COMMUNICATING CSR IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: EVIDENCE FROM THE ROMANIAN TOURISM DISTRIBUTION SECTOR

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the largest Romanian travel agencies communicate their CSR practices and policies in the online environment, as reflected by the contents of their websites and social media pages, outlining the manner of this online disclosure within specific CSR domains.

Design & methodology – The websites and social media pages of the largest Romanian travel agencies, in terms of net turnover, were analyzed considering several variables related to CSR communication/disclosure: having a CSR dedicated section, including CSR reports, emphasizing legal and economic responsibilities, and disclosing workforce, society, market, and environment oriented CSR actions or policies.

Findings – The research reveals significant deficiencies and superficiality in communicating CSR in the online environment by the investigated organizations. Only 10% dedicate a section on their website to CSR, none of them include any form of CSR reports, while the most frequent CSR aspects comprised in their online domains can be categorized as market-oriented, service quality being the most emphasized facet, fair pricing and honest/transparent communication being also consistently outlined.

Originality of the research – Research on how the members of the tourism distribution sector communicate CSR in the online environment with focus on Central and Eastern Europe has been extremely scarce. This paper's contribution consists in reducing this literature gap, bringing insights into CSR communication practices from the Central and Eastern European tourism distribution sector. Moreover, the proposed methodology for analyzing travel agencies' websites and social media pages can be further used in order to research the issue of online CSR communication in other regions or tourism sectors.

Keywords CSR; online communication; travel agencies

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) nowadays represents an integral component of business strategy, the tourism sector being no exception (Holcomb et al 2007). CSR has become relevant in the tourism industry due to the fact that tourism depends on local communities, on human and natural resources, and on the environment in which its activities take place. The importance of CSR in the industry has risen in recent years along with issues concerning the environment, human rights, and fair trade (Sheldon and Park 2011), doing business according to sustainability principles being an important aspect for most companies in the tourism industry and their stakeholders, all over the world.

The literature suggests that companies perceived as being socially responsible enjoy several benefits derived from this status, including better attraction and retention of both employees (Kim and Park 2011) and customers (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Peloza and Shang 2011), as well as enhanced business reputation and improved market performance (Ogilvy 2010; European Commission 2009). However, the public perception of a company's social responsibility represents not only an outcome of what the company does in regards to CSR, but also of what it communicates. Thus, communicating CSR is of strategic importance for any business domain, in general, and for the tourism industry, in particular.

Moreover, considering the current development and impact of the Internet, it is very important for tourism businesses to set up and implement coherent CSR online communication strategies which should take into consideration tools such as: websites, search engine optimization and social media (Murphy and Kielgast 2008; Ip et al 2011; Ayeh et al 2012). These days, many tourism organizations highlight their global CSR programs on their websites and within their social media pages. For example, large hotel management companies all prominently promote their CSR policies on their corporate websites (Smith and Ong 2014). However, the tourism companies considered to be at the forefront of CSR communication are mostly major corporations such as airlines, hotel chains and cruise lines, while travel agencies are regarded as less important and involved in regard to the issue of CSR and its communication (Wight 2007).

The objective of the paper is to investigate the extent to which the largest Romanian travel agencies communicate their CSR practices and policies in the online environment, as reflected by the contents of their websites and social media pages. The analyzed data regards 20 Romanian travel agencies, the largest in terms of net turnover, the websites and social media pages of each company being analyzed considering several variables related to communicating CSR in the online environment, such as: having a CSR dedicated section, including CSR reports, emphasizing legal and economic responsibilities, and disclosing workforce, society, market, and environment oriented CSR actions or policies.

