiveness. The model highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the destination and provides suggestions on enhancing tourism competitiveness and performance. On the other hand, if the total score falls below the standard score, it implies that the destination is not performing well in tourism.

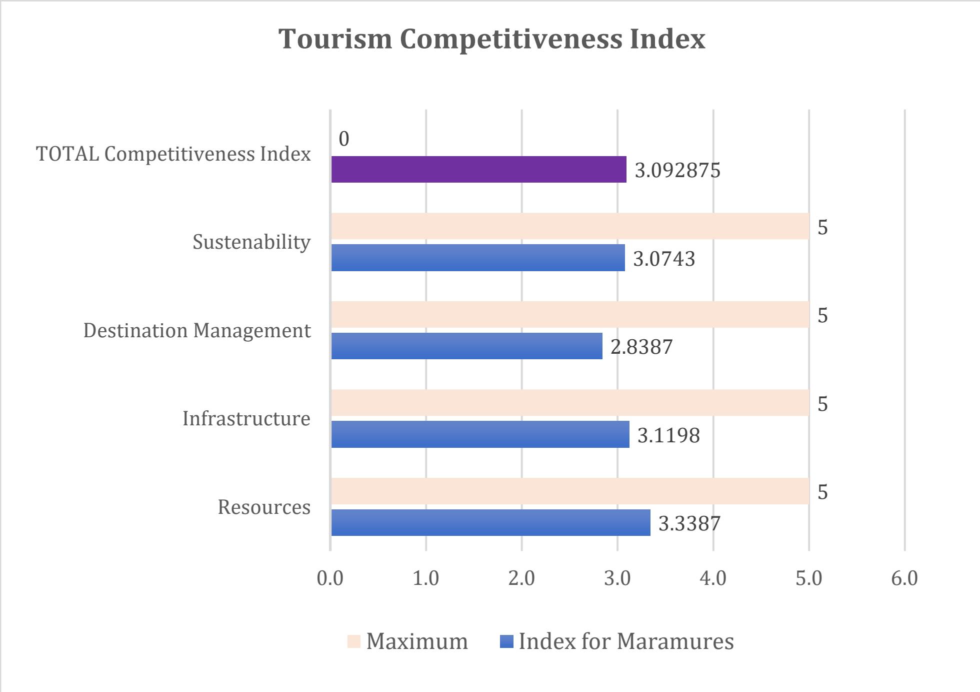


Figure 2 – Tourism Competitiveness Index

Source: authors' elaboration

The mean score obtained by Maramures is 3,1, indicating a small positive difference, however, it is only slightly above the standard. There are 10 key determinants, and four of them received a score higher than the average standard, as shown in Figure 3. Attractions received the highest score of 3,6 points, followed by General Infrastructure with 3,4 points, Cultural Aspects scoring 3,3 points, and Tourist Assistance at 3,1 points. Marketing, Monitoring and Performance each scored 3 points, which is equal to the standard average. Accessibility had a score of 2,9 points, while Environment and Public Policies received scores of 2,8 and 2,6 points, respectively. These last three determinants were below the standard average, indicating that they are the least competitive aspects. As a result, tourism representatives and public authorities responsible for tourism development need to analyse the reasons behind these scores, develop strategies and policies, and take actions to boost the level of competitiveness.

