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# Visitor experiences at UNESCO monasteries in Northeast Romania

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## ABSTRACT

The religious heritage of northeast Romania is one of the key attractions for visitors to the area. Known as 'painted' monasteries, the region's churches highlight the rich religious culture of Romania, and they have been designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This study sought to identify the main dimensions of tourist experiences in the monasteries using mixed content analysis methods to collect data from Web reviews. The results include 10 themes: 'monastery', 'painted (walls)', 'tower', 'visit', 'beautiful' (place), 'inside' (painting), 'famous' (scene), 'place', 'blue' (colour) and 'guide'. The Web reviews also reveal that tourists can feel connected to the Eastern Orthodox religion (e.g. most Romanian visitors) or they are more interested in the monasteries' paintings and architecture. The majority of tourists value these structures for their status as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, seeing them as most notable for their old paintings, which have been preserved for many years and which are famed for their colours (i.e. Voronet Monastery's blue paint).

KEYWORDS: UNESCO; web reviews; heritage; painted; monastery; content analysis

## Introduction

Tourism centred around heritage sites is one of the most widespread and oldest types of tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2006), which uses cultural, historical and ethnic components of destinations to attract visitors. An increasing interest in heritage and growing recognition of the value of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHSs) have encouraged the development of WHS tourism as a brand segment within heritage tourism. Given its fame, the UNESCO WHS label has become a desired destination asset and a tool to increase international visibility and tourism flows (Ashworth & van der Aa, 2006). This explains the continuous enlargement of the WHS list from 12 sites in 1978 to 1,073 sites as of November 2017 (UNESCO, 2017), including 832 cultural, 206 natural and 35 mixed sites.

The UNESCO branded sites can provide extremely diverse visitor experiences (Adie & Hall, 2017). According to UNESCO (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 2008), at least 20 of the places on the WHS list have religious or spiritual meaning. Given their significance in terms of faith, cultural past and identity (Bremer, 2006; Davie, 2006), these sites deliver complex and multi-dimensional visitor experiences, regardless of whether tourists' motivations to visit are religious or non-religious (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013; Olsen, 2008; Voase, 2007; Winter & Gasson, 1996).

Besides their spiritual importance, the popularity of religious attractions among tourists (Ryan & McKenzie, 2003; Shuo, Ryan, & Liu, 2009; Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2013) is often due to their promotion as cultural heritage sites and key attractions in destination marketing (Francis, Mansfield,

Williams, & Village, 2010; Ron & Timothy, 2019; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). This explains why many famous sacred sites (e.g. Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome or Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris) are among the top World Heritage attractions and why they rely heavily on tourism revenue (Ballantyne, Hughes, & Bond, 2016).

Romania has 7 WHSs: 1 natural (i.e. the Danube Delta) and 6 cultural sites. Four of the Romanian cultural WHSs have a religious significance. They include Horezu Monastery and clusters of churches in three Romanian provinces: 8 painted monasteries in Moldavia, 7 villages with fortified churches in Transylvania and 6 wooden churches in Maramureş. Most of these sites are integrated into the main national religious and cultural tourism itineraries, attracting both domestic and foreign visitors. In Romania, tourism at religious sites has increased since the fall of communism, a trend supported by the creation of new pilgrimage sites, the reinforcement of older ones through religious events and their designation as WHSs after 1993. In many cases, these sites coincide with iconic national heritage, which ensures diverse visitor profiles and motivations (Drule, Chiş, Băcilă, & Ciornea, 2012; Tirca, Stanculescu, Chis, & Bacila, 2010).

Researchers have shown that tourism at religious heritage sites is strongly experiential (Buggeln, 2012; Cohen, 2006; Poria, Biran, & Reichel, 2009). Previous studies have also revealed that these sites offer multidimensional and extremely dynamic experiences that oscillate between being religious and secular (e.g. Andriotis, 2009; Bond, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2015; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Olsen, 2008; Voase, 2007; Weidenfeld, 2006; Winter & Gasson, 1996).

Given how little research has been done on religious tourist experiences in Romania, the present study conducted an in-depth analysis of visitor experiences at Romanian religious WHSs. More specifically, this research used automated content analysis of visitors' online reviews posted on the TripAdvisor website between 2012 and 2017. The reviews covered four representative WHSs from northern Moldavia: the Sucevita, Moldovita, Humor and Voronet Monasteries.

