

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW ONLINE BUSINESS MODELS IN ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM

Mihălcescu Cezar¹

Sion Beatrice²

Mărginean Alexandra³

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the current situation of online businesses in Romanian agro tourism, as well as the perspectives it holds through the use of online business models.

The tourism sector brings along important revenue, both at the global and at the local levels. This entails great opportunities for the economic development of Romania through an increase in GDP, the development of Romanian areas for a growth in the income of people who get a job through a rise in the number of tourist arrivals. It is well known that a lot of tourism policies developed by governments without any involvement at the local level did not manage to meet the sensitivities and aspirations of tourists prospected for the respective areas.

Hence, based on studies conducted by researchers in specialized papers, made by expert institutions as well as the interviewing of a group of students, we may draw the conclusion that the online environment is fully expanding in Romania, but also that it is, nevertheless, at an incipient stage; online businesses in the field of agro tourism have developed considerably during the past few years and an exponential growth is forecast in the following years as well. If this ascending trend is maintained, Romania will be on the map of favorite destinations of the Europeans, due to its landscapes, traditions, customs, the hospitality of its people and the small prices.

KEYWORDS: business models, social media, online environment, agritourism, Romania

1. Introduction

The classical online business model refers to a simple sale of products and services for personal consumption. Buyers are natural persons, legal persons or other groups that buy products or services to satisfy their needs. This model is called B2C (Business to Consumer) in the case of natural persons, and B2B (Business to Business) in the case of legal persons. This business model is most common in the online environment, and through this model a wide variety of products and services is marketed.

¹ Prof. PhD, Romanian-American University of Bucharest, cezar.octavian.mihalcescu@profesor.rau.ro

² Lecturer. PhD, Romanian-American University of Bucharest, sion.beatrice@profesor.rau.ro

³ Lecturer. PhD, Romanian-American University of Bucharest, marginean.alexandra@profesor.rau.ro

This example of a classical model of online business has a major impact on the population. In time, the buyer has changed her/his old habits of buying, in which (s)he was accustomed to seeing the product, touching it and smelling it. In short, the buyer's interaction with the product and that spiritual side of buying and the pleasure of "going shopping" (which played an important role for the Romanians in the purchase of products and services) has modified. The pace of life, which leaves less and less spare time, the large variety of products and services offered for purchase, and, quite often, the fact that online prices for products and services are smaller determine the buyer to choose to purchase what (s)he needs through the intermediary of the Internet.

Electronic commerce of the B2C type, or the commerce taking place between companies and consumers, presupposes gathering information on products that the end consumer targets, which (s)he compares with similar products of the competition in a reduced amount of time; then, the actual purchase of the material or information goods occurs, which the buyers can receive through electronic networks or services of various kinds that are delivered to them at the date, time and location specified by the customer.

This type of commerce minimizes transactional costs, especially those involved in the search of products, through the increase of the consumer's access to information, allowing customers to find the best price for a product or service, and to save the time and the money they would have reserved for a visit to the physical shops.

This paper was possible through the use of data from the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) – www.ires.com.ro and www.internetworldstats.com, the National Institute of Statistics (INS) – www.insse.ro, which are two of the biggest and most important online databases, with books and articles published by specialists in the field, as well as based on a study regarding the place and period during which Romanian students spend their holidays. The interviewed students are from the Romanian-American University and are aged 19-25.

2. The development of business through social media

Advertising for a business is an art, which can be learnt throughout one's career through hard work, or which can be an inborn talent with some people, this aspect being very important for the success of the business. The internet, and, for a few years now, social media, have revolutionized the concept of business advertising. Social media is a tool that bears the role of promoting products and services offered by companies and small enterprises. This online promotion or online marketing medium is getting more and more powerful, helping companies to actively participate in social networks, a medium without the help of which companies can no longer survive in the twenty-first century.

Social media is an interactive platform for users, namely between consumers and producers (C2B) or, conversely, between producers and consumers (B2C). Through the intermediary of social media, users exchange information, experiences, news, opinions, which they discuss among them. This exchange of information and opinions among consumers happens online all the time, which ultimately plays a role in decision-making. Social media may be considered to include communication websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube, Digg, as well as blogs and forums. The last category has developed significantly during the last few years, and we can find on them

information about absolutely any field/product/service/institution/career etc. (Sion B., Mihalcescu C., 2010).

