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TITTEL: INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF  
MOLDOVA AS A TOURISM DESTINATION THROUGH ONLINE REVIEWS

ENGELSK TITTEL: INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF MOLDOVA AS A TOURISM DESTINATION THROUGH ONLINE REVIEWS

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The main goal of this paper was to evaluate how international visitors identified the Republic of Moldova as a tourist destination. The goal split into four objectives: (1) to determine the main themes shared online by tourists in the form of reviews; (2) to explore the inter-relationships among identified concepts; (3) to analyze the positive and negative concepts among themes collected within reviews expressed by international tourists; and (4) suggesting practical implications for tourism suppliers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – For attaining the goal, a quantitative research method was delivered. A total of 230 reviews were gathered, shared by international tourists on a social media platform.

**Findings** – The findings show that the Republic of Moldova’s image as a tourist destination tend to be positive among international tourists. The content analysis revealed the existence of six themes, which represents international tourists' travel experiences in the Republic of Moldova. These were: “hotel”, “restaurant”, “food”, “wine”, “city” and “visit”.

**Research limitations/implications** – As the research used only one online platform and 230 reviews make up a very small sample size, the findings of this analysis do not reflect the whole image of the Republic of Moldova as a tourism destination; therefore, they might not be accurate.

**Originality/Value** – The paper provides practical suggestions based on social media information, that would help in progressing and improving destination image of the Republic of Moldova among international tourists.

**Key words** – destination image, Web reviews, the Republic of Moldova, tourist, experience

## Table of contents

1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 Background of the study.....	1
1.2 Purpose of the study and research objectives .....	2
1.3 Structure of the study .....	3
2. Literature Review .....	4
2.1 Destination image.....	4
2.2. Organic image .....	4
2.3 Theory of attitude and motivation .....	6
2.4 Multi attribute approach .....	7
2.5 Factors that influence the destination image .....	8
2.5.1 Information sources .....	9
2.5.2 Personal factors.....	10
2.6 Destination image on the Republic of Moldova.....	11
2.7 Internet influence on tourism marketing .....	12
3. Research Methodology.....	14
3.1 Data collection.....	14
3.2 Data analysis.....	14
4. Results .....	16
4.1 Description of an overall experience of travelling to the Republic of Moldova.....	16
4.1.1 Hotel as the most important theme .....	17
4.1.2 Cultural experience of taste – wine .....	18
4.1.3 Visit .....	19
4.1.4 Cultural experience of taste – food and restaurant .....	20
4.1.5 Chisinau as the capital - city.....	21
4.2 Image on satisfaction of travelling to the Republic of Moldova.....	22
5. Conclusion and implications .....	24
5.1 Conclusion.....	24
5.2 Practical implications .....	25
5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research .....	26
References .....	27

## List of figures

Figure 1. Model of Tourist's Image Formation Process.....	5
Figure 2. Model of Formation of Destination Image.....	9
Figure 3. Concept map.....	16
Figure 4. Positive concepts vs negative concepts .....	23

# 1. Introduction

*This chapter introduces the topic of the thesis. It has the aim to provide background information that is helpful to understand the dissertation topic and explain the research gap contemplated in the study. In addition, it presents the research objectives which have been set in order to fulfill the thesis' purpose. The overall structure of the thesis is shown in order to give the reader the possibility to have a clear picture of the work.*

## 1.1 Background of the study

Tourism has been a driving force which contributes to the economy of each country. International tourism has a progressive structure which enforces to understand tourists' attitudes towards it. (Stela Cazacu, 2017) Destination images have become very influential in tourists' choices of vacation destinations. They are important due to their portrayal of a place into potential tourist's imagination. (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991)

The destination image is a topic that has attracted a lot of attention from researchers and practitioners since the second half of the 20th century. (Lee, 2009) Consequently, the tourism image has become critical to the success of the destination. A huge factor which motivates tourists to choose the specific destination is the attractiveness of the place. The process of forming the destination image is created by combining people and locations. Furthermore, image formation can be affected by the feelings or opinions of a tourist. That is why, destination image is described as "the sum of beliefs and impressions that a person has of a destination". (Moon & Han, 2018) As a complex concept, destination image consists of three different structural elements such as: *cognitive*, *affective* and *conative elements*. The cognitive elements refer to the definition above, as beliefs or knowledge about a destination (e.g., organic, induced or more complex image), whereas affective ones express the feelings toward a destination (e.g., satisfaction, disappointment). Meanwhile, conative elements refer to persons' behavior in relation to cognitive and affective stimuli. As a result, all three elements have a strong connection which forms an overall image formation. Additional to the structural elements (cognitive, affective and conative), which are associated with image formation, there can be distinguished agents (information sources and personal factors) that shape the image. (Kim & Chen, 2015)

Tourist perception is an important factor in understanding their expectations. To provide relevant information on the perceptions and opinions of international tourists about the destination image of the Republic of Moldova, this study will use the TripAdvisor online platform. According to Oliveira C., Brochado, Oliveira F. & Rita (2019), travel review websites are becoming influential platforms for knowledge-exchange through two-way communication with travelers. They effectively influence the choice of products, services and destinations of tourists. Analysis of user-generated content has been proven to be useful when studying tourists' satisfaction regarding their travel experiences.

This study contributes to prior literature by presenting the importance of destination image and how tourists perceive a country as a potential tourist destination. Additionally, the present paper helps to fill a gap in the research due to the lack of studies on destination image about the Republic of Moldova. Research on destination image will be evaluated in the context of the tourism perception of the Republic of Moldova based on online reviews from TripAdvisor.

## 1.2 Purpose of the study and research objectives

The purpose of the study is to investigate and evaluate the image of the Republic of Moldova in relation to how foreign tourists perceive the country as a potential tourist destination. This study will cover the perceptions and opinions of international travelers based on their online reviews on the TripAdvisor web platform.

