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ONLINE TOURISM IN ROMANIA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION - STUDY CONCERNING THE PRESENCE OF THE TRAVEL AGENCY ON THE INTERNET-

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Abstract

Tourism is a dynamic domain and sensitive to changes caused by globalization. It is modeled both by operators and tourists, being in a constant transformation. The presence of the Internet and using it constantly turns the distance from impediment in ordinary. Destinations that not long ago were regarded with suspicion today can be explored including through testimonials of tourists from around the world.

This study addresses one of the most important changes among travel agencies due to globalization that is moving their activity online. The research is made on the travel agencies from Romania in 2013 and includes both general issues such as the existence of a website, consumer protection in the online environment, card payment possibility on the site, and particular aspects, such as spa deals, social offers and tourist information.

Cuvinte Cheie: online payment, online travel, social tourism, spa offers, travel agency.

JEL Classification: L83, F63.

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a phenomenon known everywhere, with real implications for all types of businesses. Internet is one of its components that affected all areas both from merchant's and buyer's perspective. Tourism is one of the areas that transformed in a radically way. The emergence of online activities did everything to be rethought: from the way in which tour operators present their offer and get buyers to the way how tourists plan and buy their holidays.

One of the major changes occurred among travel agencies who have lost the advantage of being the primary interface between the tourist and the destination. If two decades ago to purchase a ticket or reserve a hotel room inevitably involved a trip to the agency, now anyone can be their own agent with a single click.

But with the appearance of tourism activity in the online environment, there inevitable appeared consumer protection issues. Aspects such as data protection, security of electronic payments and consumer information had been regulated to provide safer online transactions.

This study complements research that has been done, bringing new points, such as consumer protection, online payment or other items related to the offer made on the site. Because the online consumer protection has not been the subject of many research papers in Romania, this point of our work is a reference for future research.

The importance of the theme is reinforced by the fact that more and more tourists inform themselves on the internet and they even purchase products online without having to resort to traditional agencies. Also, the acquisition of airline tickets occupies a leading position among online transactions - in 2012 it registered an increase of over 100% (MobilPay, 2013), aspect that reinforces the need for a comprehensive analysis of travel agencies in Romania.

II. Review of the scientific literature regarding travel agencies and consumer protection in the context of globalization

Globalization is a phenomenon with a rich history to which man has taken part since he was at the stage of nomad and created its basis with the trade made between Europe and Asia in ancient times. Changes from the past centuries have made globalization to become increasingly acknowledged and now all of us contribute to an unprecedented expansion resulting from technological expansion (Bari, 2001). This complex phenomenon reaches all areas without exception, and tourism is one of the most influential. Globalization has created new opportunities for development in the tourism industry through technological developments in communication and transport.

The rapid spread of information has improved the efficiency of industry-specific operations and the quality of them, generating a growing demand for new tourism services (Hociung și Frâncu, 2012). So we can talk of some defining characteristics of globalization in tourism, such as:

- Organization of international tourism activity forces tourism operators to overcome their own country borders;
- Logistics had to be organized in global structure;
- The volume of capital for infrastructure elements required effort of regional structures, sometimes even from the states;
- The tourism product is an intangible one, fact which led to the early appearance of national and international rules and regulations; (Rotariu, 2007)

Moving tourist activity in the online environment has also brought changes in terminology. A new appeared term is <e-turism> which is "a part of the area of electronic commerce and records a growing number of travel agencies offering travel services through online transactions (Popescu, 2007). Tourism operators who have profited greatly from the changes made are those from aviation, hostelling, and travel agencies. For travel agencies, using the internet as direct link to customers caused a reduction of intermediates and rearrangement the position of tour operators. If before the appearance of online environment the tourism operators were forced to appeal to agencies to reach customers, today everyone is positioned on an equal level (Diaconu, 2004).

In addition, hotels are those that have accepted the opportunity offered by the online environment and have changed the way to do business. Successful examples

such as Expedia, Hotels.com, Travelocity, Priceline.com made this segment to reconsider how to reach customers (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2006).

The changes are benefic for both sides the merchant and the traveler. On one hand, the tourist saves time and doesn't have to go to office; he can compare prices and evaluate a multitude of offers. On the other hand, the trader may put an offer which is theoretically unlimited and can reach customers whom otherwise were out of his reach because of the distance. Also, costs are reduced and the online systems allow travel agents to be aware of prices in real time.