If the social media are used for the business environment, entrepreneurs must advertise for the business presentation website so that they should attract the users' attention; attention can be measured as traffic and postage of links that send to other similar websites or websites which have a connection with the field of interest of the initial website. This is an economical solution for promotion, which allows the interaction of a great number of users that may become potential buyers, which may further become loyal customers through various marketing instruments that attract them. Their socialization is extremely important because it creates a bond between the seller and the buyer. This connection helps the seller know the profile of the (potential) buyer, which is in constant transformation. This connection also helps the business preserve a return customer and even develop (Andersson G., Bonnier C., Janken M. 2009).

Every business model has a series of factors that influence it according to the nature of the business. In order to understand the nature of the online agritourism business model, it is essential to classify the business against the background of a general business context. Some online business models are nothing but a means to obtain profit. Every online business model has its specificity, through which it differentiates itself from other models and through which it creates value (R. Negoii, B. Sion, pp. 1183-1186, 2010).

A sum of key factors allow the functioning of socialization websites. These factors need to be taken into consideration in the design and development of social media websites.

- *Low participation threshold:* social media websites create fairly few barriers for the future users, allowing them to join and contribute a few minutes to the creation of the website.
- *Increased participation:* The introduction of new users on a website, their attraction into a community in which they exchange opinions and experiences, where they meet new people and interact among them, continues to be upheld by the most successful socialization websites, making user participation extremely important. Actually, this does not mean that the new users have to have an immediate significant contribution on the website, but they have the possibility of continuing through a series of small contribution steps, which progressively build their abilities to create content and develop their understanding of what the user community overall considers to be desirable, quality content.
- *Sharing property:* A key aspect of the social media is the creation of content by the user – who is guided by the content to begin with – and to encourage this activity. It is important for the users to feel that they have control over the content, as long as an adequate language is preserved and intellectual discomfort is not experienced by other users. For a lot of websites, this entails clear and long-term attribution of individual content to the users, as well as the possibility to track individual user contribution from their personal profiles (Bruns A., 2009).

3. The current situation of the online environment for Romanian rural tourism

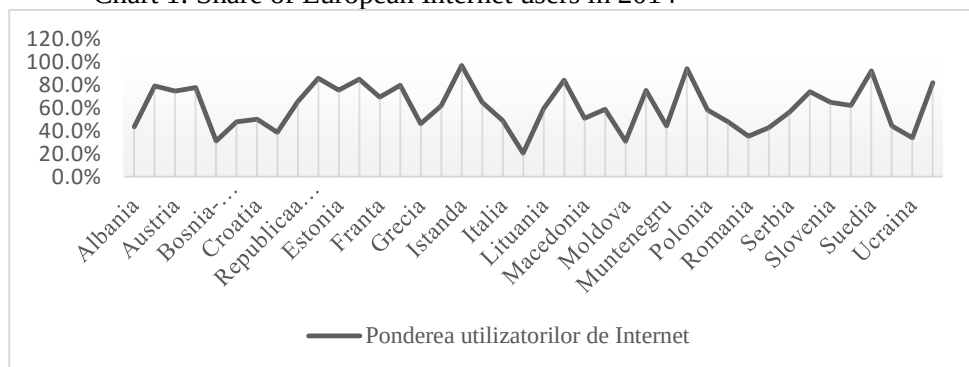
94% of the Romanians use the Internet to search for information, 82% for correspondence and 70% to socialize on online networks. This division of percentages was made as a

result of a study completed by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy in 2014.

Although the number of users has increased ten times in the last 10 years, Romania is ranked on the last positions among the European Union states when it comes to Internet usage. Thus, only 34.5% of the Romanians use the Internet, while in Europe the average is of 68.9%. The data has been taken by specialists from the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy¹ (IRES) from Internetworldstats.com.

The source of the data² from the following tables and charts for arrivals and overnights in tourist accommodation units is represented by statistical queries completed by all legal and natural persons who own property or manage in tenancy this type of structures. The list of tourist accommodation units that accompanies these inquiries is permanently updated with information regarding the structures that have been newly classified or re-classified by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism.

Chart 1: Share of European Internet users in 2014



Source: www.internetworldstats.com

Chart 1 was made using data from www.internetworldstats.com. It reflects the share of Internet usage in all European countries. To calculate the share, the number of users was considered in relation with the total population, the result being the percentage of Internet users (people who use Internet services) for each country in particular.

