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SUMMARY OF PHD THESIS

ONLINE CITY BRANDING

ANALYSIS OF THE WEBSITES OF THE COUNTY SEATS FROM ROMANIA USING AN ONLINE CITY BRAND EVALUATION TOOL

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, there is a growing interest regarding the applicability of concepts like brand and branding in the context of places. The concept of the brand can be considered a plastic and resilient notion which may refer to products, services, firms, organizations, cultural products, events, and well-known personalities as well. According to Keller (2013) the concept of the brand can appear basically everywhere, the only condition is that consumers must be in a position where they can choose between different actors of the same market. The concept of place branding can be considered a generic term, which may refer to the branding of countries, regions, cities, and destinations as well. Today, there is a growing competition among these places in a national and international context. The use of place branding practices offers a way for identification and differentiation for these places and the solution to sustaining a stable position on the market.

The development of the city branding domain is closely related to the paradigm of the entrepreneurial city (Hall & Hubbard, 1998). The concept of the entrepreneurial city marks an important shift in the way cities are administrated because it emphasizes the idea that cities should be administrated based on the profit-oriented principles of commercial organizations (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). The concept of city branding can be considered an overarching term that offers strategic guidance for city governments. This strategic guidance works as an assurance because it helps local governments to make tactical and strategic decisions that are on-brand, meaning that there are in accordance with the core values of the place brand (Boisen, 2015).

The current thesis focuses on the examination of city branding in the online sphere. The research is centered around the official websites of local governments, the primary online communication channel for cities. The official website is capable of transmitting the brand identity of a place, thereby to influence the brand image in the mind of different target groups. As a result of globalization, the online sphere offers an efficient and accessible communication channel for cities of all dimensions and from all over the world (Björner, 2013). Moreover, the official website is an important channel for cities to interact with their residents (Paganoni,

2012). It is also a channel for transmitting the identity of a place (Florek, 2011), and one of the few communication instruments in the online sphere where brand managers have a high level of control over the content, design, and structure of the channel (Grodach, 2009; Yan, 2011). In addition, the official website can be considered as the only online communication channel that local governments are obliged to use to interact with their different target groups.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Analyzing place brands from an online branding perspective is a relatively new research direction in the place branding domain. Measuring place brands in the online sphere is a challenging task and the place branding domain still lacks a measurement tool that is widely accepted among the researchers and practitioners of the field. The main goal of the current thesis is to develop an integrated and multidisciplinary model for measuring city brands using the official websites as the primary communication channel for local governments. Thereby, the current paper brings a new vision regarding the analysis of city brands through their official websites. The proposed model works as a benchmarking instrument allowing the comparison of different city brands and the identification of strong and week points regarding the performance of the examined websites. A specific goal of the current paper is to provide a comprehensive view of the performance of the official websites of all the county seats in Romania from a place branding perspective. In this sense, our research provides valuable information for future academic research in the field and for practitioners involved in city branding initiatives as well.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The current thesis is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter discusses the theoretical aspects of the place branding domain, the second chapter provides an overview of the practice of place branding and identifies the most relevant stages of a city branding project. The third chapter is centered around the idea of online city branding and proposes a new brand-related measurement tool for the official websites of local governments. This model is used to compare the performance of the main cities from Romania, notably the 41 county seats of the country. The fourth and final chapter presents the conclusions of the current research, the theoretical and practical implications of the study, as well as the limitations and possible future directions.

THE THEORY OF PLACE BRANDING

The first part consists of seven subsections. The first subchapter offers a comprehensive literature review regarding the definition of the concept of brand and branding. The branding literature provides a plethora of definitions about brand and branding. However, the research domain still lacks a clear and well-established interpretation that is commonly acknowledged. Based on this thorough review, the current paper tries to synthesize these definitions and makes a distinction between three major directions of interpretations. The first approach consists of definitions where the focus is put on the organizations as the owner's of the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Bauer & Berács, 2016), the second puts the consumer in the center (Adamson, 2008; Batey, 2008; Kapferer, 2012; Neumeier, 2016), while the third approach takes into consideration the perspective of the organization and the consumer as well (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Kladou et al., 2017).