With the advent of the Internet and the opportunities it generates a normal move from travel agencies was the acquisition of a web domain. As in other areas, it was first created to expand the traditional advertising and then to provide customers and suppliers online transactions (International Trade Center UNCTAD/WTO, 2000). But creating a website does not mean only the online appearance of a company, but must "have clear characteristics for the potential customer and answer his questions in a safe and fast way" (Stănciulescu, 2013).

The website of a company, from the tourism sector or elsewhere, must meet several elements to further convince the user to navigate to the content they are interested in. Of these remarks: reservation form, which must be simple, understandable and easy to use; control options - it is mandatory to exist, because there can be customers who feel more comfortable ordering by phone, payment options (credit cards, payment order) or the opportunity to provide feedback (Levinson and Rubin, 1999).

So it is being questioned whether traditional agencies will survive or will be replaced by booking websites, especially as the number of holidays purchased online increases from year to year (Holloway and Taylor, 2009). It is true that there are still gaps in the use of computer and distrust among the population regarding online payment systems, but in a short time these will be removed. Thus the expansion of tourism websites will continue, on one hand from the desire of managers to make travel in style on the other hand from the desire of acquiring a competitive advantage. Regarding this advantage, at first was thought that it rests the first who move his business in the online environment, focusing on the order of arrival. Time has shown, however, that this does not matter too much, on the contrary, not being the first can sometimes have some advantages such as being able to learn from the mistakes of the pioneers of online businesses (Middleton, 2009).

Emergence of online travel market has resulted in natural emergence and development of adequate legislation to ensure legal business practices and thus the protection of consumer rights. Existing laws help users to gain more confidence in online commerce and increase the numbers of online transactions, protecting both the buyer and the merchant.

The most important issues which the owners of websites should take into account are: processing of personal data (Law no. 272/2006), distance contracts (Government Ordinance 130/2000, published in Monitorul Oficial, No. 177 of 7 March 2008 on Consumer Protection in the Conclusion and Execution of the Distance), safe electronic payments, consumer protection (Order no. 72 of 11/03/2010 on Certain Measures for Informing the Consumer).

In addition to legislation, there emerged initiatives from the European Union to inform citizens of the member countries about the rights they have. Thus, in 2012 it was made and promoted consumatoreuropean.ro – a portal where are posted articles

about consumer's rights, including online commerce in Romanian. There are discussed issues ranging from the right to return products to airline passenger's rights. (ConsumatorEuropean, 2012).

Although the benefits of the Internet are obvious, there still is the need of the travel agent. Even though the Internet gives the feeling that it saves time, for an inexperienced person it could mean the opposite. The large amount of information dispersed on numerous websites makes the person who wants to purchase a holiday to lose more time than if he called a travel agent who would have know where and what to look for.

Also, many online information are not updated, fact which can confuse many tourists. In this case, the travel agent has always updated data and in addition he manages the bookings made even after the payment (Goeldner and Ritche, 2006).

II Research methodology

To perform the study we have considered undertaking a quantitative research on travel agencies in Romania in 2013, according to the list published on the website of the National Tourism Authority: Licensed Travel Agency (<http://turism.gov.ro/informatii-publice/>).

The purpose of the research is to assess the presence in the online environment of the Romanian 2013 travel agencies and to achieve it; we have considered three main objectives:

1. Analysis of the presence of travel agencies in online;

Secondary objectives aim:

- If travel agencies have a website;
- How many travel agencies with website have spa offers posted on the site;
- How many travel agencies with spa offers have social offers;

2. Analysis of the services offered by the websites of agencies

Secondary objectives aim:

- How many travel agencies with spa offers shall provide users a reservation form;
- How many travel agencies enable card payment on site;

3. Consumer Issues

Secondary objectives aim:

- Tourist Information: how many units provide specific information for spa offers (medical sending from the family doctor / physician and the proof of payment of health insurance / pension talon copy);
- How many of these shall provide users direct link to the National Consumer Protection;

The research of web site was made between 21 November 2013- 04 January 2014 on Google, by name / name + city, on the first page of results generated. There have been classified as having website inclusive loading error pages or under construction pages, and these are not included in other categories analyzed.