From Chart 1 we can infer that Romania occupies one of the last positions as far as the use of the Internet is concerned, with quite a low percentage. On the other hand, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden have a greater share than Romania.

We notice that all these countries with a high share regarding the use of the Internet are positioned in the north part of Europe, where the climate is rather cold and the people spend more time indoors, in front of the computer, in comparison with other Europeans, such as those from countries like Slovakia, Spain, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Ireland,

¹ Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES)- www.ires.com.ro and www.internetworldstats.com

² National Institute of Statistics (INS) - www.insse.ro

Hungary, Germany, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Andorra, where the climate is milder. Consequently, people in these countries spend less time in front of the computer navigating on the Internet or socializing in the virtual environment. Nevertheless, the degree of usage of electronic services is greater than in Romania. The latter category of countries are developed ones, with a higher purchasing power than the Romanians', up-to-date with technology and with everything that constitutes novelty irrespective of the field of activity, but also with a mild climate that prompts people to spend more time outdoors, which reduces the time spent in front of the computer navigating on the Internet.

Table 1: Table comparing the total number of arrivals in the tourist accommodation units and tourist pensions

Types of tourist accommodation units / Tourist areas	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February
Total number of accommodated people	450116.8	508370.8	577133.2	761632.2	317026	1026494	180666	11840.4	71181.8	530842.8	542866.8	489676.6	513679.6
Agritourist pensions	16006.8	18513.6	22576.8	28093.2	29024.4	37224	48138	8923.6	23678.4	20734.8	26781.6	20010	19485.6

Source: Monthly Statistical Bulletin, www.insse.ro

In table 1 we have the situation of arrivals in tourist accommodation units and tourist pensions, from February 2014 to February 2015. We can notice the discrepancy between those who choose tourist pensions and those who choose a different type of accommodation unit (hotels, motels, hostels etc.). From the total number of accommodation units, agritourist pensions occupy between 4% and 6%, according to seasonality.

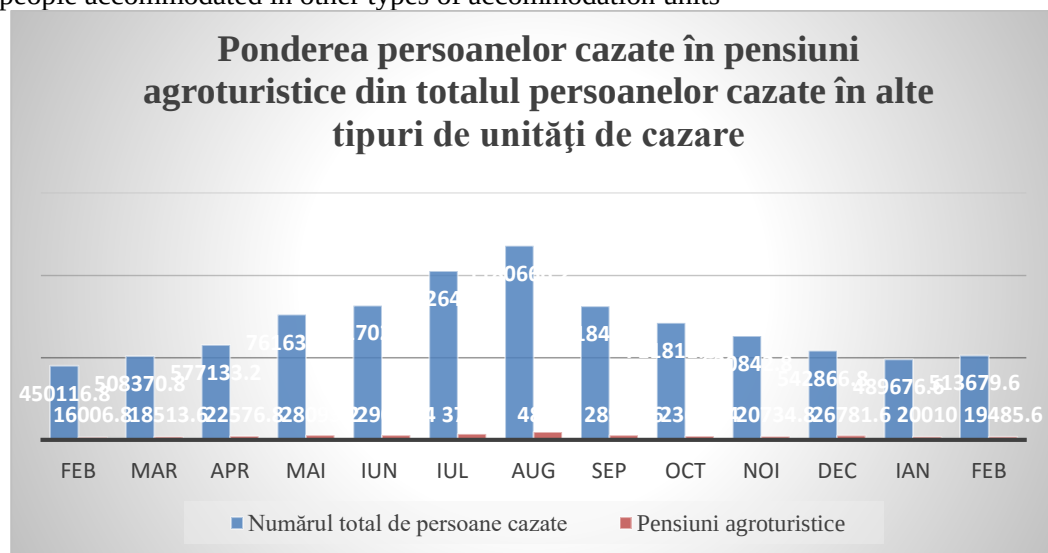
From the perspective of the topic of this article, this share is a negative factor for Romanian agritourism, as the consumer has no other sources of information regarding agritourist pensions in Romania. Tourism agencies do not have a wide variety of agritourist offers.

Hence, the only way to advertise for Romanian agritourism, besides the Internet through specific websites, remains the traditional “door-to-door” search, or the search through the intermediary of recommendations made by people we trust and who have the same standard we do and similar budgets available for holidays.

