
Article

The role of destination experience in the sustainability of the image of the tourist destination

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Abstract: The concept of destination image is closely related to the brand image of the destination. A good image is a step in branding the destination. The image of the destination can be a primary, secondary or global one, the latter incorporating the first two. The sustainability of a positive image of the destination is based on both a positive secondary image and a positive global image. The purpose of this research is to analyze separately the two types of images for a given tourist destination that has registered in recent years a remarkable increase in the number of visitors. The research is based on a questionnaire-based survey of a sample of 607 people. The collected data were processed with SPSS and the results show significant differences between the two types of images (secondary image and global image), a dangerous situation in the medium and long term for destination management. The nuances in the perception of the image of the destination on the two types of respondents (who experienced respectively who did not experience the destination) can be explained by the aggressive strategy of promoting the tourist destination, but inefficient strategy for younger age groups. The study allows the formulation of conclusions and measures to correct the situation.

Keywords: tourist destination; image; promotion; experience; Bihor; Romania.

1. Introduction

The first established definition of the image of the destination is the one proposed by Crompton [1] which was later popularized by Gartner [2]. The image of the destination is "Sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" [1] (p.18).

Interest in the image of the destination is related to its connection with the brand of the destination and the intention to visit a destination. We can say that a positive image is a step in branding the destination [3,4]. There is a strong link between destination image and branding but not an overlap of meanings [5,6]. "Destination branding is to select a consistent mix of brand elements to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image building" [7].

Image research focused on its variables with implications for destination management. Tasci et al. [8] conducted extensive research on studies conducted to investigate the image of the destination in terms of research methods used (quantitative, qualitative or combination) and the components of the destination pursued by research. The variables derived from the research that influence the image are: time spent at the destination / length of visit, satisfaction with the destination, previous visits, desirability of the destination, duration of travel planning, travel budget, probability of choosing the destination for the next vacation, motivation to choose the destination, socio-professional characteristics of visitors and others.

Some leading researchers in the field [9], propose to investigate the distinct image of visitors and non-visitors based on the idea that one's image of a destination can be secondary (from friends, acquaintances, formal promotion) or primary (formed from their own experience) or a combination of them. In this idea we understand that the image of a destination can be formed in the absence of experience with that destination, based on information gathered from different sources. In this context, these researchers emphasize the role of the promotional strategy "In this manner, the various strengths, weaknesses, accuracies and inaccuracies of the existing destination image could be more effectively addressed in the design of the promotional strategy"[9] (p.4).

And others [10], [11] share the same view that the set of attributes that contribute to the image of the pre-consumption destination differs from the influential attributes in the post-consumption stage. Sirgy and Su [12] show that tourists perceive destinations differently when they are part of the typical destination clientele or are visitors. This stereotypical image of the kind of people who usually visit a particular destination is referred to as the image of the destination visitor. The greater the match between the image of the visitor of the destination and his conception of himself, the more likely it is that the tourist will have a favorable attitude towards that destination and visit this destination. This matching process is called self-congruence. Empirical research has concluded that previous visits to a destination or familiarity with a destination influence the perceived image of the destination [13-18]. After visiting the destination, images tend to be more realistic, complex, and differentiated [13,14].

"Positive perceptions about a destination refer to the perceived attractiveness or salient aspects of a destination" [19] (p. 43). The way in which visitors perceive the attractiveness of a destination is related to socio-demographic characteristics such as: age, previous experience, culture, reasons for the [20-22]. To these, some add education [23].

Tourist motivation, which underlies travel, influences the tourist image [23,24]. Depending on the reasons for the trip, the image of a destination is constructed in a certain way.

After analyzing previous studies concludes that a destination image consists of three different components: cognitive, affective and conative [2]. In addition, there is a hierarchy between them, the affective evaluation being influenced by the cognitive one. The cognitive component of the image or cognitive evaluation (also called perceptual) refers to the sum of ideas, beliefs as a result of evaluating the destination from the perspective of its attributes. Evaluation or the affective component of the image refers to what an individual feels towards a destination, a reaction that can occur, more or less, as a result of cognitive evaluation based on the personal characteristics of the individual. The affective image is formed before, during and after visiting a place. Kleonsky[25] showed that before visiting a place, visitors form a more positive image if the emotions related to the destination match their own motives and benefits.