Even though CSR in the tourism industry and its communication, especially in the expanding online environment, have strongly grown in importance during the last decade, significant research on how Central and Eastern European industry members communicate CSR issues online hasn't been conducted, especially in the tourism distribution sector. Thus, a website and social media based analysis regarding CSR communication practices of the top Romanian travel agencies can be seen as a welcomed addition to the existing CSR specialized literature, as well as to the actual knowledge regarding CSR communication practices in the Central and Eastern European tourism distribution sector.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical and responsible business practices that take into consideration society's well-being are comprised within the concept of CSR, which implies that companies consider and manage their impact on consumers, employees, the environment, the society, and other stakeholders. All organizations should adopt sustainability principles in conducting their business, and take responsibility for their impact on the society and the natural environment, CSR basically referring to those voluntary activities that prove the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders (van Marrewijk 2003). However, there is still some confusion as to how CSR should be defined, despite numerous efforts to clearly and unbiasedly define the concept (Dahlsrud 2008). Dahlsrud (2008) identified almost 40 CSR definitions, emphasizing a certain degree of confusion regarding how CSR is socially constructed in specific contexts. Freeman et al (2010) also state that there is still no single widely accepted definition of the concept, despite several decades of CSR research.

Considering the most relevant literature on CSR systematization, three main approaches regarding CSR can be depicted. The first approach comes from Carroll (1979, 1991) who presents a four-dimensional conceptualization of CSR, structuring it as a pyramid, including economic, legal, ethical, and, respectively, discretionary (philanthropic) responsibilities. For a business, the economic responsibilities refer to being profitable, the legal responsibilities imply that the business complies with the set of rules regarding what is right and wrong imposed by the society in which it operates, the ethical responsibilities require that the business avoids harming and manages to do what is right, just and fair, while the philanthropic responsibilities refer to the business contributing resources to the improvement of the quality of life of the community in which it operates. According to Carroll, none of the four responsibilities are optional if the firm wants to be involved in long-term relationships with its stakeholders in order to create value. Adopting a similar approach, Aras and Crowther (2008) consider that *to be socially responsible a company must be more than legal and ethical*, suggesting that CSR is built on top of other concepts related to corporate behavior, legal and ethical issues. The second main approach regarding CSR systematization originates from the concept of sustainable development and regards CSR as a three-dimensional structure, including three facets (economic, environmental and social), companies having to take into consideration society's well-being, managing their impact and role in economy, environment, and society (Pérez and del Bosque 2013). The third relevant approach comes from Freeman et al (2010) who conceptualize CSR within a stakeholder management framework, categorizing the social responsibilities of companies based on their stakeholders: shareholders/investors, customers, employees, suppliers, the environment, the society, the local community etc. Öberseder et al (2013) consider that, from a stakeholder perspective, the European Commission's definition of CSR is the most appropriate: "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis". A similar approach is developed by Mandl and Dorr (2007), who consider that CSR means that companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with business relevant groups on a voluntary basis, the main fields of CSR activities

covering four main stakeholder categories: employees, society/community, environment, and market (customers and business partners included).

The importance of CSR in the tourism industry has risen in recent years along with issues concerning the environment, human rights, and fair trade (Sheldon and Park 2011). Especially at international level, CSR has become an essential part of business strategies in the tourism industry, covering aspects such as environmental protection, fair working conditions, or contributing to the welfare of local communities. The "European Cities Marketing" organization argues why CSR has become so relevant in the tourism industry in the following way: *"Tourism businesses have strong relationships to the local communities in which they are operating; therefore, they also have a strong influence on the socio-economic development of these regions. For customers as well as for employees, the integration of CSR strategies is becoming more and more important.*" (Smith and Ong 2014, p.4).

The tourism distribution sector, alongside with other tourism industry sectors such as airlines and transportation, face environmental issues more critically than others such as accommodation providers or restaurants (Sheldon and Park 2011). Moreover, travel agencies have a critical role in destination sustainability, due to their influence on destinations development and on tourists' choice of destinations (Van Wijk and Persoon 2006). Despite their important role in the tourism sector, travel agencies show a lower engagement in CSR activities as compared to other tourism industry sectors members (Van Wijk and Persoon 2006; Tepelus 2005). The tourism companies considered to be at the forefront of CSR communication are mostly major corporations such as airlines, hotel chains and cruise lines, while travel agencies are regarded as less important and involved in regard to the issue of CSR and its communication (Wight 2007).