Although just 35.5% of the total population uses Internet services, the Internet has had a rapid expansion from one year to another during the past 10 years. Taking into account the ascending trend in the number of Internet users, we can forecast future expansions that will bring about better access to information for the population, and situations in which decisions are made from a knowledgeable position, based on information and on the others’ opinion of the future holiday.

Out of the 35.5% who use Internet services, most are young people, aged between 10 and 40, while the rest are trying to keep up with technology, pertaining to the category of elderly people. The fact that young Romanians are up to speed with technology and are well informed will set the pace for a new generation of people, whose schedules are extremely tight and who will want to have peaceful holidays in familiar surroundings. In order to appeal to this category of consumers of rural holidays, the manner in which tourist pensions are advertised needs to evolve as well, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the quality of the services provided nowadays needs to be upgraded too. The new generation is part of a category of people for whom the stress factor is very high, and for whom time is of the essence, which will lead to a manner of obtaining information that heavily and primarily involves the Internet; the representatives of this group will choose quiet holidays, away from crowded cities, in the middle of nature and far away from technology.

Chart 2: Share of people accommodated in agritourist pensions, of the total number of people accommodated in other types of accommodation units



Source: Chart based on data from Table 1

Chart 2 reveals the discrepancy between the number of people who are return customers at agritourist pensions in comparison with other types of accommodation units (hotels, motels, hostels, tourist villas, chalets, bungalows), at a national level. The statistics have been made at a domestic level. Fluctuations are small from one month to another, even though the statistics have been made over a period of 13 months. Seasonality does not affect the occupancy rate of agritourist pensions, which represents a considerable advantage.

In the other accommodation units fluctuations are very big according to seasonality. We may notice that January has the lowest occupancy rate and August has an occupancy rate of over 80.

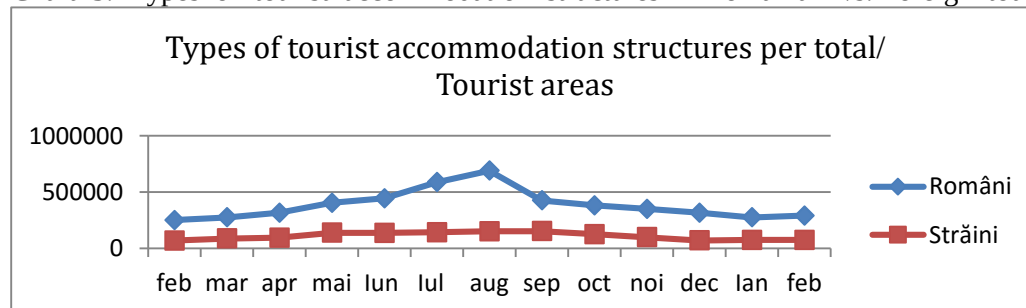
Table 2: Types of tourist accommodation structures for Romanian and foreign tourists in 2013 and 2014

Types of tourist accommodation structures / Tourist areas	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Romanians	252 216	275 361	317 678	405 023	445 047	589 120	690 548	426 833	381 959	350 573	316 701	275 060	290 963
Foreigners	692 96	877 61	945 60	139 000	138 543	144 090	152 785	153 053	126 478	100 029	710 61	747 09	759 51

Source: Monthly Statistical Bulletin, www.insse.ro

In Table 2 we have centralized the monthly statistics on types of tourist accommodation structures, for both Romanian and foreign tourists. If we draw the ratio between foreign and Romanian people, we realize that, out of the total number of tourist arrivals, only 20%-36% are foreigners; most of these practice business tourism and get accommodation at hotels in the great cities of Romania.

Chart 3: Types of tourist accommodation structures – Romanian vs. foreign tourists



Source: Chart based on data from table no. 2

In Chart 3 we have data from Table 2; we have resorted to it for a better understanding of fluctuations from one month to another regarding occupancy rates, and in order to facilitate the comparison between the number of Romanian and foreign tourists that are accommodated in the tourist accommodation structures. The number of foreigners has few monthly fluctuations as it does not depend on seasonality, which leads us to the idea that they do not come here for sightseeing but for business. As far as occupancy rates in the case of Romanians, they greatly depend on seasonality.

Taking into account the fact that Romania has a population of 23.1 million residents, it results that only 2%-3% of them leave on holiday in Romania or abroad.