The research aims to address the following objectives:

- Determine the main image themes that describe overall impressions of the Republic of Moldova shared online from the perspective of international tourists, using the TripAdvisor web platform;
- Explore the inter-relationships among concepts expressed by international tourists within TripAdvisor web platform;
- Identify the positive and negative concepts among themes collected from reviews within TripAdvisor web platform; and
- Suggest academic and practical implications for organizers and policy makers, hoteliers and tourism related authorities about destination image of the Republic of Moldova through TripAdvisor web platform.

### 1.3 Structure of the study

This study is separated into five different chapters that, together, combine elements of secondary and primary research to examine the core research objectives. Chapter one includes the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research objectives and the structure of the study. Chapter two analyzes current research on the topics of interest in the form of a literature review and presents relevant theories for this study. Chapter three outlines the methodology of the study and how the research will be conducted, it explains the data collection, variables within data and analysis of web reviews content. Chapter four presents the findings of the study in the form of descriptive main themes found in the concept map along with tourists' reviews based on each theme. Finally, chapter five summarizes the study by discussing the key findings and introducing suggestions for professionals for further research regarding maintaining destination image of the Republic of Moldova through online feedback and social media networking.

## 2. Literature Review

*The goal of this theoretical framework is to provide a relevant literature review from secondary sources, which the research paper can be based on. This chapter will focus on the development of destination image, defining the most relevant approaches, which will help to highlight their importance and relevance for tourism companies and suggesting online tools in form of Web reviews which can be effective for destination image.*

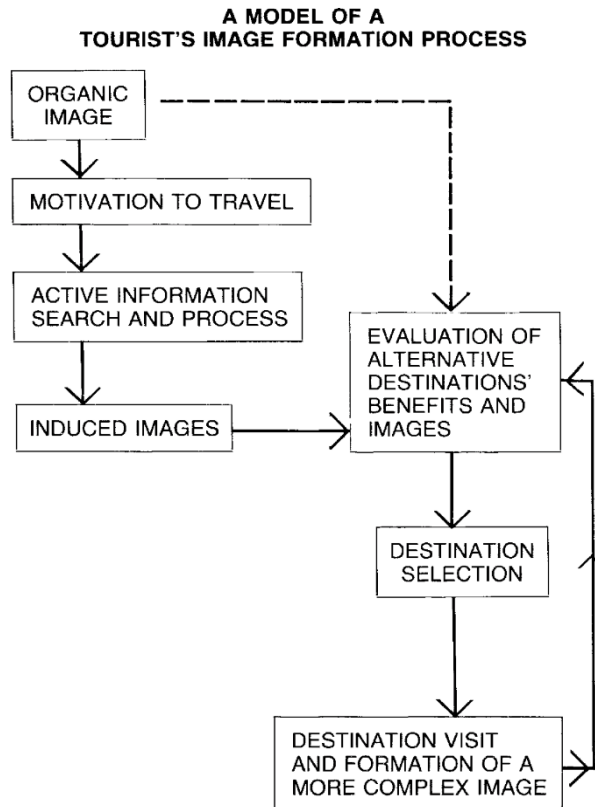
### 2.1 Destination image

One of the most prevalent topics in tourism literature is the *destination image*. Studies have shown that the images possessed by potential travellers are critical throughout the destination selection process. (Pike, 2007) This concept has been studied since the second half of the 20th century, and it has become a key element in attracting tourists. (Lee, 2009) Martin and Eroglu (1993, p. 193) defined this image as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country”. Additionally, this concept can be defined as “a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place or destination”. (Stela Cazacu, 2017, p. 50) This definition can be reflected through the perception of associations created by tourists. The associations can be created based on previous experience with the product, information obtained from various sources, or based on assumptions. (Hosany, Ekinici & Uysal, 2007) According to Baloglu and Brinberg (1997), the image is created by the perception of a person at the emotional level as a result of two factors: *cognitive* and *affective*. Cognitive evaluation is based on personal experience and knowledge. Whereas the affective factors can be assessed by a person's feelings in relation to the image. (Beerli & Martin, 2004)

### 2.2. Organic image

Within academic literature, the topic of destination image has undergone an extraordinary evolution since its first appearance in the 1970s. Consequently, academics have divided this topic into three phases of development. (Pike, 2007) According to Fakeye and Crompton (1991), the first phase started when the destination image was classified into *organic*, *induced*, and *more complex*.





*Figure 1. Model of Tourist's Image Formation Process.<sup>1</sup>*

The organic image can be formed by any tourist who has the desire to travel to new potential destinations. Figure 1 shows the formation from an organic image to a more complex one and their role in the choice of destination image selection. (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991) At the time the tourists decide to take a vacation, they start the searching process led by different personal motives. Respectively, the traveler conducts an evaluation through the information process and development of the organic image. The choice is made from alternative destinations which can meet person's need and desire. Hence, the person will select a destination, formed and based on image created during the searching process. As a result of this process, the person who had zero knowledge about the destination will develop an induced image. Ultimately, the tourist will get a more complex image during the visit. (Crompton & Fakeye, 1991)

Tourists associate the destination image with their experiences and impressions. When tourists are left with a cheerful experience that makes them pleasantly nostalgic, it is likely

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from "Image Differences between Prospective, First-Time, and Repeat Visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley" by Fakeye P.C. & Crompton J.L., 1991, Journal of Travel Research, p.11. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1177/004728759103000202

that they will revisit the destination again. (Moon & Han, 2019) Moreover, if the destination creates good money value in tourists' opinions, then the destination image will be more positive. (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) Destination image strongly depends on the satisfaction the tourist got during the visitation, and it can persuade the intentions of revisiting or recommending a specific destination. (Moon & Han, 2019)

### 2.3 Theory of attitude and motivation

Theory of attitude and motivation serve as the second phase of destination image development. (Tseng C. et al., 2014) People are getting interested in traveling for various reasons. The process of choosing the destination can be understood in terms of motivation, which is consistent with all actions. Motivation is a socio-psychological force that drives tourists to try new destinations and activities that they have never experienced before. Therefore, these driving forces can be inferred as factors that form the destination image model. (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999)

