

BUCHAREST IN DUTCH LANGUAGE ONLINE VIDEO TRAVEL STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents information of interest for researchers studying tourism or cross-cultural interaction, for economic actors involved in the tourism industry and for public managers wishing to improve the attractiveness of the city as a touristic destination. Dutch tourists visiting Bucharest or Romania are a group yet little researched, but with a very high potential, seen how a very large part of the Dutch population spends a holiday abroad, while also spending considerable sums of money on vacations. This article looks at Dutch language video narratives about Bucharest, uploaded on YouTube. Online video reviews can be seen as means of expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a holiday destination purchase or as a means of self-expression. Many of analyzed videos in this article are more similar to aesthetic videos rather than product reviews, in which the city is the supporting actor and the content creator is the main actor. Prior expectations of Dutch tourists visiting Bucharest are quite low but their expectations are exceeded and the level of satisfaction is high. It can be expected that the more online reviews will be available to the public, the more the expectations of future Dutch tourists will be higher, as they will most likely use the available information as filtering mechanism. The city should thus be better marketed as a city trip destination with the help of this sort of online video reviews, presented by tourists from different countries in their native language. This is because when watching such a video review about a destination, the anticipated otherness of the location is diminished by the familiarity of the presenter, through the shared language and cultural frame.

Keywords : tourism, YouTube, expectations.

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1. Introduction

In the last years, the number of Dutch tourists visiting Romania has increased steadily, according to the data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics. In response to this trend, on the two most popular job advertising websites from Romania, offers for Dutch speaking tour guides have been constantly posted in the last years.

These postmodern consumers are collectors of experiences and sensations and their relationship with the world is an aesthetic one (Bauman, 1998). The tourist gaze is a vision constructed through mobile images and representational technologies (Urry & Larsen, 2011). How do these tourists gaze upon Bucharest? What place does the city have in the videos of Dutch speaking tourists? Do their comments encourage or discourage other potential Dutch speaking tourists considering visiting Bucharest? In what way are Dutch language video reviews about Bucharest different from the written ones? These are the questions that the present article addresses.

According to the data from the 2015 Flash Eurobarometer 414, the Dutch tourist's profile is somewhat different from the average tourist profile at the level of the European Union. The Dutch are more likely to spend their holiday abroad (only 15% of Dutch respondents spent their 2014 holiday in the Netherlands as opposed to 40% of Europeans). How do the Dutch choose their holiday destinations? According to the above mentioned study, 63% of Dutch respondents say the most important information source when making a decision about travel plans are Internet websites, in comparison with 46% of all Europeans. This stands to show that online content is extremely important to this specific tourist population and it should be used at its full potential. Moreover, the same study reveals that 82% of Dutch tourists used the Internet in order to organize their holiday (searching for information about prices, accommodation, booking transportation etc.)

Online information addressed to potential tourists and online reviews could make or break a (less known) holiday destination. For the smart city, offering tailored information for different tourist categories and in different languages is essential for becoming a viable and attractive touristic destination, even if as a city trip destination. Such information tailored especially for tourists should include aspects about accommodation, public transportation system, different types of attractions, price ranges, warnings etc. There are therefore at least two streams of information that can be found online about a location: the so called "advertising" information, offered by the "sellers" of a holiday destination and the reviews of past consumers of that product. Regarding this last source of information, it is common sense to assume that the more Dutch citizens visit Bucharest, the more information will be posted online for

other future Dutch visitors, even if only a small part of former visitors will post reviews online. This article refers to this second source of information about a holiday destination, based on video reviews of Bucharest made by former Dutch speaking tourists and uploaded on YouTube.

2. Prior work

Bucharest is not a mainstream city trip destination. When choosing a holiday destination, perceptions about that certain place are highly important. In a Dutch language article entitled Eastern Europe remains far away (*Oost-Europa blijft ver weg*) de Pater et al. (2014) present the results of a study conducted at Utrecht University about the perceived distances between European cities, more specifically about the differences when comparing perceived distances from cities found in Eastern Europe and from cities found in Southern or Western Europe. The study investigated students' mental maps about the location of different cities and was repeated periodically, from the 70's up to 2013. The results from the 2013 investigation remain similar to the results of the studies conducted in the 70's and 80', namely that cities in Southern Europe were placed closer on the map and cities from Eastern Europe were placed further away on the map in relation to their actual location (de Pater et al., 2014). The conclusion of the authors is that "cities in Southern Europe are mentally closer than the cities in Eastern Europe (de Pater et al., 2014:15).