Many studies have focused on researching the cognitive component of destination, expressed by attributes [26,27]. Quantitative methods and semi-structured questionnaires were used for this purpose. Other studies have followed the cognitive, affective component but also the global [23,28]. The difficulty with following the affective component (positive or negative attitude) is that it requires either qualitative methods of investigation or quantitative methods with free (descriptive) expression of [29]. The affective perception is influenced by the psycho-socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Some propose the evaluation of the affective perception of the destination through a set of attributes (unpleasant / pleasant, asleep / full of life, gloomy / interesting, desolate / relaxing) [24].

Park et al. [30] showed that tourists high satisfaction can influence the intention to recommend a attraction to their social network. Assaker and Hallak [31] pointed out that satisfaction plays a mediating role in the link among image and intention to recommend.

In this context, the aim of the research is to identify the perceived image of the Bihor tourist destination among its current visitors and the perceived image of the Bihor tourist destination among its potential visitors with the highlighting of the existing differences.

2. The Tourist Destination Bihor

Bihor County is one of the 41 administrative units (plus Bucharest) that Romania has, located in the northwestern part of Romania on the border with Hungary.

There are two large areas for tourism in Bihor County, which are positioned as the main tourist destinations [32]:

- the built patrimony from the Oradea area - the spa resources exploited at Băile Felix and 1 Mai;
- the mountainous area, especially the area included in the Apuseni Natural Park.

In recent years, the number of tourists in Bihor County has steadily increased to 549,014 in 2018 with a share of 12.98% for foreign tourists. In Oradea in 2019 the number of tourists increased by 250% compared to 2008 [33].

3. Purpose and Research Methodology

The aim of the research is to identify the perceived image of the Bihor tourist destination among its current visitors and the perceived image of the Bihor tourist destination among its potential visitors with the highlighting of the existing differences.

The research objectives that are subordinated to the research purpose are (Figure 1 Conceptual model of research):

O1 Identification of the image of the Bihor tourist destination among those who visited the destination, respectively of the global image of the destination.

O2 Identifying the image of the tourist destination Bihor among those who have not yet visited the destination but found out about its existence in different ways, respectively the secondary image.

O3 Identification of socio-demographic characteristics that influence the image of the destination Bihor;

O4 Investigating the intention to recommend the destination of Bihor both those with previous experience and those without. The components of the secondary image and the global image can be seen in Figure 1.

The secondary image is formed following cognitive evaluation and affective evaluation, evaluations that are influenced by psycho-socio-demographic and cultural characteristics.

The overall image consists of the secondary image to which is added the previous experience with the destination that may or may not be satisfactory.

Both the secondary and the global image can lead to the intention to visit and revisit the destination. A positive overview can lead to a visit recommendation.

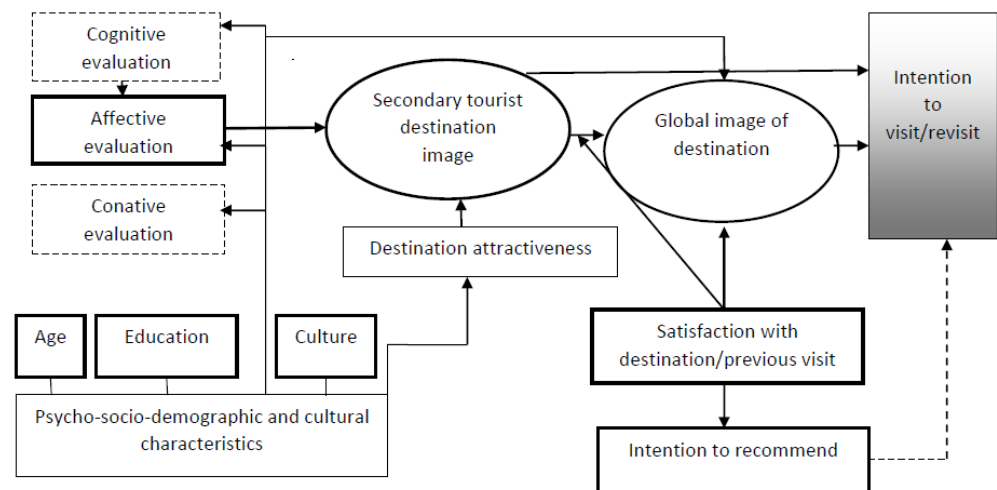


Figure 1. Conceptual model of research.

