

# STUDY ON FOREIGNERS' PERCEPTION ON ROMANIA'S IMAGE AS TOURISM DESTINATION

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## Abstract

Romania's image worldwide is a major priority for our public authorities. The aim of this study is to identify foreigners' perception on Romania's image as tourism destination departing from three research hypothesis: foreigners' perception on Romania's image as a result of Romanians behavior inside and outside the country's borders, foreign visitors' perception on tourism services and level of knowledge of Romania's tourism brand across the borders. The research gathered the opinions of 1.150 foreigners from 10 countries using a questionnaire that integrated variables corresponding to the research questions. The survey was carried out in 11 representative places for foreign tourists' visits, as well as on the internet, using the Wayn.com website, which allowed the selection of foreign citizens that have visited Romania at least once. The research is relevant not only from the perspective of its direct results regarding foreigners' perception on Romania's tourism brand, but might as well be seen as an instrument for analyzing the preliminary results of the campaign 'Romania, explore the Carpathian garden', that started in 2010 and is still in progress.

**Keywords:** country brand, national image, tourism, strategic development, survey.

## 1. Introduction

A country's brand image can shape its economic, political and cultural destiny, influencing people's decisions to buy, invest, or change the place they reside or travel. Thus, Vicente (2004, p. 33) believes that 'brands have become an important variable in taking decisions'. Beyond the theoretical approach, we advocate for the following arguments that are significant in studying some aspects of nation branding that were revealed by practice: the existence of numerous international nation branding campaigns, consistent budgets allocated to these campaigns, the competition in organizing major sporting events with an international impact, the special interest in organizing tourism fairs and 'world exhibitions', national investments granted for the conservation and restoration of historical monuments representative as tourist destinations. And the examples may continue. In this context, our approach to study the foreigners' perception on Romania as a tourist destination is reasoned, especially considering that in 2010 the Romanian authorities launched Romania's tourism brand under the slogan 'Romania, explore the Carpathian garden' which began to take effect.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The image of a country can be understood as the sum of peoples' beliefs about different places (Vicente, 2004, p. 4), representing a product that tries to process and collect essential information from a set of data about a particular place (Kotler *et al.*, 1993, p. 35). Even when a country doesn't chose to manage its name as a brand, people imagine something about the country, a picture that can be activated by just pronouncing the name of that country. 'A brand is a guarantee of superior quality. It is a promise made to consumers to deliver a good or a service according to their expectations.' (Popescu, 2012, p. 494).

Nistorescu and Barbu (2008, p. 12) believe that 'building a brand image is a difficult, complex and a sensitive process'. Vicente (2004, p. 33) states that 'the image of the country is the result of a cumulative effort, requiring long-term marketing strategies, consistent and stable' and Anholt (2005) argues that the effectiveness of such a strategy 'is to create a positive image that promotes four areas: tourism, exports, foreign direct investment and foreign policy of the country, but also is a source of competitive advantage' through 'differentiation from competitors' products' (Corboş, 2012). The increasing competition on international markets requires the creation of country image based on each of the four dimensions, but in the same time building an integrated image. In practice, the focus of each country, in every campaign promoting its own image varies depending on its competitive advantages, and its existing core image (Vicente, 2004, p. 13). On the other hand, countries do not consider the four dimensions of a brand as complementary and thus ignore the synergistic nature of the brand. Thus, we find that most countries have promoted only its tourism side. As stated by Simon Anholt (2003, p. 152), 'it is because tourism promotion is the only way that countries engage in marketing operations.'

Other authors (Eugene *et al.*, 2001, p. 186) believe that in nation branding, ‘the goal is to create a clear idea, simple, differentiated, built around emotional traits that can be symbolized both verbally and visually and can be understood by the public in various ways’. To be effective, nation branding activities should include political, cultural, sports and business. Taking note of the key words used in this statement: clear, simple, varied, you can notice the inherent complexity of nation branding. Moreover, some experts (Ying Fan, 2006, p. 3) think that ‘nation branding involves not only marketing, but also almost all aspects of a nation’s character’.