The pattern of reservation form which was taken into account is the one that matched the following criteria: is generated as result of accessing a button type "Book" or is a continuation of the bid submitted as reservation form; requires data such as departure date, number of nights / days, number of tourists. Where these data were not required we considered only the forms which specified that represent a reservation.

The offers for Christmas and New Year have been exclude in order to analyze the spa offer. The spa social offers which we take into account are: Decada Balneară, O săptămână de refacere, Hai la băi, Wellness balnear (ANAT, 2013). We chose for the analysis spa offers, because Romania is a country with a remarkable potential in this field recognized both at national and European level. Other arguments are that the treatment and rest tickets are granted each year by the National House of Pensions and the tourist authorities try to encourage this type of tourism.

About the link to the National Authority for Consumer Protection, we investigated only the sites that offer the possibility of purchasing tourism products directly from the site. Besides its existence, we have considered the effect, that if once accessed the link, it makes reference to official website of the Authority.

The possibility of online payment has been verified by taking into account several aspects: the existence of credit cards logos, the existence of a section of accommodation reservation / booking airline tickets or the exemplification the possibility of card payment. We took into account the possibility of online payment for both spa and other services: purchase airline tickets / accommodation booking.

IV. Results and discussion

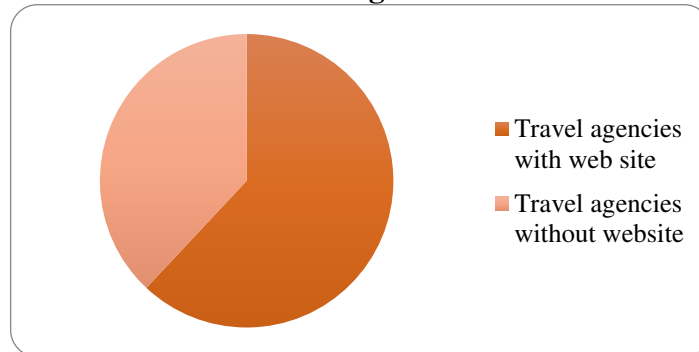
For a more accurate evaluation, of the 3290 travel agencies that operated in 2013, we excluded the multiple appearances of an agency taking it into account only once. This correction makes no changes in the research result, as agencies were analyzed at national and not county level.¹

In this way it was avoid the situation to point to the same agency website for several times. Thus, of the 3290 travel agencies remained for research 2659 units following that further to refer to this number as the total investigated.

Many travel agencies prefer to focus on a particular niche, such as climbing, B2B, medical congresses, cruises, rafting, hiking truffle, business travel, religious tourism. In addition, the most numerous are agencies that offer a wide variety of products to their customers and provide personalized offers.

The first objective of the research – **Analysis of the presence of travel agencies in online** is expressed in Figures no. 1, no. 2 and no. 3. They show results both globally: travel agencies that have website and to lesser extent - the agencies with spa offer.

¹ Part of this research is included in PhD thesis "Innovative ways of valuing natural spa resources in Romania by means of tourist services".

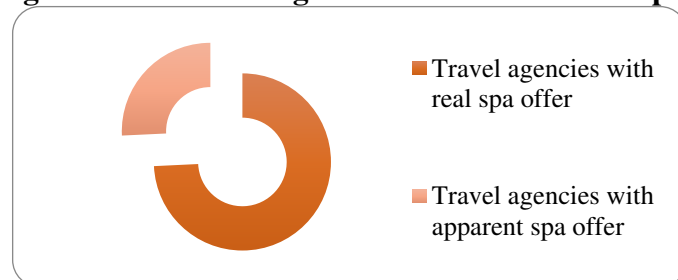
Figure no. 1: The structure of travel agencies after the existence of the website

Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Of the 2659 Romanian travel agencies, 1648 had a web site, during the research period, representing 62% of the total. The fact that the number of the agencies who have a website overpasses the number of traditional agencies can have many reasons: pressure made by tourists - they prefer to get information first from the internet and then seek the services of an agent or even to continue purchasing in the online environment, following the trend abroad, the desire to take advantage of the opportunities of the Internet. Also, some of these agencies operate exclusively online, giving up from the beginning or during the years the traditional form of marketing of tourism products.

Of the 1648 units that have website, 104 agencies have noted their online presence through a simple image that contains minimal data: agency name, logo, contact details and address. Thus, they do not have a functional menu. Other agencies prefer a simplified presence - accessing menu, which automatically directs the users to booking sites such as Booking.com, Turneo, Infoturism.