The motivation is the initial driver when it comes to clarifying the tourist's behavior. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs model (1943), tourism-related human needs are higher for self-development and self-esteem. (Tsong Hung Lee, 2009) The image of the destination plays two crucial roles in the behavior of tourists. First, influence the choice of destination "in the decision-making process", and second, condition the behavior after the decision is made, "including participation (on-site experience), evaluation (satisfaction) and future behavioral intentions (intention to revisit and willingness to recommend)". (Chen & Tsai, 2006, p.1116)

According to Crompton's model of motivation (1979), the *push* and *pull* effects are considered on the tourist's decision about the destination. Here, the push effect encourages tourists to explore new and unusual destinations. Whereas the pull effect invokes tourists looking for a destination that they find more attractive because of their associations. Moreover, people choose various activities to meet their needs for socialization, leisure and self-development. (Lee T. H., 2009)

Tourist motives can vary from leisure activities to festival events, or shopping and nature combined with relaxation. These motives can be based on a push effect because the images are already formed and can help to classify the tourists by categories. The primary source

information positioned as push factors can relate to Maslow's model of needs. In contrary, pull factors represent another aspect of the destination image, described as the attractiveness of the place. Despite the differences, both factors help to form the image. Many researchers believe that motivation is of great importance before visiting a place as it coordinates the tourist's decision on which type of tourism to choose. (Madden K. et al., 2016)

Tourist motivation is a complex concept; thus, scholars and practitioners who have researched this topic have used different methods of analysis, applying various approaches. Some researchers divided motivation into multiple segments and levels, such as knowledge, self-esteem, development, cultural intelligence, and social status. On the other hand, other researchers applied the push and pull model to assess the motivation of tourists in various areas of tourism. Nevertheless, tourists have different purposes for visiting a place, be it motivation due to attractiveness or social motivation. The social purposes may include cultural exploration, spiritual recovery, and socializing with foreigners and companies at social events. (Lee T. H., 2009)

#### 2.4 Multi attribute approach

In the last phase of development of destination image, researchers investigated qualitative measurement in addition to quantitative measurement of attitudes, which ultimately defines the formation of the image. This phase was mainly based on the model proposed by Echtner and Richie (1993), grounded on attribute-holistic, functional-psychological and common-unique factors; these all together form an overall holistic image. (Tseng C., Wu B., Morrison A., Zhang J., & Chen Y. 2014) A destination image has functional characteristics that relate to a person's perception of hospitality, climate and accommodation. Nevertheless, the holistic approach is based on an abstract image of the destination. The abstract image can be distinguished by the appearance of the place. However, the psychological factor is determined only by the feelings that a person experiences at a potential destination. (Echtner & Richie, 1993)

The destination image is not considered stationery; instead, it changes over time. Thus, each person forms an abstract image of the chosen destination. Tourism services and products cannot be reviewed prior to actual experience, so they are evaluated in a more judgmental and skeptical way rather than justly. (Kislali, H., Kavartzis, M. and Saren, M., 2016) One

of the factors that can potentially affect the image of a destination is the travel experience. Research has shown that locals with a positive image of their destination are more likely to travel more within their place than outside of it. This means that the destination image needs to be improved so that the locals have a more positive image of their destination. Better images result in more travelling. (Tasci A. 2007) When planning marketing strategies, it is important to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the place in order to make it promotional. Since the images differ from each person's experience, it is beneficial to separate the results from those who visited the place and those who did not. (Echtner & Richie, 1993) Marketers are engaged to create a positive image to attract more people. Consequently, the satisfaction level of a potential tourist can be influenced by the positive destination image. (Stela Cazacu, 2017)

## 2.5 Factors that influence the destination image

The image formation is affected by a group of factors that can be divided into the information achieved from sources and personal factors of the customer. Stern and Krakover (1993) projected a model that shows the characteristics of these factors (see Fig. 2), which influences the arrangement of the environment and creates an overall image. The facts are divided into so-called stimulus factors. The first group identifies sources and customer experiences. The second group shows personal factors, which can be divided into psychological and social. (Beerli & Martin, 2004)

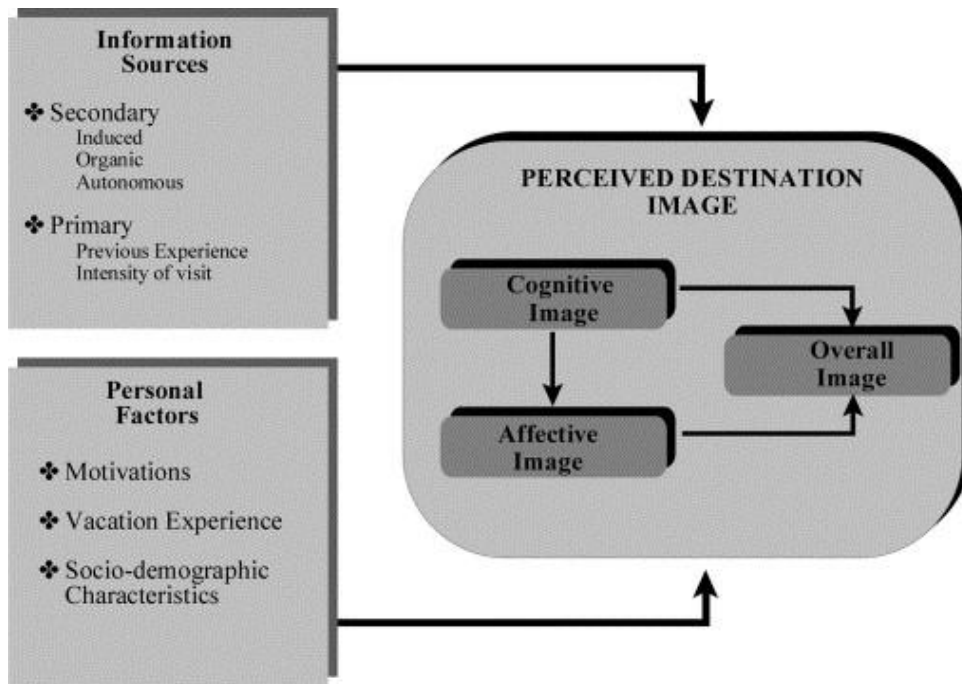


Figure 2. Model of Formation of Destination Image<sup>2</sup>

### 2.5.1 Information sources

Information sources either primary or secondary are the stimuli, which form perceptions and evaluations. They include all the information that people have access to, as well as the information gained through the experience of the visit. Different researchers have examined and suggested that the behavior behind the choice of the destination is influenced by information sources and other destinations can be chosen as well as alternative options. (Beerli & Martin, 2004)