Most images are formed on country stereotypes, extreme generalization of reality that is not necessarily reasoned (Leclerc *et al.*, 1994, p. 263). Leisure industry and the media play an important role in shaping people’s perceptions on places, especially about those who have a negative image. Not only certain categories of products such as perfumes, electronics, wine, machinery and software are associated with particular places, but diseases (such as AIDS), epidemics, political upheavals, human rights violations, threats to the environment, racial conflicts, crises economic, poverty and violent crimes.

In addition to the input from theoretical work, a major contribution was brought by practical studies, such as Anholt’s research (2005) on the most powerful nation brands. Through this research, the author pledged to set up a ranking of national brands based on citizens’ perception on six reference points that Anholt considered as parts of a country brand: tourism, exports, political regime, investment, immigration culture, heritage and people. These areas together form a hexagon of nation branding, represented in Figure 1.

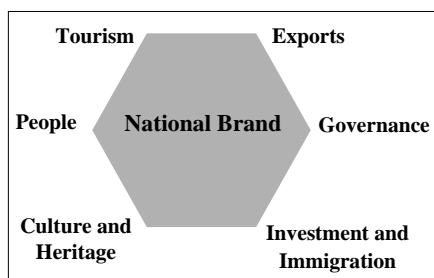


Figure 1: The National Brand Hexagon  
Source: Anholt (2003, 2012)

Anholt’s index of national brands is the first step in evaluating and ranking nation brands, measuring the power and capacity of a country brand to attract and showing how consumers around the world perceive the character and personality of the brand. By 2008, the rankings were made on a quarterly basis, after each quarter, a survey was carried on a sample of more than 25,903 customers around the world on their perception related to the cultural, political, commercial, investment potential and tourist attraction in 35 developed and developing countries. Since 2009, this study is carried out only once a year, measuring the image of 50 nations, while the methodology employed remained the same.

Since 2008, this study also includes Romania, which was ranked 41<sup>st</sup> in that year, so that in 2009 it moved 4 positions, ranking 37<sup>th</sup>, (last position among EU Member States) (Anholt/GfK Roper, 2009, p. 13). In 2010, Romania falls again and is ranked 41<sup>st</sup> (Anholt/GfK Roper, 2010, p. 14).

In another report, Country Brand Index (CBI) released by the company FutureBrand, Romania is not perceived as a significant country brand, ranking 76 (of 78 countries analyzed) in 2008, 83 (out of 102 countries analyzed) in 2009, and 92 (out of 110 countries surveyed) in 2010 (FutureBrand, 2010, p. 13). 'Romania is an underdeveloped brand. Residents in other parts of the world know very little of Romania and the country profile is not noticeable' reads the CBI report, which ranks the image of a country according to 29 criteria, from history to business and economic situation. The chapters that better rank Romania, placing it in the first half are 'natural environment' (19<sup>th</sup>), 'history' (44<sup>th</sup>), 'high technology' (45<sup>th</sup>), 'purchasing power' (45<sup>th</sup>), and 'life standard' (47<sup>th</sup>).

In this context, in 2010, Romania launched its tourism brand under the slogan 'Romania, explore the Carpathian garden' (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Romania's tourism brand logo and slogan  
Source: Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism (2011)

According to the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism (MRDT) (2011), the new brand focuses on nature and goes back to traditionalism and takes into account the creation of the Romanian cultural heritage. The new brand emphasizes the return to nature and tradition and its creation took into consideration the Romanian cultural heritage. We will investigate in this study how well this brand represented the country.

### 3. Methodology

The research methodology is based on two components of the Hexagonal National Brands conducted by Anholt, to which we have added the 'image' dimension that a country promotes worldwide for itself through branding strategies.

The main objective of this research was to identify the foreigners' perception on Romania's image from the perspective of two components of the national brand, 'people' and 'tourism'. We chose these components because they represent areas in which Romania achieved the worst score, according to the Country Brand Index compiled

by Simon Anholt. Fully consistent with this overall objective, assumptions based on observed facts were transposed in three hypotheses described below.