Communicating CSR is of strategic importance for any company. The literature suggests that companies perceived as being socially responsible enjoy several benefits derived from this status, including better attraction and retention of both employees (Kim and Park 2011) and customers (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Peloza and Shang 2011). However, the public perception of a company's social responsibility represents not only an outcome of what the company does in regards to CSR, but also of what it communicates.

Through concerted CSR communications companies can "establish an industry leadership position, launch a brand, leapfrog competitors, penetrate a new market, profile a new product, engender customer loyalty, generate employee commitment, and ultimately transform a company's reputation" (Ogilvy 2010, p.11). Moreover, the European Commission (2009, p.4) suggests that communicating about a company's responsible entrepreneurship can generate new business opportunities, as well as "higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty, improved company, brand and product reputation, more motivated and productive employees, better relations with the local community and public authorities, and increased cost savings".

The changes in legislation, growing pressure form stakeholders and potential benefits resulted in a notable growth in CSR communication activities over the past years (de Grosbois 2012). CSR communication can defined as "communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts" (Morsing 2006, p.171), and can be achieved through a number of different channels including, but not limited to, sustainability or CSR reports, advertising campaigns on television, press releases, and the Internet (de Grosbois 2012). The European Commission (2009) suggests several practical means or methods to be used by companies in conveying their CSR messages to employees, customers, community, or other stakeholders: company value statements, posters and banners, intranets, company brochures, mailing lists, product labels and packaging, events, advertisements, newsletters, company reports, press releases, interviews, and last, but not least, websites. Via their websites companies could and should let visitors know about their commitment to CSR, websites being "extremely useful for this because they offer information to every target audience, and because they can be easily and cheaply updated" (European Commission 2009, p.14).

According to Google's 2014 Consumer Barometer, the majority of Europeans who bought travel services, and, more particularly, who purchased package holidays, did online research before the actual buying decision. Therefore, the information provided by tourism companies' websites and social media pages is extremely important both because it can strongly impact the information gathering stage – one of the most important stages in the consumer decision process (Kotler and Keller 2006), but also because it can convey certain long-term consumer attitudes. Considering the current development and impact of the Internet, and the fact that competition within the tourism industry is very strong, setting up a coherent online communication strategy in this sector is essential (Ip et al 2011). Online communication in the tourism industry can't be limited to establishing websites, these having to be visible and easily found by search engines (Murphy and Kielgast 2008), search engine optimization becoming an essential online communication enhancer. Moreover, over the last decade, social media has also become an important tool in the tourism industry (Ayeh et al 2012), Facebook and Twitter being nowadays extremely useful in conveying business to consumer communications.

2. METHODOLOGY

Considering the fact that research on how Central and Eastern European tourism distribution sector members communicate CSR on the Internet is scarce, the objective of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the largest Romanian travel agencies, in terms of their net turnover, communicate their CSR practices and policies in the online environment, as reflected by the contents of their websites and social media pages, considering several variables related to CSR disclosure, such as: having a CSR dedicated section, including CSR reports, emphasizing legal and economic responsibilities, and disclosing workforce, society, market, and environment oriented CSR actions or policies.

In order to accomplish this objective, a database of the top Romanian travel agencies was built, considering their net turnover. More specifically, the analyzed sample comprised a number of 20 Romanian travel agencies. Official data regarding the net turnover was mainly extracted from the public database provided by the Romanian government (mfinante.ro). The list of the 20 investigated travel agencies, along with data regarding their net turnover during the last two years, their website, and, respectively, their main social media presence is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: **Investigated top Romanian travel agencies**

