

# THE ROLE OF MOBILE APPS IN DESTINATION MARKETING AND BRANDING

István BENEDEK

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences  
benedek.istvan@fspac.ro,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9952-8870>

Tamás SZÖLLŐSI

National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary, Public Administration Doctoral School  
office.szollosit@gmail.com,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2743-0217>

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID120227>

## ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the millennium, mobile applications have played an increasingly important role in destination marketing and branding. Official destination apps are specific media channels designed to communicate the unique characteristics of a destination and influence visitors' perceptions of the place. To date, no prior research has been carried out to analyse the use of destination mobile apps in Romania. The current paper tries to fill in this gap in the literature and provide an analysis of destination mobile apps of Romanian counties using a revised framework based on literature review and earlier studies.

Keywords: destination marketing, destination branding, digital branding, mobile apps, m-tourism

---

Cite this article as: Benedek, I., Szöllősi, T. (2022). The Role of Mobile Apps in Destination Marketing and Branding. *Territorial Identity and Development*, 7(1), 95-108. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID120227>

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the current tourist scene, places and especially destinations compete against each other in an increasingly globalised market (Garcia, Gómez & Molina, 2012). In order to successfully compete, destinations need to work on developing a strong brand identity through effective positioning. In other words, having a strong brand can significantly enhance the competitiveness of a certain place or destination (Miličević, Mihalič & Sever, 2017; Hanna, Rowley & Keegan, 2021). Since the turn of the millennium, academics and practitioners began to agree that places in general, and destinations in particular can be branded just like consumer goods and services. This has led to an increasing interest in destination branding as a research topic (Giannopoulos, Piha & Skourtis, 2021). Branding has become a significant part of the development of destinations.

As Oliveira and Panyik argued:

“in order to be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination must be favourably differentiated from its competitors, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers and potential visitors” (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015, p. 57).

Since the mid-2000s, mobile applications have played an increasingly important role in destination marketing and branding. The official destination apps are specific media channels designed to communicate the unique characteristics of a destination and influence visitors’ perceptions of the place. Nonetheless, little research has been carried out until recently to investigate the use of these communication platforms in destination branding strategies. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no prior research analysed the use of destination mobile apps in a Romanian context. Thus, the current study provides valuable information on the current state of mobile communication from a destination marketing and branding perspective, and it also offers the possibility to evaluate and compare the performance of these digital platforms.

The paper is organised into the following sections: the first part is the literature review with dedicated subsections to the topics of destination marketing and branding, digital marketing and branding in tourism, and the role of mobile apps in the tourism sector. The second part is centred around the research including the research objectives, methodology and the results. The third, and final part of this paper consists of the practical and theoretical implications of our research, limitations of the current research and future research recommendations.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Destination marketing and branding

It is common for practitioners and researchers to use destination marketing and destination branding as interchangeable concepts. While the two terms are closely related, the authors of the current paper argue that a clear distinction is necessary to better understand them. In the view of Gnoth (2007), destination marketing can be understood as the application of different marketing tools to lever the destination experience and to maximise benefits for the place. From a different perspective:

“destination marketing is the process of communicating with potential visitors to influence their destination preference, their intention to travel, and ultimately their final destination and product choices” (Pike, 2020, p. 11).

The concept of destination marketing is well established in tourism and hospitality research. As Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2012) explain, places can become destinations through the narratives and images communicated. This means that a destination can only exist through its marketing activity. Thus, it is a common practice for destinations to establish a dedicated institution, responsible for the marketing and branding activities of the place. These institutions are the so-called Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs). A Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) is:

“the entity officially recognized by stakeholders as being responsible for coordinating the tourism marketing communications for a geographic boundary” (Pike, 2020, p. 25).

It is a vital function of a DMO to position the destination in the minds of the visitors by creating a strong, distinctive, specific, and attractive brand identity (Hanna, Rowley & Keegan, 2021).

This process of positioning and differentiating a destination is called destination branding. This is reflected in the work of Campelo (2019) who states that destination branding “is the branding activity that positions places to be visited and consumed” (Campelo, 2019, p. 15). The earliest definition of destination branding is attributed to Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), which was later revised by Blain and her colleagues (2005), who defined the concept as:

“a set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word, mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk” (Blain, Levy & Brent Ritchie, 2005, p. 337).