**Hypothesis 1:** Foreigners' perception on Romania's image is determined by the behavior of Romanians in the country and abroad. Any state image is built through its citizens, including behavior, attitude and their lifestyle.

Independent variables: (1) Romanians behavior towards foreign visitors; (2) the perception on Romanians living abroad (in several countries, Romanians are considered thieves, criminals, murderers and uncivilized, which can only bring prejudice to a country image); and (3) representative figures for Romania (athletes, writers, artists).

**Hypothesis 2:** The decreasing awareness on Romania's tourism brand is determined by the ignorance of the elements of visual identity and its poor promotion abroad due to using a small number of information channels.

Independent variables: (1) awareness on the visual identity elements of Romania's tourism brand (name, logo, slogan); and (2) ways to promote the country abroad (media, outdoor advertising, direct marketing, online marketing, fairs, festivals, press conferences, and so on).

**Hypothesis 3:** Perceptions of foreign visitors on tourism services depends on the diversity and accessibility to these services, and the quality/price ratio. According to some studies (Income Magazine, 2008), Romania does not enjoy a very good image among foreign visitors, our country being perceived as an 'unsafe destination, with significant economic and infrastructure problems and a health care system far below Western standards'. In fact, many authors (Hințea, 2011, p. 178; Țigănaș *et al.*, 2011) believe that the reform of public services is one of the most difficult topics to analyze in Romania. For this reason, many officials who came into contact with foreign visitors (such as the Border Police, Customs, staff in hotels, restaurants or travel agencies) have an unprofessional attitude, even rude. In addition, rates and prices are classified as unreasonably high in relation to the quality of services and facilities offered to visitors.

Independent variables: (1) the diversity and accessibility of tourism services<sup>1</sup>; and (2) the quality/price of tourism services.

This study used a questionnaire survey method. It was applied: (1) in the traditional way, to foreigners in Romania, (2) online via Wayn.com site that is considered 'the fastest growing travel and lifestyle social networking community website in the world. WAYN is present in 193 countries and rts membership has grown from 45,000 users in March 2005 to over one million members today 2012' (Wayne, 2012). The population was represented by foreigners visiting Romania at least once for different

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1 Tourism services are defined (according to Art. 2, Section 1 of Ordinance no. 107/1999, re-published) as any of the following three groups of services, provided that the period of stay was more than 24 hours or it includes an overnight stay, namely: transport; accommodation; and other services unrelated to transportation or accommodation that are a significant part of the package holiday, such as food and entertainment.

purposes (business, education, travel etc.) and who are aged over 18 years. As sampling technique the stratified random sampling was used which means that participants were randomly selected from groups, subgroups or strata of the population, namely for this research, the group of foreigners over the age of 18.

The structure of the proposed research sample was set up on 1,150 respondents and included the following categories: tourists, business people, immigrants and students. Respondents were selected randomly from eight countries whose residents visited the most Romania in the period between 2011 and the first nine months of 2012, according to the statistics office. According to the data: (1) National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism (MDRT, 2012) argues that 'Most foreign tourists who visited Romania in 2011 were from Germany (+12.1% compared to 2010), Italy (+18.5%), France (10.23%), Hungary (+13.9%), United States (+1.8%) and the UK (+12.8%); and (2) National Institute of Statistics (2012, p. 2), 'most foreigners who visited our country in the first nine months of 2012 came from European countries (94.0%). Of the EU there were 57.7% of the total arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania. From the EU member states most arrivals were registered from Hungary (32.3%), Bulgaria (19.7%), Germany (9.5%), Italy (7.2%) and Poland (7, 1%). To these, respondents from China and Turkey were added. The statistics office argues that those two are 'important countries of origin of immigrants from Romania' (Capital, 2011).