To my mind, the conclusion from the above mentioned study is not about the actual distance between European cities, but rather about the perceived attractiveness or pleasure-potential of the destination. It comes from the public's scarce or scattered information about a certain city or region. If tourism is seen an act of consumption, the potential consumer will choose between which products to purchase based on his information about those products. Decisions based on little information are perceived as risky situations and this is when a potential consumer (if even considering to take a chance) will try to gain as much information as possible in order to make the right decision. Online reviews can be seen as digital word-of-mouth (Bing et al., 2006) and they can serve as decision making instruments in future acts of product (destination) consumption of others Litvin et al. (2008), therefore serving a utilitarian purpose.

When considering an act on consumption, a choice-having consumer can experience various phases: the expectation phase, placed before the act of consumption, the consumption phase itself, and the reflective phase, usually placed after the act of consumption ends (Craig-Smith and French, 1994). The reflective stage can however also begin during the consumption phase itself, if the consumption phase is seen as a continuum and the consumer displays a conscious reflective ability. I consider this to also be the case of tourism, where a holiday is consumed / experienced

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in a longer period of time and therefore, video reviews can be seen as reflection during consumption. Consumption takes time (Bauman, 1998) and tourism, as an act of consumption, also takes time. Therefore, filming oneself during the act of consumption (instead of writing a review about the consumed good in the post-consumption phase) can be seen as a time economy. YouTube reviews are considered live reviews (Reino & Hay, 2011) because they contain acts of real time consumption. However, it must be acknowledged that later selection and editing of the filmed material are sometimes done by the content creator before posting the material online. In the post-consumption stage, in this case the reflective stage of travel, a much more carefully constructed discourse can be put forward.

As stated before, expectations can have a significant impact on consumer satisfaction. A study conducted by Kim & Canina (2015) about online hotel reviews shows that when running a search for the words “than expected” on one of the biggest online platforms for tourist destination reviews, more than 4 million results are found. This number shows that when given the possibility to post an open review online, tourists often refer to the discrepancy between their prior expectations and the post-consumption satisfaction. In my previous analysis (Popa, 2016) I found general expectations of Dutch speaking tourists who visit Bucharest and afterwards write about it are somewhat low, and so their visiting experience brings a higher level of enjoyment than initially predicted also thanks to the element of a positive surprise as an inherent factor in the consumption act. This is in accordance with the theory developed by La Tour and Peat (1979), named comparison-level theory, that shows how satisfaction or dissatisfaction about a purchased or consumed product depends on the relation between expectations prior to consumption and results of consumption. The low initial expectations can be an advantage for those who do visit Bucharest, as their expectations are exceeded. However, low expectations remain a deterrent for the large part of Dutch tourists who decide not to visit Bucharest based on this reason. It can be expected that the more online reviews will be available to the public, the more the expectations of future Dutch tourists will be higher, as they will most likely use the available information as filtering mechanism. Irrespective of the reason for which people post video reviews of holiday destination online, the consequences in the case of Bucharest are in most cases positive ones.

Up to this point I have looked at online reviews (either written or video) in relation to an act of consumption and as a means of expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a holiday destination purchase, also with the purpose of helping others decide on a similar buy. But online posting can also serve a less altruistic purpose, as online posting can also bring inherent enjoyment (Chen et al., 2013), and filming yourself while on holiday can be seen as a means of self-expression. To be a tourist is one of the characteristics of the ‘modern’ experience and it is considered as a

marker of status in modern societies (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Therefore, the modern individual will wish to affirm his identity on social media websites through carefully filmed real life scenarios.

Posting online can be seen as part of the sharing economy, but some video reviews are more similar to acts of performance, where the main actor attempts a self-image optimization. When comparing the level of selfishness and altruism of tourism-related written online reviews and video online reviews, I consider that the video online reviews are much more self-oriented, and therefore they contain a lower degree of altruism. These content creators of video reviews will pay much more attention to their performance in the video, as their performance is as important as is their review of that certain destination.