The research method used was the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire had 28 questions to which was added a box with questions to record the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The questionnaire was divided into the following parts: Part I-General tourism preferences and Part II-Bihor tourist brand. In this material are presented the results and conclusions related to part II - Bihor Tourist Brand. For the evaluation of this topic, 9 questions were used, as follows: two open-ended questions, one to capture the general spontaneous perception of Bihor and another to find out the three main competitors in the respondents' vision; five closed questions with options for recording the existence or not of previous experience related to other two questions to capture the reasons for not visiting Bihor / respectively visited, a question with options for finding out known tourist attractions in Bihor and a question for finding out the intention to recommend / does not recommend to others the destination Bihor and two semantic differentials with 7 steps for the general impression related to the experimentation of the destination Bihor and one for 6 attributes that characterize the destination Bihor. In addition, at the beginning of the questionnaire, a question related to the previous experience with the destination Bihor was posed, 5 years being the accepted time horizon. Beyond 5 years it was considered that the experience is too far away to be used.

The sample was one of availability consisting of 611 people nationwide with 607 valid answers. The application of the questionnaire was made between May and June 2020 by combining several channels on the Internet. The profile of the respondent is in Figure 2.

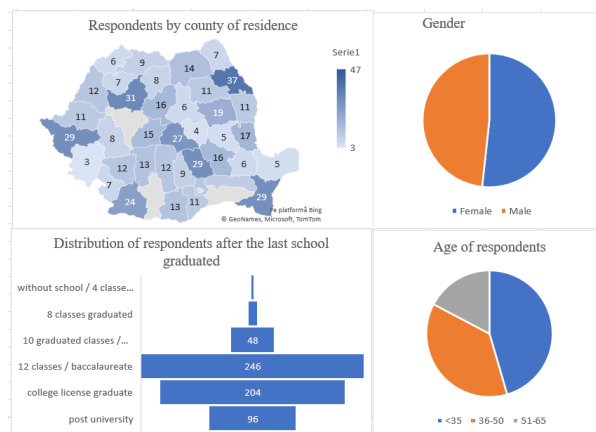


Figure 2. Profile of respondents.

The aim of this questionnaire was to record the global image and the secondary image. For the evaluation of the image, the two components were targeted: the affective component and the cognitive component. In order to evaluate the global image, it was established how many respondents experienced the destination of Bihor in the recent past (last 5 years). 195 respondents have been in Bihor in the last 5 years, respectively 31.91%.

Respondents were asked to evaluate affective image, by rate Bihor as a tourism destination with a synthesis of 6 bipolar feelings / impressions proposed (Table 1). Four of them propose the evaluation of the affective perception of the destination through a set of attributes (unpleasant / pleasant, asleep / full of life, boring / interesting, stressful / relaxing) taken from [24] and “developed by Russel and Pratt (1980) and Russel and Snodgrass (1987)” [24] (p.321). The scale was 7-point semantic differential. I chose the Likert scale which is an ordinal scale. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 steps are used for the Likert scale. It is most commonly used as a 5-step scale [34,35]. On the other hand, Leung [36] considers that the 11-step Likert ladder is the best (along with 6) and closer to normal. Others consider the 7-stage Likert scale variant to be the best [37]. We chose the 7-step ladder. A 7-point Likert scale was employed ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”, including a 8 “I don’t know / I can’t answer” option in order to avoid false neutral evaluations.

The registration scale of the affective component of the image was completed with an open question (answers related to those who did not visit the destination Bihor) “Q22. What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear about Bihor?”. This assessment of the image of those who have not yet visited the destination Bihor forms the secondary image of the destination Bihor. It will be analyzed according to the characteristics of the other respondents (age; Romanian or foreign culture and level of education).

In this case, the affective image of the destination related to those who have not yet visited the Bihor destination forms the secondary image.

