EFFECTIVE DIGITAL STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE ROMANIAN TOURISM

PASCARIU ANKA ROXANA*[1], SUBA ANITA GEORGIANA[2], SUBA MONICA[1], CHENDE DRAGOS[1], MANESCU CAMELIA[1],
[1] University of Life Sciences „King Mihai I" from Timisoara, Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Romania
[2] Politehnica University Timișoara
*Corresponding author's e-mail: anka.suba@usvt.ro

Abstract: *Romania, with its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and unique attractions, has the potential to become a leading destination in European tourism. This paper explores effective digital strategies for promoting Romanian tourism in the global marketplace. In an increasingly digital world, leveraging online platforms is crucial for reaching international audiences and showcasing Romania's tourism offerings. The study examines various digital marketing tools, including social media campaigns, search engine optimization (SEO), influencer partnerships, and content marketing. It also highlights the importance of developing a strong online presence through websites, mobile apps, and virtual tours to enhance visitor engagement and satisfaction. Furthermore, the role of user-generated content, online reviews, and digital storytelling in building Romania's brand as a tourist destination is explored. The paper concludes with recommendations for public and private sector collaboration to create cohesive digital marketing strategies that highlight Romania's distinctiveness, ensure targeted audience engagement, and increase the visibility and appeal of Romania as a sustainable and attractive travel destination. Effective digital strategies, when strategically implemented, can drive growth in tourism while fostering long-term economic and cultural benefits for Romania..*

Key words*: tourism, communication, marketing, digital strategies, social media campaigns*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of a well-executed marketing campaign to promote a country's tourism cannot be overstated, as an effective marketing campaign can completely transform the international perception of a destination [6,11] and attract a significant number of tourists, thus bringing economic, social, and cultural benefits.

One of the most direct benefits of a well-thought-out marketing campaign is the increase in economic revenues, as tourists spend money on accommodation, food, transportation, and leisure activities, all of which contribute to the local economy. Additionally, a rise in tourism can lead to the creation of new jobs and the development of infrastructure [2,10]. A successful marketing campaign can significantly improve a country's international image. By promoting tourist attractions, culture, and traditions, a country can become more attractive to visitors, which not only increases the number of tourists but can also encourage foreign investments and international partnerships. A well-executed marketing strategy [14] can also help preserve the culture and heritage of a country. Promoting cultural and historical attractions can raise awareness and appreciation of them, both among locals and tourists, leading to increased efforts to protect and restore sites of cultural and historical importance.

Through marketing [13], a country can promote not only its famous attractions but also lesser-known destinations, thus contributing to a more balanced distribution of tourist flows. This can help prevent overcrowding in certain areas and offer tourists unique and authentic experiences. Marketing campaign [4,10] can also promote sustainable tourism [3] forms. This includes eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and other types of tourism that have minimal impact on the environment and local communities [1,12]. By promoting these types of tourism, a country can ensure that the benefits of tourism are sustainable in the long term. [1]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method will combine several data collection techniques to provide a thorough analysis of the digital strategies used to promote Romanian tourism. By analyzing literature, review case studies, this study aims to offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies and provide practical recommendations for enhancing Romania's tourism promotion in the digital age. [2]

RESEARCH RESULTS

Tourism in Romania offers an impressive variety of attractions and experiences for travelers, with spectacular landscapes, a rich history, and well-preserved traditions. Romania should be a destination to be explored by as many tourists as possible. [12]

Romania is well-known for its diverse natural landscapes. The Carpathian Mountains offer excellent opportunities for hiking, mountaineering, and winter sports. Among the most popular destinations are Retezat National Park, Piatra Craiului National Park, and the Transfăgărășan, a spectacular alpine road. The Danube Delta, one of the largest and best-preserved deltas in Europe, is a paradise for nature lovers and ornithologists. Here, numerous bird species can be observed, and visitors can experience the traditional life of fishermen. [8]

Our country also has a rich cultural and historical heritage [1,7], with numerous sites and monuments dating from various historical periods. Bran Castle, also known as "Dracula's Castle," attracts tourists from all over the world due to the legend of Vlad the Impaler.