However, it should be noted here that the current view about place branding and destination branding is more consumer-oriented. This consumer-oriented approach is reflected in the work of many scholars that usually cite the definition provided by Zenker and Braun, who suggested:

“place brand is a network of associations in the place consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, and its’ stakeholders” (Zenker & Braun, 2017, p. 275).

The authors of the current paper tend to agree with this latter approach. It can therefore be argued that a destination brand can be viewed as a network of associations engendered in the minds of actual and potential tourists, while destination branding is the process of defining a strong brand identity that has the power to influence these associations and the overall image of the destination.

Another current theme emerging in the literature of place branding and destination branding is the identity-based approach of the brand. This is highlighted among others, in the work of Saila Saraniemi (2011), who states that we can think about the concept of destination brand in several ways. We can interpret the destination brand as a holistic and co-created identity, or as a subjective impression that is based on the identities of the destination as well. Furthermore, it should be noted here that the identity of a destination is determined by the interactions between stakeholders and consumers. As a result, identity is more of a fluid and dynamic construct as opposed to a static one, thus:

“destinations should be viewed as an evolving brand process and not a fixed and completed identity” (Saraniemi, 2011, p. 253).

We can argue that destinations are more complex and varied constructs compared to products and services, thus destination branding has some unique characteristics as opposed to commercial branding (Lund, Cohen & Scarles, 2018), where companies market products and services with full control in terms of production, distribution, and marketing communication. Other major differences are related to the lack of control regarding the brand experience, the lack of stability of destination brands compared to product brands, the complexity of the tourist decisional process, and the impossibility to test the destination before (Almeyda-Ibanez & George, 2017).

Other relevant challenges of destination branding include the complexity of the tourism offering, the lack of control over the branding process, and the large number of stakeholders involved in the branding initiatives as well. These stakeholder groups involved in the branding process can have different interests, goals, and vision about the future of the place as a destination. Moreover, a single organisation, such as a local DMO cannot exercise full control over the whole branding process. Several studies (Green, Grace & Perkins, 2016; Perkins, Khoo-Lattimore & Arcodia, 2020) suggest that the right approach would be the active participation of

residents and local stakeholders in the co-creation of the destination brand. Giannopoulos and his colleagues (2021) argued that:

“co-creation is the *raison d’être* of effective destination management, where operand and operant resources are commonly shared between the actors along the destination branding process” (Giannopoulos, Piha & Skourtis, 2021, p. 158).

While it can be difficult to distinguish between destination marketing and destination branding, there are a number of authors who suggest that these terms should not be used interchangeably. The authors of the current paper argue in favour of a clear distinction between these two terms, in order to better understand them. Chan and Marafa (2019) cited the work of Hospers (2007), who argued that the main difference could be explained in the following manner: destination marketing is based on an *outside-in-approach*, while destination branding adopts an *inside-out-approach*. In other words, while the former is a more market-oriented activity, the latter is based on the identity of the place itself.

The main task of destination marketing is to balance the supply and demand, while the main task of destination branding is the creation and management of brand identity and place reputation (Boisen et al., 2018). Therefore, we can conclude that a destination’s branding should precede its marketing activity because a well-defined brand identity is necessary for a successful marketing campaign.

#### Digital marketing and branding in tourism

From a communication perspective, one of the key issues for destinations is the consistency of the communication across a wide spectrum of information sources. These platforms may have different communication goals, and it is also possible that they convey different types of destination images (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). Digital marketing has several advantages for organisations in tourism industry, like the lower costs, better efficiency, opportunities to enhance consumer experience, possibilities to reach a worldwide market, and the 24/7 availability.

The 5D of digital marketing (George, 2021) highlights the main possibilities for online users to interact with, and for businesses involved in tourism to reach out to their target groups. According to this framework, the first component is **(1) digital devices**, which refers to the fact that users experience brands through a combination of digital devices, including smartphones, tablets, and desktop computers. The second component is **(2) digital platforms**. These interactions between the supply and demand side take place on popular social media platforms, like Facebook, YouTube, or Instagram. The third element of the framework is called **(3) digital media**. This refers to those communication channels that offer the possibility for tourism businesses to reach out to their audience. A possible classification of these communication channels distinguishes between paid, owned, earned, and shared media.

