

## EXPLORATORY RESEARCH REGARDING ROMANIANS' PERCEPTION ABOUT THE REGIONAL BRAND "MARAMUREȘ"

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, the expansion of touristic activities confirmed the importance of marketing activities in touristic regions. In tourism as well, globalization implies an unlimited number of options, and the traditional elements regarding competition and differences related to price or quality are no longer sufficient in efficiently differentiating the touristic region. A key factor in this sense is represented by the notion of place branding or, to be more precise, regional branding. Theoretical studies on this subject are relatively recent, and fewer compared with studies on traditional brands, for example. A practical research regarding a touristic region can thus provide a series of utile information that marketers can use in elaborating marketing strategies and, specifically, in the branding process. The study's main objective aimed at shaping the regional brand "Maramureș" using mainly projective techniques, scarcely used in studies of this kind in Romania, based on a sample of more than 200 respondents. The information obtained focused on the respondents' perceptions regarding the region of Maramureș as a touristic brand, the associations made, the values attributed to the region in terms of touristic potential, of touristic infrastructure, of weak and strong points of the touristic brand Maramureș, but also elements of the regional image and identity (at this point were considered certain associations with visual elements but also with its personality). By highlighting respondents' subjective and diverse opinions, it was aimed to point out some directions that would eventually guide a new approach of the brand for this touristic region. Also, the results of this study could represent a starting point for a program of regional development, funded through various local or European funds. Furthermore, based on the information obtained from respondents, it has been proposed a new logo of the region, as a first step in running a promotion campaign of Maramureș as touristic destination.*

**Keywords:** regional brand; regional marketing; tourism destination; tourism brand's personality; Maramureș.

**JEL classification:** M31; M38; L83.

### 1. Introduction

The study of brands designed for touristic regions is relatively recent and, according to Dumbrăveanu (2010), Ryan and Mizerski (2010) or Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010), the number of materials in which it is discussed in detail being rather small. Among researchers who deal with it can be mentioned Lucarelli and Berg (2011), who focus on time evolution of specialty studies regarding city branding, highlighting

their growing importance. Kotler et al. talk about place marketing for the first time in 1993. But this subject became more and more popular, discussed 'as a result of the growing competition between places, cities and nations (...). Moreover, place marketing is not limited only to touristic activities, but plays an important role in urban and regional development, the positioning of the region and/or country within international relationships, as well as maintaining a constant development of economy and infrastructure.' (Maheshwari et al., 2011:198). Zenker (2011:41) affirms that in recent years the focus was increasingly more on the process of *regional branding*, as element of regional marketing: 'regions are motivated to obtain positive associations in consumers' minds in order to develop and promote the brand continuously'. However, Anholt (2005) states that the brand is a very powerful tool in the process of economic development, having a significant contribution to *regions' development*. Touristic destinations are extremely varied, this category including cities, countries, regions or any other element that is perceived as touristic objective. Regions, however, are much more diverse destinations, and the branding process highlights their complexity. So, for some authors, the destination brand is equal with the competitive identity, and represents the destination's essence and characteristics or, in other words, it is the DNA that defines that destination (Buncle and Keup, 2009).

## **2. Tourism Destination Branding**

The branding process of the destination surprises very complex elements, the main purpose being that of guarantying touristic a positive experience, from the moment they come in touch with the destination to their return home (Buncle and Keup, 2009). Nyseth and Viken (2009) stress the importance of the cooperation between the public and the private sector in the process of creating an image/an identity for the touristic destination. Many authors who have studied the problematic of *destination branding* (Hall, 1999; Buhalis, 2000; Prideaux and Cooper, 2003; Zevedo, 2004) but also that of national branding (Szondi, 2006; Rausch, 2008; Pike, 2010) underline the importance and the practical utility of the brand as a very powerful strategic process specially created for developing competitiveness and economic development of regions and countries.

According to Buncle and Keup (2009), *complexity* is a base attribute of touristic destinations' brand. Pike (2005) highlights the complexity of destination brands with the following arguments: destinations are multidimensional, the interests of various groups on the market are heterogeneous, and the theory cannot be applied due to the politics of taking a decision across all the people involved.

As an aspect associated to this complexity, *brand architecture* is very important (Hankinson, 2010), because of identities correlations at a regional level, and of choosing brand alliances (between cities or regions with different or complementary traits).

According to Morgan et al. (2004), the 5 phases within the process of building a destination brand are: (1) market research, analysis and strategic recommendations; (2) development of brand identity; (3) brand launching and introduction: communicating the concept; (4) brand implementation; (5) monitoring, evaluation and verification. According to Buncle and Keup (2009), the stages of this process are: destination audit, segmentation analysis, SWOT analysis, shareholders' commitment, competition analysis, models of brand building, brand's integration in marketing activities, global campaigns versus local campaigns, brand

global versus target segments. Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) present the model of developing the destination brand- DEBRA, based on ideas regarding brands in services belonging to de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003).