Medieval towns such as Sighișoara, Brașov, and Sibiu retain the charm of past eras, with cobblestone streets, historic buildings, and impressive fortifications. Sighișoara, for example, is one of the few inhabited medieval fortresses in Europe and is included in the UNESCO World Heritage. Romanian folk traditions and customs are highly sought after by tourists, with regions like Maramureș and Bucovina famous for their crafts, wooden churches, and painted monasteries.

In addition to natural and cultural attractions, Romania's large cities, such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Timișoara, offer a vibrant urban life. [5]

In 1990, Romania's tourist accommodation structures were in a period of transition. After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Romanian tourism began to open up to Western influences and sought to adapt to the new economic and social realities. These included hotels, motels, guesthouses, cabins, and campsites. Although the tourism services required significant improvements, the country's tourism potential was recognized, and efforts were set to be made for the modernization and development of the tourism sector in the years to come. Thus, from Table 1., it can be observed that the tourist accommodation structures in Romania were quite diverse, even though the tourism infrastructure was not as developed as it is today. [15,16]

Hotels were the most widespread form of accommodation, ranging from luxury units located in major cities and tourist resorts to lower-category hotels aimed at a less demanding clientele. The most renowned hotels were located in large cities such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and in resorts on the Black Sea coast or in mountain areas, such as Valea Prahovei. Most of them were state-owned and managed by state-run tourism enterprises. The quality of services and facilities varied and, in general, was below international standards. Romania had a tradition in spa tourism, with numerous resorts specialized in treatments with mineral waters and therapeutic muds. The spa resorts were frequented by both local and foreign tourists, but the infrastructure required modernization. At the same time, many restaurants were state-owned and offered a limited menu, although traditional Romanian cuisine was appreciated by tourists.

Table 1.

Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by type of structure

Tourist reception structures	Development regions of Romania	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2023
		Number						
Hotels	NORTH-WEST region	87	82	110	139	172	195	201
	CENTER region	109	110	124	172	277	271	268
	NORTH-EAST region	65	63	76	89	122	131	132
	SOUTH-EAST region	326	327	377	413	411	420	440
	SUD-MUNTENIA region	66	68	95	115	164	157	150
	BUCHAREST - ILFOV region	46	36	59	107	123	140	140
	SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA region	64	52	62	76	102	118	129
	WEST region	67	74	86	122	151	149	141
Tourist cabins	NORTH-WEST region	38	25	19	21	18	20	23
	CENTER region	78	59	30	47	76	74	67
	NORTH-EAST region	26	13	11	16	25	19	22
	SOUTH-EAST region	10	5	5	3	1	2	3
	SUD-MUNTENIA region	27	26	24	25	33	25	25
	BUCHAREST - ILFOV region	:	:	:	1	:	:	:
	SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA region	10	6	5	9	14	13	17
	WEST region	37	27	19	12	29	73	66
Tourist villas	NORTH-WEST region	86	46	73	49	52	67	78
	CENTER region	473	191	100	77	138	162	136
	NORTH-EAST region	70	33	38	28	37	47	54
	SOUTH-EAST region	503	334	356	468	270	286	290
	SUD-MUNTENIA region	151	99	49	48	61	65	69
	BUCHAREST - ILFOV region	83	4	6	5	9	12	12
	SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA region	109	42	44	49	35	52	56
	WEST region	76	52	50	44	41	61	61
Tourist guesthouses	NORTH-WEST region	:	23	54	100	157	187	200
	CENTER region	:	47	202	320	613	611	599
	NORTH-EAST region	:	23	68	126	218	271	239
	SOUTH-EAST region	:	26	55	61	59	87	91
	SUD-MUNTENIA region	:	30	68	104	171	161	137
	BUCHAREST - ILFOV region	:	20	30	15	13	10	11
	SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA region	:	8	33	67	102	145	142
	WEST region	:	24	87	156	194	257	223
Agritourism pensions	NORTH-WEST region	:	35	140	266	246	616	835
	CENTER region	:	242	418	487	813	967	988
	NORTH-EAST region	:	51	134	229	321	475	481
	SOUTH-EAST region	:	33	85	104	81	237	377
	SUD-MUNTENIA region	:	27	98	109	203	249	240
	BUCHAREST - ILFOV region	:	1	5	6	1	1	1
	SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA region	:	4	38	60	105	238	287
	WEST region	:	7	38	93	148	239	289