The research question addressed was as follows: What are the main components of visitor experiences at UNESCO religious WHSs in Romania, as shown in reviews shared online? This study posited that content analysis would reveal a mixture of religious and non-religious components since WHSs are characterised by their world heritage value and the generally increasing number of non-religious visitors at religious sites (Hughes et al., 2013; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003; Woodward, 2004).

The paper below is structured as follows. This introduction is followed by a review of the literature on tourism at religious sites. The third section describes the methodology used in the data collection and treatment. The results section presents the concept map generated and the qualitative (i.e. narrative) analysis of tourists' reviews. The final section includes conclusions and limitations, as well as avenues for future research.

## Tourism at religious sites

Tourism at religious sites is among the oldest (Rinschede, 1992; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005) and most important forms of tourism in terms of volume (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Its importance increased in the late twentieth century (Shackley, 2002) alongside an overall growing interest in spiritual experiences. This trend explains the large numbers of travellers mobilising each year to visit religious destinations. About 300 to 330 million people are estimated to travel annually to religious sites (World Tourism Organisation, 2014), and the top 32 religious destinations alone attract annually about 140 million people (Alliance of Religions and Conservation, 2014).

An important driver of trips to religious sites is how these places are marketed as both sacred sites and general heritage attractions and how their perceived value has increased when associated with famous global brands such as the UNESCO WHS label. Given the well-known role of UNESCO in the conservation and promotion of world heritage, categorisation as a WHS is an indicator of these places' cultural value and authenticity. This brand normally enhances sites' international visibility, builds trust and attracts more diverse categories of visitors and heritage tourists in particular.

In this context, tourism at religious sites has become a popular focus among tourism scholars, promoters and the media (e.g. Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Wright, 2008). Many religious sites now function as both sacred places and tourist destinations (Olsen, 2010), thus generating diverse visitor expectations and travel motivations. The existing research (e.g. Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Hughes et al., 2013; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014; Voase, 2007) has, therefore, analysed internal and external motivations (i.e. push and pull factors) of tourists visiting religious sites. Individuals travel to these sites not only for religious purposes but also for recreational, educational, cultural or social reasons (Hughes et al., 2013; Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015; Shackley, 2002; Smith, 1992; Woodward, 2004).

The main religious motivations for these trips include feeling the love of God, making sacred vows, experiencing spiritual peace (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000), seeking spiritual enlightenment (Gutic, Caie, & Clegg, 2010), strengthening faith, redeeming sins, improving health, praying (Timothy & Boyd, 2006), blessing objects, lighting candles and participating in masses (Bar & Cohen-Hattab, 2003). Among non-religious motivations are spur of the moment decisions, family connections with the sites, famous people connected with these places, personal interest in architecture and history and the natural environment (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Hughes et al., 2013; Liogier, 2012; Voase, 2007). Other typically postmodern tourist motivations include a search for authenticity and personal development, feelings of being attracted to a religion or the aesthetic value of religious practices (Liogier, 2012).

Visitor motivations and activities have been the main criteria used to differentiate between religious tourism and pilgrimages (Cohen, 1992; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Gutic et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2013; Olsen, 2010; Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Smith, 1992). In general, religious tourism is defined as trips to sacred sites partly or exclusively motivated by religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992). These take various forms such as religious pilgrimages, religious gatherings or religious groups' leisure-motivated trips (Wright, 2008).

However, in recent decades, the religious tourism market has grown and become segmented, with niches ranging from high-end religious travel and volunteer-oriented religious trips to modern-day spiritual pilgrimages (Ron, 2009; Ron & Timothy, 2019). Thus, religious tourism includes a higher share of nonreligious motivations and activities. In contrast, pilgrimages are often seen as a special form of religious travel primarily motivated by faith and characterised by a strong ritualistic dimension (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016).

Many researchers consider religious heritage tourism to be predominantly experiential travel (Buggeln, 2012; Cohen, 2006; Poria et al., 2009). Individuals visit religious sites searching for certain emotions and experiences enabled by place attributes, such as transformative experiences or escapes from visitors' ordinary life (Bond et al., 2015; Drule et al., 2012). Given the central role of experiences in tourism and their contribution to a deeper understanding of tourist behaviours overall, visitor experiences at religious sites have been the subject of many tourism studies (Andriotis, 2009; Bond et al., 2015; Olsen, 2008; Voase, 2007; Winter & Gasson, 1996). Most of these have focused on the religious (i.e. spiritual) dimension.

