

Bezoek aan Boekarest. Reconstructing Bucharest through the virtual footprints of Dutch speaking tourists

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***Abstract.** Since the integration in the European Union, the number of Dutch and Belgium tourists visiting Romania increased steadily. Based on the data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, in 2014 roughly 78000 tourist from the Netherlands and 55000 tourists from Belgium visited Romania. Some of them wrote online about their travel experiences. Their stories are important because reviews and comments from former tourists can have a decisive influence on the decision of prospective tourists to visit or to not visit that specific destination. Through a qualitative research approach I take a look at some of these Dutch language website and blog entries of tourists who visited Bucharest. In this article the perspective of the Dutch speaking tourist is central to the process of reconstructing Bucharest through its online projection. The following questions are addressed in the article: What does Bucharest look like when reconstructed based on the comments written and on the pictures uploaded online by Dutch speaking tourists?; Is the city seen mainly through its architecture, its people, its green spaces, its clubs & cafe's or its food?; What adjectives do Dutch speaking tourists use in their online texts when describing Bucharest?; Are there signs of perceived otherness in the online discourse of Dutch speaking tourist talking about Bucharest?*

Keywords: Dutch, Bucharest, virtual, tourism.

Introduction

Netherlanders are quite fond of recreational travelling. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in 2013, 81% of the Dutch population went on vacation, spending a total of 15,4 billion euro. Half of the number of vacations was spent abroad. The most popular foreign destinations for Dutch tourists are France, Germany and Spain in the summer months and Austria and Germany in the winter months (CBS, 2014) but the Dutch spend longer vacations in the summer months. The preferred transportation form of Dutch travellers, for both long and short vacations abroad remains the auto, followed by the airplane (CBS, 2014). How many of these tourists choose to visit Romania? Based on the data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, in 2013 roughly 71000 tourist from the Netherlands and 48000 tourists from Belgium visited Romania. In 2014 these numbers went up to 78000 tourists from the Netherlands and 55000 tourists from Belgium (INSSE).

Some of these tourists wrote about their travel experiences online. Their stories are important for prospective tourists documenting a possible holiday destination. Reviews and comments from former tourists can have a decisive influence on the decision to visit or to not visit that specific destination. Many studies researching recreational travel focus on the effects that online travel testimonies have on the intention to visit a tourist destination of future tourists (for example Yu-Chen Chen et al., 2013; Del Chiappa, 2011). Other authors (for example Tussydia and Fesenmaier, 2007, 2009) concentrate on how travel journals can be used as reliable sources of tourist behaviour.

Travellers can research a number of online sources when documenting their prospective destinations. Official tourism bureaus and travel companies have their own websites where they present touring packages. Because they serve a commercial purpose, the content presented here is most of the time idealized and standardized even if some of these forms of online presence also have specialized sections for user opinions, where users/clients/tourists can post opinions and give ratings to a certain destination. Tourists can also post their travel experiences in the form of text, pictures, videos and combinations of these three on blogs (web logs), social networking sites and other sharing platforms.

Travelling as an act of consumption

Tourism or recreational travel can be seen as a form of product consumption (Richards, 1996). In regard to all sorts of purchases, travelling destinations thus included, “interpersonal influence arising from opinion exchange between consumers is an important factor influencing consumers’ purchase decisions. Word-of-mouth or advice from friends and relatives often ranks as the most influential source of pre-purchase information” (Crotts, 1999 cited in Bing et al., 2006). Word-of-mouth is generally understood as “the communication between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence” (Litvin et al., 2008, 459). With the help of the Internet, this circle of friends and relatives spreading word of mouth has become larger and larger, reaching global size. The Internet facilitated the development of what Narayan (2001) calls bridging social capital, creating

larger and larger networks through weak ties Granovetter (1973). The Internet made it possible that in a very short period of time a piece of information can reach global spread through digital word-of-mouth. The Internet is thus a prime source of information for travellers and travel blogs can be seen as a digital word-of-mouth (Bing et al., 2006) or electronic-word-of-mouth – eWOM – (Litvin et al., 2008).

Litvin et al. (2008) also focused on the way blog entries can shape future consumer behaviour for the same destination by interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth. Based on the consumption experience connected with previous consumption expectations, there can be positive or negative word-of-mouth. For Litvin et al. (2008) these testimonies are that more trustworthy for prospective tourists because they are a result of product consumption while at the same time serving no commercial purpose. It must be noted here that in certain cases a commercial entity might sponsor in some form a person from the general public to make a review for a certain product (in this case a destination). For example, in some cases, individuals are offered paid vacations to a certain location if they agree to be filmed for the duration of their visit and be part of a reality show. Readers should thus try to be aware of the possible commercial purpose of some product/destination reviews.