The fourth element, **(4) digital data** is also crucial for success, because tourism businesses can offer more personalised experiences based on the data they can collect about their customers in the online environment. Finally, **(5) digital technology** refers to the marketing technology that tourism businesses are using in order to create interactive experiences including offline and online platforms as well.

The actors of the tourism sector usually refer to their digital marketing efforts in terms of the four types of media channels they have at their disposal: the paid, owned, earned, and shared

media. This classification is based mainly on content marketing that builds on how and by whom marketing content is created, controlled, and distributed (Kotler et al., 2022). The first category is **(1) paid media**, which includes the promotional channels paid for by the marketer. Paid media can be divided into two main categories: traditional media, such as television, radio, print or outdoor advertising; and non-traditional or online media, including paid social media ads, mobile ads, display ads, or search ads as well. In comparison, **(2) owned media** refers to those communication channels that are owned and controlled by the marketers, including websites, blogs, social media pages, events, or mobile apps as well. The third category consists of **(3) earned media**, also called PR media channels, such as television, print media, blogs, and other media not directly paid for or controlled by the marketers.

Finally, **(4) shared media** is the media shared by users with other users, mainly on social media platforms, but word-of-mouth can also be considered as a form of traditional shared media. In the context of the current research, owned media can be conceptualised as the official communication channels of a destination. Although, nowadays people tend to rely more on earned and shared media sources, the official communication of a destination is still able to influence the brand image of the place. Vinyals-Mirabent and her colleagues (2019) argued that the main challenge of the official communication is to provide consistency while presenting a wide range of brand values about the place:

“Even though this complexity makes it more difficult to construct a stable image, destinations need to be consistent and recognizable through different messages” (Vinyals-Mirabent, Kavaratzis & Fernandez-Cavia, 2019, p. 150).

In other words, even though destinations communicate different messages across a wide variety of channels, the essence of the brand identity should remain basically the same.

#### The role of mobile apps in tourism

As early as the 1990s, information and communication technologies (ICTs) began to have a major effect on tourism and hospitality. Digital platforms, like webpages, social media sites, and mobile technologies changed the way tourism businesses interact with their target audience. Among the many technological innovations over the past decades, smartphones are probably the most significant (Gössling, 2021). The rise of mobile technologies and smartphones began in 2007, when Apple Computers introduced the first version of iPhones. Even though there had been several smartphones available in the market before, the iPhone was the first to become a mainstream product among users all over the world. The main advantage of smartphones over regular phones is that they allow users to download and use certain applications, called mobile apps. Gibbs and Gretzel (2015) provides the following definition for mobile apps:

“A mobile application is an end-user software designed to run on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers and which extends the device’s capabilities by enabling users to perform particular tasks” (Hamouda, 2022, p. 2).

In contrast to integrated computer software, mobile apps usually provide a limited set of features and functionalities for their users (Ceci, 2021). Recent statistics highlight that the number of mobile app downloads reached 230 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2022). Today, mobile users can download almost six million apps from the two most popular mobile stores: the Apple AppStore and the Google Play Store (Travelport Digital, 2019). It’s fair to say that mobile technologies have become the primary devices for users to connect to the Internet (Law, Chu Chan & Wang, 2018). Nowadays, mobile users can choose from a variety of travel related mobile

apps including flight booking apps, accommodation booking apps, navigation and transport apps, airline apps, travel insurance apps, travel guides, car renting, and destination official apps as well. It is this last category that is discussed in detail in the current paper.

The ICT development from the perspective of the tourism industry can be divided into four distinct stages, where each stage covers about one decade (Gössling, 2021, p. 743): **(1) Opportunity (1985-1995)**: this first stage is marked by important advancements in terms of company websites, global distribution systems, and digitalised reservation systems; **(2) Disruption (1996-2006)**: the second stage is characterised by the emergence of the so-called platform economy. In this stage the branding activities and reputation management of tourism related businesses were highly influenced by the introduction of rating systems on sites like Booking.com or TripAdvisor.com; **(3) Immersion (2007-2015)**: the third phase remarks a wider integration of ICT technologies in consumers' lives, as a result of increased smartphone and social media use. Several disruptive innovations, like the appearance of AirBnB, challenged the traditional business models of the industry; **(4) Usurpation (2016-ongoing)**: the fourth and final stage is characterised by personalised offers, relying on big data statistics. People are increasingly relying on internet-based platforms to participate in social and professional activities.