The organic image, as advised by Gunn (1972), is developed through sources of information such as newspapers, television reports, and articles. Further, it develops into a persuaded image, which is presented through advertisements. The author believes that even if the person has never been to that specific destination, this person will have in mind some information about the destination image retrieved from the sources. (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991, p.10) Secondary sources of information are critical when applied to decision-making process. Moreover, Mansfeld (1992) argues that secondary sources serve several functions in

<sup>2</sup> Note. Reprinted from “Factors influencing Destination Image” by Beerli A. & Martin J.D, 2004, Annals of Tourism Research, Volume 31, Issue 3 Pages 657-681

destination selection. It lowers the risk where the choice might be involved, and it develops a certain image of the chosen tourism place. (Beerli & Martin, 2004) This aspect refers to the levels of transformation of the destination image, which can be divided into the following subcategories:

- The image formed before visiting the place is based on information from different sources such as advertisements and word of mouth that differ from the actual image;
- Biased image formed while collecting more information;
- Cultured image meanwhile visiting; and
- Concluding image after the experience of destination. (Madden, Rashid & Zainol, 2016)

### *2.5.2 Personal factors*

The definition of the image can be described as a group of feelings and reactions about the destination. Gould and White (1974) outlined this definition as “our views about places are formed from a highly filtered set of impressions, and our images are strongly affected by the information that we receive through our filters.” The filters present the information (cultural and physiological factors) that form the images themselves. Moreover, these factors influence the understanding and apprehension of the information received, as they help to perceive information from the environment. Once the information is received, it will remain in memory in the form in which it was created. (Stern & Krakover, 1993)

Some researchers argue that compared with primary source information, people tend to form a different image when visiting the place, which meets the reality, rather than the one formed through information from sources. (Beerli & Martin, 2004) Furthermore, Echtner and Ritchie (1993) also argue that people who have visited the place before are more likely to have a complete, different and psychological image. Compared to the source information, people form images built on practical aspects and average characteristics. The perceived and overall image also depends on the length of stay, the experience of staying in the same place and, obviously, on the total length of stay. (Beerli & Martin, 2004)

## 2.6 Destination image on the Republic of Moldova

A particular case about destination image is to be found in the Republic of Moldova. As for the post-communist countries, including the Republic of Moldova, which changed their economy to a market one, economic growth and development are crucial for the country image. For that reason, governments create an advantageous image by engaging in national branding. Some researchers have examined that destination image can influence people's desire to visit the place, either for travelling, business or migration reasons. Furthermore, the assumption of the destination can serve as a good motivation for a visit. For such less known country as the Republic of Moldova, the promoted destination image should correspond to the perceived image formed in one's mind. The controversial way can lead to inaccuracies of the existing destination image.

“Bozbay & Ozen (2008) consider that the destination image has five dimensions: (1) environmental beauty and convenience, (2) country's citizens, (3) place and architectural structure, (4) shopping and tourist accommodation and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine.” (Stela Cazacu, 2017) Having the communist past and communist regime, the Republic of Moldova is still left with some monuments, buildings and other constructions, which represent impressive marks of the past. The goal of marketers in tourism is to change these marks into elements, which will attract more tourists. Besides the fact that there is a necessity to develop new policies in order to stimulate growth in the economy, more powerful policies need to be taken into consideration to promote destination image on the international market. (Patrascu, 2014)

In 2013, the Republic of Moldova was declared by Lonely Planet as Europe's least visited country according to a Traveler's Choice poll. Moreover, according to Lonely Planet, the Republic of Moldova is considered as the second off-the-beaten-path destination in the world. In 2014 was launched the new campaign as symbol of national culture “Discover the Routes of Life” by Agency for Tourism in the Republic of Moldova. The aim of the company was to invite tourists to experience new discoveries through hospitality, history, wine, gastronomy and Moldavian traditions. The information source was the advertisement on Euronews channel, which helped to promote the destination image. In 2016, the campaign mentioned above was presented in Europe at IMEX Frankfurt, dedicated to MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) tourism. Respectively, wine incentives were the

main target, in order to attract professionals to visit the Republic of Moldova for the cultural experience, competitive prices and rich vineyards. (Chereghi B.F. 2018)

## 2.7 Internet influence on tourism marketing

In today's marketing world, social media plays a vital role. It has influenced our culture, economy and overall perception of the world. The ability to connect with people at any time has removed communication barriers and created a decentralized communication channel that makes it easier for people to stay in touch, engage, and interact with others through the web. For marketers, the use of social media can also be very cost effective, because many social media platforms are free or inexpensive to use. This strategy makes it possible even for small businesses to create and share products/services with individual consumers and customer communities. In other words, social media has had a dramatic influence on the traditional model of marketing communications and has significantly changed the strategies for communicating with customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016)

Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing has also become a prominent feature on the Internet, this platform provides consumers with the ability to share their views, preferences, or experiences with others (Trusov et al., 2009). WOM that travels through the Internet is also called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), such as customer reviews, product feedback, and promotion of brands - have the potential to reach hundreds and thousands of people. This form of social proliferation of a message is not only more credible than the businesses' own impact attempts, but it is also completely free (Sander, 2017). Travel review websites are becoming influential venues for knowledge exchange. They have an effective impact on tourists' choices of products, services and destination places. Researchers found that ratings from consumers regarding the hospitality services and products were mostly related to online popularity of restaurants. It was suggested that WOM and eWOM are important in tourism and hospitality, because they highlight customer's experience. Customer reviews posted through websites such as TripAdvisor.com help to gather opinions about tourism locations and attractions. It is a great way to collect feedback from tourists about their previous experiences, to better understand tourists' attitudes towards the destination. (Tseng C. et al., 2014)

Another form of online marketing is posting digital video content on a company's social media platform or website. Great video advertising can go viral resulting in it reaching and



engaging millions of consumers, this will produce positive exposure for a company. This form of marketing can be very inexpensive because customers themselves find and share these videos online (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016).