If prospective tourists search for information on the Internet in order to make up their mind about visiting a destination, they use this medium as an instrument in the decision making process. For this large part of readers, online travel-related-content usage serves an utilitarian purpose. But why do creators of online-travel-related-content spend their time in order to create decision filtering instruments for others? For most online content creators and also some of the online travel related content readers, blog usage also brings inherent enjoyment (Chen et al., 2013). Some motivations for online content creation are: entertainment/ passing time, self-expression and social interaction (Papacharissi 2002).

Returning to the topic that these content creators write about, namely a place, I adhere to the perspective of place as a social construction: “Places exist, and are constructed, from a subjective point of view; while simultaneously they are constructed and seen as an external ‘other’ by outsiders” (Knox and Pinch, 2006, 194). In this article the place referred to as *Boekarest* (Bucharest) is analysed through the travel impressions of Dutch speaking tourists.

Methodology

Through a qualitative research approach I take a look at some of the Dutch language website and blog entries of tourists who visited Bucharest. In this article the perspective of the Dutch speaking tourist is central to the process of reconstructing Bucharest through its online projection. This method can be included in what Kozinets calls netnography (Kozinets, 2002) or what Hine calls virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000).

Following the approach proposed by Tussydia and Fesenmaier (2007), the data analysed in this article was selected based on purposive sampling. More specifically, this meant the selection of travel reports about Bucharest written in Dutch and their subsequent filtering according to the rule that the entries had to be based on the writer’s personal experiences. I searched for Internet results containing the Dutch words for “visit/visiting Bucharest”, “things to do/see in Bucharest” and derivations hereof. In the search I came across more tourism websites than personal (travel) blogs. I only analysed personal entries following a trip to Bucharest, and I eliminated general, informative

online articles. From these refined results I analyzed 19 websites containing travel reports and travel reviews. The demographic information of the content writer was not researched. All quotes mentioned in the following pages and marked with inverted commas were translated from Dutch to English by the author of this paper.

A first observation is the fact that many travel reports written in Dutch are about Romania in general, not specifically about Bucharest, as Dutch visitors coming to Romania by car or bus mostly visit the western part of the country. This article investigates only text and image based impressions of Dutch speaking tourists referring to Bucharest. Another relevant remark is that some Dutch tourists write their travel story directly in English, given the good command of the English language that most Netherlanders have. This article seeks to examine a less researched angle of the Dutch tourism pattern to Romania, by analysing Dutch language travel stories about Bucharest.

Findings

What does Bucharest look like when reconstructed based on the pictures that Dutch speaking tourists upload online? Is the city seen mainly through its architecture, its people, its green spaces, its clubs & cafe's or its food? By far most of the photographs in the travel reports are of architectural objectives/ buildings. Bucharest is experienced by Dutch speaking tourists mostly through its architecture. The most frequently mentioned attraction is by far the Parliament Palace (the former House of the People). Other very often mentioned and photographed attractions are: Lipscani, the parks, The Romanian Peasant Museum, the churches, The Village Museum and the Romanian Athenaeum. The *Cărturești Carusel* bookstore is also an often mentioned and photographed architectural attraction.

The analysed photographs present a positive view, serving thus as positive recommendations or positive digital word-of-mouth. However, when speaking about the architecture of the city in general, *communism* is a word often mentioned in the analysed travel stories, in the construction "communist architecture" (*communistiche architectuur*). The word is often used as an explanation for the size and the standardization of the city architecture taken as a whole.

Dutch tourists' travel experiences include all aspects of consumption, from architecture, shopping, city's general feel, food and drinks and social interaction: "A lot of beautiful old buildings. The Parliament Palace is very impressive. On Lipscani there is always something to do. Food and drink are delicious and affordable. People are super friendly" (online comment). However, food doesn't seem to be a central attraction in Bucharest. Tourist mention the fact that food and drinks are very cheap: "spicy little sausages (mici). Really delicious and they cost very little", "A lot to see and uncountable terraces", "Nice pubs and clubs" (online comments).

Adjectives used by tourists in their online texts indicate how Bucharest is experienced by Dutch speaking visitors. Reviews include "Nice city with friendly people", "Rather safe" and "chaotic" (online comments). Bucharest is often compared with Braşov, and the latter is often seen as more beautiful. Many tourists mention the feeling of going back in time when visiting Bucharest: "This city feels, on the one side, as if time stood still for 30 years [...] and on the other side the city also found the 21st century", "A step back in time, a developing city", "I had the feeling that I travelled through a time machine" (online comments).

“Contrast” is a word often used in the discourse of Dutch tourists when referring to Bucharest: “Bucharest is a city full of contrasts. One neighborhood is very nice as a whole, another one is awful“. The idea of contrast is also expressed indirectly: “Bucharest is not a beautiful city. It is fascinating though to see how the western shops are mashed together out of the ground” (online comment). Another often used word in the Dutch tourist discourse about Bucharest is “cheap” (*goodkoop*).