The 1.2 subchapter provides an overview of the terms *place brand* and *place branding*. Regarding the concept of place brand, we considered as a reference point the interpretation of Zenker and Braun (2010), who state that a place brand can be conceptualized as a network of associations in the consumer's mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place. In our view, this interpretation can be considered as an overarching definition applicable to countries, regions, cities, and destinations as well. The term place branding can be conceptualized as a two-sided, bilateral process (de Chernatony et al., 2011). The first part is the input phase, consisting of the development of a brand identity, while the second part is the output phase when the brand image is formed. While the first phase is done by the brand managers, the second phase takes place in the mind of the consumers. Scholars and practitioners of the field also highlight that the process of place branding is not limited to the creation of a visual or verbal identity (Hospers, 2009; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Baker, 2019). In its current view, place branding can be considered a more complex process, that provides a strategic vision and guidance for the future development of a respective place. Compared to the branding of commercial goods and services, the place branding domain is a distinct and specific field of branding first and foremost due to its close relation with the political and administrative sciences (Jorgensen, 2015; Lucarelli, 2015; Oliveira, 2016). Speaking about the process, a clear distinction should be made between the concept of place branding and place marketing. In the literature, these two terms are used mostly as synonyms (Skinner, 2008; Kalandides & Kavaratzis, 2009; Zenker, 2011). The current thesis considers that place marketing is a demand-driven, while place branding is an identity-driven strategic process

(Boisen et al., 2018). This approach assumes that place marketing should be considered as a short-term, tactical instrument, while place branding is more likely to be a long-term, strategic tool, which provides the long-term vision for the development of a certain place (Govers, 2011; Wheeler, 2017).

The third subchapter presents an overview of the development of the place branding domain. The development of the field can be divided into three major phases. The first one can be described as the phase of place promotion, the second one is centered around the idea of place marketing, and the third phase marks a shift in the promotion and communication of places by introducing the concept of place branding. Since the start of the new Millenium, this new research domain emerges as a complex and multidisciplinary field, related to administrative sciences and urban policy, geography and tourism, and marketing studies as well. The development of the place branding domain is explained in relation to the aforementioned scientific fields, based on the work of Hankinson (2015). According to the author, the subject of place promotion was developed in the urban policy domain, the first publications about place marketing appeared in the economics and marketing field, while in the tourism and geography domain the majority of related papers examined the role of destination image, considered a key element in destination and place branding as well.

The 1.4 subchapter describes the relationship of the place branding domain with other branding-related fields, like product branding, service branding, as well as corporate branding. According to the literature the place branding domain on the one hand has several particularities compared to product branding (Papp-Váry, 2009; Anholt, 2010) and service branding (Hankinson, 2010), and on the other hand, multiple similarities compared to corporate branding (Hankinson, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2009; Dinnie, 2011). In comparison to product and service branding, the literature suggests that places are more complex entities, with multiple stakeholder groups, and the management of the brand has some specific challenges related especially to the delimitation of the brand owner. In addition, similar aspects and challenges can be found compared to the field of corporate branding as both places and corporations are complex and multidimensional entities dealing with a large number of stakeholder groups. In the case of place branding, the relationship with the brand owner and the different stakeholder groups can be done using the so-called PPP (public-private partnership) approach, where partnerships are developed between the members of the public and the private sector.

The fifth subchapter of the first part sums up the most relevant terms used in the branding literature and explains their applicability in the context of places, like countries, regions, and cities. The thesis underlines four basic concepts used in the place branding domain: place brand identity, place brand image, place brand positioning, and place brand equity. These concepts are closely related to each other. First, it is the role of the brand manager to develop a well-defined and coherent brand identity that subsequently serves as the foundation for the brand positioning. Positioning means that the brand occupies a certain place in the mind of the consumers and this way it can be identified and differentiated by the competitors of the same market. This way a brand image is formed in the mind of the consumers, which conclusively determines the value of the respective brand. In the context of places, a certain distinction should be made between the concept of place identity and place brand identity. While the former is a complex construct developed in a rather spontaneous manner during the history of a certain place, the latter is a consciously developed concept as a result of a place branding process (Kerr & Oliver, 2015). However, the two concepts are closely related to each other, because the place brand identity should be based on the place identity of a certain country, region, or city (Hospers, 2006; Govers & Go, 2009).