Source: Anuarul Statistic al României;2024 [15], http:tempo-online [16]

Guesthouses were smaller accommodation units, usually owned and operated by families. They offered a more intimate and personalized environment, being popular in rural and mountain areas, but they were often simple and provided modest facilities.

Cabins were accommodation structures specific to mountainous areas, located near tourist trails and ski slopes. They were especially intended for nature lovers and winter sports enthusiasts. These offered simple, yet adequate conditions for tourists eager for hiking and other mountain activities.

In 2000, tourist accommodation structures underwent various transformations and developments, reflecting an adaptation to the new market demands and emerging trends in tourism [15,16]. First of all, although there was a decrease in the number of accommodation units, both in urban and rural areas, significant investments were made in infrastructure and the modernization of accommodation spaces. Additionally, the year 2000 marked a diversification of the types of services offered by tourist accommodation structures. The main trends included a greater emphasis on niche tourism, such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, and wellness tourism. Accommodation units began to offer comprehensive packages that included recreational activities, guided tours, and spa treatments, thus attracting a more diverse and demanding clientele. This diversification was essential in adapting to the changing preferences of tourists and improving the overall visitor experience. Furthermore, technology played a crucial role in transforming tourist accommodation structures in 2000. The implementation of online booking systems and feedback platforms became increasingly common, facilitating tourists' access to information and quick bookings. These technological innovations contributed to greater transparency and improved service quality, allowing accommodation units to respond more efficiently to customers' needs and expectations. Thus, the year 2000 was a year of significant changes and adaptations in the tourist accommodation sector, preparing them for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

In 2010 and 2015 [15,16], Romania experienced a significant increase in the number of hotels (Table 3.1) reflecting the continued development of the tourism industry. This upward trend was influenced by several factors, including growing interest in Romanian tourist destinations, both from domestic and international tourists, as well as improvements in infrastructure and tourism services. The Romanian government and local authorities played a key role in this process by implementing various programs and initiatives to support the development of the hotel sector. These included tax incentives, streamlining administrative procedures, and promoting Romania as an attractive tourist destination at the international level. Additionally, private investors were motivated to invest in the construction of new hotels and the modernization of existing ones, due to the profit potential and increased demand. Large cities such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Brașov, as well as traditional tourist destinations like the Black Sea coast and mountain resorts, benefited the most from this expansion.

Another important factor was Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, which facilitated access to European funds for the development of tourism infrastructure and contributed to an increase in the flow of tourists from EU member countries. This growth was the result of a combination of economic, political, and social factors, which contributed to the development and diversification of the country's tourism offering. The evolution had a positive impact on the local economy and positioned Romania as an increasingly attractive tourist destination on the map of European and global tourism.