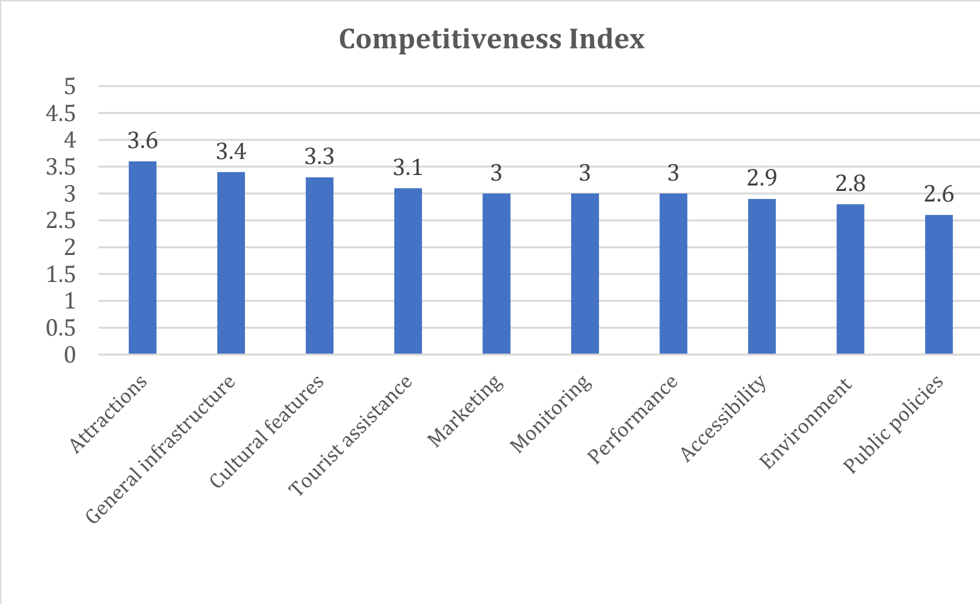


Figure 3 – Main competitiveness determinants

Source: authors' elaboration

One can conclude that Maramures obtained an upper score, but it is a minimum positive difference. There are 37 competitive positions and other points to improve (27 competitive indicators scored under the standard average).

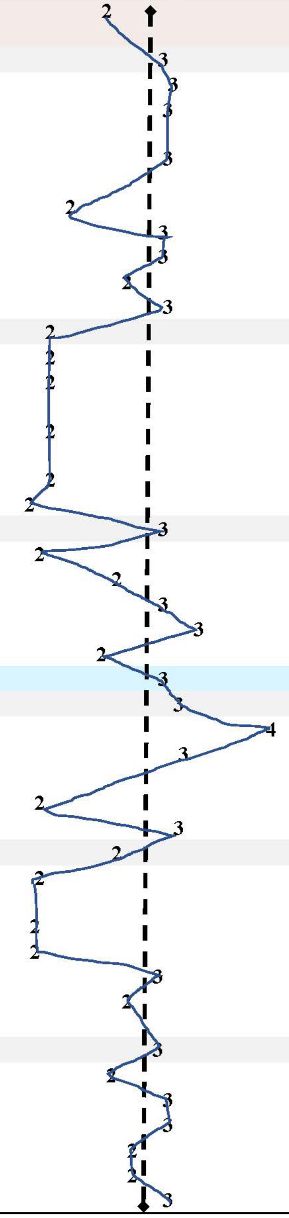
The research findings highlighted some interesting observations that correlate with the unique characteristics of the rural location. The main reason to visit appears to be the Customs and traditions, as it achieved the highest score of 4,6 out of 5 points, followed closely by Natural resources with a score of 4,3 points while Hospitality and Crafts both score above 4 points, at 4.2 and 4.1, respectively. The other aspects to be considered are Gastronomy with 3,9 points, Museums and monuments with 3,8 points and the Heritage Quality with 3,8 points. These 5 elements rated above 4 points, 10 elements scored between 3,5 and 3,9 points, 14 indicators between 3,1 and 3,4 points and 8 indicators had an average rating of 3 points. 24 indicators scored less than the standard average, between 2,5 and 2,9 points. And the last 3 competitive aspects, that received the lowest scores, were Strategic alliances with 2,4 points, Transport within destination with 2,3 points and the Transport to destination by train with 2,1 points. These aspects need to be considered with great attention and take necessary measures to enhance them.

Table 1 shows in-depth scores obtained by Maramures for each proposed indicator and sub-indicator in the model. The blue line indicates the relative positions of the elements when compared to the standard average.