To address the citizens of these countries, a questionnaire survey was conducted in several institutions in Bucharest with links to those included in the sample set. The institutions represented are:

- Goethe German College Bucharest (25 persons of German origin were surveyed);
- Anna de Noailles French School in Bucharest (10 people of French origin);
- Dante Alighieri High School in Bucharest (15 people of Italian origin);
- Shopping Center 'Red Dragon' Bucharest (100 people of Chinese origin were surveyed);
- U.S. Embassy in Romania (25 people of American origin were surveyed);
- Embassy of Poland in Romania (20 people of Polish origin were surveyed);
- Embassy of Hungary in Romania (15 Hungarians were questioned);
- UK Embassy in Romania (15 people of British origin were questioned);
- Embassy of Turkey in Romania, International School of Informatics<sup>2</sup>, Turkish businessmen in Romania (in total 35 people of Turkish origin were interviewed);
- and
- Embassy of Bulgaria in Romania (10 people of Bulgarian origin were surveyed).

A large number of respondents participated in the survey through the Wayn.com network. These has helped to collect responses from 880 people, including 125 people of Italian origin, 65 persons of British origin, 175 persons of Bulgarian origin, 110 persons of Polish, 185 persons of Hungarian, 130 persons of German origin, and 90 persons of French origin (Table 1).

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2 Private college in Bucharest owned by several Turkish businessmen.

Table 1: The sample structure in terms of country of origin

Country	Number of respondents
Hungary	200
Bulgaria	185
Germany	155
Italy	140
Poland	130
France	100
China	100
United Kingdom	80
Turkey	35
United States of America	25

The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

1. The first section has served as a filter, aimed at demonstrating that the respondent belongs to the proposed sample of investigation. This section consisted of four questions that helped identify the respondents (nationality, age, education) and were very useful information that proved whether or not the person visited Romania;
2. The second section focused on the purpose and duration of visit of respondents in Romania; and
3. The broader and also the most important section of the questionnaire was the third section, which was designed to demonstrate the research hypotheses and variables. It included 13 questions with the aim to refute or confirm the hypothesis.

Questions analyzing *the first hypothesis* aimed at collecting information regarding the impression made by Romania on those who visited it, the social status of Romanians encountered in the country of origin of the ones being interviewed, their willingness to have a Romanian friend or an employee, Romanian characteristics that foreigners have noticed during their visit, Romania's image associated with athletes, politicians, artists, personalities famous for as scientific or historical figures, or association with one defining word. *The second assumption* – how widely known is the tourism brand of Romania abroad – was measured through questions on Romania as a tourist destination, awareness of the current visual identity elements of the country's tourism brand and promotion channels through which foreigners could identify Romania's brand. *The third hypothesis* was assessed through questions about the impression of Romania left on foreigners in terms of diversity and accessibility to tourism services and quality/price ratio. Another question sought to compare tourism services in Romania with services provided by the country of origin of people interviewed.

For processing information obtained through questionnaires SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), was used, which is one of the most used programs in the statistical analysis.

#### 4. Results and discussions

This study analyzes the most relevant questions that helped in demonstrating the research hypotheses and variables. The first question of the questionnaire considered the status of Romanians that were encountered by the respondents. According to the data analyzed, students were most often encountered (20%), followed by businessmen and employees (15.7%), tourists (13.9%), and a considerable number was represented by beggars (12.2%) (Figure 3).

If the perception of foreigners on Romania is reflected by the social statute of Romanians, this means that their perceptions should be in general positive considering that more than 51% represented students, employees, businessmen and tourists.