Balakrishnan et al. (2011) classify *the components of a destination brand* in several categories: functional elements refer to the basic function/purpose of the brand associated with tourists' immediate, practical needs; symbolic or emotional elements are those situated above the basic product, referring to attributes regarding intangible aspects; elements related to experiences include the relationship between the brand and the consumer, its intuitive preferences, the ability of the brand to communicate an exclusivity feature, a particular lifestyle.

### **3. Identity, Image and Personality of the Brand of Touristic Destination**

*Identity* captures the internal dimension of the brand, while *the image* surprises the external one (Saraniemi, 2010). *The image of the destination* contributes to the formation of the destination's brand and to its success. There are two different types of images involved in the branding process: the image projected (promoted by marketers) and the image perceived (received by tourists) (Tasci and Kozac, 2006). For Hildreth (2010), the brand is the visual representation of an entity (the brand's identity) and the collective perceptions of the entity in people minds (the brand's image). The images of the touristic destination can be classified in: organic images made on long term from a multitude of sources (mass-media, novels, and geography), induced images made from exposing to the projected image of the destination an induced modified image or a complex image, based on the interaction of touristic experience with organic and induced images (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). *Brand's personality* is part of the branding process of a touristic region (Avraham and Ketter, 2008). Go and Govers (2009) state that the personality of the brand and that of the destination are correlated concepts, which sustain the idea that regions, especially through the process of branding, can be attached to human's personality traits. Forristal (2009) analyzes the personality of the brand in respect to Aaker's model. Aaker (1997) presents the five dimensions of the brand's personality: sincerity, enthusiasm, competence, refinement and strength, which, at their turn, have other subcategories.

Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010) also stress the importance of *brand's personality*, suggesting that the places in competition should be associated with famous persons, such as artists, persons, celebrities.

Morgan et al. (2004) surprise two side of the personality, namely the rational side and the emotional side: the first refers to the logic traits of the brand, and the second refers to its emotional benefits and associations. Using only one slogan or logo is not sufficient but, according to Hankinson (2005), Hildreth (2010), Maheshwari et al. (2011) many campaigns rely solely on these elements.

### **4. Regional Branding**

Creating a *regional brand* is the core element in promoting local competitiveness, especially when regions and cities try to compete for external resources, using their brand. So, it is not an unusual thing to notice a national brand playing the role of umbrella-brand for its regions, and the regions to have the role of umbrella-brand for the cities (Boisen et al., 2011). Region's branding is seen as a 'process that permits a place to develop through its strong points, to find the sense adequate to its complex and multidimensional traits, as well as the variety which characterizes

its past, present and future identity' (Maheshwari et al., 2011: 201).

According to the authors Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010), the brand, whether it's national or regional, must be seen as a multidimensional concept, with functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements, which create a unique set of associations in the mind of the public. Regional brands must be distinct, but still to have similarities, to integrate within the national brand. The difficulties of coordinating activities arises from the fact that regional brands cannot be controlled by one entity or organization, but they are developed and offered through a complex network of public and private actors (Dinnie, K., 2009). Another feature mentioned by many authors is the similarity and the comparison of regional touristic brands with corporate brands. Anholt (2005, 2010) compares the nation with a corporate brand, and Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) states that regional brand resembles with the umbrella-corporate brand.

In creating *region's identities*, an important role is held by symbols (names, logos, customs, etc.) (Mueller and Schade, 2011). Kotler et al. (1993) argue that the image of a place or a region can be positive and attractive, negative and weak, mixed (with both negative and positive elements) or contradictory (when the region's image is positive for some tourists and negative for others). The diversity of the actors involved in the creation and development of a regional brand is very high. Destination's marketing organizations (DMO) represent an important active element in the branding process. Dinnie (2011) underline the participation of residents and tourists. Taking into consideration the region's inhabitants has numerous advantages, these being the first that should know, understand and share the values of the region they live in. *Regional identity*, as an element of the regional brand, is perceived as a sustainable competitive advantage" (Go and Govers, 2009: 49), and for long term sustainability, regional brands need a strategic management (Ryan and Mizerski, 2010).

## 5. Research Methodology

The importance given to the process of development of the regional brand and to the marketing programs thoroughly sustained by all active participants depends on the extent to which each country understands the positive effects brought by a powerful touristic brand. It was chosen the analysis of the touristic regional brand Maramureş because it is a representative area for Romania's tourism. However, the methods used for promoting the area have a low degree of efficiency, are not fully adapted to the target audience, promotion campaigns are not very well-known even among residents, and market research to highlight deeper the opinions of those involved and affected by touristic activities are practical inexistent.