Researchers have shown that religious sites can deliver complex and multi-dimensional visitor experiences, which are usually separated into religious (i.e. numinous) and non-religious ones (Hughes et al., 2013; Olsen, 2008; Voase, 2007; Winter & Gasson, 1996). The material and immaterial components of religious sites can enable spiritually and personally fulfilling experiences including religious, aesthetic, educational and cultural aspects (Andriotis, 2009, 2011; Bond et al., 2015; Bremer, 2006; Buggeln, 2012; Davie, 2006; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Hughes et al., 2013).

Visitors to these sites can explore their national or personal identity, whilst, at the same place and time, others enjoy the sites' architecture, history or natural environment. Depending on their subjective experiences and motivations, tourists to religious heritage sites have been classified as thinkers or feelers (Francis et al., 2010). Another typology categorises visitors as (1) religious, (2) personal (i.e. searching for nostalgia, peace and satisfaction of curiosity) or (3) social (i.e. attracted by social events, festivals and hospitality) (Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014).

In addition, prior studies have identified various factors contributing to visitor experiences and satisfaction at religious sites, such as weather, opening hours and schedules of holiday ceremonies (Nyaupane et al., 2015). Still other factors are site accessibility and accommodation facilities (Hughes et al., 2013) or the diversity of interpretation techniques that engage tourists spiritually, intellectually or physically (Ballantyne et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2013). Researchers have also shown that visitor experiences vary depending on individual tourists' features including, among others, age, gender, social status (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005), religion or nationality (Nyaupane et al., 2015).

A well-known model of tourism experiences at religious sites is Smith's (1992) pilgrim-tourist continuum. This model puts pilgrims associated with sacred motivations and activities in opposition to tourists associated with secular motivations. Pilgrims are usually seen as humble and sensitive to local culture, while tourists are reported to be hedonistic and demanding (De Sousa, 1993). These two extremes are separated by a continuum of sacred-secular combinations representing the multiple and changing motivations and behaviours of travellers, which range from pilgrimages to tourism – with religious tourism at the centre (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Smith, 1992).

The tourist-pilgrim dichotomy has, however, been contradicted by recent research showing that visitor experiences at religious sites are multidimensional and dynamic (Andriotis, 2009; Bond et al., 2015; Gatrell & Collins-Kreiner, 2006; Weidenfeld, 2006). For example, Bond et al. (2015) proposed a model of religious tourism experiences in which visitors to the same sites can choose to identify with three main roles (i.e. orientations), whilst also sharing a common interest in history, culture and heritage sites. The cited model posits that heritage-focused visitors are more attracted by the cultural dimension (e.g. cultural resonance, buildings and architecture or associations with specific persons and events). Religion-oriented visitors are attracted to sites linked to their personal religious traditions, thus seeking both meaningful spiritual and educational experiences. These tourists can also have a broader interest in historical and religious dimensions. Visitors with a pilgrimage orientation are associated with a stronger spiritual focus, namely, the search for deeper spiritual and fulfilling experiences. These individuals choose sites linked to their faith community or a specific holy person or event.

The model by Bond et al. (2015) suggest that particular spaces influence visitors' choice of orientation and their experiences and orientations can change during visits. The aesthetic, sensual or social qualities of religious sites can affect – but do not determine – the kinds of experiences people have within those spaces (Bond et al., 2015). Some religious place attributes thus have a key role in enabling authentic visitor experiences.

Andriotis (2009) suggests five place characteristics are important to religious tourism. The first is the spirituality of the sites, while the second is the cultural dimension inspired by architecture, heritage, rituals and monastic life. A third attribute is secularity enhanced by the communal way of life and the material manifestations of religiosity. The fourth is the beauty and complexity of the sites' natural environment, and the last characteristic is the educational dimension, which is linked to personal growth and development.

As a result, five main types of authenticity can be experienced by visitors at heritage and sacred sites (Andriotis, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 2007; Wang, 1999). The first of these is natural authenticity enabled by these places' natural beauty and complexity. The second is original authenticity inspired by historical architecture, heritage and rituals. The third is exceptional authenticity built by the presence of monks and nuns, their communal way of life and the rituals and hospitality they offer. The fourth is referential authenticity or a sense of history and historical continuity, while the last is influential authenticity, namely, the sites' significance for humanity.

