Attractiveness and Competitiveness of the Romanian Carpathian Mountains Destinations: A study of Perception of Generation Y

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Abstract: The Carpathian Mountains, an undeniable element of the Romania's tourism brand, have a great variety of attractions, accessed by over half of domestic visitors. At the same time, they are subjected by inappropriate development, which affects the supply and demand. Therefore, the study aims to analyze the perception of Generation Y (GY) regarding the tourism attractiveness and competitiveness in the Romanian Carpathians mountain units in order to identify a benchmarking of directions needed to improve the development of these destinations. The research is based on the survey method, applied to a sample of Millennial(s)/GY, processed in SPSSv.17 and evaluation using aggregate indexes. The results show that young tourists consider the attractiveness to be high for tourist resources and satisfactory for facilities. Performance of their experiences is influenced by outdoor relaxation, photos, and trekking activities. Despite some lacks regarding the winter sports facilities, accommodation, GY is still interested to visit or revisit different mountain units. Thus, the stakeholders must take in consideration the issues of facilities for winter sports, walk, mountain bike, and races events, to reshape and adapt all aspects related to the mobility, accommodation, promotion and quality of experiences in the Carpathian Mountains to meet much more to GY's expectations.

Key words: *Attractiveness, Competitiveness, Generation Y, Romanian Carpathian Mountains, Tourism*

1. Introduction

The Carpathian Mountains, which cover one third of the Romania's surface, rank as the first option of domestic tourists, with more than two-thirds of their flow (Matei, 2011). Apart from these, the uncontrolled flow of tourists is added (Matei et al. 2013), especially one-day stays, usually unrecorded in official statistics. Definitely, the high rate of visitors is influenced by their attractiveness, widely promoted in/formally and often debated in academic literature. Thus, in Romanian studies, the attractiveness is analyzed mainly from the perspective of the resources that have the potential to be included in tourism of an area. Thus, some authors argue that the Carpathians landforms have remarkable geomorphosites consisting in many complexes of rocks (Comănescu & Nedelea, 2010; Comănescu et al., 2013) while others underline the highly biodiversity capitalized in protected areas which stimulate the development of ecotourism (Matei, 2011; Dincă & Erdeli, 2011). It also recognized that the wealth of water resources favored the spreading of health resorts or spas since ancient times (Stăncioiu et al., 2013), and the mountain communities are focused on agro-tourism as villages preserve unique traditions for centuries (Turnock, 1999; Dezs, 2008; Vijulie et al., 2013; 2018). These all could be correlated with the attraction's power for tourists seen by business and infrastructure

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development (Brătucu et al., 2017) despite some gaps related to accessibility (Tache, Petrișor, 2017), deforestation (Knorn et al, 2013), pollution (Mihai, 2018), etc.

However, the Carpathian Mountains, which are the core of the national brand, named "Explore the Carpathian Garden" since 2009, have much larger opportunities to diversify the tourism products, a better supply-demand match (Matei et al., 2014) and hence to improve their competitiveness. In this respect, an assessment regarding their attractiveness and competitiveness is most suitable, as this can show how the potential is used by tourist industry and consumed by tourists.

2. Literature Review

In international literature, many scientific debating argued and evaluated either the tourist destination attractiveness (Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Kim, 1998; Formica, 2002; Lee, Cheng & Huang, 2014) and competitiveness (Buhalis, 2000; Dwyer & Kim 2003; Hong, 2009) or both of them (Vengesayi, 2003; Cracolici and Nijkamp, 2008).

Destination attractiveness (DA) is distinguished from destination competitiveness (DC), but strongly connected. Their definitions and the methodology of evaluation have known many approaches. While Mayo & Jarvis (1981) defined DA as the ability of a destination attributes to meet the tourist needs, Formica & Usal, (2006) underlined the destination availability, importance to deliver benefits to tourists. But steadily, the authors have glided to other aspects, related to the socio-cultural background of the consumers, their perception of a destination according to motivations, expectations, etc. Morachat (2003), Vengesayi (2003) tied the DA with the tourist's feelings, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, perceptions which influence the consumer decision. Later on, Cho (2008) appreciated DA being an aggregated indicator of attributes while others pay attention to the DA uniqueness (Lee, Ou and Huang, 2009; Ariya et al, 2017).