Just like identity, the brand image of a place is also a complex concept with numerous meanings. In the current thesis, we highlight the approach of Baker (2019) who distinguishes between three types of place brand images. The first one is called organic images developed in a rather spontaneous manner, determined by external factors such as the representation of the place in literature, music, movies, or mass media, by the performance of the place related to sports, economy, science, or culture, as well as by the different stereotypes related to the place. The second is called marketing-induced image. This type of place representation is the result of a consciously planned strategic brand communication. This brand communication is realized using marketing and communication techniques like advertising, public relations, direct marketing, or personal selling. The third is called the experience-induced image, and as the name suggests, it is based on the primary experiences of consumers about a certain place. The term positioning, first used in the seventies by authors Al Ries and Jack Trout, is considered one of the most relevant marketing and branding concepts. Positioning involves a certain degree of simplification in order to define the core idea of a brand that can be communicated adequately. This core idea must be communicated adequately for consumers to have a clear association in their minds about the values of a certain brand. This simplification is a specific

challenge in the context of place branding because of the complexity and diversity of the place brand.

The last core concept is brand equity, which refers to the added value of a brand for the brand managers and the brand consumers as well. In the place branding domain, several global rankings try to measure the value of a certain country or a city. The 1.6 subchapter summarizes the most relevant place brand rankings, that are considered as reference points for the academic community and the practitioners of the field as well. Regarding the measurement of country brands, the current thesis presents the following rankings: the Anholt Nation Brand Index, the FutureBrand Country Brand Index, the BAV Group Best Countries Index, the Reputation Institute Country RepTrak model, and the Bloom Country Brand Ranking which consists of two separate rankings on the touristic and economic brand value of the examined countries. In addition, the thesis presents the following rankings that are considered as relevant city brand measurement tools: the Anholt City Brand Index, the Reputation Institute City RepTrak, the Global Cities Index, the Global Cities Outlook, the Cities in Motion Index, the Global Power City Index, the Resonance Best Cities Report, and the ING Most Talked About Cities ranking. The end of the chapter provides a summary of the most commonly used research dimensions regarding the measurement of country and city brands. In the context of country brands, the majority of the rankings include dimensions related to the economic, touristic and cultural performance of the place, while in the context of city brands besides the economic performance the majority of rankings highlight the quality of living and the human resources of a city as the main dimensions for determining the place brand value.

The last subchapter of the first part examines the different types of place branding activities including country branding, regional branding, city branding, and destination branding. Place branding can be considered as an umbrella term, so it can refer to branding activities done at different spatial levels. Moreover, the literature uses different concepts for the same spatial levels as well. Speaking of countries, authors use terms like *state branding* (Van Ham, 2001), *country branding* (Szondi, 2007), and *nation branding* (Anholt, 2002). Among the scholars of the field, the term nation branding is the one that is used most commonly in recent publications. The concept of nation branding was introduced by Simon Anholt in 1996, a concept that is centered around the idea that the reputation of the countries is a key component capable of influencing their competitiveness in a global market. According to Anholt, this reputation should be managed by implementing the techniques and instruments of commercial branding. Among the concepts related to the different spatial levels, *regional branding* seems to be the

most challenging to define. The term regional branding may refer to regions inside a country, like Catalonia in Spain (Huertas-Roig et al., 2010), or regions situated at the territory of two or more countries, like the Oresund region between Denmark and Sweden (Falkheimer, 2016). The greatest challenge in the context of regional branding is related to the fact that in the majority of cases there is no single administrative entity capable of acting as the brand manager for the respective region (Oliveria & Ashworth, 2017). At a local level, the place branding literature suggests concepts like *city branding* (Dinnie, 2011), *location branding* (Hankinson, 2001), or *rural branding* (Rausch, 2008). These concepts highlight that the place branding practices can be applied to large cities and small-town and rural areas as well.

This chapter also presents some of the place branding projects done in Romania at a national, regional, and local level. At the national level the first attempts were made at the beginning of the 21st century like the *Romania, Simply Surprising* campaign from 2003 (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011), the *Romania, Land of Choice* project initiated in 2009 (Cheregi, 2017), or the *Explore the Carpathian Garden* campaign from 2010 (Andrei, 2017), which served as the foundation for the touristic brand of the country in the last ten years. The main objective of the aforementioned campaigns was to promote the touristic offering of the country among potential foreign visitors. Therefore, these campaigns were mostly destination branding initiatives without having an overarching objective of branding the whole nation. At a regional level, the majority of place branding initiatives are realized at the county level, mostly because the county council is an administrative body that can act as the brand manager. Among the case studies in Romania, Coroș and Coroș (2010) examine the case of Brașov County. The county was among the pioneers in applying place branding tactics as the *Be.live.it* touristic brand was launched back in 2009. Recently, there are several counties inside Romania where a touristic brand is developed at a regional level. Good examples include Covasna County (Visit Covasna), Harghita County (Visit Harghita) or Maramureș County (Visit Maramureș).