Regarding Romania's religious tourism, previous studies have rarely focused on this tourism niche in this country, and the literature review conducted for the present research revealed no research specifically on tourism at UNESCO religious heritage sites. In addition, the existing studies have highlighted both religiously and non-religiously motivated visitors to sacred places in Romania, but predominantly the first kind, who usually travel to feel closer to God, experience the sacred nature of places or seek guidance (Tirca et al., 2010). The next most important motivation for

religious tourism found for tourists in this country is personal development, namely, wanting to be a better person (Drule et al., 2012). Finally, the main factors influencing visitor experiences at Romanian religious sites are the landscape, architecture and an interest in the life of monks and nuns (Tirca et al., 2010).

## Methodology

### *Case study description*

Romania has been a UNESCO member since 1956, with seven WHSs. These include the monasteries of Moldavia, the Dacian fortresses of the Orastie Mountains, the historic centre of Sighisoara, Horezu Monastery, villages with fortified churches in Transylvania, the wooden churches of Maramureş and the Danube Delta. Situated in northeast Romania, the eight painted monasteries of Moldova (i.e. Arbore, Moldovita, Sucevita, Voronet, Probota, Patrauti, Humor and Saint John the New of Suceava) are primary UNESCO heritage sites that attract both Romanian and foreign visitors. Famous for their external and internal mural paintings, these monasteries are representative examples of Byzantine art from between the late fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries (UNESCO, 2017) and of authentic Romanian traditions. Due to restrictions on the data available (i.e. reviews shared online), only four monasteries were selected for this study: Humor, Moldovita, Voronet and Sucevita.

Humor Monastery is one of the most impressive medieval monuments in Romania. Built in 1530 by local artisans, this monastery is most known for its Byzantine murals dating from as far back as 1535, as well as the special red colour of its brick walls. Founded in 1532 by Prince Petru Rares, Moldovita Monastery is best known for the golden lustre of its murals, which were painted in 1537. The most famous scenes are those of the Constantinople Siege represented on the southern façade – reminders of the wars against the Ottoman Empire. Voronet Monastery, which is also known as ‘The Sistine Chapel of the East’, was founded in 1488 by Prince Stephen the Great. The monastery is famous for the painting of the Last Judgement on the western façade. This place is also known for the blue colour of its external walls, which is known as ‘Voronet blue’. The origin of this paint has not yet been discovered. Sucevita Monastery was built between 1581 and 1601, and it is representative of the architectural style that matured during the reign of Prince Stephen the Great. The church’s exterior is entirely covered in paintings considered the ‘swansong of medieval Romanian art’ (UNESCO, n.d., p. 11). The scene depicting the Ladder of Virtue, on the northern side, is particularly famous.

Although these sites are among the most famous Romanian attractions for both domestic and foreign visitors, tourist flows to these monasteries are quite difficult to estimate because of the limitations of national statistics on visitor registration. Only overnight visitors in certified accommodation units are officially registered, thereby excluding a significant share of the same-day or transit visitors. These tourists dominate inflows to these sites since daily tours are one of the main ways to visit these monasteries.

In addition, no official visitor data is reported by the monasteries based on tickets sales. Visitors often stay in accommodations in neighbouring cities used as departure points for daily monastery tours. Thus, according to Romania’s official statistics, the number of tourist arrivals accommodated in the four UNESCO monasteries is still low, even though stays have increased from 51,248 in 2012 to 84,979 in 2016 (i.e. 0.77% of Romania’s total tourist arrivals).

### *Data collection*

TripAdvisor was used as the source of data in the present study because it is the world’s largest travel site, with 20 million members and more than 50 million reviews and opinions. TripAdvisor also appears to be the only tourism-related social network that includes age in reviewers’ profile, which facilitated the identification of different age groups in the present research.

As in other previous studies (Brochado, Troilo, & Shah, 2017; Pearce & Wu, 2016; Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele, & Cretchley, 2015; Wu, Wall, & Pearce, 2014), only English reviews were selected for analysis. Different numbers of reviews were posted in English on TripAdvisor for each monastery selected: Humor Monastery – 67 reviews, Moldovita – 76 reviews, Sucevita – 118 reviews and Voronet – 156. Overall, the 416 review texts analysed had a total of 27,791 words.