Travel agency	Net turnover* 2013	2012	Website	Facebook page	Twitter page
Accent Travel & Events	47	72.9	accenttravel.ro	YES	YES
Aerotravel	150	156	aerotravel.ro	YES	NO
Business Travel Turism	70.2	66.4	businesstravel.ro	NO	NO
Christian Tour	195.3	155.8	christiantour.ro	YES	YES
Eximtur	160.1	157.1	eximtur.ro	YES	YES
Filadelfia Turism	44.9	41.1	filadelfiaturism.ro	YES	YES
Happy Tour	161.8	181.9	happytour.ro	YES	YES
HotelAir	81.5	74.2	hotelcon.net	NO	NO
Jʾinfo Tours	46.6	44.3	jinfotours.ro	YES	YES
Kartago Tours	13.3	19.3	kartagotours.ro	YES	YES
Mareea Comtur	67.5	64.1	mareea.ro	YES	YES
Marshal Turism	44.1	50.5	marshal.ro	YES	YES
Olimpic International	48	56.2	olimpic.ro	NO	NO
Paralela 45	157	127.6	paralela45.ro	YES	YES
Perfect Tour	206.4	110	perfect-tour.ro	YES	YES
Prestige Tours	46	57.9	prestige.ro	YES	NO
Prompt Service Travel	61.9	63.9	cocktailholidays.ro	YES	NO
SunMedair	61.5	64	gotravel.ro	YES	NO
Transilvania Travel	30.1	34.8	transilvaniatravel.com	YES	YES
Vola.ro	107.5	92.8	vola.ro	YES	YES

* RON (annual average exchange rate RON/EUR: 4.42 in 2013; 4.46 in 2012)

Source: Research results

The analysis of CSR communication has been an important literature subject, especially for the last decade (Morhardt 2010). A review of the literature shows that most of the authors focus on CSR reports contents and approach the research problem by quantifying the volume of communication (recording the number of words, expressions, sections, or pages devoted to specific CSR topics), and/or by measuring the presence of specific CSR topics, identifying whether a topic is addressed or not (de Grosbois 2012). The same approach can be adopted when it comes to analyzing online CSR communication, by focusing on corporate websites or social media pages (Băleanu et al, 2011). Thus, the websites and social media pages of each travel agency included in the research sample were analyzed considering several variables related to CSR. The data collection was conducted between August 1 and August 15, 2014. Each travel agency's website and social media space was accessed, the gathered information being structured and/or coded. In order to identify CSR related information comprised

in websites the data collection for each travel agency started from the website's map, relevant sections being thus identified. The vast majority of CSR communication elements were found in websites, in sections such as "About us", "Our vision", "Our mission", "Our values", "Press room", or "CSR", while social media pages only comprised insignificant information regarding CSR practices or policies, mostly linking to information found within websites.

Considering the fact that all the top Romanian travel agencies are medium sized enterprises, the analysis was focused on identifying those CSR topics which are specific to SMEs. Therefore, a significant number of variables included in the analysis were extracted from the CSR activities structure outlined by Mandl and Dorr (2007) specifically for SMEs (Figure 1).

Figure 1: **SMEs' CSR activities structure**

Workforce-oriented CSR Activities	Society-oriented CSR Activities	Market-oriented CSR Activities	Environment-oriented CSR Activities
• working conditions • work/life balance • equal opportunities • staff development • participation in company decisions • responsible and fair remuneration etc.	• social and/or labor market integration at community level • improvement of the local infrastructure • donations to local community institutions • support of the society in a wider sense etc.	• improving products' quality and safety • fair pricing • ethical advertising • paying suppliers without delay • contracting local partners • supporting local business alliances etc.	• environmentally friendly products or production processes • efficient use of resources • reduction of waste • ecologic assessment of suppliers • informing on environmental issues etc.

Source: Adapted from Mandl and Dorr (2007)

Moreover, several other variables were included in the analysis in order to have a more comprehensive outlook of how CSR is communicated online, these variables referring to: legal and economic responsibilities, the existence of CSR dedicated sections, and the inclusion of CSR reports within investigated travel agencies' virtual presence. The full list of CSR online communication variables which were analyzed can be outlined as it follows: *the existence of a dedicated CSR section, the inclusion of CSR reports, emphasizing the focus on service quality, communicating about tourism distribution sector specific legal responsibilities, emphasizing economic responsibility, conveying fair pricing, emphasizing honest and transparent communication, disclosing society/community-oriented CSR policies, communicating workforce-oriented CSR policies, and conveying environment-oriented CSR policies.*