We can argue that nowadays, ICT technologies play an increasingly prominent role in tourism industry, both from the standpoint of travellers and businesses. As Oliveira and Panyik explain:

“travellers and tourists, of all ages, increasingly use digital technologies to research, explore, interact, plan, book and ultimately share their travel experiences” (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015, p. 54).

Today, there is a growing number of online platforms available for travellers, thus, destinations should develop new digital strategies in order to meet these changing demands. Among these platforms, mobile apps can help travellers in all phases of the trip: before the trip, during the trip, and after the trip (Okazaki, Campo & Andreu, 2012). It is possible for mobile users to research different destinations prior to their trip; they can access on-site information during their trip to make it easier to navigate at a particular destination; and finally, they can share their experiences and provide valuable feedback for other travellers using apps like TripAdvisor, Facebook, or Instagram.

As for the tourism businesses, mobile applications also offer a number of advantages. Based on the view of practitioners, Fernandez-Cavia and his colleagues (2017) highlight the following possibilities: reach out to customers in real-time, during their trip; customisation and personalisation, ease of use, and geo-location functionalities. In addition to the advantages, there are some disadvantages as well. Practitioners of the field stressed out aspects like the low level of smartphone penetration, poor connectivity in certain locations and the limited dimension of mobile phone screens (Fernandez-Cavia et al., 2017, p. 270). The majority of these disadvantages, however, are no longer relevant today, as the mobile penetration reached 78% by 2020; almost the whole population (95%) has access to a mobile broadband network; and the average smartphone screen size increased from 2.59 to 6.3 inches since 2007.

According to a recent Travelport Digital research report, the most common reasons to download tourism-related mobile apps are searching for flights, searching for accommodations, booking flights, booking accommodations, and getting boarding passes (Travelport Digital, 2019). This study also indicates that for nearly every action travellers choose mobile apps over mobile websites. The main reason behind this is that mobile apps usually outperform mobile websites in terms of functionality and features provided. The results of the Travelport Digital report are somewhat challenged in another research report by Google (2016). This study suggests that

travellers use mobile apps and mobile websites simultaneously to accomplish different types of actions. For example, a travel-related mobile app is commonly used to keep track of loyalty programmes and access digital boarding passes, whereas a mobile site is generally used to research for information and plan activities at a certain destination.

Beside the aforementioned advantages and possibilities, ICT and mobile technologies also represent a challenge for destination marketing and management organisations. According to Gretzel (2015) the main challenges DMOs face in terms of mobile technologies are the following: DMO websites are no longer the primary source of information for travellers; the content on online marketing platforms are no longer controlled by DMOs solely; it is hard for DMOs to keep up with the latest innovations of ICT; and finally with the advent of smart devices, DMOs are forced to adapt and optimise their online presence accordingly.

## DESTINATION MOBILE APPS OF ROMANIAN COUNTIES

### Research objectives and methodology

The main objective of the current research is to provide a comprehensive look of the mobile applications used by Romanian counties for destination marketing and branding purposes. The study is centred around those mobile apps that are administrated by the County Councils and county level DMO organisations in Romania.

Based on the literature review and previous research, this study examines several criteria in order to analyse these owned media channels from a branding perspective, including the brand naming, brand management, brand communication, brand visibility and brand visual identity. Application analysis was conducted between 16<sup>th</sup> May and 19<sup>th</sup> June 2022. The research was carried out using multiple mobile devices: iPhone SE with iOS 15.5 and Google Pixel 6 with Android 12 mobile operating system. The first part of the research was the identification of the mobile applications using the database of the two most popular app stores: Apple App Store and Google Play Store. This part of the research was carried out using the name of the Romanian counties together with tourism related keywords, such as *visit*, *discover*, *travel*, and *explore* (Table 1).

A total of 41 counties forms the official administrative divisions of Romania. According to the results of the keyword search, we can affirm that about half of the Romanian counties (20 out of the 41) have an official mobile application for destination marketing and branding purposes. Table 1 provides an overview of the analysed mobile apps, including their names, developers, and year of appearance. The following section examines these mobile apps based on factors and features like the name of the application, the owner and management, the language of the communication, the content types and features available, and the interactivity of the platforms. The analysis is based on the literature of destination branding and marketing and especially on the work of Scolari and Fernandez-Cavia (2014), who studied the destination mobile apps in Spain, including 66 official apps of regions, provinces, and cities.