3. Case study and results

The present analysis of the video reviews posed on YouTube is based on purposive sampling (described in the following) and thus it does not contain an exhaustive inventory of all materials. Prior to the search, the Dutch language was selected from the settings of YouTube and the Netherlands was selected as location, in order to resemble as close as possible the scenario of a Dutch speaking person seeking information about Bucharest. All numbers of search results that follow are valid for May 2016.

The Dutch language spelling of the name of Romania's capital was used as a key word for the search. When searching on YouTube for the Dutch language word "Boekarest", about 9330 results appear. This multitude of videos contains videos on different themes, many from sporting competitions with teams from Bucharest or from artistic events (most notably the concerts of Andre Rieu in Bucharest). Filtering these results based on the length of the video, 7530 results are short videos, under 4 minutes. When arranging these 7530 short videos based on number of views, the first 50 results (with two exceptions) are all about sporting competitions, not necessarily played in Bucharest but in which one team's name contains the word Bucharest. The first exception is of a video entitled Folkloric dance in Bucharest (Volksdans in Boekarest) with 4145 views and a short video about Ceausescu at the time of the Revolution, with 2057 views. Up to this point, based on these results, it seems that for the Dutch speaking public of YouTube, Bucharest is known mostly through its sport teams.

For comparing the presence of Eastern European touristic cities on YouTube, when searching for the Dutch language word "Boedapest", 12.400 results are shown. When combining the names of the two cities (Bucharest and Budapest) with the Dutch word for trip – "reis" or for holiday – "vakantie", the following results are given:

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“Boekarest reis” – 573 results, “Boedapest reis” - 2120 results, “Boekarest vakantie” – 410 results, “Boedapest vakantie” – 1780 results. When combining “Boekarest” and “Roemenië”, a total of 2180 results appear, out of which 1260 are short videos, under 4 minutes. This is important, as shorter videos are more likely to be watched from beginning to end.

Based on the watched videos, most Dutch speaking tourists visiting Bucharest are people around 30 years old or younger, most travel in two's, either two men or two women. Out of the watched videos, few show tourists taking part in a guided tour (such an exception is a video of a large group of young students visiting Bucharest as part of an extracurricular activity). Many tourists arrive in Bucharest by plane, as they film themselves in the airport or they film the road leading from the airport to the city. Some arrive by train, when visiting Bucharest as part of a larger European tour.

Open spaces are predominant in the watched videos. The Parliament building is the most filmed building and other attractions or places caught on camera are: the parks, churches, a market, the zoo, shopping malls, the Village Museum. Filmed closed spaces are mostly from restaurants or coffee's and the hotel rooms where the tourists are housed. Many tourists film themselves while having lunch or dinner, and they present their food. A particular tourist attraction found in more videos was artisanal ice-cream. The tourists choose international cuisine, pizza or even Japanese food. Culinary tourism has a high potential for developing thus.

An interesting remark is that in the analyzed videos, content creators also film themselves while using the public transportation system from Bucharest (the metro in most cases, but also the bus). Events caught on camera are: the Easter ceremony in front of a church, a civic protest movement, a rock concert in club, a children's festivity in a park.

Filmed less positive aspects, mentioned more than once in the videos are: the cables hanging from the street poles, the contrast between buildings in terms of the state of renovation, the fares that some taxi drivers charge.

Many of these videos are more like aesthetic videos rather than product reviews, in which the city is the supporting actor and the content creator is the main actor. The videos have background music, some (not in most cases) contain no spoken comment from the content creator. Some videos show willfully irregular, even playful movement of the camera, and the subject is not filmed in a structured fashion as it would be for a product review. These videos are more similar to stories or video diaries than to product reviews.