The *main objective of the research* is to analyze the perceptions and the opinions people have about the touristic region of Maramureş, as a touristic brand, but also of the values assigned to it. Starting from this general objective, there were established *several derivate objectives*, as following: the analysis of the elements which form the image of the touristic region and those which determine its identity (visual elements, as well as personality traits), respectively identifying weak and strong points of the touristic brand Maramureş.

*The research hypotheses* focused on the fact that:

1. Respondents have generally positive opinions on the touristic region Maramureş.
2. Respondents associate the region with tradition, folklore and less with modern

elements.

3. Respondents consider that touristic promotion is poorly implemented.

As *data collection method*, it was chosen the survey (punctual among a judgmental sample of the studied population) combined with a series of indirect methods, namely projective tests. Besides the types of tests mentioned above, there were included also several response matrices through which was followed the association of the regional brand with a series of personality traits. The population studied was formed out of people who knew the region of Maramureş, either personal (residents or tourists), or indirect (based on information provided by mass-media, friends, family or acquaintances). *The size of the sample* studied was of 248 respondents.

## 6. Research Findings and Discussion

Opinions regarding *tourism generally practiced in Maramureş* reveal both positive and negative elements: the majority of the respondents (67.7%) highlight the touristic potential of the region, because of particular natural elements, Maramureş's traditions but also the openness of the residents and of the hosts towards tourists. If 12.9% consider satisfying *the level of touristic services* in the region, a higher number of respondents (19.4%) consider them unsatisfying.

Approximately a third of the persons interviewed (32.3%) claim *that tourism promotion is insufficient*, even though there are many development opportunities through concrete measures ('creating more info-points for tourists', 'lack of promotion abroad, among foreigners'). 19.4% from the respondents highlighted a series of region's traits through their own experiences as tourists in Maramureş ('it is a unique touristic experience, but I get informed and I asked around as a tourist, from Internet sources').

12.9% of respondents presented more forms of tourism specific to the region of Maramureş (rural tourism, religious tourism, cultural tourism, agritourism, ecologic tourism). Through *several association tests was aimed to identify what is the opinion of the respondents regarding the current situation of tourism in Maramureş*. The answers reveal even more complex aspects: the majority (87.1%) believes that there isn't enough promotion and exploitation of the region's touristic potential.

Other options have been manifested in lower proportions: the lack of online promotion campaign (32.3%); authenticity, uniqueness through traditions, people and landscape (29%); poor participation of local authorities and residents, lack of investments, lack of coordination between the traditional environment and the appearance of touristic hostels or poor promotion within foreign tourists (22.6%); poor infrastructure which lades tourists' access (12.9%); an optimist vision of the regional tourism, which is still developing/ improving (9.7%).

As for *Maramureş's touristic potential*, the first aspect mentioned by respondents was the diversity and the uniqueness of the region (41.9%), but also the traditions specific to the region (38.7%). In addition, 22.6% of respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the way in which the potential touristic is exploited (inefficient and insufficient), while 19.4% stressed a defining element: wood art, represented by the specific gates and the wooden churches. Only 9.7% from the respondents mentioned agritourism as the most important aspect of touristic potential.

*Elements that are mostly associated with Maramureş* in the mind of the respondents are: nature (51.6%), local people features (48.4%) and tradition (41.9%). Fewer people mentioned traditional food (29%), famous touristic sights (22.6%) or wood art (19.4%). Besides these aspects, respondents mentioned in their answers:

traditional clothing and music (12,9%), a feeling of retrieval (9,7%), authenticity (9,7%), famous people such as Paula Seling or the Rednic couple (6,5%), color (6,5%), hiking (3,2%) and the city of Baia Mare (3,2%).

At the question regarding *the image of Maramureş region*, more than half of the respondents described the landscape of the historical Maramureş (58,1%), followed by mentioning the traditional Maramureş gates (22,6%), as well as very famous sights such as ‘Mocăniţa’ or ‘Cimitirul Vesel’ (19,4%).

16,1% of respondents have thought of people dressed in traditional clothing, followed by churches and Sunday’s religious sermons or holiday days (9,7%), the image of a museum in open air (9,7%), persons singing traditional music (2,4%).

In order to discover *the personality traits associated with Maramureş*, it was used an open question, through which respondents had to associate the region with a person and to describe the way she or he would interact with it. A large number of respondents associated with the region an open, cheerful, lively, sociable and welcoming person (41,9%); a wise, empathetic, good-hearted, compassionate, hardworking and caring person (38,7%). Furthermore, approximately one-quarter of the respondents (25,8%) associate the region with a bold, intelligent, charismatic and sincere person. However, some respondents, besides the traits mentioned earlier, associated the region: with a caring mother or a grandmother in traditional clothing (25,8%).

