

Characteristics of Romanian Travel Bloggers and Generated Content During COVID-19



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Abstract Tourism plays a vital role in the global economy and its promotion relies on a variety of methods, including advertising, social media, and blogging. Traditional travel writing has evolved into digital platforms such as blogs, micro-blogs, and travel apps, changing the way travellers document their journeys. This paper examines the phenomenon of travel blogging and its impact on the tourism industry, focusing on Romanian travel bloggers. We used content analysis to explore our research objectives: to understand the demographics of bloggers, to explore their travel interests, to analyse the topics covered, and to assess the effectiveness of travel blogs. This is particularly important given the challenges facing the tourism industry during the pandemic. In addition, our findings highlight the importance of travel-related blog posts, such as those discussing travel conditions and restrictions during the pandemic. These findings are valuable in both stable and disrupted travel industry contexts. In conclusion, this study reveals the evolving role of travel blogs and their importance in destination development and highlights the adaptability and relevance of travel blogs in different tourism scenarios.

Keywords Blogs · Blogging · Content analysis · Tourism · Travelling

1 Introduction

In the early 2000s, blogging became a fast-spreading phenomenon with a huge global impact. Thus, it began to play the role of influencing the population on various areas, such as daily routines, personal experiences [1, p 81].

Blog is “a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser” [2, p 115] or a new form of mainstream personal communication, suitable for exchanging information as well as building different relationships [3, 4]. Reading and participating in blogs can be seen

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as relaxing, entertaining, enthusiastic activities that are undertaken in one's spare time [2].

With the emergence of new media, communication has taken on another form, a digital one, of which the blog is one. New media emerged as powerful communication and development tools, adding to the potency of mobile telecommunications as drivers of economic and democratic change. New media technologies have significant impacts on organizational, professional and individual reputations [5, p 174]. With the success of social media [6], blogs have also enjoyed a significant growth in the online environment [7, 8]. Some of the most relevant functions of blogs are interactivity, easy access to information, anonymity, low cost and global [4, p 151]. Some of the most important aspects of blogs that have led to such success are the unedited content and the social dimension, in comparison with the first versions of blogs [1, 9], which contained opinions, views, experiences of the authors related to many aspects of their daily life, travels, experiences. Over time, blogs have become more than just online journals, and are now an essential business tool [7, p 60].

Blogs allow users or readers to express their opinions in comments, interact with other users or even with the author of the blog. More and more people are looking to interact online, as it is a simpler, more convenient interaction. Scholars have called this type of bloggers "ordinary bloggers" because they are motivated to create content to interact with their readers, but also to seek information for their own development and documentation [10, p 170]. A blog can be viewed as a many-to-many and asynchronous platform that provides a personal, interactive process for communication and e-WOM exchange and produces interpersonal influences [11, p 788].

Therefore, the aim of the paper is to present demographic analysis of Romanian travel bloggers, followed by the content analysis of blog articles and the effectiveness of blogs, using an adapted research model [21].

2 Literature Review

Even though all blogs are an author's online diary, there are several types of blogs. The blogosphere is the category that encompasses all types of blogs, they are subcategories. Because blogs are often used for information and communication, each of the readers has different interests, so authors must please all readers. People who have a keen interest in fashion will look for blogs that deal with this [12, p. 65]. Those interested in education will look for blogs where they will find the necessary information on education [13]. Also, travel blogs are just a subcategory of the many types of blogs that the blogosphere holds under its wings [14]. According to Schmallegger and Carson [15], there are four broad general categories of blogs: consumer-to-consumer, business-to-business, business-to-consumer, government-to-consumer.

Tourism is one of the most sought-after and interesting topics that users search for [15, p 100]. Travel blogs have evolved very rapidly [16], which has been due to the higher perceived credibility of consumer opinions as compared to traditional tourist

information sources [15, p 100]. In turn, travel blogs are divided into individual, corporate, collaborative and traditional. The individual travel blog is the one that reflects personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, photos related to the experience. Collaborative travel blogs are blogs owned by those who offer travel services and post details about travel services, travel tips, even guidebooks. Traditional travel blogs are written by bloggers who post details about travel regularly with updated information, or even about problems experienced as a tourist [17, p 15].

The most popular and obvious travel blogs are those where travellers post their photos, videos showing sights or something remarkable from their experience, recommendations or descriptions of specific products, dishes, restaurants, hotels and more. In countries such as New Zealand, Canada, Sweden and Austria there are travel blogs, written by a travel blogger and posted on the destinations' official websites. This greatly increases their credibility by being seen on official websites [15, p 101].

The topics covered in travel blogs offer a personal touch to the trip, more concrete descriptions of sights, activities, which is not often found in travel forums or other review sites. There the focus is on transport, accommodation, restaurants or other services. Blogs are easy to read, encourage interaction, exchange of ideas, information, experiences, feelings after visiting a destination, which is not allowed on any travel or review site. Bloggers also write about the anticipations they made before going on the trip, the actual experience when they arrived at the destination, and the overall impression at the end of the trip [18, p 300].