Global image is a combination of cognitive and affective components to which is added the previous experience with the respective destination [38]. In our study, previous experience was measured with a single item. The question was: “Your overall experience with the destination Bihor was one ...”. A 7-point Likert scale was employed ranging from 1 “Totally unpleasant” to 7 “Totally pleasant”, including a 8 “I don't know / I can't answer” option in order to avoid false neutral evaluations. Additionally, an open question has been added to record the overall picture by “What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear about Bihor?”. In this study, the overall image is the sum

of the secondary image (focused on the affective component) with the satisfaction related to the previous experience.

The last two destination evaluation scales in Table 1 belong to the holistic evaluation of the destination image, as defined by Echtner and Ritchie [9].

Table 1. Scale for evaluation of affective perception of image.

Attribute									Attribute
Sleepy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I don't know / I don't answer	Full of life
Boring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I don't know / I don't answer	Interesting
Stressful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I don't know / I don't answer	Relaxing
Unpleasant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I don't know / I don't answer	Pleasant
For young people	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I don't know / I don't answer	For older people
For everybody	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	I don't know / I don't answer	Exclusivist

4. Results and Hypothesis Testing

In the research carried out, we started from the following hypotheses:

H1 The overall image (those who visited the destination Bihor) is better than the secondary image (those who did not visit the destination Bihor) in the case of the investigated sample;

H2 The overall image of the destination Bihor is better among the public over 35 years old;

H3 The secondary image of the Bihor destination is better among the public up to 35 years old;

H4 The image of the Bihor destination based on the affective evaluation differs depending on the age of the respondents;

H5 The image of the destination Bihor is influenced by the level of training of the respondents.

H6 Previous experience with Bihor increases the chances that it will be recommended to others.

Table 2. The variables of the research.

Vabiabes of the research	Correspondence in the items of the questionnaire
V1a- <i>experiența anterioară;</i>	Q23
V1b- <i>lipsa experienței anterioare;</i>	Q23
V2- <i>percepția cu privire la Bihor;</i>	Q22
V3- <i>satisfația globală cu experiența anterioară;</i>	Q23c
V4- <i>recomandarea destinației;</i>	Q27
V5-V5a-V5f <i>evaluarea afectivă;</i>	Q25(a-f)
V6- <i>education</i>	
V8- <i>age</i>	

Table 2 shows the research variables and their correspondence in the items of the applied questionnaire.

Hypothesis H1 The overall image (those who visited the destination Bihor) is better than the secondary image (those who did not visit the destination Bihor) in the case of the investigated sample, was verified using three items: V1a-previous experience (highlighted by question Q23), V2-perception of Bihor (highlighted by question Q22) and the overall impression of the experience with Bihor (Q23c).

The image of Bihor from secondary sources (those who have not visited Bihor in the last 5 years) is analyzed versus the image of Bihor from primary sources (direct experience). From here you can see if the experienced reality differs from the communication / promotion of the Bihor destination, respectively if the experience with the destination leads or not to a better perception of the destination / if the promotion made is effective. Promotion must attract and at the same time create expectations that are confirmed, maybe even exceeded.

The image of Bihor from secondary sources (those who have not visited Bihor in the last 5 years) was analyzed in relation to the global image of Bihor, an image consisting of secondary sources and primary sources (direct experience). From here you can see if the experienced reality differs from the communication / promotion of the Bihor destination, respectively if the experience with the destination leads or not to a better perception of the destination and if the promotion made is effective. The promotion must attract and at the same time create expectations that are confirmed, maybe even exceeded.