Since the second part of the 2000s, there is a growing interest among the cities in Romania to engage in branding projects at a local level, especially in regional centers like Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, or Iași. This list should be expanded with the city of Sibiu as one of the first good examples of cities that managed to improve their reputation at national and international level as well. The city was designated the European Capital of Culture in 2007 and this title was the main reason why Sibiu managed to gain better visibility among the European visitors (Petrea et al., 2013). Another good example is Alba Iulia, the county seat of Alba County, a city that engaged in city branding projects from the beginning of the 2010s (Irimieș, 2012). This

branding project was recognized at national and European levels as well. Alba Iulia was considered the first city in Romania to have a brand book realized in accordance with international standards.

PLACE BRANDING IN PRACTICE

The second part is entitled *Place branding in practice* and is divided into five subchapters. This part of the thesis overviews the process of place branding, focusing mainly on the branding realized at a local level. The first subchapter proposes a thorough literature review about the place brand management models. This section reviews the interpretations of authors like Kádár (2014), Moilanen and Rainisto (2009), Govers and Go (2009), Zavattaro (2014), Hanna and Rowley (2011; 2013), Papp-Váry (2011; 2019), and Baker (2019) as well. Based on the work of the aforementioned authors the thesis proposes a new model for city brand management. This new model consists of the following four stages: analysis, planification, implementation, and evaluation. The model is based on the framework of the Project Management Institute (PMI), which distinguishes five stages of a project: initiating, planning, executing, monitoring, and closing.

The process of city branding starts with a preliminary analysis phase. In this stage, primary and secondary research data should be used to have a better understanding of the current situation of the current reputation and image of the place. The data gained through these research methods can be grouped, analyzed, and evaluated using situational analysis instruments like the SWOT or PEST analysis. The former defines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the place, while the latter examines the macro environment of the place including the political, economic, social, and technological factors.

Subchapter 2.3 provides an overview of the second phase of the process, which is called the planification stage. This stage begins with the definition of a clear place brand identity, which provides the foundation for the positioning of the brand. According to Baker (2019), the following aspects should be taken into consideration when positioning a place: differentiated, authentic, compelling, and sustainable. This stage is followed by the structural development of a working brand architecture, where the city brand is considered the umbrella brand of the place. The third and final phase of the planification is a creative process resulting in the development of a brand book. This brand book works as a guide for the city brand communication including recommendations and prohibitions on the use of different visual and verbal brand elements. This chapter examines the most relevant visual elements like the logo,

the colors, the font, and the visual and audiovisual content used in the city brand communication, as well as the most significant verbal elements including the name, the slogan, the communication style, and the storytelling practices of a certain place.

The next subchapter provides an overview of the implementation phase of a city branding project. This chapter is structured into three parts as well. The first part highlights the importance of the target group definition, provides tools and instruments for segmentation, and emphasizes the role of residents in the place branding process. In the past, the main goal of place branding processes was to reach external target groups like potential visitors and investors, but recently there is a common agreement among the scholars and practitioners of the field regarding the key role that residents play in the whole branding process. This new approach considers residents as the central target groups of these projects (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Zenker et al., 2017; Insch & Walters, 2018).

It should be noted here that residents can fulfill different roles in their interaction with the city branding projects. According to the literature (Braun et al., 2013), we can think about the residents as an integral part of the place brand identity, as the ambassadors of their place, and local citizens who have the power to support or disprove the efforts of the local government. Even though the implication of residents in place branding processes is considered as a crucial condition for successful projects, in practice the majority of such initiatives still relies on a top-down approach (Bennett & Savani, 2003; Jorgensen, 2015; Larsen, 2018). A city branding project implementation implies not only the segmentation of the target groups but the determination of key messages and content strategy as well, especially regarding the online communication channels (Simmons, 2007; Rowley, 2008).

The final phase of the implementation examines the most relevant communication channels for city brand communication. This section of the thesis proposes the use of the PESO model to define these communication channels. This is an important theoretical contribution of the current thesis because earlier studies in the domain mention only the use of the POE model in this context. The PESO media mix developed in the work of Dietrich (2014; 2020) distinguishes between four types of media channels: paid media, earned media, shared media, and owned media. Moreover, the model also highlights some of the key instruments that are situated in the intersection of these media platforms like influencer marketing, which can be considered as a paid-earned media instrument, or e-mail marketing, a form of paid and owned media at the same time. The last chapter of the second part overviews the fourth stage of the

city branding process, namely the evaluation phase. This part involves the evaluation of the branding process, the constant monitoring of the newly created place brand, and finally the long-term management of the brand. Strategic leadership and tactical management are key conditions for a successful and sustainable city brand (Hanna & Rowley, 2013; Baker, 2019).