The reviews analysed were posted on TripAdvisor from January 2012 to December 2017. Data from these four years were selected in order to have a sufficient number of reviews per year and to ensure significant results for this recent period for all monasteries. For each review, the variables available were review title and text, quantitative rating, traveller type (i.e. families, couples, single persons, businesses or friends), month and year, gender and nationality. The quantitative rating includes the following categories: 1 = terrible, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = very good and 5 = excellent.

The overall traveller profile in the sample is strongly dominated by families (29.3%) and couples (41.7%), which indicates these religious sites are quite attractive to families and people in a relationship. Around 59% of the reviews were written by men and the remaining 41% by women. The only exception to this is Humor Monastery, with 63.5% male reviewers.

The tourists' nationality indicates their geographical distribution by continents, with most of them coming from Europe (67.6%). The sample also includes an important number of Romanian tourists (41.4%), who identify themselves mainly as religious visitors interested in monasteries. In addition, other tourists are linked to the sites by their Eastern Orthodox religion, including Russians (5%). American tourists represent another important segment (21.7%) Table 1.

### Data treatment

This study used content analysis to understand tourists' experiences during their visit to the four monasteries in northeast Romania. Content analysis is a research method commonly used to analyse any verbal communication ranging from written to spoken forms. This method is also associated with two other major approaches: thematic and semantic analyses.

Table 1. Sample profile of TripAdvisor reviews analysed.

	Total Sample		Humor		Moldovita		Sucevita		Voronet	
			Monaster		Monaster		Monaster		Monastery	
	N	N %	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Traveller Type</b>										
Business	10	2.5%	2	3.0%	0	0.0%	4	3.4%	4	2.6%
Couples	16	41.7%	2	41.8%	2	50.0%	4	40.2%	62	39.7%
Families	11	29.3%	2	29.9%	2	35.7%	3	26.5%	45	28.8%
Friends	6	16.9%	1	16.4%	1	1.8%	2	20.5%	31	19.9%
Singles	38	9.6%	6	9.0%	7	12.5%	1	9.4%	14	9.0%
<b>Gender</b>										
Female	15	41.0%	19	36.5%	30	41.7%	44	42.3%	61	41.2%
Male	4	59.0%	33	63.5%	42	58.3%	60	57.7%	87	58.8%
<b>Continent of Origin</b>										
Europe (UK, Romania, Belgium, Russia)	26	67.6%	42	95.5%	49	68.1%	77	69.4%	97	66.0%
Asia	5	4.1%	2	4.5%	1	1.4%	4	3.6%	9	6.1%
Africa	16	0.8%	2	4.5%	0	0	0	0	7	4.8%
Australia	3	4.8%	3	6.8%	0	0	6	5.4%	30	20.4%

North America (Canada)	85	21.7%	12	27.3%	3	4.2%	24	21.6%	1	0.7%
Oceania (New Zealand)	4	1.0%	1	2.3%	19	26.4%	0	0	3	2.0%
Rating										
1	3	0.7%	1	1.5%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%	1	0.6%
2	2	0.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.6%
3	16	3.9%	3	4.5%	4	5.3%	2	1.7%	7	4.5%
4	99	23.9%	18	26.9%	17	22.7%	27	23.1%	37	23.7%
5	295	71.1%	45	67.2%	53	70.7%	87	74.4%	110	70.5%

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The content analysis used Leximancer software, which works based on data mining and machine-learning techniques, in order to determine the key concepts in texts and the way these concepts are semantically interrelated (Rooney, 2005). Leximancer uses word frequency and cooccurrence word counts as data (Rooney, 2005). More precisely, this software produces ‘a concept cooccurrence matrix’ based on frequency data and the cooccurrence of concepts.

At the time that a concept is identified, the programme establishes a ‘thesaurus of words’ that are intimately related to the concept, thereby producing semantic or definitional content around each concept (Rooney, 2005). Leximancer offers both conceptual and relational analysis tools. In conceptual analysis, the presence and frequency of concepts are established by the measurement of the documents in question, while relational analysis concentrates more on how the concepts are related to each other within the documents analysed.

The final output of Leximancer is a conceptual map that represent themes and concepts in the form of circles and dots, respectively. The position of the circles and dots and their distance from each other shows the semantic links between the concepts in the text in question (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011).