User-generated content in the use of customer reviews are important sources for people in forming destination images, and as references for making travel decisions. As the Republic of Moldova is less visited in comparison with other Europe countries, customer reviews have a significant role in country's image formation.

### **3. Research Methodology**

*This section describes the research method used to collect quantitative data. A presentation of the research method, acquisition of data and a discussion of the study's reliability and validity will be given. It will describe the way in which this research has been conducted, allowing the potential reader of this paper to understand and assess the process of data collection and analysis.*

#### **3.1 Data collection**

The main goal of this paper was to evaluate how international visitors identified the Republic of Moldova as a tourist destination. The source for the web reviews examined in this paper was the TripAdvisor website platform, which is the largest community in the world. The language of reviews for analysis was selected as English since it is the most common for international tourists. On this website, all visitors have free access to reading and writing their own reviews and posting pictures.

A total of 230 reviews from the section “*Moldova*” were gathered. All the reviews were collected based on 5 sections which are “*hotels*”, “*restaurants*”, “*things to do- parks, monuments and statues, wineries, wine tasting, architectural buildings*”. For all the items, the rating scale ranges from 1 to 5 where 1 (“*Terrible*”); 2 (“*Poor*”); 3 (“*Average*”); 4 = (“*Very good*”); 5 (“*Excellent*”). Each section includes its own features which rating is given for. The website itself has already displayed popular mentions throughout all reviews under each possible choice. Considering that positive reviews are more than negative, the website mentions only the good features. The aim of this paper is to find out positive and negative aspects throughout all the sections and not only individual ones.

#### **3.2 Data analysis**

Content analysis has been recognized as an effective method to interpret the fast-growing body of Web communications. Qualitative and quantitative analyses can be used to process textual data. The analysis can be done with structured quantitative or unstructured qualitative methods. These involve, respectively, counting words or phrases and measuring observable text characteristics or making sense of what is written and extrapolating latent meanings from

the data. This approach combines mixed methods to capture different and broader components of eWOM texts.

This paper used quantitative analysis of tourists' Web reviews using Leximancer, which transforms textual data into semantic patterns. Leximancer is a software program that analyses the content of collections of textual documents and visually displays the extracted information. Afterwards, the software represents graphically the main themes within the texts and provides information about how the concepts are associated. Leximancer measures the presence of repeated concepts and the ways these concepts are semantically interrelated to produce a graphical representation of the results. (C. Tseng et al., 2015)

## 4. Results

The content analysis revealed the existence of six themes, which represents international tourists' travel experiences in the Republic of Moldova. These were: “hotel”, “restaurant”, “food”, “wine”, “city” and “visit”.

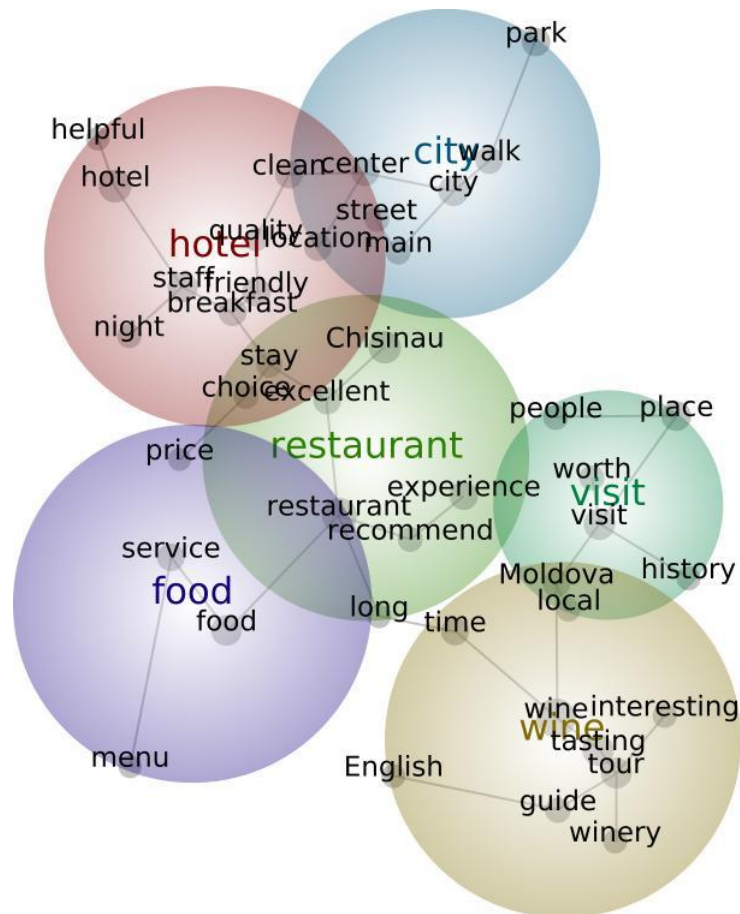


Figure 3. Concept map

### 4.1 Description of an overall experience of travelling to the Republic of Moldova

The six themes displayed above in Figure 3 are the most influential aspects affecting international tourists' destination images of the Republic of Moldova. Figure 3 demonstrates the themes and their connected concepts. In Leximancer output, the small grey connections are the concepts, which are grouped in colorful themes. The most important theme is colored red, and then as themes decline in importance, the themes have colors of green, purple,

yellow and blue. There were forty-one concepts identified within the themes. The more concepts a theme has, the richer the meaning the theme signifies.