Therefore, blogs are a highly popular resource for gathering information both prior to selecting a travel destination and during the trip itself. They offer valuable insights into destinations as described by bloggers, helping users find experiences that align with their preferences.

3 Methodology and Research Approach

Volo [18] analysed the value of travel blogs and how they can influence travel decisions. As a research method, content analysis was used and applied on 103 travel blogs with articles about "South Tyrol", a province in Italy. In addition, it also analysed 246 comments on articles about the region to find out if they have the potential to influence future tourists. Both Italian blogs (71), and international blogs (32) were analysed, and the results showed that the Italian blogs had a greater potential to influence the travel decision, the comments also contain recommendations, advice, but do not contain the "essence of the experience". In another study [19], content analysis was used to find out if travel blogs are beneficial, if they bring results to travel companies, and at the same time the strengths and weaknesses of this method were highlighted for this study. It was shown that travel blogs can bring to the attention of the company what their opinions are about the destination, the offer that has been made to them.

The objectives of this research are to present the characteristics and interests of bloggers in Romania; to analyse the topics covered and to identify the effectiveness of blogs. The content analysis procedure we used is frequency analysis. Frequency analysis is the number of occurrences of variables in a sample [20, p 419]. It measures the frequency of an idea, theme, quotation marks or symbols. Following the analysis, it will be possible to see whether there is concern for the topic in the blog or not. Using the methodological design [21], the first part of the research is the demographic analysis of Romanian travel bloggers, followed by the content analysis of blog articles and the effectiveness of blogs.

The research universe [22] involves determining the objects to be researched. Thus, the universe of the research is the ranking that includes the best travel and tourism blogs in 2019 according to the ranking published by Biz Magazine in collaboration with Zelist, which annually deliver “Digital Report” [23], a synthesis of the online environment in Romania. Out of the total of 22 travel blogs from the Digital Report 2019 ranking [23, p. 94], a selection criterion was used regarding the approach of the COVID-19 topic during the analysis period within the content of the blogs [16], thus the volume of the sample being set to 20 blogs. The *corpus* of analysis includes the following travel blogs from Romania: adventurescu.ro, bloguldecalatorii.ro, extravita.ro, călătoruldigital.ro, impertortravel.ro, lipa-lipa.ro, lumeamare.ro, mihaijurca.ro, povestidecalatorie.ro, prinlume.com, ralucacalatoreste.ro, răzvanpascu.ro, simonamocanu.ro, tedoo.ro, tickettonomadland.com, travelwihasmile.net, travelzoom.ro, turismmarket.com, visatorprinlume.ro and xplorio.ro.

The period for which the blogs were analysed is 10 April to 10 June 2022. The research focuses on reasons for travel, tourist attractions visited, modes of transport, season of travel, topics covered by the author (whether providing details of accommodation or describing the destination visited).

Using the coding scheme adapted from Wegner [21, p 172], we were able to identify the main topics addressed by the bloggers during the research period, and these are grouped into categories. Thus, the first unit of context is the one related to the characteristics of bloggers in Romania, in particular demographic data related to age and gender [24]. The second unit of context is represented by the content of the articles, namely: tourist attractions visited, season of visit, accommodation offers, means of transport, as well as information about Covid-19, being the main disruptive factor of tourism in the last two years [25]. And the third unit of context relates to the effectiveness of blogs, as some blogs taken into analysis have been affected by the pandemic.

4 Results

The first part of the research is an analysis of the characteristics of Romanian bloggers. The indicators used (units of analysis) refer to age, gender and the number of authors who are blogging. The age of the blog authors varies from 20 to 50 years old. Another theme addressed is the number of blogging authors. Most blogs in the ranking used

are written by a single author (16), and the other four blogs are written by several authors.

After presenting the demographics of bloggers in Romania, the next section analysed the content of their blogs. The Romanian bloggers prefer to visit the country's nature parks. Among these nature parks there are some that have been visited by many bloggers, such as the Danube Delta. This category also includes lakes, caves, forests, caves, hills. Outdoor attractions include statues, monuments, towers and other tourist attractions that do not require indoor access. Given that the period of analysis is a pandemic period, this preference for outdoor visits may be because travellers could not access museums or other tourist attractions indoors, as they were closed or access was restricted [26], they finally opted for nature walks, where there are no access restrictions.

On the other hand, although the analysis period also includes a part of the summer season, trips to the seaside rank last. The preference for the mountain over the sea can be seen as an avoidance of crowding, avoiding the risk of infection. It can therefore be said that Romanian bloggers have been responsible in terms of complying with the measures imposed because of the virus, avoiding the crowds formed at the sea and opting instead for nature hikes. There are some trips that can be done regardless of the season or the weather outside. Museums, castles, places that require indoor access can be visited in all seasons. Content analysis shows spring's preference for visits. The second place is occupied by summer, and winter being the favourite season for winter sports lovers, the ideal season to visit different towns located in the mountains, to experience different slopes, occupies the third place.