Researchers can perform other tasks using Leximancer that include finding the main topic within a text, emphasising how topics relate to each other and identifying which source files or individual authors and/or speakers refer to specific topics (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013). Beside concept maps, Leximancer generates statistical output in order to help analysts gain deeper insights into and a fuller understanding of natural language (i.e. interviews, reviews and focus group discussions). This is done through the process of (1) conducting semantic information retrieval of the key themes and concepts, (2) viewing bodies of data in a graphical format (i.e. a concept map) and (3) navigating through concepts while mining texts for deeper contextual associations (Cretchley, Rooney, & Gallois, 2010).

## Results

The content analyses revealed the existence of 10 themes (see Figure 1) that can be linked to two both religious (i.e. spiritual) and non-religious experiences. The former is connected to one theme, namely, ‘monastery’ (hits = 654). Non-religious experiences are linked to nine themes: ‘painted’ (walls) (450), ‘tower’ (314), ‘visit’ (290), ‘beautiful’ (scene) (288), ‘inside’ (painting) (270), ‘famous’ (place) (111), ‘place’ (79), ‘blue’ (colour) (76) and ‘guide’ (30). These themes are discussed in detail below.

### *Monastery theme*

This theme includes the concepts of ‘monastery’ (count = 358, likelihood = 90%), ‘preserved’ (51, 49%), ‘history’ (51, 45%) and ‘religious’ (25, 64%). A typical review says, ‘The beauty of the [p]ainted [m]onasteries [emphasis added] is other[-]worldly. If you make it to Romania, you have to come to Bukovina for these monasteries!’ (female, Romanian, Humor Monastery) Another guest shared:

[This is a] jewel of art in the chain of monasteries ... [in] Bucovina. [This is a] beautiful place that deserves ... [to take up] some of your holiday in Bukovina. [The i]nterior and exterior paintings are extraordinary and they ... [have been] well *preserved* [emphasis added] over hundreds of years. (female, American, Moldovita Monastery)

An additional review reports, ‘[This is a] special place, full of *history* [emphasis added], full of beauty, full of very friendly people ... with things to see and/or do in Sucevita or nearby’ (female, British, Sucevita Monastery). One visitor wrote:

[This place has a]mazing pictures ([with] *religious* [emphasis added] [themes]) on the walls, inside and outside, [giving it an a]uthentic atmosphere. Don’t forget that this monastery is [an] active religious site so keep ... silent and wear long pants if you are a man and cover your head [if] you are a woman. [This is j]ust a sign of respect for the local community. (male, Canadian, Voronet Monastery)