PLACE BRANDING IN THE ONLINE SPHERE

The third chapter of the current thesis examines the city branding phenomenon in an online context. This part of the paper consists of six subsections. The first one offers an overview of the most relevant particularities of online city branding. This is inspired by the work of Hanna and Rowley (2015), where the authors suggest that there are seven essential factors when considering digital strategic place brand management: channels, clutter, communication, chatter, community, co-creation, and collaboration. The second subsection provides a summary of the current online communication channels and marketing instruments, based on the previously presented PESO model. The 3.3 subchapter highlights the role of official websites in the context of online city branding. The next chapter provides a comprehensive literature review on the evaluation instruments for official websites of cities, countries, or destinations. This section takes a multidisciplinary approach by including measurement tools developed in different domains like tourism, administrative sciences, commercial branding, and place branding. The fifth chapter presents a new and integrated model for the measurement of city brands using the official websites of local governments. The 3.6 subsection examines the results of the empirical research, where the proposed model is applied to rank the performance of the websites of the county seats from Romania.

DEVELOPING A NEW MEASUREMENT TOOL

Our research is based on the content analysis of the official websites of local government entities. The model allows the grouping and classification of the operationalized characteristics. The proposed model of the current thesis is called the OCBE model, which is an abbreviation for online city brand evaluation. This evaluation tool can be used for the evaluation of official websites of cities from a place branding perspective. Regarding the development of this new evaluation tool, the current paper takes a multidisciplinary approach. The table below offers a summary of the literature review in the domain of tourism, administrative sciences, and place branding as well. The proposed OCBE model makes a synthesis of the results of these studies and defines the most significant research dimensions and related variables from a branding perspective.

Table 1: earlier models of website analysis from related domains

Examined dimensions	Source	Field
Aesthetic, Informative, and Interactive dimension	Han & Mills (2006)	Tourism
Information quality, ease of use, responsiveness, security and privacy, visual appearance, trust, interactivity, personalization, and fulfillment dimension	Park & Gretzel (2007)	Tourism
Technical Qualification, Consumer Perspective, Website Attractiveness, Marketing Effectiveness	Qi et al. (2008)	Tourism
Information, Communication, Transaction, Relationship, and Technical merit dimension	Li & Wang (2010)	Tourism
Technical functionality, Usability, Marketing Effectiveness, Information Content dimension	Stepchenkova et al. (2010)	Tourism
Visual appearance, Information Quality, Ease of use, Interactivity, and Personalization dimension	Giannopoulos & Mavragani (2011)	Tourism
Visual style, Navigation and interactivity, Textual information, Advertising, Social media, and travel aids	Luna-Nevarez & Hyman (2012)	Tourism
Technical dimension, consumer perspective, marketing, destination presentation	Morrison (2013)	Tourism
Technical, Communicative, Relational, and Persuasive aspects	Fernández-Cavia et al. (2014)	Tourism
Information, Communication, Transactions, Relationships, and Technical Merit dimension	Charoula et al. (2015)	Tourism
Visual appearance, navigability, usability dimension	Martínez-Sala et al. (2020)	Tourism
General, budgetary information, and financial information, presentation and navigation, relational web presence	Gandía & Archidona (2008)	Administrative Sciences
Accesibility, performance, navigability, content dimension	Miranda et al. (2009)	Administrative Sciences