DC is seen in different ways by each authors' expertize. Therefore, the term includes the capacity/ability, to increase tourism expenditure, enlarge the flows of visitors ensuring memorable experiences, high degree of satisfactions in such way that everybody has profits including the wellbeing of residents in the destination and sustainable exploitation of natural resources (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005).

DA evaluation have been applied on different spaces based either on quantitative or qualitative methods. Thus, for DA, many models were built: model or index of tourism, Gearing et al., (1974); Fishbein expectancy-value model, Goodrich (1978); multi-attribute model, Hu & Ritchie (1993), Tang & Rochananond (1990), etc. The issues for these assessments must solve the attributes included, and the method to measure DA, etc. In earlier studies, a various number of attributes were included: from 8 (Tang & Rochananond, 1990) to 20 (Kim, 1998), depending on the spatial scale and type of tourism. Midelton (1989) analyzed it by prices of venues, and transport networks. Later on, the geographical background was considered very important and thus, Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman (1992) stopped at the experience environment (climate, geography, social background etc.), while Meinung (1995) argued that scenery is one of the most important. Hu & Ritchie (1993) introduced the context of the vacation experience and Kim (1998) focused on the sensitivity of drivers: clean and peaceful environment, quality of accommodation facilities, accessibility, if the amenities are family-oriented, reputation, entertainment, recreational opportunities. Goeldner, Ritchie & McIntosh (2000) identified five types of attractions: natural (a), cultural (b), events(c), recreations (d), entertainment (e), and support facilities. To analyze the DA, Deng et al. (2002) stated that this depends on five drivers groups: tourist resources (1), tourist facilities (2), accessibility (3), local communities (4) and

peripheral attractions (5). Vengesayi (2008) stressed the importance of the group of drivers, referring to the support facilities: transport, accommodation, food, health, and shopping.

DC analyses apply quantitatively research by tourist arrivals and tourism incomes and/or the qualitative aspects of performance (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999). But from the global level to national or regional, destinations are in competition aiming to achieve performance and satisfy the experienced or new tourists. Even the scientists developed many models to evaluate DC, these cannot be used for all destinations at all time (Perna et al., 2018). Crouch (2011) cited by (Perna et al., 2018) grouped models into three: a. based on diagnose competitive positions of specific destinations; b. destination's positioning or management systems; c. aggregates of competitiveness indexes.

As methods of measurement, some studies use the investigation of perception of DA or DC. In fact, perception became an increasingly approached topic in tourism research, with a large palette of themes: local communities perception's role on the sustainable development of destinations (Dyer et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2013), predictions regarding the destinations' viability (Diedrich & Garcíá-Buades, 2009), protected areas attractiveness (An et al., 2019), tourism investors in relation to the factors (Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska et al., 2012), finding solutions for the tourism development on a long term (Dudensing et al., 2011) or tourists' satisfaction (Matei, 2014).

Recently, starting from the fact that young tourists generation (GY) defined as people born between 1977 and 1994 (Gardiner, Grace, and King 2014) became a rising segment on the global market, from 20% in 2010 and 30% in 2020 of total international arrivals (UNWTO and WYSE Travel Confederation, 2016) a series of studies have been conducted on GY perceptions on different subjects and geographical areas. It can be noticed China, with the highest proportion of GY, where Xu, (2009), taking into account the 5 elements of the tourism product (the physical plant, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement), promoted by Smith (1994) find that in the Y's perception all variables are important but they differ across a variety of tourism products. In South Asia-Pacific, Australia stands out with Gardiner et al., (2014) whose study shifts in domestic tourist behavior and motivation, and, also, New Zealand regarding the mobility to a destination, where Hopkins (2016) shows emergent trends of multimodality etc. In Europe, the subjects are focused on the impact of travel experiences on Italian GY (Stafieri et al., 2018) as well as in Great Britain (Ghandour & Bakalova, 2014) or the determinants of France GY's accommodation choice (Prayag, Del Chiappa, 2014).