The initial analysis of Figure 3 might display the basic travelling necessities which a tourist might look for, such as accommodation, restaurants, attractions, entertainment and the city itself. The themes with multiple connections were hotel and wine. (Tseng C. et al., 2014)

#### *4.1.1 Hotel as the most important theme*

The hotel theme includes the concepts of “location” (relevance = 42 per cent), “choice” (relevance = 36 per cent), “clean” (relevance = 33 percent), “stay” (relevance = 33 percent), “breakfast” (relevance = 33 per cent), “friendly” (relevance = 30 per cent), “helpful” (relevance = 29 per cent), “quality” (relevance = 29 per cent), “staff” (relevance = 27 per cent), “street” (relevance = 23 per cent) and “night” (relevance = 21 per cent). Hotel was the most important theme in tourists’ reviews. Leximancer showed that hotel has a strong connection with the concept “location”. Hotels are essential for tourists and the fact that they frequently mention this word in their reviews confirms how important they are to destinations. According to the data of the city hotels, the city of Chisinau is visited annually by approximately twenty-five thousand foreign tourists and forty-five thousand domestic ones. The hotel units of the city register an annual increase of 6-7% of number from accommodated tourists. (Stadnic, Ş. & Stadnic, S. 2019)

A typical review from the collected data from the section rated with *5 points (“Excellent”)* shows: “Central and excellent hotel I selected the hotel due to its central location and I was very happy to stay there. The hotel is on a quiet pedestrian street but just down the road from a large park with restaurants close by. The room was small, but bigger than many West European hotels and the room was very quiet from both external as well as internal noise. bed was excellent and I slept well. Staff were helpful and there was an excellent breakfast included with both hot and cold dishes. WIFI was free and fast.” (Australia, male, Flowers Hotel).

Another customer shared: “Awesome place to stay Comfortable hotel in the center of Chisinau, where I would certainly love to return. Clean bathroom, very clean and stylish

room, comfortable bed, helpful staff and high-quality room cleaning. The Wi-Fi speed in the room is fast at a fairly low price. The location of the hotel is perfect for any tourist visiting Chisinau. I never had to use public transportation, all the attractions within walking distance.” (Canada, male, Jazz Hotel)

A third tourist wrote: “Excellent hotel Great location close to many places of interest, bars and restaurants. Walkable from the railway station. Friendly and helpful staff. Clean, well-decorated and interesting! Lovely room, amazing shower.” (UK, female, Zentrum Hotel).

#### *4.1.2 Cultural experience of taste – wine*

The wine theme includes concepts of “tasting” (relevance = 69 per cent), “tour” (relevance = 59 per cent), “local” (relevance = 45 per cent), “winery” (relevance = 38 per cent), “guide” (relevance = 35 per cent), “English” (relevance = 30 per cent), “time” (relevance = 25 per cent), “Moldova” (relevance = 24 per cent) and “interesting” (relevance = 24 per cent). Wine is an important theme because it reflects aspects of the history, culture and national heritage of the country. “Tasting” concept has a strong connection with the theme of wine. Wine tourism involves visiting the wine-making house/factory, taking the chance to explore the vineyards, participate in a tasting event and learning about the history and culture of the place. According to the Legislation of the Republic of Moldova, “wine tourism is a form of tourism oriented towards visiting economic agents that work in the field of wine and wine regions with the aim of combining the pleasure of tasting wine products with knowledge of the rural environment, lifestyle and local cultural activities”.

The following are three examples of positive reviews rated with 5 (“*Excellent*”). First, a tourist shared online: “It is almost unbelievable what was been done there in a relative short time start with 60 years ago Such a great history in such a short time relative. Great location 120 km tunnels digging great wine collections millions of bottles well organized everything really impressive location therefore if you pass in Chisinau this winery is a must. Wine tasting was great but they are really specialized in champagne one of the best in the world. So great go there and try it !” (Romania, male, Milestii Mici)

The second tourist wrote: “Quite an interesting tour of the brandy making factory which is very popular in Russia. The tour ended with a tasting, starting with newer brandies and going up to vintages. Were surprised to find that some of the vintages that tasted very good indeed were about \$9 to buy! Change came by way of bottles of wine which were also very good. Worth trying.” (UK, male, Kvint)

A further visitor stated: “The restaurant located inside the winery fields is astonishingly big, hosting different rooms and decors. You can savor the Moldavian rural traditions and have a taste of its most representative dishes. The staff friendliness is outstanding and the simplicity of the places offer the right balance of charm and relax. The wines produced here are also their pride and indeed they are outstanding. Try their outstanding Feteasca Neagra. You will not be disappointed. A visit to their production line is also recommended. It is really enriching.” (Italy, male, Asconi)

#### *4.1.3 Visit*

The “visit” theme includes concepts as “place” (relevance = 45 per cent), “people” (relevance = 38 per cent), “worth” (relevance = 34 per cent), “Moldova” (relevance = 31 percent), “history” (relevance = 29 per cent) and “local” (relevance = 20 per cent). Figure 3 shows that “visit” has connections with concepts “Moldova” and “history”. Tourists associate their visit with the country and its history. In this context, history is expressed through monuments, architectural buildings and statues.

A visitor shared his thoughts at this departure: “Definitely worth a visit if you're in the city given the history and association the country has with Stephen the Great. It's not the tallest statue you'll see and a quick stop is good before checking out the park which is a good space in the city to wander around.” (UK, male, Stephen the Great Statue)

Another foreigner wrote: “Always a pleasure to go here. As well as being a reminder of the wars, its a nice location to visit and be reminded of the importance of peace. Time it right and see the change of the guard on the hour. Immaculate respectful garden and tree areas.” (Sweden, male, Architectural building)

#### 4.1.4 Cultural experience of taste – food and restaurant

These two themes of food and restaurant can be combined because they take part from identical aspects of culture. The theme of restaurant includes concepts “Chisinau” (relevance = 46 per cent), “choice” (relevance = 45 per cent), “experience” (relevance = 25 per cent), “long” (relevance = 25 per cent), “excellent” (relevance = 24 per cent), “stay” (relevance = 23 per cent) and “recommend” (relevance = 21 per cent). The theme of food includes concepts “service” (relevance = 29 per cent), “menu” (relevance = 27 per cent), “restaurant” (relevance = 27 per cent) and “price” (relevance = 18 per cent). Food and restaurants have a sophisticated meaning which represents not only customers’ psychological needs, but also traditional Moldavian cultural sides. Traditional cuisine gives a tourist a great sense of authenticity. Restaurants combined with markets with food, can show the traditional cuisine of the country and fulfill tourists’ desired experiences.