A particular type of video is the one in which the protagonists register for a holiday with a company that lets them know their destination only when arriving at the airport, similar to a last minute vacation package that can be bought at the airport. More specifically, the tourist here in question are young girls, so called vloggers, who have numerous videos on different themes uploaded on YouTube. These posts have more parts, as the holiday is filmed during more days, and the videos are named [...] part 1, [...] part 2 or [...] day 1, [...] day 2. Out of all the analyzed videos in this article, these sort of videos have the most views, ranging from 3000 to 3400 views. The reaction of these travelers when hearing their destination (Bucharest in this case) is revealing, when considered in relation with the perceived distance of cities in Eastern Europe, as it was shown in the study of de Pater et al. (2014). The reaction of the narrators as they find out about their destination shows surprise and uncertainty about their feelings regarding the news. One such traveler says on video: “a standard destination like Barcelona is somewhere where you can always go ... I am really curious [about Bucharest]. We have just searched the Internet and there are some super hip things there, so ... Nice that you can go somewhere you completely didn’t expect”. Another remark given by a content creator in a similar situation is the following: “I have never heard someone saying they went on holiday to Bucharest”.

The discrepancy between prior expectations and the actual experience can also be observed in the comments posted by other viewers at the bottom of some of the posted videos about Bucharest. Such examples are:

- “I really didn’t expect the city to be so beautiful” (*Ik had eigenlijk ook niet verwacht dat de stad zo mooi was.*)
- “Never knew that Bucharest is so beautiful!” (*Nooit geweten dat Boekarest zo mooi is!*)
- “Wow! How super hip is Bucharest!” (*Woowwww, wat is Boekarest mega hip!*)
- “What a nice vlog. Bucharest looks super! I wouldn’t have quickly chosen to go there, but maybe my opinion will change after your vlogs. I am curious about the second part!” (*Aahhh wat een leuke vlog. Boekarest ziet er super leuk uit! Ik zou het niet snel hebben uitgekozen om heen te gaan, maar misschien verandert mijn mening na je vlogs! Ben benieuwd naar deel 2!*)

The last above mentioned comment shows that watching such video travel stories can influence the decision of viewers to visit a less known location. Videos are more convincing in this case than written reviews, as the viewer can judge on his own the visualized images. Fotis (2015) also relates how searching on YouTube for certain attractions can help undecided tourists choose which attractions to visit.

4. Conclusions

This article wished to shed light on the video-based Dutch language tourist's stories over Bucharest, spread with the help of YouTube. Studying tourist's perception about Bucharest based on the country of origin of the tourists could bring more insight into the different patterns of vacation destination consumption and it could help the actors in the tourism industry better meet the demands of future visitors. This is because consumption patterns and ways of seeing the city could vary in great measure, as Urry and Larsen explain: "There is no single tourist gaze as such. It varies by society, by social group and by historical period. Such gazes are constructed through difference. [...] There is no universal experience that is true for all tourists at all times" (Urry & Larsen, 2011:2-3).

I dare to say that video reviews about Bucharest are more important for the city's future as a touristic destination than they are for cities such as Paris or London. The symbols of these two European capitals are well known to the general public. On the other hand, studies conducted in the Netherlands (Pater et al., 2014) show that cities in Eastern Europe are imagined as being far away, unfamiliar and unknown. Images and videos of Bucharest can help close this gap, as they bring the familiar in the home of the potential tourist and they offer information that can reduce the perceived risk and help in the decision making process about choosing a destination. When watching such a video review about a destination, the anticipated otherness of the location is diminished by the familiarity of the presenter / content creator, through the shared language and cultural frame. The distance is therefore shortened and the unfamiliar, unexpected, unimagined starts to shape in the mind of the viewer.

In order to be attractive to more types of tourists, Bucharest should be marketed as a multi-laired holiday city, offering diverse sources of entertainment to holiday consumers with different interests. According to the Flash Eurobarometer 414, for 62% of Dutch tourists the current economic situation does not change their holiday plans for 2015. As shown in my previous investigation about Dutch language online written reviews of Bucharest as a tourist destination, the Dutch find Bucharest (and Romania in general) affordable and even cheap destination, as the Dutch word "goedkoop" (meaning cheap) is used quite often in those reviews (Popa, 2016). This suggests that the affordability of Bucharest as a touristic destination can be a factor in the choice of cities to visit, but it also suggests that Dutch tourists would be willing to pay more for specialized forms of tourism in Bucharest or Romania (for example culture tourism or culinary tourism) if these forms would be developed and marketed as such online. As mentioned in the first part of the article, the Dutch public relies heavily on information found online when having to make a decision about a holiday destination and when organizing a holiday. The future challenge for the smart city of

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Bucharest is to diversify its touristic theme offer and subsequently update its online presence to show the changes.

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