In a scarcity of studies on the GY's perception in Eastern Europe, our study may bring a new perspective in this domain in an area characterized by an eclectic development of tourism as many countries passed from a centralized economy to a market economy.

Our study of the master students' perception, part of the Y Romanian tourists, that (will) develop their future work in tourism, but, also, in their quality as mountain travelers in the Carpathian area, aims to analyze the attractiveness and competitiveness of the Romanian Carpathian Mountains Destinations (RCMDs) in order to identify directions needed to improve the tourist experiences. In this respect, our investigation could be useful for stakeholders in benchmarking the directions needed to develop this destination.

The objectives of the study begin with:

1. RCMDs attractiveness analysis using the GY's perception;
2. identification of specificity of RCMDs competitiveness in the GY views;
3. ending with sketching of directions needed for development of RCMDs coupling to the young consumers.

3. Methods and the research design

The study concentrates mainly on a cohort of Generation Y (born 1980 to 1994) because its time frame is clearly established and analyzed in specific literature, even Brown et al., (2015) enlarge it on those born between 1981 and 2000.

The GY's perception analysis is based on the survey method, respectively a semi-structured questionnaire. This was composed of four parts: the first one aims to investigate the socio-demographic profile of respondents, the second designate to collect examples about their micro-scale visit in RCMDs in the last ten years and how many time they repeated the places. The third part is dedicated to the attractiveness of mounts they visited having a good expertize, asking them to appreciate on 5 Likert scale by single or multiple choice. The last part investigated the perception about the destination performance. In this section, respondents were invited to select one mount to be recommended for their friends, relatives etc., which of them to be revisited, and to mention the space for their future intention to travel in RCMDs.

The structure of the questionnaire allows to measure two constructs; attractiveness and competitiveness, each grouping several attributes/ variables (Table 1).

Table 1. Constructs proposed to be measured by the survey.

Constructs	Groups of attributes	Attributes/Variables	Symbols - sub/attributes/issues
Attractiveness	TR- tourist resources	Natural assets (NA)	<i>Gc, Gs, Gv, Vg, Ca, Wf, L, Pa, Fe, Pe^a</i>
		Cultural assets (CA)	<i>La, Hm, Ra, Mu^b</i>
		Events (E)	<i>F^c</i>
		Recreational (R)	<i>Oa^d</i>
	TF- tourist facilities	Accommodation (A)	<i>Qa; Aa^e</i>
		Food (F)	<i>Qf, Fa^f</i>
		Information (I)	<i>It, Mm, Ic, G, Ps, Pm^g</i>
		Sports (Ss)	<i>Ws, Sf^h</i>
		Services (S)	<i>ⁱATMs, SALVAMONT, H, Ph, Es, Ws, SS</i>
	TA-Transport accessibility LC-local communities CP- Cost/Price	Toward destination (TD)	<i>D; Ta^j</i>
		Inside destination (ID)	<i>Ts^k</i>
		Attitude pro tourists	<i>K^l</i>
Competitiveness		Money spent on major services	<i>CP^m</i>
		Overall satisfaction	<i>Tsⁿ</i>
		Intention to revisit	<i>IR^o</i>
		Intention to recommend	<i>Ir^p</i>
		Intention to travel in a non-visited mountain	<i>In^r</i>

^a*Gc*-geomorphosites on limestone/conglomerates; *Gs*-on crystalline schist; *Gv*-on volcanic rocks; *Vg* - valleys gorges; *Ca*-caves, *Wf*-water falls; *L*-lakes; *Pa*-protected areas; *Fe*- endemic fauna; *Pe* -endemic plants; ^b*La*-local architecture; *Hm*-historical monuments; *Ra*-religious attraction, *Mu*-museums; ^c*F*-festivals; ^d*Oa*-outdoor activities; ^e*Qa*-quality of accommodation; ^f*Aa*-availability of accommodation; ^f*Qf*-quality of food units, *Fa*-availability of food units; ^g*It*-virtual, *Mm*-mass-media, *Ic*-information center, *G*-guiding, *Ps*-pedestrian signposts; *Pm*-printed materials; ^h*Ws*-winter sports facilities, *Sf*-summer leisure facilities;

ⁱ*ATMs*; *SALVAMONT*-police/mountain security; *H*-medical/health services, *Ph*-communications; *Es*-energy supply, *Ws*-clean water supply; *SS*-and sewerage system; ^j*D*-distance; *Ta*- type of access; ^k*Ts*-special transportation; ^l*K*-conflicts; ^m*CP*- cost/prices; ⁿ*Ts*-tourist satisfaction; ^o*IR*-intention to revisit; ^p*Ir*-intention to recommend; ^r*In*-intention to travel in a non-visited mountain.