Applying the five-category brand personality Aaker model (1997): excitement, sincerity, competence, sophistication and ruggedness (Table 1), respondents associated the region to a higher extent with a merry, honest, incorruptible, with a strong spiritual character, loyal and intelligent person, a charming person and into a higher degree with inventiveness and dearness, but less with a modern character.

**Table 1:** Regional brand Maramureş’s personality dimensions

Dimensions		Mean	Dimensions		Mean
Excitement	Daring	3.77	Competence	Reliable	4.06
	Spirited	4.48		Intelligent	4.06
	Imaginative	3.71		Successful	3.84
	Up-to-date	2.42		Sophistication	Upper class
Sincerity	Down-to-earth	3.03		Charming	4.00
	Honest	4.42	Ruggedness	Outdoorsy	2.87
	Wholesome	4.10		Tough	2.48
	Cheerful	4.69			

Source: authors’ calculations

Closely related to image and personality, identity is the central element on which marketers focus in creating and strengthening a regional touristic brand. The vast majority of the information obtained from respondents focus on the image these have already formed about Maramureş but also on the personality of the brand (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Maramureș's representative aspects

	Mean		Mean
Wood art	3.68	Museums	2.52
Wood churches and monasteries	3.61	Landscapes	3.55
Art clothing and fabrics	3.65	Baia Mare	2.81
Ornamental pottery	3.00		

Source: authors' calculations

In *creating a positive image*, many respondents (61,3%) support the importance of correlating well-organized touristic services with distinct elements of the region (traditions, folklore, wood art, landscapes). 54,8% consider that touristic sights must be efficiently valued at a local, national but also international level. 29% of the respondents believe that the brand must be sustained and developed through well done campaigns and actions, focusing on the necessity of developing touristic infrastructure.

*Campaigns of creating identities* are extremely complex and require substantial resources, in this case focusing on one of identity's components, namely proposing a logo. From all the general categories that determine in a lesser or greater extend the positive appreciation of Maramureș, the most representatives, according to opinions expressed by respondents are: wood art, clothing art and fabrics, wooden churches and monasteries but also Maramureș natural landscapes. These categories exposed to respondents broadly outline the traits of a region which still conserves unaltered and unchanged elements of culture, folklore and history.

## 7. Conclusions

From the prior set of assumptions, most of them have been confirmed, *so the image of Maramureș in the eyes of the respondents is a positive one, and these put a great accent on traditional elements that offer uniqueness and a distinct character of the touristic region and less on modern elements*. Descriptions and arguments offered by the respondents offered the image of a region with a huge touristic potential, mainly represented by traditions, customs and famous objectives. However, Maramureș brand requires a deeper, more profound analysis, but which, according to the study should be based on the following:

1. *Region's characteristics*: wood art and culture, customs and habits of the traditional village of Maramureș, the hospitality of the people, Maramureș's traditional clothing and fabrics, unique touristic objectives, nature, cultural and religious elements;
2. *Rational benefits*: unspoiled natural elements, especially outstanding mountain landscapes, accessibility, escaping from the urban space, an oasis of relaxation, new experiences;
3. *Emotional benefits*: reconnecting with the traditions and the culture of Maramureș, a feeling of freedom, openness, return to everything that means customs and elements of authentic folklore, spiritual peace correlated with natural landscapes, special memories;
4. *Values and traits of the brand's personality*: this regional brand reflects, according to the respondents, the idea of openness, sociability, courage, charisma but also wisdom and faith, a mix of resistance and fragility, all in correlation with traditions that define the touristic region and reflect its distinctive

character;

5. *The brand's essence*: tradition and nature, optimism and openness, continuity. As far as a possible logo of Maramureş is concerned, it must be representative for the region, with suggestive and defining elements, but in the same time simple and effective. Analyzing all the information obtained through this research, traditions and folkloric elements are definitely very suitable for creating the logo.

More precisely, wood art is one of the most distinctive elements through which it could be indicated at a visual level regional identity. The actual logo reflects the outline of a wooden church, however, an even more representative and fit element, which cannot be found in any other region of the country is the traditional Maramureş gate, conclusion which results from the study as well.

Among the motifs present on a traditional gate can be mentioned: the nods, the rope, the solar wheel that appears as a simple circle, of some concentric circles, sun with human face (the solar cult), the tree of life, the ear of corn, etc. Also, it is recommended to focus on the solar motif present on the gate as a dominant symbol. The solar disc in a simplified form combines traditionalism with the dynamism specific to the Maramureş region, through the nuance and the forms used. Also, the logo would convey an idea of continuity, optimism and openness.

These are only a few guidelines that could lead to a more precise outlining of the regional brand Maramureş, part of a much larger project of regional branding, which seeks to reinforce the touristic brand Maramureş at all levels.

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