3. RESULTS

The first result reflects the fact that none of the investigated travel agencies allocate any *CSR section* within their social media pages, while only 10% of the investigated travel agencies dedicate a section on their website to CSR. Regarding the actual contents of the websites' CSR sections, the information comprised is rather superficial and extremely limited. Thus, in one of the cases the CSR section is not placed in the website's homepage, but in the "About us" section, having a limited visibility to online visitors. Moreover, the section only describes two rather minor philanthropic actions of the company, both of them being related to a corporate anniversary dating back several years ago. In the other case, even though the CSR section is placed in the website's homepage, having a good visibility, it only comprises an outdated formal statement of the company's CEO of about 1000 words, regarding several CSR policies focused on its employees, customers and shareholders, the local community, the society as a whole, and the environment. The document suggests that all policies were designed according to international standards of CSR certification, even though it does not claim the possession of any form of CSR certification.

Regarding the *inclusion of CSR reports*, none of the investigated websites or social media pages contains any form of such reports, neither focused on CSR, nor on business ethics or other similar issues. In the absence of such forms of reporting, certain statements regarding general attitudes towards stakeholders were looked up within the contents of the websites and social media pages. Regrettably, only 25% of the investigated travel agencies include clear statements regarding their general attitudes towards their businesses' stakeholders within their online contents (especially websites). Moreover, out of the 25%, only one travel agency includes such a statement in a complete manner, referring to all stakeholders ("Business Travel Turism": *"satisfying the needs of all stakeholders […] our results depend on our responsibility towards employees, society, customers, shareholders, local community and natural environment"*), while the others outline a limited view, referring to only some of their stakeholders (e.g. *"respecting customers, employees, partners and collaborators"*, *"earning and maintaining the respect of our business partners"*, *"relations based on sustainability principles"*, or *"professional and fair relations with our partners"*).

By far, the CSR topic that is the most emphasized in the investigated travel agencies' online communication is *service quality*. The concepts of service quality and CSR are strongly connected, as one of the most important fields of CSR refers to market-oriented activities, among which improving the quality of products and services is essential (Mandl and Dorr, 2007). Improving service quality and providing high quality services, as part of the social responsibility of tourism businesses, further generate long term relationships with important stakeholders (Blešić et al 2011), among whom customers are essential. In order to operationalize the online environment analysis regarding the communication of service quality orientation, the classical five dimensions approach of Parasuraman et al (1985, 1988) regarding service quality was adopted. Thus, key words or expressions were extracted or summarized from the contents of the investigated online domains, in order to identify the extent to which they focused on each service quality dimension (except for the tangibles, in which case none of the websites' content made references): reliability (ability to perform the

promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge, professionalism, courtesy, ability to inspire trust and confidence etc.), and empathy (caring, individualized attention to customers etc.). According to the content of the analyzed websites and social media spaces, reliability and empathy were the most emphasized service quality dimensions, followed by assurance, and, respectively, responsiveness. In order to convey their service reliability, the investigated travel agencies used messages that were mostly based on descriptive words attached to the term of "service quality" ("high", "high standards", "improving", "top", "best", "excellence") or, in some cases, emphasized several awards received for quality excellence. Empathy was mostly converged by emphasizing customer satisfaction orientation, using key expressions such as *"customer orientation", "customer satisfaction", "satisfying customers' needs"* and others alike, and, in many cases, by claiming a strong orientation towards customization and treating each customer individually. In what concerns conveying responsiveness the most outlined aspects were related to the permanent or quasi-permanent availability of customer assistance, using key expressions such as *"24/7", "7 days a week, 24 hours a day", "easy to find", "non-stop support and assistance", "non-stop availability"* and others alike. Finally, in suggesting assurance, the most frequent emphasized aspects were found to be related to the experience of the company in the Romanian tourism sector, using key expressions such as *"[more than] ... years of experience", "experience gained through years"* and others alike, and, respectively, staff professionalism, suggested through keywords such as *"professional", "[high] professionalism", "high qualification"* and others alike. In addition, mentions of any formal *service quality management certifications* were identified. Thus, 40% of the investigated travel agencies clearly mention within their online domains the ISO 9001:2008 certification, a quality management system certification involving that the company has the ability to consistently provide products/services that meet customer and applicable regulatory requirements, enhancing customer satisfaction through the effective application of the system (iso.org).