The situation of the agencies which have included in their offer spa packages is shown in figure No. 2. Another aspect observed in this objective is the fact that some agencies have exposed on the site only apparent offers. These have the corresponding category of health tourism in the menu, but it does not generate results.

Figure no. 2: Travel agencies in Romania after spa offer

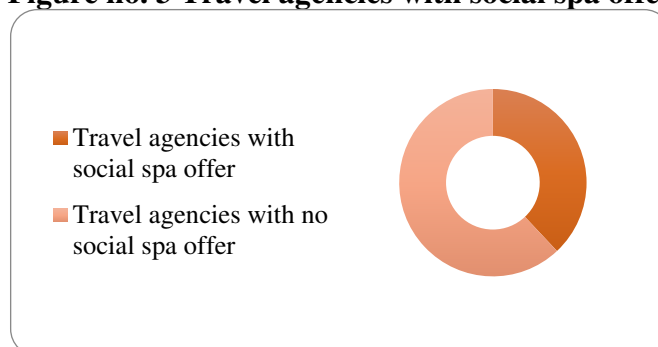
Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Of the total of 1648 agents which have website, 400 of them offer a spa offer, which represents 24%. Of these, 74% or 297 offer users a concrete offer, other sites having only the title available and no offers. Absence of specific offers may be due to the fact that the research was undertaken near the holiday season, during which agents are more concerned to sell packages for Christmas and New Year than treatment packages.

The low level of spa offers - 24% may be also caused by restrictions imposed by social programs: tourists must buy packages of 6 nights' accommodation with full payment. A category eligible for these programs is made up of employees who are not always easy to take leave for several days at the end of the year. Full payment to purchase the package can be a problem for another eligible category - retirees who have to pay, according to the tariff recommended by the ANAT, maximum 625 lei / person / place for a 2 star hotel and 740 lei / person / place for a 3 star hotel.

However, travel agencies take advantage of these incentives and give tourists offers in different resorts. Figure no. 3 shows the number of travel agencies in Romania 2013 which have offers that correspond to one of the following programs: Decada balneară, O săptămână de refacere, Hai la băi, Wellness balnear.

Figure no. 3 Travel agencies with social spa offer



Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Of the total of 400 agencies that have posted on the web site spa offers, 152 have deals included in one of the four social programs, which means 38%. The low number of travel agencies offering social packages share can be explained by the fact that some agencies are specialized only in certain segments (niche tourism) and automatically excludes the domestic tourism or health tourism.

The second major objective focused on the elements required to obtain feedback (message or purchase a package) from the user which travel agencies with spa offers have on the website: the reservation form and online payment. For tourists to use the agency's website as a source of information preceding the visit to the Agency, it requires to have a reservation form. By this, tourist gives the agent first and most important information: the period, number of people, destination. The situation of travel agencies with spa offer on the website which have reservation form or online payment is presented in the following table (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1: Reservation form and online payment

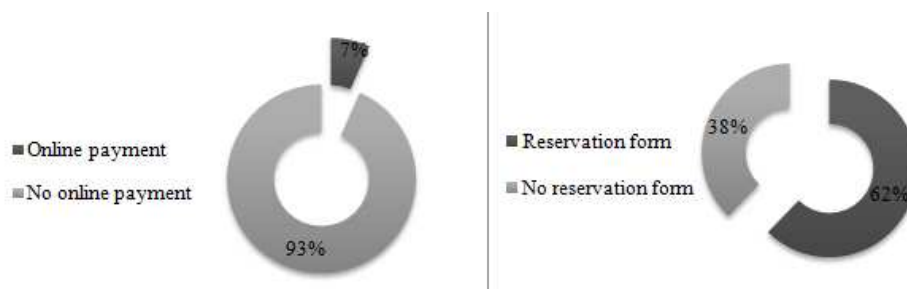
No	Travel agencies with spa offer	No	%
1	Total Number	297	74%
2	Reservation form	185	62%
3	Online payment possibility	20	7%
4	Online payment possibility from the 1651 travel agencies	76	5%

Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Of the 297 agencies that in 2013 offered spa deals on the website, 185 had available a reservation form through the client to send summary data to the agency about the product he wants to purchase, which means 62% (Figure No. 5). This situation is mostly due to the low experience the travel agencies in Romania have in the online environment. They still see the website as a purely informative page and do not take into account that it can be humanized and used to their benefit. Often tourists want to share information about a specific offer with the travel agent taking advantage of fast internet communication. Thus the reservation form becomes necessary to convince the potential customer to request additional information or to make a reservation immediately and not later, when he can change his mind, forget or choose another agency.