Expectations and experiences

The consumption experience includes various phases (Craig-Smith and French, 1994): before consumption (expectations), during consumption and after consumption (reflections). The analysed travel reports (texts and photos) are part of the reflective stage of travel, a moment when remembrance sets in, after getting back to the known, comfortable “home setting”. Writing about travel impressions in this phase has the advantage of more time available for analysis, information processing and reshaping text. Other sources of travel impressions are short films uploaded by creators on YouTube, where real time impressions can be analysed. Reactions during the real time consumption act can differ from post factum analysis and this is why I suggest a separate analysis of the different moments of consumption. My future research plans on this topic include an analysis of real time travel impressions in the form of video logs uploaded by Dutch speaking tourists on YouTube.

Many times the experience itself comes into conflict with the anticipated experience, or expectations. An example of conflict between expectations and the consumption experience can be found in the following review posted online by a Dutch student visiting Bucharest with his other 22 colleagues: “Bucharest seems to be everything except the third world [city] that I had in my mind before making this journey. We stepped out of the bus and [saw] on the other side an enormous shopping mall with a neon billboard that made you think of New York” (online comment). A similar idea can be found in the opening line of a tourist’s story about Bucharest on a travel related website. Before making a list of 5 recommendations of things to see/do in Bucharest, he mentions the following: “if you want to go on a city trip, Bucharest is probably not your first thought” (online comment). Another tourists states: “The city is bigger than I had expected” (online comment). Amazement is also expressed about the large shopping malls from Bucharest and the brands found here. In some cases this gap between expectations and experience can suggest that the number of Dutch tourists could increase if the image of Bucharest in the minds of prospective tourists would be made to resemble reality. This gap can be connected with the general image that Romania has for the Dutch public.

Perceived otherness

“Chaos” is an often used word in the stories of Dutch tourists relating about Bucharest. Chaos refers to a state of disorder (opposed to the order known by the word user) and using this word suggests a perceived image of otherness. Examples in this regard are: “It’s a chaotic and hectic city but surely worthwhile to really discover” and “[...] chaotic manner in which things often run in Romania. Bucharest is a strange city. I had no feeling of walking through a capital. It’s a city with little shine, if you compare it with other large cities”. Chaos is also used to characterize the car traffic in Bucharest. Several complaints about the travel experience in the city traffic were found. The

Bucharest traffic is perceived as chaotic by Dutch tourists. Advice is given by former tourists regarding the use of taxis in Bucharest as taxi drivers are said to sometimes overcharge tourists.

Tourists complain about the apparent disorder of the traffic, the noise and the taxis: “the taxi is a whole experience. The drivers ride as blind men in the traffic, without once paying attention”, “[Referring to the “Universitate” Square] An enormous chaos, parking places in the middle of the intersection and everything honks and *bromes*”. Another tourist states: “Keep in mind that the traffic in Bucharest is very busy. Romanians love honking, crawling into every hole, driving through red and blocking the intersection. As gallant as the Romanian is at home, as macho he or she is in the city traffic. Three lanes easily become five, direction is often not indicated, pedestrian crossings have no precedence etc.” Another Dutch tourist compares the traffic in Bucharest to a Formula 1 circuit. However, the metro network is appreciated as being “excellent”. Standing in line is also perceived as being different in the story of another Dutch tourist, as she understands neither the moving of the railway employee from one locket to another nor the cutting in line that goes on in front of the lockets.

Final remarks

Just like online materials can serve an instructional purpose when used in such regard (Porumb, 2015) so too can online travel testimonies serve the instruction process for prospective tourists. The gap between projection/ expectations and experimentation can be reduced through previous instruction with the use of online travel stories. Since the number of Dutch tourists has increased over the last years, it can be expected that the number of online Dutch language travel stories will also increase. Replicating tourist experiences previously documented online can lead to a closed circuit of visiting patterns, a sort of monopoly. This is why a diversification of the travel stories could lead to different visiting patterns, if other attractions would be discovered by the future incoming tourists.

Digital word-of-mouth represents an online link between the three entities directly interested in the travelling activity: the first hand information source (the content creator), the information seeker (the reader and prospective tourist) and the entities based in that specific location, that are economically impacted by the number of visiting tourists. For content creators, the act of uploading their impressions online can serve an aesthetic purpose as well as a social purpose. For content seekers, the act of reading serves both an informative and a recreational purpose. Digital word-of-mouth about a travel destination is nowadays an important marketing instrument for travel agencies and other economic entities from a certain location.

To summarize, based on the analysed online comments, reviews and photos, Bucharest is mostly *seen* by tourists through its architecture, the Parliament Palace being the most visited and the most recommended attraction. The Parliament Palace is central to the image of Bucharest. The city is also heard (in a negative sense) through its traffic. It is a city for autos, not for pedestrians or bikers. It is a cheap destination. For Dutch speaking tourists, the online reconstructed Bucharest is quite small, restrained to the centre and the well-known tourist attractions. It is a city full of contrasts. It's chaotic. To the Dutch tourist it gives the feeling of going back to the past. People are considered friendly and helpful.

“Boekarest. Een stad die moeilijk te beschrijven is.” (Bucharest. A city that is difficult to describe.)

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