Table 3: Foreign tourist arrivals in Romania

Europe, of which:	411 82	505 875	559 122	593 768	637 170	831 304	929 244	606 764	553 735	508 402	508 240	446 682	3925 58
The European Union, of which:	282 586	336 337	361 653	401 182	387 105	513 873	550 968	357 525	346 598	314 691	306 161	260 133	255 743
Austria	108 64	150 54	148 41	164 25	151 23	207 42	209 52	132 36	132 85	123 48	128 95	957 5	103 14
France	803 2	924 1	110 09	138 06	117 85	151 11	168 72	993 0	919 3	900 2	870 5	814 1	917 5
Germany	205 37	303 92	304 13	380 54	339 17	473 89	536 87	346 64	321 82	252 19	265 03	184 88	201 09
Greece	511 0	623 1	642 3	634 5	615 2	593 4	663 7	592 3	496 7	566 0	556 3	621 5	563 5
Italy	207 86	267 47	264 22	264 22	262 00	313 87	406 91	270 84	269 07	258 68	276 64	222 30	214 07
The Netherlands	347 1	483 4	574 7	742 6	534 7	869 4	785 5	497 8	554 4	478 7	395 0	362 7	443 4
Poland	102 68	105 40	100 66	112 11	196 93	587 45	559 39	175 16	121 61	124 47	968 1	101 15	921 0
UK	662 5	619 4	713 5	996 0	843 6	107 27	112 12	765 5	685 8	581 8	549 1	509 3	623 6
Hungary	122 635	138 164	150 870	170 195	154 066	169 648	177 345	136 459	140 226	121 668	120 323	979 93	936 22
Bulgaria	486 71	595 29	662 58	654 89	695 04	782 06	873 35	654 58	667 29	660 30	631 12	588 20	547 55
Africa	108 1	146 6	198 9	152 5	151 6	181 4	237 3	231 6	248 3	144 1	136 9	230 4	119 2
North America	499 0	829 4	101 19	171 38	219 47	233 24	185 67	167 23	127 10	845 4	803 7	566 4	515 7
South-Central America	749	789	102 6	134 7	164 6	177 5	189 1	182 7	136 4	953	905	906	948
Asia	835 5	13116	13643	1776	21168	218 95	237 32	222 80	180 91	125 91	128 59	111 84	107 91

Australia, Oceania and other territories	318	481	769	1523	2000	1974	1879	1709	1076	585	703	443	410
Unspecified countries	31	36	48	47	59	28	18	26	30	41	25	48	22

Source: Monthly Statistical Bulletin, www.insse.ro

Table 3 centralizes the number of foreign visitors who come to Romania, irrespective of the nature of their visitation. Part of them come for business and another part for tourism purposes.

We can notice that most visitors are from Europe; Hungary occupies the first position, with 122635 visitors, followed at great distance by Bulgaria with 48671. Germany, Italy, Austria, Poland, Great Britain are the main target markets when it comes to Romanian rural tourism, because of their landscapes, hospitality, traditions, customs and low prices.

4. Prospects regarding online business development in the field of Romanian rural tourism

Nowadays advertising activities have in view primarily the following source-markets: Germany, Italy, France, Great Britain, Austria, Russia and Hungary.

Other actions will unfold on such markets as the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Belgium, Sweden, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia, Moldavia, China and Japan.

The domestic market targets activities that are predominantly oriented towards building a marketing system for Romanian tourism, especially *the creation of a central web portal of Romanian tourism*, with an adjacent reservation system.

The preoccupations of the government in the following period of time will focus on building notoriety through televised awareness campaigns, through a media innovation strategy through non-traditional media channels, and through the creation of a brand communication platform for the interested parties. Out of the total budget for communication, 49% will be allotted to online promotion, 32% to TV commercials and 19% to printed advertising.

Romania occupies the last position in the classification of online advertising expenses in 2015, among the 23 European markets evaluated in the most recent AdEx report, made by the IAB Association of Romania, an organization which represents the Internet communication industry both in Romania and in Europe. According to the whole report, the online advertising expenses in Croatia, Romania and Slovakia decreased in 2014, in comparison with 2013, while the European market increased by 4.5%, reaching 14.7 billion euro.

In a report made by the IAB Association¹, Europe synthesizes all data collected by every IAB branch in the member states, in 2013 and the first trimester of 2014. The complete document is available to IAB members, or by order for the companies who are not part of the association.