Table 1: Destination mobile apps of Romanian counties included in the current research

No.	Official mobile app	Developer	Launch date
1	Visit Covasna	Eventya	2017
2	Visit Harghita	Eventya	2018
3	Visit Mures	Visit Mures	2019
4	Visit Bacau	Schubert & Franzke	2020
5	Visit Maramures	Eventya	2022
6	Visit Neamt	Fidesys Mobile	2018
7	Visit Prahova	Schubert & Franzke	2018
8	Visit Vrancea	Eventya	2022
9	Visit Nasaud	Schubert & Franzke	2018
10	Visit Caras-Severin	Schubert & Franzke	2019
11	Discover Dolj	Eventya	2019
12	Discover Hunedoara	Schubert & Franzke	2019
13	Discover Timiș	Eventya	2018
14	Descopera Buzaul	Schubert & Franzke	2021
15	Explore Bihor	DMO Bihor County	2021
16	Argeș Ghid App	Eventya	2019
17	Brasov Tourism	Eventya	2018
18	Cluj Tourism	DMO Cluj County	2017
19	Salaj Tara Silvaniei	Schubert & Franzke	2018
20	Teleorman App	Schubert & Franzke	2020

Source: author's creation

### The analysis of mobile applications

The first aspect to consider from a destination marketing and branding perspective was the name of the mobile applications. The name of the brand is one of the most important assets, that should be meaningful, distinctive, future-oriented, modular, protectable, positive, and also visual (Wheeler, 2017). A brand name should also suggest something about the benefits and qualities of the brand, it should be easy to pronounce and remember, and it should be extendable (Kotler et al., 2022). Our results suggest (Table 2) that there is a clear pattern

regarding the practice of naming the official destination mobile applications, as the majority of apps use the *visit* prefix, followed by the name of the county in order to mark the touristic aspect of the communication channel. Besides that, there are a total of four counties (20%) that use the *discover* prefix in their names, and one county used the *explore* word. Finally, there are five mobile apps (25%) that do not use any of the aforementioned prefixes. For some, there is still a clear indication that it is a tourism related application, like the case of Braşov (Braşov Tourism) and Cluj (Cluj Tourism) counties, but in some cases this indication is clearly missing, like in the case of Sălaj (Sălaj - Țara Silvaniei) or Teleorman (Teleorman App) counties.

Table 2: Brand naming practices of Romanian destination mobile apps

Brand naming	visit [name]	discover [name]	explore [name]	other
Number of apps	10	4	1	5
Percentage	50%	20%	5%	25%

Source: author's creation

Regarding the naming practice it should also be noted here that the majority of mobile apps (90%) have an English name, but there are two applications with Romanian names. Beside the brand name, the brand slogan is probably the most important verbal representation of a brand. There is a clear room for improvement in this regard, because only one destination uses a slogan for its destination mobile app. Another aspect of the mobile apps that should be considered from a branding and marketing point of view is the owner of the application. One of the main differences between product or service brands and destination or place brands is related to the brand owner and brand management.

On the one hand, companies offering the product and service brands have a well-defined ownership and those people are responsible for the management of the brands. On the other hand, destinations and places in general are not owned by anybody, so it is rather complicated to determine the people or entity responsible for the management of the place brand. However, in practice, most of such marketing and branding activities are initiated and coordinated by public agencies, such as the local, regional or national government.

As Table 3 sums up, the majority (65%) of the analysed mobile applications are clearly related to the County Council, and there is a clear indication that the public institution is the responsible entity for the management of the communication platform. In case of three mobile applications, the responsible entity is defined as being the county level Destination Marketing Organisation. In four cases (20%), the entity responsible for the management of the mobile application is not specified. It is a common practice for County Councils to outsource the development of such mobile applications to specialised agencies. Table 1 highlights that most apps (80%) were developed by two such firms: Eventya and Schubert & Franzke, which indicates a high level of market concentration.