Cultural activities, visiting various attractions are in first place, and the next place is occupied by mountain activities. In the "Relaxation" category, only outdoor activities in nature are listed. There are some articles on the blogs analysed which only present accommodation options in different areas or cities. But there are also articles where bloggers have visited certain tourist attractions, been to different cities and recommend the guesthouse, hotel or cottage they stayed at. There is a significant difference in choosing guesthouses over hotels. Hotels were mainly chosen by winter sports enthusiasts, with chalets coming second.

Regarding the means of transport used to reach the destination, few authors felt the need to specify how to reach the destination. Thus, only three blogs mention the means of transport by which the travellers can reach the places, i.e., the car is their preferred means of transport.

Because at the time of the analysis there were still restrictions and measures in place due to the Covid-19 virus, it is an important factor to know to what extent the bloggers' activity was affected. In the category "Travel conditions" we identified discussions about colour codes used to access various areas, information about vaccination, PCR tests, European digital certificate of vaccination, and in the category "Restrictions" we found information about quarantine, wearing a mask, access to different places (e.g., restaurants, museums, etc.).

In the blog selection used for analysis, there were a few blogs (3) that had no articles posted at the time the research was conducted. There were blogs that were affected by the pandemic, as no activity had been identified since 2020, but there

were also blogs that had ceased activity prior to the pandemic, the reasons for which are unknown. Therefore, the effectiveness of the blog is an important topic to be analysed to find out whether the articles written have the capacity to help readers or influence them to choose different destinations. There are blogs (7) that generated less than five articles posted during the research period, which suggests that most of the bloggers in the ranking were affected by the pandemic, with low blog activity. However, there are also blogs (4) that have more than 10 articles posted during the research period, which shows that they have overcome the difficult period in tourism due to Covid-19, with constant blog activity. Three blogs have between 5 and 10 articles posted during the research period, so their activity was partially affected by Covid-19.

5 Discussion

Following the application of the research tool, we were able to identify and observe the characteristics of bloggers in Romania regarding their demographics, their interests and the topics they have addressed.

Therefore, the demographic data reveals that most of the blogs in the ranking used [23] are written by people aged 30–40, followed by those aged 20–30, and at the end are those aged 40–50. Female individuals engage in blogging more than male individuals.

Regarding the topics covered, we identified that both female and male bloggers prefer nature trips, especially nature parks, with 41 appearances of this indicator in blogs. As for the preferred season for visiting, this is spring, followed by summer, with women preferring both seasons, aged between 20–30 and 30–40. Bloggers also like to provide information on accommodation options, recommendations for those visiting the respective areas, and guesthouses are preferred by bloggers. In general, guesthouses are preferred by women and men aged 30–40, followed by women aged 20–30.

The subject of means of transport is not frequently addressed by bloggers, with only three blogs specifying the means of transport used to reach the destination, but the car emerges as the preferred means of transport for women. Although there were many blogs where the main topics were about travel and tourist attractions, there are also exceptions where information about travel restrictions and conditions predominated. For the most part, these two topics were covered by women and men aged 30–40.

Considering the degree of effectiveness of a blog of at least 10 articles posted during the period of analysis, we observe that this was met by only four blogs, with women aged 20–30 having more than 10 articles posted during the period of analysis. Most blogs generated less than five articles, being owned by women and men aged 30–40.

6 Conclusion

Blogs are a useful element of expression and communication, an easy tool for readers to keep up to date with the different information they need and a key element of tourism. Even though tourism has been put to the test by the pandemic period, some travel bloggers have proved to be resilient and able to overcome the difficult period and keep their blogs as active as possible, even if they have travelled less than before the pandemic. They have adapted to the situation, informing readers with information about travel conditions, restrictions, etc. Unfortunately, not all bloggers have managed to cope with the unprecedented period tourism has encountered, and they have given up blogging.

In conclusion, from this research we can highlight that women are the most likely bloggers, aged between 20–30 and 30–40 years respectively; however, it is not an obvious criterion for the success of a blog. Bloggers have tackled different topics, have undertaken many activities, mainly those of visiting, but the pandemic was still felt by most of the bloggers analysed, most of them having less than five articles posted during the research period.

While the premise of our research initially focused on the impact of the pandemic on Romanian travel bloggers, the findings and methodology employed in our paper hold relevance beyond this specific crisis. The study focuses on the demographics of bloggers, their travel interests, and the effectiveness of blogs as a communication tool. For instance, the results can serve as a baseline for future research, allowing us to track changes in travel blogging trends over time. Additionally, the methods we used, such as content analysis, can be adapted to explore various industries and niches, offering a comprehensive understanding of how bloggers influence their respective fields.

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