Table 2: **Emphasizing the focus on service quality**

Travel agency	Reliability	Empathy	Responsiveness	Assurance
Accent Travel & Events		"customize your holidays", "plan your trips as you wish"		
Aerotravel	"innovative tourism services", „quality"	"customer orientation", "customer satisfaction"		"more than 16 years of experience", "professional teams"
Business Travel Turism	"improving qualitative characteristics of services"	"customized solutions", "each individual is unique"	"assistance 7 days a week, 24 hours a day"	"we act in the same way for 21 years"
Christian Tour	"carefully selected accommodation", "top transportation"	"according to your wishes", "customization universe"	"we are easy to find", "we expanded to be close to you"	
Eximtur	"high quality travel services", "carefully select offers"	"services diversity", "full/complete travel services"	"non-stop support and assistance", "extensive network"	"safety", "experience", emphasizes staff high qualification
Filadelfia Turism	"best quality", "constant improvement of service quality"	"satisfying customers' needs", "long-term partnerships"		"kindness/ politeness", "seriousness"
Happy Tour	"we are engaged in excellence"	"travelers' satisfaction"		
HotelAir				
J'info Tours	"high standard", emphasizes quality excellence awards	"we satisfy the needs and hopes of customers"		emphasizes experience & staff high qualification
Kartago Tours	"high quality tourism services"	"customer orientation", "customer satisfaction our first priority"		
Mareea Comtur	„the quality of our services"	"constant growth of customer satisfaction"	"prompt services"	"experience gained through years", "professional team"
Marshal Turism	"we offer qualitative services"	"adaptable to new requests"	the CEO promises to personally respond to any complaint	
Olimpic International		"our mission is total customer satisfaction"		
Paralela 45	emphasizes quality excellence awards			„22 years of experience"
Perfect Tour	"excellent services", "travel excellence"	"customers before anything", "customized services"	„non-stop availability"	„friendly"
Prestige Tours	"quality is an essential component of anything we offer"	"we focus on our partners' requests and wants"		"23 years of tourism experience", "professional team"
Prompt Service Travel	"guaranteed quality"		"assistance from consultants", "24/7 online reservations"	"more than 20 years of experience in tourism"
SunMedair	"high quality of services"	"adapt offers to customers", "according to customers' desires"		"more than 23 years of experience", "high professionalism"
Transilvania Travel				„professionals", emphasizes staff high qualification
Vola.ro	"you receive exactly what you buy", "latest technology"	"customized services", "your satisfaction is our gain"	"on 24/7", "professional Call Center [that is] never busy"	"5 years of experience", "buy with trust"

In what concerns *specific legal responsibilities of the tourism distribution sector* in Romania, it is important to outline the fact that this sector is highly regulated, several legal restrictions being applied to any company that wants to act as a travel agency within the Romanian national territory. More specifically, any travel agency (and, as a matter of fact, any of its branches) that commercially acts in Romania must request and receive a tourism license which can only be issued by the Romanian state (Romanian Government order no. 65/2013). Moreover, in order for the tourism license to be issued, the travel agency must comply with several legal requirements related to physical offices (area, endowments etc.), customers' protection (e.g. an insurance policy for refunding customers in case the travel agency becomes bankrupt or insolvent), personnel qualifications (e.g. the general manager of any travel agency – as well as the managers of its branches – must possess an individual tourism license or another formal and authorized certificate of qualification), communication methods, and other aspects. Last, but not least, any travel agency that commercially acts in the Romanian market must have a public and operative website which should display scanned copies of (at least) the general manager's certificate of qualification in tourism, the travel agency's tourism license and, respectively, the mandatory insurance policy. The websites analysis revealed that even though the majority (75%) of the investigated travel agencies comply with the national legal requirements for travel agencies' websites, displaying the mandatory scanned copies, the other 25% of them treat these legal requirements superficially, their websites only textually outlining the general coordinates related to the mandatory legal documents (such as issuing number, issuing date, start/end date of validity etc.), instead of scanned copies.