Security, Usability, Content, Service, Citizen participation	Holzer et al. (2010)	Administrative Sciences
Navigation, Content, Website layout dimension	Elling et al. (2012)	Administrative Sciences
Content, Usability, Quality, Accessibility, Citizen engagement, Transparency, Responsiveness, Dialog, Balancing of interests	Karkin & Janssen (2014)	Administrative Sciences
Information tools, E-services, Utility, Transparency, Civic engagement	Feeney & Brown (2017)	Administrative Sciences
Hard variables: based on the legal framework, Soft variables: based on efficient, transparent, and accessible communication	Kádár & Benedek (2018)	Administrative Sciences
Transparency, Service Quality, Citizen engagement	Lee-Geiller & Lee (2019)	Administrative Sciences
Privacy and security, Ergonomy, Content, Online services, Citizen involvement, and engagement	Urs (2020)	Administrative Sciences
Brand design, brand behavior, and brand communication	Florek et al. (2006)	Place branding
Appearance, personality, humanity, style, medium, credibility	Fernández-Cavia & Huertas-Roig (2009)	Place branding
Logo, colors, slogan, visual elements, multimedia elements, storytelling, brand description	Vinyals-Mirabent (2014)	Place branding
Usability, interactivity, content, and reference to social networks	De Rosa et al. (2019)	Place branding
Brand personality analysis based on website content analysis	Vinyals-Mirabent et al. (2019); Hanna & Rowley (2019)	Place branding
Brand presentation, Brand behavior, Brand communication, Brand functions	Briciu (2020)	Place branding

source: *author's own creation*

THE PRESENTATION OF THE OCBE MODEL

Based on the thorough review of earlier studies, the current thesis concludes that there are four major factors influencing an online city brand on official websites: the visual appearance of the brand, the interactivity of the brand and the platform, the content provided by the website, and the quality of the website which assures a proper user experience for the visitors of the site. The proposed model of the current thesis is composed of four dimensions. The first dimension is called the *brand presentation* and it has seven subdimensions: the visual identity of the brand, the presentation of the touristic brand, the presentation of the economic brand, visual storytelling, audiovisual storytelling, the description of the brand, and the visual consistency between the brand identity and the website design. The second dimension examines the *brand interactivity* and it is composed of five subdimensions: contact information, resident interaction, tourist interaction, social media communication, and mobile communication. The *brand content* is the third dimension examined through seven subdimensions: content actuality, content accessibility, the general description of the city, resident information, tourist and visitor information, presentation of the cultural offering, and presentation of the economic offering. The fourth and last dimension is related to the *quality of the brand*, with the following subdimensions: visibility, performance, navigation, structure, readability, accessibility, and privacy & security. The table below summarizes the proposed dimensions, subdimensions, and indicators of the OCBE model.

Table 2: The dimensions, subdimensions, and indicators of the OCBE model

1. Brand presentation	Examined indicators
1.1 Visual identity	the city logo, city slogan, city coat of arms, domain name
1.2 Touristic brand	touristic logo, touristic slogan
1.3 Economic brand	investor logo, investor slogan
1.4 Visual storytelling	header image, image gallery
1.5 Audiovisual storytelling	highlighted video, video gallery
1.6 City brand description	description of city log, description of city coat of arms, brand book
1.7 Visual consistency	font consistency, color consistency, shape consistency

2. Brand interactivity	Examined indicators
2.1 Contact information	the physical address, phone address, e-mail address
2.2 Resident interaction	newsletter, webcast, virtual assistant, participatory budgeting, mayor's blog
2.3 Visitor interaction	city map, webcam, virtual tours, tourism blog
2.4 Social media communication	Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter
2.5 Mobile communication	mobile app, resident app, visitor app
3. Brand content	**Examined indicators**
3.1 Content actualization	news feed, latest post
3.2 Content accessibility	multilingualism, dedicated search
3.3 General description	mayor's welcome message, mayor presentation, city general presentation, history, sister cities, famous people
3.4 Resident information	city vision, city performance, city management
3.5 Visitor information	tourism-related information, dedicated visit page
3.6 Cultural information	cultural offering, events calendar
3.7 Economic information	economy-related information, dedicated investor page
4. Brand quality	**Examined indicators**
4.1 Visibility	search engine position, number of links
4.2 Performance	loading speed, mobile optimization
4.3 Navigation	home button, site map, main menu, breadcrumbs, doormat navigation, jump to the top of the page option
4.4 Structure	length of the first page, the orientation of the main menu, number of items of the main menu, customer-oriented web structure
4.5 Readability	Text distribution, text size, text hierarchy
4.6 Accessibility	accessibility widget, text size modification, color modification, number of general and contrast related WCAG errors
4.7 Privacy & security	secure domain, cookie banner, privacy policy

source: author's own creation

The OCBE model is composed of four dimensions, 25 subdimensions, and a total of 100 indicators. For every indicator, the proposed model indicates the structural level where the presence or absence of a specific content should be analyzed. In this sense, the model is composed of indicators that should be evaluated on the first page of the website (H), as well as by indicators examined at the first and second structural level (H+1, H+2). There are some indicators where the content of the whole site should be analyzed (W). On several indicators, the results are evaluated using search engines (S) or third-party measurement tools (M). Every indicator is evaluated on a scale between zero and one point, depending on the degree of fulfillment. On some occasions, only the appearance or the absence of a certain variable is evaluated, but there are numerous indicators where the quality of the communication is also considered.