The sample was chosen on the grounds that respondents must have knowledge of marketing and tourism management, on the other hand to be consumers of mountain tourism visitor of at least two mountain units. Sampling followed the structure of gender of the students within the

faculties, where two thirds are girls and one third are boys and have the same amount of professional information acquired in courses and seminars of Master Degree either inside the Faculty of Geography (Bucharest University) or Faculty of Tourism Marketing (Bucharest University of Economic Studies).

Among all 250 students, who have freely consented to participate in the investigation, the number of validated questionnaire was 202, because 48 had discrepancies among the answers, visiting only one mountain. Following these conditions has been resulted a sample of 76.7% of females and 23.3% male, randomly structured by the regions of the country: 43.7% Bucharest, Muntenia 32.2%, 10.4% Moldova, Oltenia 8.9%, 16.4% Dobrogea, 4.5% from Transylvania, and 3% Banat.

The attractiveness index was calculated using the values attributed by respondents following the variables of Table 1.

$A_i = \sum (TR, TF, TA, LC, CP)$ where,

A_i -the tourist attractiveness index; i -the number of components taken into consideration; c -the qualitative level of the components ($c=1-5$), value 1 - for a very low quality, value 2 - for reduced quality; value 3 - for satisfactory quality; value 4 - good quality, and 5 value for the highest quality. To avoid the subjectivism of each respondent, we assume equal weight for all the variables, thus the aggregation of the 12 indicators can be useful to reveals the perceived attractiveness level within and among all these mountains. Thus, the index can fluctuate between 12 and maximum 120, later normalized between 0 and 100 points for a graphs representation and analysis (Figure 2).

The competitiveness uses qualitative and quantitative research method, being based on the perception aiming to evaluate the qualitative aspects of performance (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999).

4. Results and discussions

4.1. The GY's perception about the attractiveness of the RCMDs

The attractiveness evaluation of RCMD included top 12 visited units which have a number of outstanding features that attract tourists (Table 1). According to the respondents' perception on natural tourist resources Bucegi, Ceahlău, Retezat and Piatra Craiului Mountains rank first. Except for the Retezat Mts., the other three have a mixture of rocks and consequently a great variety of landscape. In terms of tourist facilities the best endowment is attributed to Bucegi Mts., followed at a big interval by Piatra Craiului. The transport accessibility is seen to be the best in Bucegi, Parâng and then in Făgăraș Mountains, the last two crossed by highest altitude roads in Romania. The last attribute concerning the local communities' attitude toward tourists seems to be satisfactory in the mountains, where the facilities are more developed, and decreases in those areas with a high population density. In all the mountains, the costs for major services are satisfactory (Figure 1). The global attractiveness index reveals that only four mountain units have an attractiveness index higher than the general average, the Bucegi Mountains being on top (Figure 2).

The hierarchy of the attractiveness in the GY view has some particularities. It can be observed that, except the Bucegi Mountains, the GY is mostly impressed by wilderness than facilities.

Figure 1. The attractiveness of RCMDs by groups of attributes. After the respondents' rates.

Figure 2. The global attractiveness index of RCMDs. Processed after the respondents' rates.

4.2. The competitiveness of the RCMDs in the GY's perception

Even the RCMDs represent entirety a destination, the Romanian GY perceived them, separately, by units. Starting from the assumption that YG focused on 12 mountains, we may discuss about the competitiveness among these. Starting from the statement of Kozak & Rimmington (1999), that visitors which gather experience in different destinations, their perceptions regarding the performance will play a determinant role in repeating travels, often juggled through the comparison among items which they like or dislike the most during vacation, we apply a qualitative evaluation for the competitiveness.