Regarding *the manner in which the economic responsibility is communicated*, it is important to emphasize the fact that the perceived economic success of a company can be significant in generating customer trust, choice, preference, loyalty, and a positive customer attitude towards the company, especially in the tourism sector, in which case the specific characteristics of the offering (intangibility, inseparability etc.) can increase customers purchasing perceived risks. As an essential component of the whole concept of CSR, the economic responsibility of companies is directly related to obtaining long-term economic success, which should be communicated in a credible manner. The analysis revealed that 25% of the investigated travel agencies pay very little attention to emphasizing their economic success, even though they are among the top businesses in this sector. Moreover, another 20% of the analyzed travel agencies present their success extensively, but in a less credible manner, by self-praising, with no third party sources or endorsements such as press news or received awards. Nevertheless, the other 55% include press news links (3 agencies), scanned copies of received awards (7 agencies), or both (1 agency) within their online domains, in order to increase the credibility of their claims regarding economic success.

In what concerns *fair pricing*, the analysis revealed that 50% of the investigated travel agencies include references to such aspects. Most of these travel agencies were found to be focused on suggesting low prices, using key words such as: *"best"*, *"less"*, *"low"*, *"lowest"* and others alike, in combination with terms such as *"price"*, *"cost"*, *"tariff"*, *"budget"*, *"solution"* etc. (e.g. *"best solutions for customers budgets"*, *"optimal costs"*, *„holidays for all budgets"*, *"you pay less with us"*, *"proper price quality ratio"*, *"competitive prices"*, *"maximum economy and value for all expenses"*,

*"good prices", "low tariffs", "best quality price ratio", "lowest prices possible",
"lowest tariff guaranteed"*). However, only one of them conveys the message of fair
pricing per-se, using the key expressions *"correct price"* (Table 7).

Regarding *honest and transparent communication*, only 35% of the analyzed travel
agencies emphasize this CSR aspect, using key words such as *"honest"*,
"transparent", "correct", "open", and others alike in order to suggest such
orientations (e.g. *"honesty and transparency", "transparent relations with all
stakeholders", "transparent activity", "we are honest", "open communication",
"detailed, pertinent and correct information", "transparent commissions"*).
Nevertheless, in most cases these terms were mainly used generically, with no specific
stakeholder targeting, and no details regarding the actual implementation of these
values. Another aspect conveying honest and transparent communication is related to
the agency-customer contractual framework. As specified before, the Romanian
tourism services distribution sector is highly regulated, one important aspect bound to
legal restrictions being the contract between travel agencies and their customers when
it comes to selling tourism services packages (Romanian Government order no.
516/2005). Thus, Romanian regulations impose a standard content of such contracts,
which is applicable to any travel agency, and which is mandatory, only a few
sections/parameters of the contract being customizable. Nevertheless, it is not
mandatory for travel agencies to display or describe in detail, on their websites, the
standard contract, but its display or detailed description can be considered an extra-
indicator of ethical, honest and transparent communication. Therefore, the occurrence
of such a disclosure was quantified, the results revealing that 60% of the investigated
travel agencies present in detail the standard agency-customer contract, 15% of them
outline some selective information regarding the standard contract in their websites
"Terms & Conditions" section, while the other 25% do not include within the content
of their websites any details regarding the contract.

Considering *the manner in which society/community-oriented CSR policies* are
communicated, only three such CSR topics were identified within the content of the
analyzed online domains: *social tourism offerings* (dedicated to the poor, seniors or
other social cases), *philanthropy*, and, respectively, *labor market integration at
community level*. In what concerns social tourism offerings, the analysis revealed that
70% of the investigated travel agencies include referrals to such offerings within their
online contents, but only 55% of these 70% dedicate a website section to these.
Considering philanthropy, only 15% of the analyzed travel agencies include such
aspects within their online domains. However, these is done superficially, by described
a few isolated and rather minor philanthropic actions (e.g. a small financial donation
for a group of institutionalized children, sponsoring a holiday for a group of eminent
students, offering a free holiday for a group of institutionalized children), or by
displaying some awards received from non-profit organizations for offering support
(e.g. a local library, The Romanian Maltese Relief Service), but with no details.
Finally, considering labor market integration at community level, only 10% of the
investigated travel agencies include within the content of their online domains such
specifications, strictly referring to offering internships for students, or generally
referring to its responsibility to undertake actions to facilitate children & teenagers
education, with no any other detail.