APPLYING THE OCBE MODEL

The last section of the third chapter presents the application of the proposed measurement tool. The research sample consists of the official websites of county seat cities from Romania. The official website was defined as the main communication channel managed by the city halls. There are two reasons for focusing on county seats: the first one is related to the fact that city branding is still considered a relatively new practice in cities from the Central and Eastern European region, and especially among the cities from Romania. The second reason is related to the position of these cities as regional centers with the necessary resources to initiate these types of projects. These cities are those magnet places that have the power to attract residents, visitors, and investors as well, therefore the instruments of city branding can be exploited more efficiently. The literature also suggests that these big cities are the ones who engage first in place branding projects, compared to smaller towns and rural areas.

A total of 41 official websites were analyzed using online content analysis between January and April 2021. The results of the evaluation reflect the actual situation regarding the performance of the city brands communicated in the online environment through the official websites of the cities. The average score of the examined websites was 42.34, which means that the fulfillment of the evaluated dimensions indicates an average performance below 50%. The results also indicate differences among the examined research dimensions. The lowest average score was obtained in the *Brand presentation* dimension with an average score of 7.41, which indicates a fulfillment rate of 30%. This is followed by the *Brand interactivity* dimension, where the average score of 8.33 means a fulfillment rate of 33%. The examined

websites performed better in the *Brand content* and *Brand quality* dimensions. The average score of the former was 13.11 points, while the latter was 13.49 points. The average fulfillment rate of these two dimensions is above 50%. The standard deviation regarding the whole sample indicates a score of 9.97. A lower standard deviation was obtained in the *Brand presentation* (2.78) dimension, while the highest score (3.98) was obtained by the *Brand content* dimension. The *Brand interaction* and *Brand quality* dimensions had similar standard deviation scores, the former 3.40, the latter 3.44.

For a more structured presentation of the results, we grouped the analyzed cities into four groups based on their fulfillment rate. The first group included cities with an average performance between 0 and 25%. This first group was represented by only one city website from our sample. The second group included cities with an average performance between 25 and 50%. This group was represented by almost three-quarters of the websites included in our research. The third group consists of websites with an average performance between 50 and 75%. This group included a total number of 10 city websites. The fourth and final group is the one for city websites with average performances above 75%. In our sample, there were no websites that managed to reach this performance, which indicates considerable room for future improvement.

Table 3: Dimension related and overall scores of the analyzed websites

	City (website)	Brand presentation	Brand interactivity	Brand content	Brand quality	SUM
1	Sibiu	10.00	16.00	19.00	19.50	64.50
2	Cluj-Napoca	10.00	15.00	18.00	19.50	62.50
3	Alba Iulia	14.00	12.50	15.50	19.00	61.00
4	Zalău	9.00	10.00	18.00	22.00	59.00
5	Brașov	9.00	15.00	18.00	14.00	56.00
6	Oradea	10.00	12.00	16.00	16.00	54.00
7	București	11.00	12.00	13.00	16.50	52.50
8	Baia Mare	10.00	10.00	16.00	15.00	51.00
9	Galați	15.00	10.00	14.50	11.50	51.00
10	Bistrița	9.50	8.00	14.50	18.00	50.00
11	Iași	9.00	11.50	16.00	11.00	47.50
12	Buzău	9.50	13.00	8.00	16.00	46.50
13	Reșița	9.00	8.00	13.50	15.50	46.00
14	Craiova	9.00	7.50	18.00	10.50	45.00
15	Satu Mare	5.50	9.00	15.50	14.50	44.50
16	Constanța	10.00	8.00	12.00	12.50	42.50
17	Sfântu Gheorghe	5.00	3.00	17.50	17.00	42.50
18	Timișoara	7.00	8.00	14.00	13.50	42.50