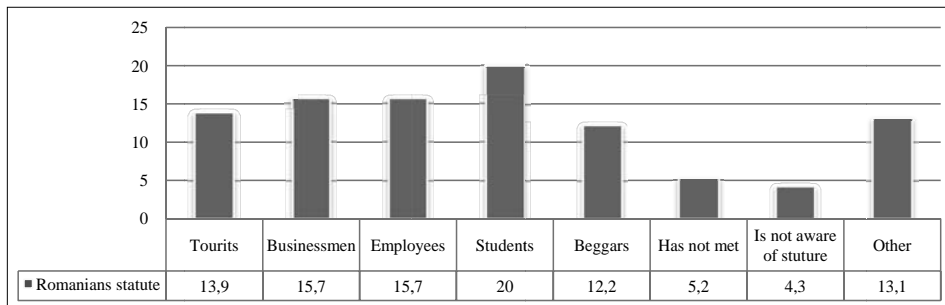


Figure 3: The social status of Romanians encountered in the country of origin of the interviewees

Another item of interest to our study was the characterization of Romanians made by respondents. According to the responses obtained, Romanians are friendly (17.4%), modest (14.8%), hospitable and hardworking (13.9%), temperate (12.2%). Less than 7% are perceived as: tolerant (7%), dishonest (6.1%), robbers (3.5%), arrogant (2.6%), aggressive and uneducated (1.7% each), lazy and superficial (0.9%). The distribution of each feature in the proportions obtained is represented by Figure 4.

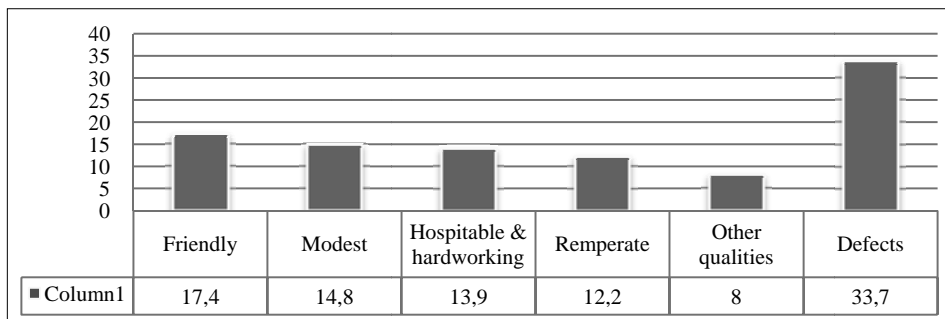


Figure 4: The character of Romanians as perceived by respondents

About 49% of the respondents associated Romania's image with Vlad Țepeș – Dracula from a list of proposed figures. About 31% of respondents associated the image with sport figures (Nadia Comăneeci, Gheorghe Hagi, Ilie Năstase), most likely due to



the immediate impact of the promotional campaign 'Romania – Land of Choice' which ran on CNN and Eurosport during August – December 2009. In contrast, Romanian artists such as Constantin Brâncuși (Romanian sculptor with overwhelming contributions to the reinvention of plastic language and vision in the contemporary sculpture), George Enescu (composer, violinist, pianist and conductor), Mircea Eliade (historian of religion, fiction writer, philosopher), Emil Cioran (philosopher and writer) and scientific personalities as Traian Vuia (global aviation pioneer, who performed on March 18, 1906 the first self-propelled flight with no catapults or other means outdoor), Henri Coandă (academic and Romanian engineer, aviation pioneer, physicist, inventor of the jet engine and discoverer of the effect which carries his name) and Ana Aslan (Romanian physician specialist in gerontology) were each associated with Romania in a proportion of only 5.5%. About 5% of respondents associated the image of our country with former communist leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and 4% of people interviewed did not associate Romania with any of the options proposed.

According to the data collected (Figure 5) the most common characteristic associated with Romania was 'natural wealth' (32.2%). Romania is a country that was considered corrupt by 24.3% of respondents, while 19.1% mentioned that it faces serious economic problems. About 16.5% of respondents think that cultural richness is a feature of Romania, while 7% see it as a state with political issues and only 0.9% perceives Romania's a clean country.