In 2015, tourist accommodation structures in Romania saw significant growth, reflecting an increasing interest in both domestic and international tourism. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (Tables 3.1) [15,16], tourist accommodation structures and, implicitly, tourist accommodation capacity increased, with some cases even

doubling compared to previous years. This growth was supported by both improvements in tourism infrastructure and more efficient promotion of Romanian tourist destinations in international markets. A notable trend in 2015 was the diversification of types of tourist accommodation. In addition to hotels and guesthouses, other forms of accommodation, such as vacation homes, and an increase in the number of tourist guesthouses and agritourism pensions, began to gain popularity. This allowed both local and international tourists to choose from a wider range of personalized options, depending on their preferences and budgets. The rise in alternative accommodation structures was also driven by an increasing demand for authentic and unique experiences. Moreover, the year 2015 also brought improvements in the quality of services provided by these structures, with many accommodation units investing in modernization and staff training to offer a superior tourist experience. This included modern amenities, additional facilities, and a greater focus on hospitality and comfort. Along with the increase in the number of tourists, these improvements contributed to a higher level of customer satisfaction and helped strengthen Romania's reputation as an attractive tourist destination.

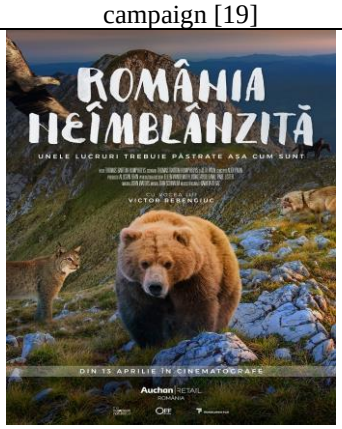
The year 2020 [15,16] posed major challenges for tourist accommodation structures but also brought significant and innovative changes in the way these services were offered and perceived. Tourist accommodations were strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many had to adjust their operations to comply with safety measures and restrictions imposed by authorities. Hotels were forced to implement strict hygiene measures and limit accommodation capacity to ensure social distancing. Some hotels offered contactless check-in and check-out options. Guesthouses, especially those in rural areas, saw a slight increase in popularity as tourists sought more isolated and safer destinations. However, these establishments were also subject to the same safety measures.

Romania is a country with spectacular landscapes, a rich history, and a vibrant culture. Over the years, there have been several tourism promotion campaigns that have successfully captured international attention and attracted a significant number of tourists. A successful campaign can be beneficial for promoting a country’s tourism. It not only attracts tourists and increases economic revenue but also contributes to improving the international image, preserving culture and heritage, diversifying the tourism product, and promoting sustainable development. Therefore, investing in a well-thought-out and executed marketing strategy is crucial for the long-term success of a country's tourism. The rise of social media and digital platforms has revolutionized the way destinations are marketed, allowing Romania to reach potential tourists across the world instantly. Campaigns like #DiscoverRomania and #TravelRomania (Table 2.) [17,19,19,20] have utilized visually captivating content to highlight the country’s scenic beauty, historical landmarks, and cultural heritage, sparking the interest of travelers looking for authentic and memorable experiences. Additionally, digital tools such as SEO optimization, online advertisements, and influencer partnerships [9] have played a pivotal role in amplifying the reach and effectiveness of these campaigns, engaging a younger, tech-savvy audience eager to explore new destinations.

However, while digital strategies have proven effective, they must be continuously adapted and refined to stay relevant in an ever-evolving digital landscape. The use of data analytics to understand audience preferences, monitor campaign success, and improve targeting is essential for refining future efforts. Romania’s tourism promotion strategy should remain dynamic, with a strong focus on the ongoing development of digital content, engagement with online communities, and collaborations with global travel influencers. In Table 2. are represented some of the most successful campaigns.

Table 2.