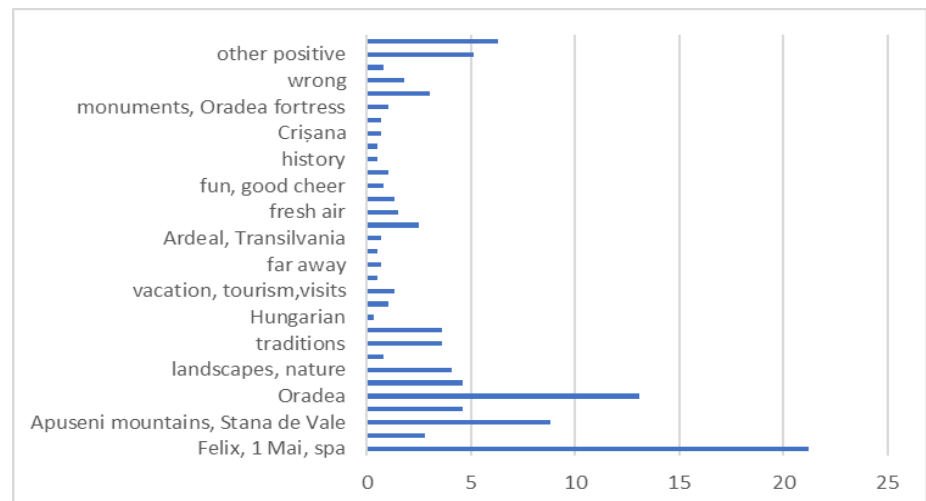


Figure 3. Distribution of all the answers to the question "What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear about Bihor?"

Figure 3 shows the way the Bihor destination is perceived, starting from the first word associated with this destination by the respondents. The destination Bihor is associated with: Băile Felix and 1 Mai (in overwhelming proportion), followed by the city of Oradea, the Apuseni Mountains and Stâna de Vale. As can be seen in Figure 3, Bihor is defined geographically, administratively and less by quality attributes.

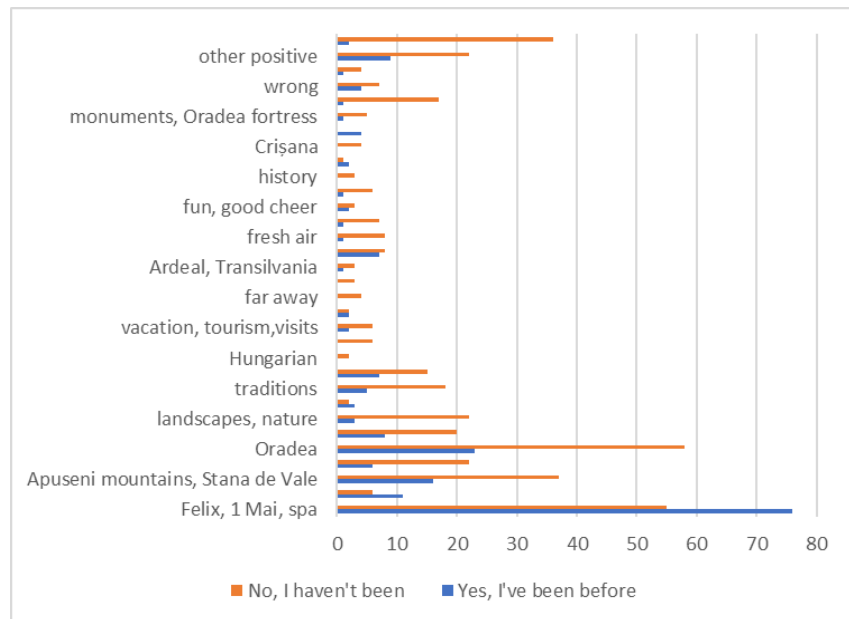


Figure 4. Distribution of all the answers to the question "What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear about Bihor?" after existent/nonexistent previous experience

In Figure 4 you can see the order of the elements that identify Bihor as a tourist destination, in the view of those surveyed, depending on the existence or not of previous experience. Those who had an experience with this destination linked Bihor to, in this order: Băile Felix and 1 Mai (at a great distance from the others), Oradea, Stâna de Vale, Apuseni Mountains, nature, etc. Those who have not yet been to Bihor County, identify this place by, in this order: the city of Oradea, Băile Felix and 1 Mai, Stâna de Vale and the Apuseni Mountains, nature, traditions, positioning near the border, etc.

It is very interesting that the city of Oradea outperforms the Băile Felix and 1 Mai resorts, a situation that can be explained by the insistent campaign to promote Oradea made in the last 5 years on social networks and other online channels. Of the mentions made regarding Bihor only 16.08% refer to quality attributes of Bihor among those who have already been to Bihor and 26.21% refer to quality attributes of Bihor among those who have not yet been in Bihor. We grouped these references into 10 categories as seen in Figure 4.