Regarding the possibility of real-time reservation of spa offers and implicitly the online payment on site, 20 agencies offer this service, which means 7% (figure no. 4). This is caused by the need to implement an online system to show in real-time the number of available offers. By default it is necessary for the agency to have these stocks - meaning to have the packages already purchased. This is increasingly rare today when many agencies work as intermediaries for online booking systems without having the site connected to the system. This requires the intervention of the travel agent to check the availability every time

Figure no. 4 Services offered by the agencies with spa offer



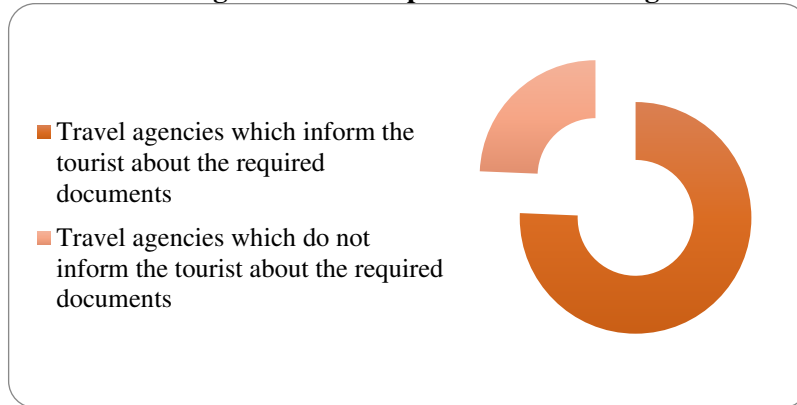
Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Also, the fees generated by the online payment system and the implementation fee are other arguments for delaying agency managers to provide this service.

Of the total 1648 travel agencies with website, 76 enable payment by credit card, this means 5%. A very low level taking into account that the largest volumes in Romanian e-commerce are, in order: tourism services and flight reservations, bill payments and mobile IT & C products (Payu, 2011). The difference of 54 units is not given by the fact that agencies with spa deals give the customer the opportunity to purchase other packages online, but that these units have integrated reservations systems for ticketing / accommodations.

The results of the third main objective refer to the rights of consumers that provide travel agencies with the website spa offers. Figure no. 5 illustrates the first point investigated in this step - if agencies respect the right of consumers to be informed about necessary documents that must be submitted to the hotel after purchasing a spa package.

Figure no. 5 Travel agencies who respect information right of their tourist



Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Of the 152 agencies that have social offers on the websites, a number of 115 (76%) inform its customers about the necessary documents that must be submitted to the hotel: medical sending from the family doctor / physician and the proof of payment of health insurance / pension talon copy.

An explanation for which no all agencies involved in ANAT social programs inform its customers on the website is that the most require physical presence in the unit for purchasing touristic package. Thus, it is assumed that the travel agent will then inform tourists about the necessary documents, even if the website should fully inform the tourists.

The appearance of e-commerce sites implies the existence as compliance with legislation. Consumer protection is available on the internet just like in traditional commerce. In this sense, online merchants are required by Order no. 72/11.03.2010 to provide a visible link to the official web address of the National Authority for Consumer Protection. Regarding the situation of travel agencies which have available the required link, it is shown in the table no. 2. For proper accounting of links, sites were interrogated by three key words: ANPC, National Authority for Consumer Protection and Consumer Protection.

Table no. 2 Travel agencies that make reference to the ANPC website

No	Travel agencies that have available online payment (76)	No
1	Link/site ANPC	36
2	Validity link/site ANPC	29

Source: Developed by authors based on the research in the period 2013-2014

Of the 76 agencies that have online payment available on the site, only 36, less than half, comply with the law regarding consumer protection. And of the 36 links, 29 make reference to the ANPC. The rest generate messages like: "The requested page does not exist".