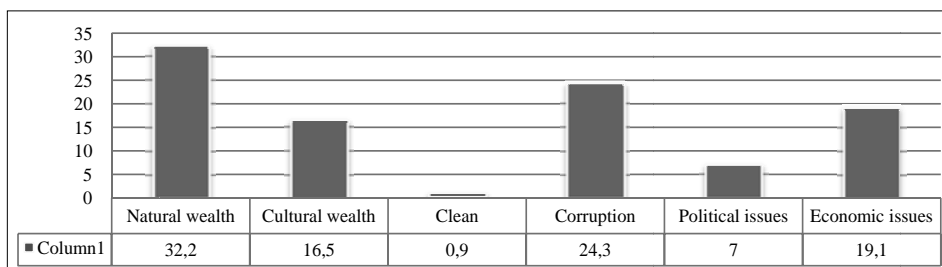


Figure 5: Romania's characteristics as perceived by the ones interviewed

About 38.3% of people interviewed responded that they were aware of Romania's tourism brand abroad (Figure 6), while 34.8% were not sure, 11.2% were familiar with an older one, and 15.7% of people are not aware of any nation branding.

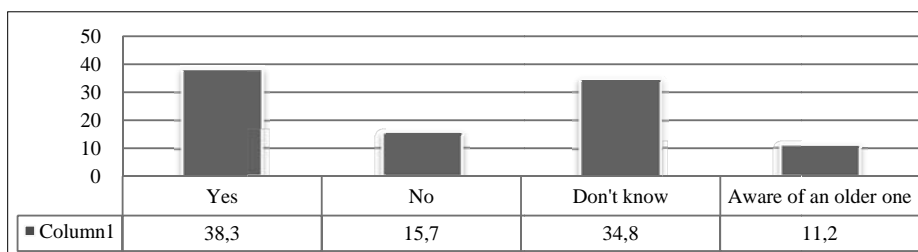


Figure 6: Familiarity with the Romanian tourism brand

Of the ones that were aware of Romania's tourism brand, 13% have encountered the brand through commercials, 18.3% through outdoor advertising, 33% through websites and social networks, and 13% came into contact with guides and catalogue (Figure 7).

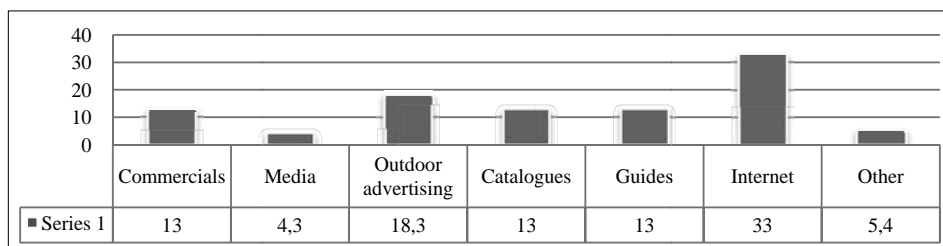


Figure 7: Means to come into contact with country brand

The quality/price ratio for tourism services in Romania (question 16) is perceived as balanced by 26% of respondents. More than half of survey participants (59%) believe that tourism services are of low quality at a high price and 21% of respondents believe that tourism services in Romania are offering high quality at a low price.

In assessing the quality of tourism services in Romania compared to those offered in the countries of the respondents, about 48.3% of respondents believe that tourism services in Romania are of lower quality than those offered in their country of origin (Figure 8), 12.3% consider it comparable, while 12.2% claim that services in Romania are better than those offered in the respondent's country of origin, same percentage as for respondents that find the tourism services in Romania much weaker than in their country.

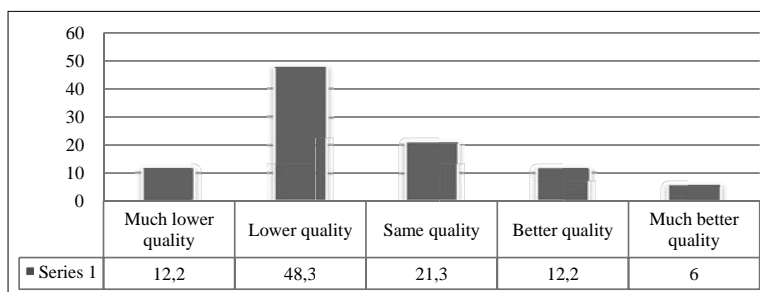


Figure 8: Respondents opinion on the quality of tourism services in Romania as compared to services provided in the country of origin of the ones interviewed

The most common characteristics of tourism services in Romania chosen by the participants were accessibility (22.6%), under its potential (20.9%), diversified (20.9%) and least diversified (19.1%) (Figure 9).