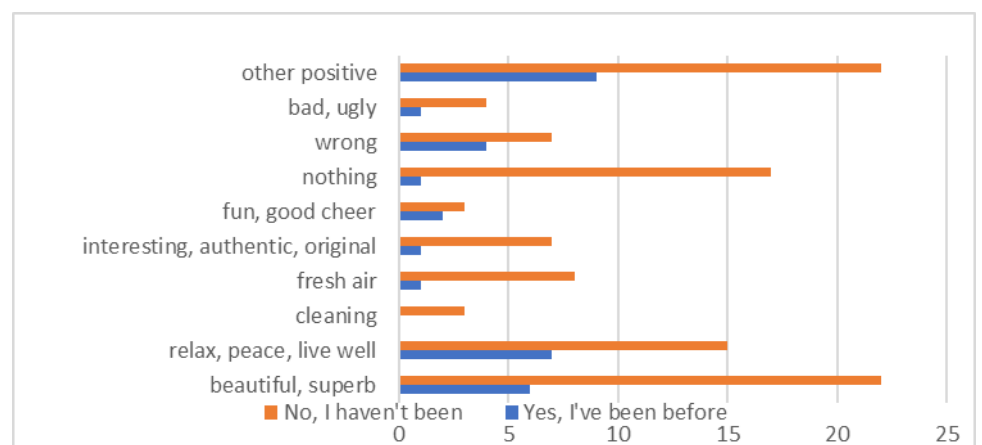


Figure 5. Associations made regarding the destination of Bihor for those who visited Bihor, respectively for those who did not visit it.

It is very interesting that in all 10 categories, Bihor has higher values for those who have not visited it yet, including the two in 10 categories that mean negative attributes. It can be seen that those who have not yet visited Bihor have stronger impressions about this destination. Correlating Figure 5 with Figure 4 we can say that these impressions, predominantly positive among those who have not visited Bihor, are the result of the national campaign to promote the city of Oradea, an insistent and well-directed campaign made in the last 5 years. It seems that the secondary image of the Bihor destination is better than the overall image (result and experience).

Following the above analysis we can say that the H1 hypothesis is invalidated. Hypothesis H2 The overall image of the destination Bihor is better among the public over 35 years was verified using three items: V1a-previous experience (highlighted by question Q23), V8-age of respondents and V3- satisfaction with previous experience to Bihor (Q23c). Hypothesis H2 was verified with the SPSS for Statistics program. The results did not show a clear link between the three variables. The data collected were also analyzed as an average by age categories as seen in Figure 6, the differences identified not being substantial. The hypothesis is invalidated.

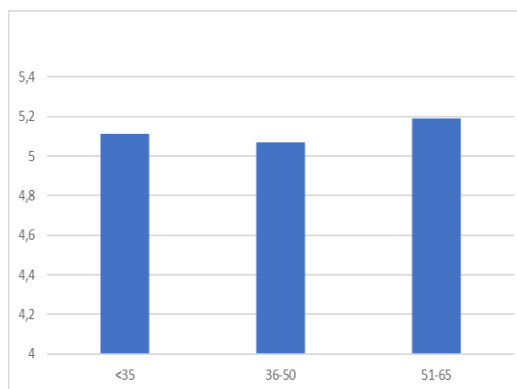


Figure 6. The average overall impression regarding the experience with Bihor by age categories.

Hypothesis H3 The secondary image of the destination Bihor is better among the public aged up to 35 years was verified with the program SPSS for Statistics. The variables used were: V1b-lack of previous experience (highlighted by question Q23) and V8-age of respondents.

The results showed that the worst secondary image is even among young people, respectively the group up to 35 years old. We will conclude that the hypothesis is invalidated.

Verification of hypothesis H4 The image of the Bihor destination based on the affective evaluation differs depending on the age of the respondents based on the evaluation made by all respondents regardless of age. The variables used were: V5-affective assessment (highlighted by question Q25) and V8-age of respondents.

Figure 7 shows the average distribution of all answers on a 7-step semantic differential scale. The bipolar attributes used can be seen in Table 1. For all 6 attributes, Bihor was evaluated with a score above average, but still a maximum of 5 points out of 7 possible were obtained.