Table 2. Data of sample (N=202)

Variables	%	Variables	%	Variables (Multiple Choice)	%
Gender		Residency Region		Information to travel	
Male	23.3	Bucharest	43.7	Internet	75.5
Female	76.7	Muntenia	32.2	Friends	75.5
Income		Moldova	10.4	Family	53.9
Less 250€	86.7	Transilvania	4.5	Mass-media	46.0
250.1-450 €	6.9	Banat	3.0	Travel agencies	9.3
450.1-750€	5.9	Dobrodgea	16.4	Books	31.6
Over 750.1€	0.5	Oltenia	8.9	Expected activities	
Mean of travel		Length of holiday		Trekking	85.1
Car	71.8	One day	23.7	Recreational	52.4
Train	24.2	One week-end	56.9	Photos	75.7
Bus	2.0	One week	15.4	Hiking	9.9
Mixed + bike	2.0	Two weeks	2.5	Bird/fauna watching	3.0
Accommodation		More than 2 weeks	1.5	Sports	5.9
Hotel	21.7	Travel mode		First reason for purchasing	
Chalet	10.1	Alone	3.5	Accessibility	52.9
Tent	5.8	Couple	15.8	Natural Specificity	50.0
Holiday village	32.2	With friends/group	79.2	Leisure	32.1
Others or none	30.2	With family	1.5	Cultural Specificity	29.2

It is noted that mountains with the highest attractiveness were the most demanded, and then those closest to the residence of the respondents, the location of the institutions where they study. Through the statistical analysis, (χ^2) we obtained a clear correlation between visited mountain and the region of tourist residence, regardless of gender, as the following: Ceahlău

Mountains for those from Modova, Banat for Cerna and Semenic Mountains, Bihor in case of Transylvania, those from the south to Piatra Craiului and Bucegi (Table 3).

Table 3. Chi square test: the correlation among the residence of respondents and visited mountains.

Mountains	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Cehalău	24.411 ^a	6	.000
Bucegi	12.572 ^b	6	.050
Bihor	12.867 ^c	6	.045
Piatra Craiului	14.515 ^d	6	.024
Semenic	66.352 ^e	6	.000
Cernei	14.457 ^f	6	.025

Souce: extract from SPSS v.17 output

According to these results, the mountain tourism should be focused on knowing the local/nearest tourists basins, and then other consumers, they must try to make them loyal at the first visit

Secondly, their choice to visit these mountains could be correlated with the financial power. However, exploring the correlation between income and the number of visiting mountains there is no statistical association, which demonstrates that the income does not usually play a role in the young tourists' option to visit mountain destinations. More important are time resources, especially the weekends (56.9%), and the belonging to a group of friends or colleagues (79.2%). Additional to these, information collected via Internet or from friends (75.5%) has the highest influence on the decision to visit a mountain.

For young tourists, respectively 50% of them, the accessibility and unique attractions influence their decision to choose a destination, as they are kind of walking on foot trails (85%), photography (75%) and very rare fishing, climbing, admiring the wildlife and birds (less than 10%). The next factors are leisure facilities (25%) especially the winter sports or summer mountain bike (76%), and cultural elements (25%).

Tourist services quality (accommodation, food and leisure) reaches the level of equipment, but are disjointed with perceived attractiveness. The highest values were recorded by the Bucegi Mountains, rated as "good", and "satisfactory" in Făgăraș. All other mountains were classified as unsatisfactory and very unsatisfactory. Given that the young people mostly opt for cheaper accommodation services, the likelihood that they reflect the view is not relevant.

The χ^2 test shows a significant association between the degree of appreciation of the tourist services quality and the students' experience as consumers: $\chi^2(40) = 177.353$, $p = 0.00$.

The total satisfaction placed the Bucegi Mountains on top (89.6% of respondents), and they also hold the first place in the hierarchy of the Carpathians according to the attractiveness, followed by the Făgăraș Mountains (50.5%), which are highly demanded because they hold the highest peak in the Romanian Carpathians and the second in the Carpathian chain and then, Piatra Craiului (28.7%) with the longest and challenging ridge.