Hypothesis 1: *Foreigners' perception on Romania's image is influenced by the behavior of Romanians, both from home and abroad* was confirmed analyzing data collected through the survey conducted. According to the information analyzed, most of those with a bad impression due to their last visit in Romania, think that Romanians are aggressive, dis-

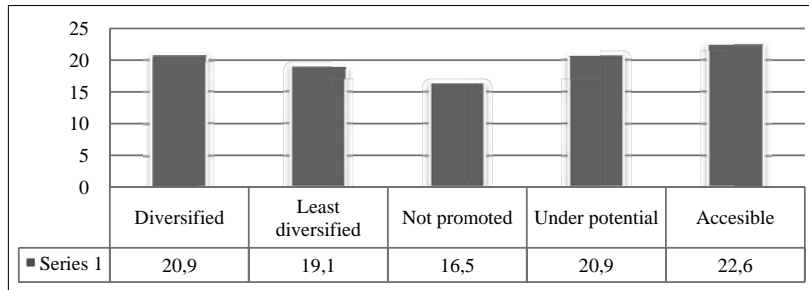


Figure 9: Characteristics of tourism services in Romania

honest, thieves, arrogant and uneducated. The country’s image is also indicated by the Romanians that live abroad and in particular by their social status. When we correlate the status of Romanians with their character, we can notice that the country of origin of the respondents perceiving Romanian as dishonest and aggressive are the same. This is also suggested by the perception of respondents that have encountered Romanian beggars in their country of origin that perceive Romanian as a corrupt country. All these correlations support the first hypothesis of this research that went by demonstrating that the status and behavior of Romanians help create an image of the country.

Hypothesis 2: *The decreasing awareness on Romania’s tourism brand is determined by the ignorance of the elements of visual identity and its poor promotion abroad due to using a small number of informational channels* was confirmed. Thus, the data shows that Romania’s tourism brand is familiar to over 38% of respondents, but about 34% argued they do not know the current brand. This can be explained by the fact that most connoisseurs of the brand are people who have regular contacts with Romania, that visit Romania several times a year or that currently live in Romania, while those expressing uncertainty about being knowledgeable about its tourism brand are part of those who have visited just once the country for tourism purposes.

Hypothesis 3: *Perceptions of foreign visitors on tourism services depends on the diversity and accessibility to these services, and the quality/price ratio* was confirmed. Therefore, the tourism services in Romania are perceived by some foreigners as accessible and diversified, while others find them below its potential. The quality/price ratio of these services is considered balanced only by 26% of respondents, while Romanian tourist services are considered by 48.3% of survey participants as weaker than in their countries of origin.

### 5. Conclusion

The study is aimed at identifying foreigners perception on Romania’s image as tourism destination following three hypotheses: (1) Foreigners’ perception on Romania’s image is influenced by the behavior of Romanians, both from home and abroad; (2) The decreasing awareness on Romania’s tourism brand is determined by the igno-

rance of the elements of visual identity and its poor promotion abroad due to using a small number of informational channels; (3) Perceptions of foreign visitors on tourism services depends on the diversity and accessibility to these services, and the quality/price ratio was confirmed. Data analysis verified the hypotheses.

This study used a questionnaire survey method. The structure of the proposed research sample was set up on 1,150 respondents and included the following categories: tourists, business people, immigrants and students. Respondents were selected randomly from eight countries whose residents visited the most Romania during 2011 – the first nine months of 2012. To these were added respondents from China and Turkey (important countries of origin of immigrants from Romania).

After analyzing the information supplied by the questionnaire we can admit that improving the perception on Romania's image abroad can be done by investing in three major components of the brand, which can become vectors of its growth, 'people', 'tourism' and 'image'.

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