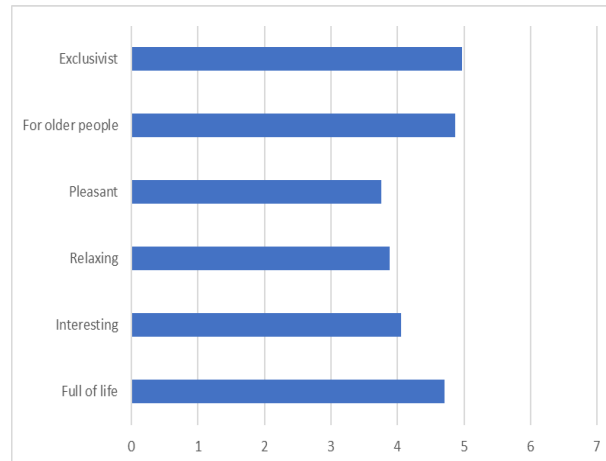


Figure 7. The average distribution of affective assessments valid for all respondents.

The correlation of the answers with the age of the respondents was done with SPSS for Statistics, the results showing the existence of a correlation, the most critical evaluations being among people up to 35 years old. The hypothesis is validated.

Hypothesis H5 The image of the destination Bihor is influenced by the level of training of the respondents was verified with SPSS for Statistics and the results are irrelevant, the hypothesis cannot be validated.

Hypothesis H6 Previous experience with Bihor increases the chances that it will be recommended and was verified to others using the following variables: V1a-previous experience (highlighted by question Q23), V1b-lack of experience (highlighted by question Q23) and V4 - recommendation of destination and others (Q27).

The correlation was verified with SPSS for Statistics and the results show a correlation but with reservations regarding the causal relationships. The hypothesis could not be validated.

5. Conclusions and implications

The research aimed to evaluate the two types of images of the destination Bihor, the secondary image and the global image and their comparison. The results showed important differences between the two types of images, a situation that can become dangerous in the medium and long term. On social networks, Oradea and Bihor County enjoy an intense promotion, taken over and supported by the residents of Bihor. This positive image has spread throughout the country generating a strong and positive secondary image. The analysis of data collected from respondents with a good territorial distribution in Romania (Figure 1) shows important discrepancies between the secondary image (formed indirectly from different sources) and the global image (formed from the secondary image and direct experience with the destination). The virtual audience, respectively the consumers of the secondary image, appreciate those objectives more intensely promoted and evaluate the destination more emotionally and positively. The implications for the destination management are related to the need to bring the two images closer because creating expectations that are not satisfied by reality will lead to dissatisfaction and loss of credibility of promotional messages.

The analysis of the two types of images by age categories (under 35; 36-50 and 51-65 years) showed another worrying situation, namely the more critical appreciation of the destination by the youngest and potential segment. The under-35 segment considers the destination "boring" which is not a positive signal. The implications for destination management are related to the design of activities appreciated by this age category. The destination of Bihor is best appreciated among Romanians over 36, respectively 51 years

who have not been at all or recently (last 5 years) in Bihor and who appreciate the improvements that this destination has had, especially Oradea and Băile Felix and May 1.

Following the analyzes made, it was not possible to establish a correlation between the formed image and the level of training, the target audience of the destination being still uncertain. A more precise targeting of current and potential consumer segments is needed with a focus on their specific needs.

Although the overall experience with the Bihor destination is a good one, with an above average value, there is still no strong connection with the intention to recommend the destination to others. The implications for the management of the destination are related to the pursuit of the objectives of satisfying the visitors, their loyalty and their transformation into sources of promotion of verbal marketing.

The limits of the research are related to the use of a non-statistical sample but which is nevertheless characterized by a good territorial coverage.

Future research could deepen administrative units of the Bihor destination to identify problem areas in the event of the detection of subzones with different images.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at www.mdpi.com/xxx/s1, Figure 1-7, Table 1-2.

Author Contributions: For research articles with several authors, a short paragraph specifying their individual contributions must be provided. The following statements should be used “Conceptualization, Olimpia Ban; methodology, Olimpia Ban and Adrian Hatos.; software, Adrian Hatos and Laurențiu Droj; validation, Olimpia Ban, Adrian Hatos, Laurențiu Droj and Carmen Toderășcu; formal analysis, Adrian Hatos; investigation, Adrian Hatos; resources, Ban Olimpia, Laurențiu Droj, Carmen Toderășcu; writing—original draft preparation, Olimpia Ban and Adrian Hatos; writing—review and editing, Olimpia Ban, Carmen Toderășcu; funding acquisition, Ban Olimpia, Laurențiu Droj, Carmen Toderășcu. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.”

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