A typical positive review rated with 5 (“*Excellent*”) states: “We had a great experience and meal here. The waiter was new to the role and tried so hard to make us feel very welcome despite his limited English. The restaurant was spotless and the food was delicious and filling. It was definitely a taste of local cuisine and seemed to be popular with a range of families and couples. Food came quickly after ordering and was mid-range in price. Would definitely recommend.” (UK, male, La Placinte)

Another pleased customer wrote: “Good restaurant! Healthy and fresh food delivered in good quantities and original tastes! This place is different from other restaurants in the way that quality really seems important. We had an lunch and there was too many choice. They even have an green egg. “(Netherlands, male, Pegas Restaurant)

Still another positive review reads: “The best local food I had in Chisinau so far. The service is great, very polite and English-speaking. The atmosphere is great, very traditional with calm background music. Food-wise, this restaurant is hard to beat. For Chisinau, it's a bit pricey, but it's definitely worth it!” (Cyprus, male, La Taifas)



#### *4.1.5 Chisinau as the capital - city*

The theme of city includes concepts such as “center” (relevance = 56 per cent), “main” (relevance = 38 per cent), “park” (relevance = 23 per cent), “location” (relevance = 21 per cent), “walk” (relevance = 21 per cent), and “street” (relevance = 15 per cent). One of the main reasons in the motivation for international tourists to visit the Republic of Moldova is the actual capital city which is Chisinau. It is the main tourist destination of the country because the main purpose of foreign tourists is business. Over 90% of them, while visiting the Republic of Moldova stop in Chisinau, mainly due to the status of capital, regional mode of communication (international airport, intersection of road and railways), as well as an impressive number of historical monuments as tourist objects. The blending of communist history and modern architecture represents how two periods of time collided and formed something unique and interesting. The theme city has as primary concepts “center” and “park” because all the attractions, parks, museums and architectural buildings can be found in the heart of Chisinau – center.

Many reviews from the tourists were very positive about the appearance of the city. For instance, a tourist wrote: “Chisinau is quite a small city anyway but is also has lots of green space and this park is really nice. It's quite large with a lake in the middle - we were there in September 2019 so it was fairly quiet, with a few joggers etc. It's amazing how the sound of the traffic and city just disappears when you step into the park. There are nice fountains on the terrace down to the lake - they weren't on when we were there, but would look great in the summer. If you've got kids, it's worth checking out the superhero pedestrian pillars “....” and just going for a stroll and getting an ice cream.” (UK, male, Valea Morilor)

Another tourist reviewed: “The Stephen the Great park is a great place to experience during your visit to Chisinau. At the entrance, there is the statue to the man the park is named after. Inside there are loads of places to sit and relax. There are several statues inside the park as well as a number of water features.” (The US, male, The Stephen the Great Park)

One more visitor wrote: “Not only is this the best park in Chisinau, it would rank pretty highly in any city worldwide. The flower beds are plentiful and gorgeous, and there are lots of paths to explore. I suspect the park isn't so beautiful outside the summer months, but it

can't be beat in July or August. It costs about \$.25 for entry, which is definitely worth it.”  
(The US, female, Dendrarium Park)

#### 4.2 Image on satisfaction of travelling to the Republic of Moldova

The second objective of the present paper was to determine the positive and negative concepts in tourists' Web reviews. Leximancer software determined 42 favorable concepts and 19 unfavorable concepts. The positive concepts had a high rating (4 or 5 out of 5 points), and negative concepts had a low rating (1 or 2 out of 5 points). The results of the analysis show that tourists who rated with 4 (“Very good”) and 5 (“Excellent”) mentioned frequently concepts like friendly, service, experience, food, staff, restaurant and visit (see Figure 4). In contrast, customers who rated with 1 (“Terrible”) and 2 (“Poor”) were mostly unsatisfied with hotel, restaurant, service and people. Both positive and negative common concepts are mostly related to accommodation, food and beverages, and service. They all describe customers' satisfaction during their stay. The fact that they meet frequently in Web reviews shows how important hotels and restaurants are for a destination. Both positive and negative attitudes towards them are influential factors for the destination image. There are double as many positive concepts as negative ones, suggesting that people tended to have a favorable experience during their stay in the Republic of Moldova.

However, there are some examples of reviews which demonstrate the negative part of their experience regarding the hotel: “A good hotel but with some basic drawbacks Initially I thought this was a good hotel. Rooms are nice, I was upgraded from a basic room to a deluxe one which gave me an extra 10m. Breakfast was adequate and the price of the rooms is ok. The big problem in this hotel is the lack of soundproofing between each room and the corridors, it was like the people in the rooms either side of me were in the room with me, same for people in the corridors. For this reason alone I would not stay in this hotel again.”  
(France, male, Jumbo Hotel)

Another tourist wrote a negative review about the restaurant and food: “The place looks nice and the atmosphere is cozy. But, unfortunately, the food is below expectations. We ordered the famous ribs but they came cold, unsalty and very very dry. It was obvious that they were cooked long time before but at least they could have used the oven to heat them up. The sides

were very small and not tasty at all. So, good place to hang out for beers but don't waste good money on food.” (Romania, male, Smokehouse)

A further tourist was disappointed with the service: “First of all, they cancelled our reservation without any reason. After thrley found us a table we realised that the service is horrible! They are arrogant, indifferent to the customers and on top, you wait a looong time for the food. We've been waiting for almost one hour and a half. When we asked how long until the food comes, he said 5 minutes and still waited for another 20. When the food arrived, the waiter came very angry that we were not satisfied and threwed the plates on the table. It is a pittty cause the food is good. Although the food is good, I would never EVER come back to this restaurant!” (Romania, female, Pegas Restaurant)

Tourists complained about hotels, restaurants and service. Creating discomfort while staying in the hotel, serving bad food and offering a terrible service is not acceptable. At the same time, negative reviews should always be welcomed as they help to develop a better service or product. For this reason, all the factors above should be maintained by tourism suppliers in order to deliver favorable images that generate positive WOM and desire to revisit.