But, as whole, the RCD is perceived positively by young, as their intention is to recommend them to other consumers, taking it a major role mainly the natural beauty and then the tourist services (Table 4).

Regarding the intention to revisit the mountains, this increases with the frequency of traveling. Thus, those who have low experiences as mountain tourist usually do not repeat their choice or are undecided on future options, while those who have more experience tend to become loyal customers and to revisit the destinations.

As for the intention to visit other mountains, most respondents have chosen Piatra Craiului, followed by Ceahlău and Parâng (Table 4), mountain units which are less accessible and somewhat wild and remote.

Table 4. The GY's perception about the decisions to visit and recommend a mountain unit

MOUNTAINS	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Intention to visit (%)	8.8	11.8	5.9	6.6	2.9	8.1	14.0	9.6	10.3	9.6	8.8	3.7
Intention to recommend (%)	3.1	7.1	3.1	3.7	37.2	3.4	8.5	21.9	4.8	5.1	0.9	1.1

A-Rodna; B-Ceahlău; C-Călimani; D-Ciucaș; E-Bucegi; F-Bihor; G-Piatra Craiului; H-Făgăraș, I-Parâng; J-Retezat; K-Semenic; L-Cernei.

4.3. Directions for the development in RCMDs toward GY expectation

Beyond all other mechanisms to develop a destination, getting to know the factors that influence the consumers' decision remains one direction which enables and enforces the demand.

In this regard, the GY in Romania, generally, buy the destination on the criterion the most popular mountain near the residence or the place where they carry out their studies.

The second option is nationally recognized mountains having the best attractiveness (Bucegi, Făgăraș, Piatra Craiului, Parâng and even Retezat Mountains) and then the tourist facilities. Also, it is more convenient to consume those areas with direct access, from home to destination without changing several means of transport, firstly by car (75%), then by train (24%). As a result, entrepreneurs and local authorities should pay attention on promotion of the natural potential consequently with the enhancement of tourism infrastructure, targeted to increase the tourist decision for a destination.

In terms of accommodation and food services, stakeholders must be prepared to streamline food services and maintain a fair relationship between the categories of affordable accommodation structures for short stays, usually performed at the end of the week or only for one day. This is somewhat in line with the GY option to travel mainly in group, then in couple and rarely solitaire.

Not all events organized in the mountain area are attractive for this generation, which are oriented to sports (racing mountain bike, ski, endure etc.) mixed with funs to strengthen or making friends. Moreover, destinations should enhance the trails networks for trekking, to increase the opportunity to admire sceneries, generally or for photography lovers.

Much attention should be paid to the environmental cleaning or maintaining the unspoiled space as GY express their desire to avoid pollution and enjoy wilderness and noiseless.

The promotion must use webbing applications, but also managers will pay close attention to the quality of the services given the high degree of confidence of the words of mouth and testimonials in GY demand.

5. Conclusions

The Carpathian Mountains are a favorite destination for youth. This is due to the easy access and their position at a medium distances for all regions, cities of the country. Mountains as (micro) destinations can firstly focus on the tourists nearby and then on those from remote areas, thus the presence of accommodation must be suitable for each segment of consumers.

Geographical elements or natural attractions are the strengths in GY demand but in combination with facilities for winter sports, walk, mountain bike, races events. It is obviously

that a number of sporting activities such as riding (Ceahlău Mountains), climbing (Piatra Craiului) etc. should be included in the tour package either for short periods and longer periods, providing a specific element to each tourist areas. Also, a series of trails networks must be improved in order to complement the mountain tourism experience. Regarding the promotion of mountains tourism, natural environment may be associated with the wilderness, geographical superlatives, and in the recreational activities such as adventures, funs, challenge, etc. should not miss in the content of any promotional.

To get an adequate tourism development of the Carpathians as destination, added to the GY perception, more studies are required which should include other consumers, local communities, stakeholders of tourism, all constituting as a starting point in prospecting expectations. Associated to health, the mountain has to become and / or be a product as much as possible consumed by all types of tourists.

Limit of the study. Although the structure and size of the sample could be considered specific for a segment of GY, we consider that the Y students' cohort allowed us pertinent and tenable findings.

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