Among other things, the report states that the online advertising market in Europe has continued to grow despite the economic climate that has affected every market individually; the first six big European markets (Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) account for 76% of the total expenses for online advertising, as assessed by the IAB Association in Europe, whereas Romania, Slovakia and Croatia registered a slight decline (of up to 5.5%) in 2013, a year in which the decline of the whole advertising market in these countries was much greater, reaching 33%. This shows that the online environment had better performance than the other channels in this region. Only four countries registered two-figure increases: Greece (49%), Austria (14%), Poland (13%) and Turkey (12%).

The IAB Europe report mentions, in the case of Romania, that the level of online advertising expenses was 13 million euro in 2013. The local online advertising market reached 65.19 million RON in 2013 (15.4 million euro at an annual average exchange rate of 4.23 RON/euro).

At a European level, advertising based on search engines increased by 10.8%, while advertising of the display type practically remained at the level of the preceding year (+0.3%).

What we may conclude based on this report is that Romania is in full ascension due to the fact that we as a country are becoming more and more visible online, both at a national and international levels, which will bring about a growth of Romanian rural tourism.

We have to be aware of the fact that we have to pass from advertising isolated ecotourism products, designed by administrations of parks or by specialized tour operators, towards the development of ecotourism destinations that offer an integrated ecotourism product which constitutes the result of partnerships among implicated parties (the park administration, the local public administration, the local community, private investors) and which is advertised for through a joint effort made by both local ecotourism development associations, and the central public administrations.

Moreover, the tourism industry will be marked by an important process of transformation, as more and more clients are interested in the attractive offers presented online. Tourists give up traditional services offered by air transport companies, tourism agencies or tour operators in order to take advantage of the smaller prices accompanying packages that are available on the Internet. The probability for the online packages of tourism services to be cheaper than the ones that can be found at traditional companies is of 70%, the differences being of almost 26% (the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, June 2014).

In the past years, the number of tourists who resort to this type of practices has doubled, thus loyalty to a certain agency will be increasingly lower in the years to come. The new trends face service providers in the field of tourism with questions with no easy answers. How many clients are they about to lose? How should they react to that? Have consumers

¹ IAB Romania is the association of online marketing and promotion in Romania which reunites advertising agencies, media administrations, resident publishers and service providers dedicated to the industry of online advertising.

developed enough trust in their capacity to organize their own holidays so that they should not need the intervention of a tour operator? As more and more consumers make their own travel arrangements online, tour operators in tourism are forced to reconsider their role. The market is currently passing through major changes. The reservation of hotel rooms has in some cases allowed consumers to diminish their costs and to make more flexible travel arrangements.

CONCLUSIONS

Due to the lack of understanding of the communication means, worthless information is sometimes posted on the Internet, information which brings nothing new or simply does not transmit anything or, worse, there are people who post erroneous information that other readers perceive as an absolute truth.

Generally, small entrepreneurs invest very little in the online environment, usually a few hundred euro for a website design, hosting, promotion, postage on the first pages of the main search engines, but a high quality website that is up-to-date with novelties does not cost so little. In comparison with other countries, Romanians invest the least in the virtual environment but expect exceptional results.

Although the Internet is gaining more and more users, it is underestimated. This happens for the mere reason that Romanians use it mainly to access information and for socialization and not as a means to do business, whereas among those who have online businesses very few are aware of the real worth of the online environment and of the widening of perspective that it brings.

Nevertheless, in 2014, an increase by a few percent was registered in the online environment investments, which leads to a slight growth in the interest of both the national and international buyers.

This paper has analyzed the current situation of Romania, from the point of view of Internet service users that look for information, socialization or for business, as well as the online advertising of Romanian ecotourism and agritourism.

We hope that the conclusions that have been reached are relevant for finding out the exact situation of the online environment in Romania, in order to help those who wish to develop new online business models for rural tourism.

E-consumers, namely those who purchase the desired holidays on the Internet, tend to get accustomed to the new technologies. Also, they are able to use dynamic instruments in order to contact the providers of tourism services directly, to obtain information online, to compare prices and then follow the online registration and purchase procedures. Consumers can interact online on specially designed forums in order to exchange opinions and travel experiences.

Users of online services are usually educated people who are interested in choosing their travels on their own, without the intervention of a tour operator. We must take into account the fact that the growing number of Internet users and the ascending trend in the use of new access channels (for instance television and mobile devices) will change the profile of the consumers, who will progressively give up the traditional market.

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