Table 3: Brand management of Romanian destination mobile apps

Brand management	County Council	County DMO	Not specified
Number of apps	13	3	4
Percentage	65%	15%	20%

Source: author's creation

For destination applications, language serves as a key indicator of who the target audience is. Table 4 summarises the results of the analysed mobile apps in terms of the number of available languages. The most common solution is the bilingual platform (65%), with English and Romanian as the two choice options. Four mobile applications (20%) are trilingual, like in the case of Visit Covasna, Visit Harghita, Visit Mureş where Hungarian is the third language choice and in the case of Visit Neamţ app, where the content is accessible in German language as well. There are two mobile applications with more than three language options: first the official travel app of Sălaj County which is available in four languages (Romanian, English, German, and Hungarian), and the official travel app of Cluj County, where the content is accessible in five languages, including Romanian, English, German, Hungarian and French. Finally, the mobile app of Vrancea County is the only one out of the 20 analysed platforms that is available only in Romanian. It is interesting to compare these results with the research of Scolari and Fernandez-Cavia (2014), because in Spain most of the apps (60%) were developed in only one language, usually Spanish.

Table 4: Language availability of Romanian destination mobile apps

Number of languages	One	Two	Three	Three+
Number of apps	1	13	4	2
Percentage	5%	65%	20%	10%

Source: author's creation

The analysed mobile apps follow very similar patterns in terms of the content shared. Every application provides relevant information about the following topics: nature, gastronomy, tour routes, accommodation, and current promotions. Most of the applications (95%) also provide information about the history of the destination.

From a brand communication perspective, one of the current key issues is related to the transmedia branding and content marketing strategy. To put it another way, destination brands should ensure that they maintain the same brand identity across a wide a range of online communication channels. In order to maintain this, consistency links should be established between these platforms. Nowadays, social media networks are considered as one of the main owned media channels, thus our analysis focused on the relationship between these networks and the mobile applications. Our results highlight that only 35% of the apps have social media links: Braşov, Dolj, Harghita, Covasna, Mureş, Maramureş, and Timiş. The detailed list of social media networks used by destination mobile apps are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Social media links of Romanian destination mobile apps

Connected social networks	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter
Number of apps	7	6	3	1
Percentage	35%	30%	15%	5%

Source: author's creation

Facebook is the only social network site to appear on every mobile app with social media links. Instagram is also a popular platform, mainly because the visual storytelling capabilities which

are essential for destination marketing and branding communication purposes. In terms of other social networks, YouTube and Twitter are the only ones to appear as links, but overall, we can conclude that there is room for improvement in this regard too for Romanian destination mobile applications. Mobile apps can also provide interaction and contribute to the brand interactivity through specific features, including event calendars, audio guides, AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) functions, or user ratings and reviews.

Table 6 summarises the results of these brand interactivity functions. Based on these results, we can conclude that the event calendar is the most popular (85%) interactive feature implemented by the destination mobile apps. Half of the applications provide possibilities for users to rate and review the content, especially accommodations and restaurants. Only one application offers audio guide and none of the analysed mobile apps has AR or VR functions. This demonstrates the challenge highlighted by the literature, that most DMOs can hardly keep up with the latest innovations and possibilities provided by digital media technologies.

Table 6: Brand interactivity of Romanian destination mobile apps

Connected social networks	Calendar	Audio guide	AR/VR	Rating/review
Number of apps	17	1	0	10
Percentage	85%	5%	0%	50%

Source: author's creation

The final part of our analysis examined the use of logos. The logo is the most visible brand identity element that helps the identification and the differentiation of the brand. In our research, we used a typology that consists of three type of logos: iconic/pictorial marks, typographic/wordmarks, and mixed marks/emblems, which is basically the combination of the previous two categories. The results show that the most common practice is the use of iconic/pictorial logos (50%), followed by mixed/emblems (35%) and only three mobile apps (15%) use a typographic/wordmark logo. Some counties have a well-defined and specific visual identity. Some of the best practices include the case of Visit Mureş, Visit Harghita, Visit Covasna, or Visit Maramureş. On the other hand, there are examples where the visual identity is basically the same as the coat of arms (Visit Prahova, Descoperă Buzăul) or the map of the respective counties (Sălaj – Țara Silvaniei, Teleorman App).

## CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current research confirms that Romanian counties are still at an early stage of adopting mobile applications as communication channels for destination branding and marketing purposes. About half of the Romanian counties have an official destination app, so there is clearly room for future improvement in this regard. Most of the current mobile apps are rather static platforms, developed for one-way communication, with a low level of interactivity. In general, these applications are managed by the county councils, and, in some cases, there is a dedicated DMO organisation responsible for the promotion of the respective region. Based on our research, we can argue that these mobile platforms should be better integrated with the other online channels of the respective destinations. Only seven mobile apps use links to social media networks and, in most cases, this is just one single social media network. In the future,

mobile app management should pay attention on building links with destination websites and social media networks. Destinations should use more than one social media network, depending on their target audience to better exploit the possibilities provided by platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or even TikTok. From a brand identity perspective, only a small number of applications use a brand slogan, and the majority of current destination mobile apps do not have a distinctive and well-designed visual identity neither. Due to this lack of specific brand elements, it is harder for brand managers to position the destinations in a more effective manner.

One of the main limitations of the current study is that it only considers the official mobile apps of the counties. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of mobile destination app usage in Romania, future research should also include cities and regions as well. There is a wide range of factors and indicators that should be taken into account when analysing a communication platform from a branding and marketing perspective. The current study is more likely a preliminary analysis that could be a viable starting point for more in-depth future research. Nevertheless, the authors of the current paper are hopeful that this research was able to identify some key aspects of the current state of destination mobile app usage in Romania.

## REFERENCES

- ALMEYDA-IBANEZ, M., & GEORGE, B.P. (2017). The Evolution of Destination Branding: A Review of Branding Literature in Tourism. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing*, 3(1), 9-17.
- BLAIN, C., LEVY, S.E., & BRENT RITCHIE, J.R. (2005). Destination Branding: Insights and Practices from Destination Management Organizations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43(4), 328-338.
- BOISEN, M., TERLOUW, K., GROOTE, P., & COUWENBERG, O. (2018). Reframing Place Promotion, Place Marketing, and Place Branding – Moving Beyond Conceptual Confusion. *Cities*, 80, 4-11.
- CAMPELO, A. (2019). *Handbook on Place Branding and Marketing*. Cheltenham: Elgar Publishing.
- CECI, L. (2021). Smartphones – Statistics and Facts, *Statista*. Retrieved 18 May 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/topics/840/smartphones/>
- CHAN, C.-S. & MARAFA, L.W. (2019). Branding Places and Tourist Destinations: A Conceptualisation and Review. In: Camilleri, M.A. (ed.), *The Branding of Tourist Destinations. Theoretical and Empirical Insights* (pp. 15-42). Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- FERNANDEZ-CAVIA, J., MARCHIORI, E., HAVEN-TANG, C., & CANTONI, L. (2017). Online Communication in Spanish Destination Marketing Organizations: The View of Practitioners. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 23(3), 264-273.
- GARCIA, J.A., GÓMEZ, M., & MOLINA, A. (2012). A Destination-Branding Model: An Empirical Analysis Based on Stakeholders. *Tourism Management*, 33(3), 646-661.
- GEORGE, R. (2021). *Marketing Tourism and Hospitality. Concepts and Cases*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.
- GIANNOPOULOS, A., PIHA, L., & SKOURTIS, G. (2021). Destination Branding and Co-Creation: A Service Ecosystem Perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 30(1), 148-166.
- GIBBS, C. & GRETZEL, U. (2015). Drivers of Responsive Website Design Innovation by Destination Marketing Organizations. In Tussyadiah, I., Inversini, A. (eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2015. Proceedings of the International Conference in Lugano, Switzerland, February 3-6, 2015* (pp. 581-592). Cham: Springer.
- GNOTH, J. (2007). The Structure of Destination Brands: Leveraging Values. *Tourism Analysis*, 12(5-6), 345-358.
- GOOGLE (2016). How Travel Apps Fuel the Consumer Journey. *Think with Google*. Retrieved 18 May 2022, from <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/app-and-mobile/app-marketing-travel-consumer-journey/>