Table 1 – Competitiveness Index breakdown

Competitiveness indicators	Score 1 Very poor · 2 Poor · 3 Average · 4 Good · 5 Very good	Competitiveness index
A: RESOURCES	3	**3,3**
1. Attractions	3	**3,6**
1.1 Natural resources	4	4,3
1.2 Cultural and historic heritage	4	4,1
1.2.1 Customs and Traditions	4	4,6
1.2.2 Museums and monuments	3	3,8
1.2.3 Heritage Quality	3	3,8
1.3 Events	3	3
1.4 Leisure activities	3	3
1.5 Crafts and traditional products	3	3,5
1.5.1 Crafts	4	4,1
1.5.2 Souvenirs	2	2,9
1.6 Gastronomy	3	3,9
2. Tourist assistance	3	**3,1**
2.1 Tourist signage	2	2,9
2.2 Accommodation facilities	3	3,4
2.3 Quality of service	3	3,5
2.4 Human resources	2	2,8
2.5 Local communication and information	2	2,7
B: INFRASTRUCTURE	3	**3,1**
3. General infrastructure	3	**3,4**
3.1 Safety and security	3	3,6
3.2 Medical services	3	3
3.3 Financial and banking services	3	3,2
3.4 IT usage	3	3,4
3.5 Lodging	3	3,6
3.6 Food service	3	3,4
3.7 Sanitary conditions	3	3,5
4. Accessibility	2	**2,9**
4.1 Transport to destination	2	2,5
4.1.1 by air	2	2,5
4.1.2 by road	2	2,9
4.1.3 by train	2	2,1
4.2 Transport within destination	2	2,3
4.3 Transport infrastructure level	3	3
4.4 Proximity	3	3
4.5 Access to natural areas	3	3,5

Competitiveness indicators	Score 1 Very poor · 2 Poor · 3 Average · 4 Good · 5 Very good	Competitiveness index
C: DESTINATION MANAGEMENT		**2,8**
5. Marketing		**3**
5.1 Destination promotion		3,2
5.1.1 Tourism product promotion		3,1
5.1.2 Participation in tourism fairs		3,2
5.2 Marketing strategies		2,7
5.3 Brand image and awareness		3
5.4 Online promotion		3
5.4.1 Destination website		2,9
5.4.2 Social media		3,2
6. Public policies		**2,6**
6.1 Local tourism organisation		2,7
6.2 Development strategy and planning		2,6
6.3 Involvement, support and cooperation		2,6
6.4 Tourism projects/funding		2,6
6.5 Strategic alliances		2,4
7. Monitoring		**3**
7.1 Visitor management		2,5
7.2 Resource mapping		2,9
7.3 Impact of tourism		3,1
7.4 Satisfaction level		3,6
7.5 Length of stay		2,8
D: SUSTENABILITY		**3,1**
8. Cultural features		**3,3**
8.1 Hospitality		4,2
8.2 Architecture/ landscape conservation		3,3
8.3 Access to education		2,5
8.4 Local products and services		3,4
9. Environment		**2,8**
9.1 Environment protection measures		2,6
9.1.1 Waste management		2,6
9.1.2 Environment projects		2,6
9.2 Public utilities		3
9.3 Protected area conservation measures		2,9
10. Performance		**3**
10.1 Tourism income		2,8
10.2 Occupancy rate		3,2
10.3 Quality/ price ratio		3,2
10.4 Local entrepreneurship		2,9
10.5 Jobs generated by tourism		2,9
10.6 Prices		3,2
Total competitiveness index		**3,1**



Source: authors' elaboration

Conclusions

Assessing the competitiveness of a tourist destination is a multifaceted process. The different stages of development of tourism destinations can impede the achievement of accurate quantitative outcomes. Thus, it can be challenging to conduct comparative studies due to variations in statistical reporting. Additionally, certain qualitative methods can result in a subjective interpretation.

Experts and researchers believe that rural tourism has the potential to drive sustainable economic growth in many rural areas worldwide. Unfortunately, there is a lack of both theoretical models and practical tools for assessing and comparing the competitiveness of rural tourism. In light of this, this research introduces a tailored perspective on assessing the competitiveness of rural destinations.

The current study has introduced a distinct and an exclusive method of evaluating tourism in rather small regions with unique characteristics, where tourism is not seen as a driving force for economic growth, but rather as a means of enhancing the appeal of a place. It provides an overview of the different factors and indicators related to rural tourism competitiveness. The analysis provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses uncovered by these criteria with respect to tourism competitiveness. Understanding the development dynamics of the rural tourism is of great importance for practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

As Maramures slowly transforms into a more competitive destination, this research offers valuable insight and guidance for improving specific areas that require closer examination and customized approaches.

Future research can bring more comprehensive results when enhancing the assessment of the competitiveness of rural destinations with measurements of visitors perception.

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