Regarding the communication of *workforce-oriented CSR policies,* regrettably, only 25% of the investigated travel agencies include in their websites and social media pages statements regarding such CSR topics. Among these, only one agency includes such a statement in a quasi-complete manner, referring to permanent improvement of working conditions, occupational health and security, respecting employees' rights, zero tolerance to discrimination, and, respectively, equitable disciplinary practices, working hours and remuneration. The others generally limit their statements to assuring periodical professional trainings to their employees (i.e. *"we periodically organize internal or external specialization, sales, communication, and customer care training activities", "we ensure all the necessary resources for our employees to be continuously trained and prepared in order to develop their competences", "sales and communication training sessions are periodically organized"*), and, in one case, to working conditions and professional promotion opportunities (*"we offer professional promotion opportunities to motivated employees"*).

In what concerns *the communication environment-oriented CSR policies,* only one (5%) of the top travel agencies includes in its online presence such references, mentioning among its CSR policies the *"prevention of environment pollution"* and the *"monitoring and measuring of environmental performance"*. However, the travel agency's website does not include any other detail regarding these policies, nor does it make any other reference to environment-oriented CSR aspects (examples, implementation results etc.).

4. CONCLUSIONS, RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The results of the current research show significant lacks and superficiality in what concerns the online communication of CSR aspects by the investigated members of the tourism distribution sector. Only 10% dedicate a section on their website or social media page to CSR, while none of them include any form of CSR reports within their online contents. Moreover, a significant proportion of the Romanian top travel agencies ignore their sector's specific legal requirements, while their economic responsibility is communicated mostly in a less credible manner. The website and social media based analysis reveals, by far, that the most frequent CSR aspects communicated and emphasized in the top Romanian travel agencies' online domains can be categorized as market-oriented, service quality being the most emphasized facet, fair pricing and honest/transparent communication being also consistently emphasized. However, employees-oriented, society-oriented or environment-oriented CSR issues are very scarcely (or, in some cases, not at all) included within the content of the investigated travel agencies' online contents.

A possible explanation of this situation could be the fact that the top-management of these travel agencies does not understand or realize the significant positive impact that CSR activities and their communication/disclosure can have on their companies' success, despite their medium size. For that matter, Mandl and Dorr (2007) demonstrate and outline the fact that CSR can positively influence SMEs' in several ways: improved products, higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty, higher

motivation and loyalty of employees, better publicity due to the award of prizes and/or enhanced word-of-the-mouth, better position in the labor market, better networking with business partners and authorities, cost savings and increased profitability, and increased turnover/sales.

However, the fact that the top Romanian travel agencies online domains do not suggest a significant engagement in CSR activities does not mean that the investigated companies are not actually concerned or engaged in CSR. The problem might be mostly related to the lack of importance their top-management assigns to online CSR communication.

Regarding the limitations of the research, it must be admitted that analyzing only the largest travel agencies does not offer a comprehensive image of the whole tourism distribution sector. Nevertheless, many tourism enterprises, especially the smaller ones, do not significantly communicate about their CSR (European Commission 2009). Moreover, the idea of analyzing the largest companies from the sector can be seen as being rather subjectively approached within the current research framework, the sample being limited to the top 20 Romanian travel agencies. Nevertheless, the variables proposed for analyzing the largest travel agencies' online contents could be used for expanding the research by taking into consideration a random sample of travel agencies from a specific territory (including both small and medium sized enterprises), and, thus, conveying a comprehensive analysis of the whole sector.

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