- GÖSSLING, S. (2021). Tourism, Technology and ICT: A Critical Review of Affordances and Concessions. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(5), 733-750.
- GREEN, A., GRACE, D., & PERKINS, H. (2016). City Branding Research and Practice: An Integrative Review. *Journal of Brand Management*, 23(3), 252-272.
- GRETZEL, U. (2015). Digital Marketing for Destination Management Organizations. *World Destination Management Outlook*. Bali: The Bali Tourism Forum International.
- HAMOUDA, M. (2022). Mobile Applications in Tourism: Examining the Determinants of Intention to Use. *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction*, 18(1), 1-13.
- HANNA, S., ROWLEY, J., & KEEGAN, B. (2021). Place and Destination Branding: A Review and Conceptual Mapping of the Domain. *European Management Review*, 18(2), 105-117.
- HOSPERS, G.J. (2007). Editorial: Pile 'em High, Sell 'em Cheap? *Regions Magazine*, 268(1), 3.
- KÖLTRINGER, C. & DICKINGER, A. (2015). Analyzing Destination Branding and Image from Online Sources: A Web Content Mining Approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 68(9), 1836-1843.
- KOTLER, P., BOWEN, J.T., BALOGLU, S., & MOROSAN, C. (2022). *Marketing for Hospitality and Tourism*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- LAW, R., CHU CHAN, I.C., & WANG, L. (2018). A Comprehensive Review of Mobile Technology Use in Hospitality and Tourism. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 27(6), 626-648.
- LUND, N.F., COHEN, S.A., & SCARLES, C. (2018). The Power of Social Media Storytelling in Destination Branding. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 8, 271-280.
- MILIČEVIĆ, K., MIHALIĆ, T., & SEVER, I. (2017). An Investigation of the Relationship Between Destination Branding and Destination Competitiveness. *Journal of travel & tourism marketing*, 34(2), 209-221.
- MORGAN, N., PRITCHARD, A., & PRIDE, R. (2012). *Destination Brands. Managing Place Reputation*. Hoboken: Taylor & Francis.
- OKAZAKI, S., CAMPO, S., & ANDREU, L. (2012). Mobile Marketing in Tourism Services. In: Tsiotsou, R.H., & Goldsmith, R.E. (eds.), *Strategic Marketing in Tourism Services* (pp. 339-357). Bingley: Emerald.
- OLIVEIRA, E. & PANYIK, E. (2015). Content, Context and Co-Creation: Digital Challenges in Destination Branding with References to Portugal as a Tourist Destination. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 21(1), 53-74.
- PERKINS, R., KHOO-LATTIMORE, C., & ARCODIA, C. (2020). Understanding the Contribution of Stakeholder Collaboration Towards Regional Destination Branding: A Systematic Narrative Literature Review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 43, 250-258.
- PIKE, S. (2020). *Destination Marketing Essentials*. Third edition. London: Routledge.
- RITCHIE, J.R.B. & RITCHIE, J.R.R. (1998). The Branding of Tourism Destinations. Past Achievements and Future Challenges. In: Keller, P. (ed.), *Proceedings of the 1998 Annual Congress of the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism, Destination Marketing: Scopes and Limitations*, International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism (pp. 89-116).
- SARANIEMI, S. (2011). From Destination Image Building to Identity-Based Branding. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 5(3), 247-254.
- SCOLARI, C.A. & FERNANDEZ-CAVIA, J. (2014): Mobile Applications and Destination Branding in Spain. *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies*, 8(2), 15-22.
- STATISTA (2022). Number of Mobile App Downloads Worldwide from 2016 to 2021 (in billions). Retrieved 15 May 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271644/worldwide-free-and-paid-mobile-app-store-downloads/>
- TRAVELPORT DIGITAL (2019). How Travelers Are Using Mobile in 2019. End Traveller and Industry Research. *Travelport Digital Research, HubSpot*. Retrieved 18 May 2022, from <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2401279/Travelport%20Digital%20End%20Traveler%20Research%202019%20FINAL.pdf>

- VINYALS-MIRABENT, S., KAVARATZIS, M., & FERNANDEZ-CAVIA, J. (2019). The Role of Functional Associations in Building Destination Brand Personality: When Official Websites Do the Talking. *Tourism Management*, 75, 148-155.
- WHEELER, A. (2017). *Designing Brand Identity: Essential Guide for the Whole Branding Team*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- ZENKER, S. & BRAUN, E. (2017). Questioning a “One Size Fits All” City Brand: Developing a Branded House Strategy for Place Brand Management. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 10(3), 270-287.