	Co-Count	Likelihood		Co-Count	Likelihood
friendly	17	85%	menu	2	12%
excellent	12	71%	people	2	10%
history	7	58%	local	1	9%
location	11	58%	choice	1	9%
quality	6	55%	price	1	8%
service	15	54%	night	1	7%
experience	12	52%	service	2	7%
food	24	51%	hotel	3	5%
stay	11	48%	tasting	2	5%
local	5	45%	friendly	1	5%
breakfast	9	45%	breakfast	1	5%
center	8	44%	wine	3	4%
staff	15	44%	restaurant	2	4%
long	5	42%	time	1	4%
restaurant	20	38%	staff	1	3%
clean	8	38%	city	1	3%
choice	4	36%	tour	1	3%
helpful	5	36%	place	1	2%
guide	6	35%			
visit	14	35%			

Figure 4. Positive concepts vs negative concepts

## 5. Conclusion and implications

*This chapter will conclude this bachelor thesis, summarizing and explaining the key findings of the study. Firstly, the research objectives will be discussed. Then, the practical implications for this research will be offered. Lastly, limitations and suggestions are presented for further research regarding developing a positive destination image of the Republic of Moldova through online platforms.*

### 5.1 Conclusion

The present paper helps to fill a gap in the research due to the lack of studies on destination image about the Republic of Moldova. The aim was to accomplish four objectives of which first was to determine the main themes collected through Web reviews shared online from the perspective of international tourists. Based on a case of reviews from three different categories, six themes were revealed throughout international tourists' experiences: hotel, wine, restaurant, food, city and visit. The concepts within these themes detected by Leximancer affect international tourists' images about the Republic of Moldova and can manipulate the image formation. The image of the Republic of Moldova is formed based on its culture and history (people and cuisine), surroundings (nature and historical monuments/buildings) and build facilities (accommodation and transportation). (C. Tseng et al., 2015)

The Leximancer software used in this study has a big advantage by displaying visual diagrams and detecting the main themes along with lexical concepts. In comparison with other programs, this one illustrates a more complex picture of the destination image of the Republic of Moldova. In this paper, *hotels* were the most important theme on international tourists who traveled to the Republic of Moldova. According to the findings, the accommodation seems to be influential to international tourists.

The second objective of this paper was to explore the inter-relationships among concepts expressed by international tourists within TripAdvisor. Along with themes and concepts, Leximancer provides concept connections. For example, the "hotel" theme has a strong connection with the concept "location" which is followed by concepts "main", "street" and "center". Based on this analysis, the combination of these four concepts shows that a tourist

will likely look for central accommodation in a convenient location which will have access to the main streets of the city. Therefore, these connections indicate that location is an important aspect in travelers' choice of destinations.

The next objective was to identify the positive and negative concepts among themes collected from reviews within TripAdvisor platform. Tourists who evaluated their experiences with high ratings (4 "Very good" or 5 "Excellent" out of 5 points) point out in their reviews, concepts like: friendly, service, experience, food, staff, restaurant and visit. In contrast, tourists who evaluated their experiences with low ratings (1 "Terrible" or 2 "Poor" out of 5 points) point out their disappointments regarding hotel, restaurant, service and people. Comparing positive and negative reviews' concepts, there can be observed that both sides refer to similar aspects such as service (hotel and restaurant), food (restaurant) and people (staff).

## 5.2 Practical implications

This paper's findings provide organizers, hoteliers and tourism related authorities with a deeper insight into how international tourists perceive destination image of the Republic of Moldova through TripAdvisor. Online platforms like TripAdvisor can help tourism suppliers to determine the main features required to accomplish more positive reviews and to minimize the negative ones. Tourists' Web reviews are great for understanding travelers' needs through their previous experience. From the economical point of view, online platforms are profitable methods to collect feedback from international tourists, and as a result, achieving a positive destination image. To achieve high ratings, positive eWOM and favorable images, tourism companies should always improve their service quality and products.

According to the results, positive comments regarding experience of staying in the Republic of Moldova was significantly more than negative ones. However, the negative comments should be taken into consideration such as arrogant staff, loud noises from the hotel rooms, terrible service and food below expectations. These aspects should always be upgraded by developing good managerial implications and finding solutions that improve tourists' experiences. It is very important to show customers that the management team of each tourism department is dedicated to solving problems and progressing in their business for a better experience and image.

### 5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

The findings in this thesis are subject to some limitations. Firstly, the sample size for this research – the TripAdvisor users are not a sufficient representative sample, as they comprise only a small part of travellers. In addition, this research analysed reviews from only one media platform. This is just a small part of all the reviews of international tourists. Thus, the 230 reviews collected represent a very small sample size. For this reason, caution should be applied as the findings may not be applicable to the whole destination image of the Republic of Moldova. Nevertheless, given that no personal data was retrieved when collecting user data, the sample cannot be strictly characterized in terms of TripAdvisor user profiles. This leads to the next limitation - this research uses only one method, which consequently can narrow the extent of the results. To get a more accurate result, a controlled environment is needed, accessible, for example, through interviews or focus groups. Thus, qualitative research methods would lead to deeper conclusions. Finally, a significant limitation of this study is the lack of preliminary research on the destination image and the perception of tourism in the Republic of Moldova. This can limit the understanding of the research problem and the development of the corresponding conclusions. Consequently, this gap in the image destination literature indicates a need for further research.

The suggestions for further research are important to help the development of future studies which could deepen those aspects which were not explicitly considered in the writing of this thesis. More research is needed to further define the destination image of the Republic of Moldova. The findings of the paper were unclear as they describe mostly the personal needs regarding the service and accommodation rather than the impressions of the nation and the country. It would be interesting to conduct similar studies but using different research methods like questionnaire surveys among international tourists in the Republic of Moldova and potential visitors of the Republic of Moldova. This research also used only one online platform, but there are many more platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Yelp and Foursquare that could be successful in reaching more international reviews.

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