The fact that less than half of the agencies comply with Order No. 72/11.03.2010 can be generated by the fact that the units do not have a legal department to advise them regarding the online commerce. This field is a new one for Romania and it still not generate responsibility due to consumer and often it is believed that the

Internet is a medium where the law does not apply. Also, another factor that can cause a lack of interest from tourism managers on this topic is the low number of actions taken by ANPC for online commerce. According to the ANPC website, there has been no action on tourism sites until the date of this study. Actions made by ANPC took into account only traditional tourism, the main issues were: the contracts, purchase order, legality of operation. So those who have specialized sites are not under pressure to comply with the law, considering that the Internet is not enforcing the legislation.

V. Advantages and limitations of research

In order to achieve the research, we identified its advantages and limitations. The main advantage of this research is the study support - the list of travel agencies from the year 2013. This was taken from the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, thus eliminating the step of making a database of travel agencies. Other advantages of the study are:

- The research had targeted the presence in the online environment of tourism agencies, aspect which reduced the time allocated to research. This is because there have eliminated steps such as the trip to the office, collecting offers, their analysis, interviewing employees, things which are necessary for a comprehensive study of traditional travel agencies.
- Study of the sites could be made whatever the program agencies - websites are functional regardless of time or day of week.

The limits of the study come from the fact that there have been used only two types of keyword for searching agencies websites: agency name as it appears in the list and agency name + city. Other limits are:

- It was questioned only the first page of search results generated by Google.
- For online payment analysis were considered three indices: the presence of credit cards logos accepted on the site, the presence of a booking section for flights / accommodation and the possibility clear enunciation of online payment. So it was not researched each section of the site, but there were considered the existence of these clues.
- The existence of a discrepancy between the name of the travel agency and the website domain. The search generated results only if the web version of the agency has specified its name in one of the pages of the website as it is written in the file used.

Although the study is characterized by the presence of both the limits and advantages, we believe that the results are not affected to a large extent by the limitation identified. This because searching by name often gives the desired results on the first page and websites on one of the pages "Contact" or "About Us" specifies the company name as it appears in the Trade Register.

VI. Conclusions

The Internet is a characteristic of globalization being one of the causes the tourism field has changed in a direction in which the user can be its own specialized agent. However, this aspect brings impending changes in the travel agencies, which are under pressure to expand their business in the online environment. This result in new issues related to e-commerce and consumer protection, providing online payments, the existence of a reservation form, completing sections of the site.

Regarding the study undertaken on the 2659 travel agencies that worked in 2013, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The percentage of travel agencies that have web site is over 50%;
- Although Romania is a country with a remarkable spa potential, only 24% of the travel agencies with website sells spa offers;
- Not all offers are available, but 74%. The remaining 26% have only the spa section without any tender;
- As a result of measures taken by ANAT, result four social spa programs: Decada balneară, O săptămână de refacere, Hai la băi and Wellness balnear. Travel agencies that have offers that include at least one of these programs are in proportion of 38%.
- The proportion of travel agencies with spa offer that respects the rights of consumers to be informed is 76%. They provide complete information on potential tourists about the necessary documents which must have at the hotel.
- Some of the websites analyzed were designed as a simple extension of advertising, without the user to be able to interact with the travel agent. Thus, from the agencies with real spa offers only 62% had available reservations form.
- Analysis of the possibility of online payment took two directions. On one side it was examined how many travel agencies offer packages which can be purchased directly from the site and on the other hand it was analyzed how many website have a section (accommodation / flight booking ...) to allow online payment. So in the first case, the percentage was 6% and in the second case of 5%.
- Another point was to analyze consumer protection in the online environment (right to be informed). Namely, if the sites that provide online payment inform the buyer of his rights by placing on the Home page a link to ANPC. Thus, more than half have posted on the front page of the web site link to the National Consumer Protection (36 travel agencies from a total of 76). But not all 36 links generate the desired result, but only 29.

The study brings into focus the changes caused by globalization of tourism, referring to issues such as agency websites, consumer rights, services available on tourist sites. Thus, we can draw the conclusion that travel agencies from Romania begin to adapt to the new wave of tourists more informed and more exigent. If there were in the past sections that embarrass tourists, demanding mandatory the intervention of a travel agent, today any holiday can be made with a single click in the online environment.

This complex research done on the travel agencies operating in Romania in 2013 plays an important role regarding the countries tourist trade position in e-

commerce. For a more detailed study, it can be repeated in the coming years to see the direction followed by the touristic agencies. It also can be extended from spa tourism to other several categories.

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