19	Târgu Mureș	4.50	10.00	16.00	11.50	42.00
20	Brăila	7.00	8.00	9.50	17.00	41.50
21	Arad	6.00	7.50	16.00	11.50	41.00
22	Focșani	8.50	7.00	13.50	12.00	41.00
23	Deva	4.50	9.50	17.00	9.00	40.00
24	Tulcea	7.00	10.00	10.50	12.50	40.00
25	Ploiești	7.50	6.00	16.00	9.00	38.50
26	Piatra Neamț	5.50	5.00	12.50	15.00	38.00
27	Pitești	6.00	6.00	11.50	14.50	38.00
28	Râmnicu Vâlcea	5.50	10.00	10.00	12.50	38.00
29	Vaslui	5.50	6.00	14.00	12.00	37.50
30	Giurgiu	8.50	6.00	13.50	9.00	37.00
31	Târgu Jiu	6.50	7.00	7.50	16.00	37.00
32	Bacău	4.00	11.00	6.00	15.00	36.00
33	Slobozia	6.50	9.00	8.00	12.00	35.50
34	Alexandria	6.00	3.00	15.50	10.50	35.00
35	Călărași	7.50	4.00	10.50	12.00	34.00
36	Suceava	5.50	7.00	12.00	8.50	33.00
37	Miercurea Ciuc	5.00	2.00	15.50	8.50	31.00
38	Drobeta Turnu Severin	7.00	5.00	3.50	14.50	30.00
39	Slatina	5.00	6.00	5.50	12.00	28.50
40	Botoșani	2.50	5.00	11.00	7.50	26.00
41	Târgoviște	1.00	3.00	5.50	9.50	19.00

source: author's own creation

Table 3. provides detalied informations about the scores obtained by the city websites in different dimensions. The first group (0-25%) is represented by the city website of Târgoviște. The second group (25-50) includes cities like Botoșani, Slatina, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Miercurea Ciuc, Suceava, Călărași, Alexandria, Slobozia, Bacău, Giurgiu, Târgu Jiu, Vaslui, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Pitești, Piatra Neamț, Ploiești, Tulcea, Deva, Focșani, Arad, Brăila, Târgu Mureș, Constanța, Timișoara, Sfântu Gheorghe, Satu Mare, Craiova, Reșița, Buzău and Iași. Finally the top 10 performers of the ranking are the ones with average scores above 50%. This group consists of the following city websites: Bistrița, Galați, Baia Mare, București, Oradea, Brașov, Zalău, Alba Iulia, Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu. A certain territorial concentration can be observed in the ranking, because the majority of the well performing cities are located in the Nord-Vest and Centre development regions. Among the top 10 performers 80% of the cities are situated inside these regions.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

The current thesis has some important theoretical and practical implications. First of all, it tries to summarize the most significant results and directions of a relatively new research domain, called place branding. The research is based on the theoretical foundations of the place

branding domain, but takes a multidisciplinary approach and includes sources and relevant research results from the domain of tourism, marketing, administrative sciences, commercial branding, and online communication as well. The thesis describes a restructured city branding management model with four major phases and twelve subsections. It also makes the connection between the domain of online branding and city branding. Speaking of theoretical implications, the current thesis develops a new measurement tool for city brand evaluation. This model can be applied to official websites of the cities and measures the presence, content, interactivity, and quality of the city brands communicated through these online communication channels. This evaluation tool is based on earlier models proposed by scholars from the field of tourism, administrative sciences, and place branding. As a result of this multidisciplinary approach, the proposed model is more comprehensive, compared to the majority of earlier place branding instruments. It also shifts the focus from the visual appearance of the brand identity and argues that in a technologically determined environment the user experience provided by the website is also a main component of the brand image. For the practitioners of the field, the proposed city brand management process model and the online city brand evaluation tool are both valuable instruments for planning city brand projects and evaluating online city brand performance. The current thesis provides an overview of the current situation regarding the performance of the county seats from Romania. In this sense, the research offers significant results for decision-makers in local governments as well. By comparing the performance of these city websites, local governments can have a clear understanding of their current situation and can easily identify the strong and week points of their online presence based on the examined research dimensions and variables.

The current research provides numerous opportunities and directions for future studies. The sample size included only county seats but future research should examine the performance of smaller cities and towns as well. Another recommendation is to apply the model on an international level, starting with capital cities from Europe. The current results offer possibilities for more in-depth evaluations and interpretations. The city brand performance can be compared with the economic and tourism-related performance of these cities. Finally, it should be noted that nowadays there are numerous online channels that brands can use in order to communicate their identity. This is true for commercial brands and place brands as well, therefore future studies should include other types of owned media channels, for example, social media sites like Facebook or Instagram.

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