Marketing campaigns in international tourism

Campaign name	Visual representation	Description
”Explore the Carpathian Garden”	 Figure 1. The logo of the ”Explore the Carpathian Garden" campaign [17]	This campaign highlighted Romania’s stunning natural beauty, focusing on its majestic Carpathian Mountains, vast forests, and pristine landscapes. The aim was to showcase the country's untouched nature and promote ecotourism, attracting nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts.
”Romania, the Land of Choice”	 Figure 2. The logo of the "Visit Romania – Land of Choice" campaign [18]	Aimed at promoting Romania as a diverse and attractive tourist destination, this campaign showcased the country's rich cultural heritage, historical landmarks, and unique traditions. It presented Romania as a land of contrasts, where modern cities coexist with medieval towns, offering a variety of experiences for all kinds of tourists.
”Romania – Simply surprising”	 Figure 3. The logo of the "Romania – Simply surprising" campaign [19]	This campaign focused on Romania's lesser-known tourist attractions, such as its unique villages, hidden gems, and off-the-beaten-path destinations. The idea was to entice adventurous tourists who wanted to explore the more authentic and undiscovered sides of Romania, beyond the major tourist hotspots.
”Wild Romania”	 Figure 4. The logo of the ”Wild Romania”campaign [20]	The "Wild Romania" campaign focused on ecotourism and nature conservation. It highlighted the country's stunning wildlife and biodiversity, emphasizing Romania's unique natural habitats, such as the Danube Delta, the Apuseni Mountains, and other protected natural reserves. The campaign featured breathtaking documentary film showcasing the rich fauna and flora of these areas. These moovie were shared and presented at international events, raising awareness about Romania's pristine ecosystems and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

These campaigns have significantly contributed to increasing Romania's visibility on the international tourism map and succeeded in attracting tourists from all corners of the world, eager to discover the natural, historical, and cultural beauties of this country. The marketing campaigns created a positive and captivating image of Romania, emphasizing the diversity of its landscapes, from mountains and forests to the beaches of the Black Sea coast and the Danube Delta.

Through these initiatives, Romania managed to build a distinct tourist identity and attract visitors from important international markets such as Europe, Asia, and North

America. The campaigns utilized various promotion channels, including social media, dedicated tourism websites, international events, and collaborations with influencers and tourism ambassadors. Another positive outcome was the diversification of the types of tourists attracted to Romania, from nature lovers and ecotourism enthusiasts to those passionate about history, culture, and folk traditions. As a result, Romania became an increasingly appreciated destination, not only for its spectacular landscapes but also for the opportunities to explore medieval castles, painted churches, authentic traditions, and local cuisine. Furthermore, these campaigns encouraged greater involvement from local and regional authorities in promoting tourism, aiming to increase visitor numbers and improve tourism infrastructure. They also had a positive impact on the local economy, stimulating the growth of small businesses such as guesthouses, restaurants, and local guides.

Thus, the campaigns promoting Romanian tourism not only attracted a significant number of tourists but also succeeded in creating a positive image of Romania internationally, solidifying the country's position as a top tourist destination.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the effective use of digital strategies has proven to be a key driver in promoting Romania as a premier tourism destination. Through a combination of social media marketing, website optimization, partnerships with influencers, and targeted digital advertising campaigns, Romania has the opportunity to reach a global audience and enhance its tourism visibility. The findings from this study highlight that Romania’s digital tourism strategies, such as leveraging SEO, engaging content creation, and fostering online collaborations, can significantly impact tourist behavior, driving both domestic and international interest in its diverse attractions. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is not solely dependent on digital tools but also on how they are integrated into a broader, cohesive marketing framework. The data collected indicate that personalization, consistent branding, and sustainability practices are critical elements for success in the digital age. Additionally, learning from successful tourism campaigns in other countries and adapting their best practices could further enhance Romania’s digital tourism promotion efforts.

To maintain and improve this growth trajectory, continuous adaptation to emerging digital trends, a focus on high-quality user experiences, and ongoing engagement with both tourists and industry stakeholders will be essential. By embracing innovation and maintaining a strategic digital presence, Romania can position itself as a top global tourism destination, recognized for its rich cultural heritage, scenic landscapes, and unique travel experiences. The implementation of these digital strategies, backed by data-driven insights and a focus on sustainability, will be key to ensuring the long-term success of Romanian tourism. As digital marketing continues to evolve, Romania must remain agile and forward-thinking in its approach to attract and retain tourists in an increasingly competitive global market.

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