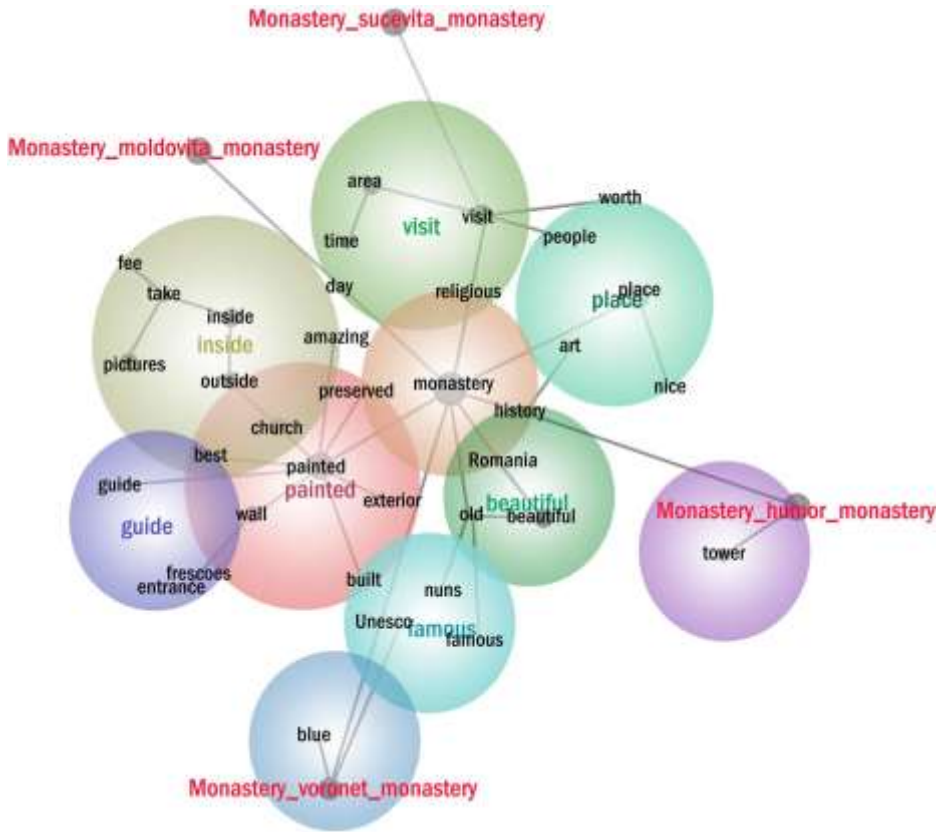


Figure 1. Concept map of tourist reviews of UNESCO monasteries in northeastern Moldavia (Romania).

### *Painted theme*

This theme contains the concepts 'painted' (291, 47%), 'church' (108, 32%), 'wall' (76, 57%), 'frescoes' (80, 34%), 'exterior' (50, 64%) and 'built' (35, 29%). A typical review is as follows:

The [p]ainted [m]onasteries of [s]outhern Bucovina are worth the trip. There are four worth seeing but this might be the best if you only have time for one. Look online for photos and [its] history and you will see that this is a magical place in a spiritual way. (male, American, Voronet Monastery)

Another visitor said, 'This monastery was built in the 16th century and [it] is famous because of the [painting] depicti[ng] ... the 31 steps to heaven. ... [The different structures] are impressive buildings in a beautiful setting' (male, Australian, Sucevita Monastery). A further tourist wrote:

The monasteries are basically the same and what differentiates [sic] them is the quality and condition of the paintings. Visit as many as you can and be sure to engage a guide or have a good guidebook to interpret the paintings, murals and frescoes. (female, American, Sucevita Monastery)

One visitor exclaimed, '[These are b]eautiful grounds and buildings. The [c]hurch paintings both inside and out are amazing. The little museum is interesting as well!' (male, American, Voronet Monastery) Another tourist said, 'The painted monasteries are a must-see. Both the interior and exterior are beautiful and you should try to see all four of them. [They are d]efinitely worth the trip' (male, American, Humor Monastery).

### *Tower theme*

This has the single concept of 'tower' (39, 20%). A typical review reads, 'The definit[ive] ... element of this church is the defence tower built nearby, with its narrow stairs. This tower offers ... tourist[s] an impressive view over the surrounding hills' (male, Romania, Humor Monastery).

### *Visit theme*

This includes the concepts 'visit' (201, 32%), 'time' (66, 29%), 'area' (71, 38%) and day (31, 39%). A typical review reports:

[This is a] must see if you are in the area ... [e]specially the old tower[, which is] totally worth the difficult climb because once you're up there the view is breathtaking. The church is ... now undergoing restoration with the help of the students from the Art Academy and I bet it will look brilliant once they finish. [This was a g]reat visit for me and my family! (female, Romanian, Humor Monastery)

A South African visitor wrote, 'What an amazing place ... [the p]ainted monastery [is]. [I] loved this place[. You] must visit if [you] are in the area[. P]lease do not miss [this] UNESCO HERITAGE SITE [sic]' (female, South African, Voronet Monastery). Another tourist suggested:

If you want to have [a] spectacular lesson ... [in the Eastern O]rthodox religion at the [m]onastery, try to have as [your] guide [sic] the [n]un Tatiana. She will explain [to] you the meaning of each painting from the walls in one-two [sic] hours. She can speak in French, English, German, Spanish and Italian. It is a beautiful [m]onastery, with a lot of history ... [within its] walls. If you have time to stop[, it will [be] worth all ... [the] minutes [you] spent [sic] there. Enjoy! (female, Romanian, Moldovita Monastery)

A further visitor said:

Bucovina is one of the most beautiful region[s] of Romania. You have to visit it at least once in ... [your] lifetime. The journey begins with ... Piatra Neamt, [near] my place[,] and goes along Targu Neamt to Putna Monastery. All the churches and monasteries along the way are part of ... U[NESCO] heritage and each of them is charming. [There is] Voronet with her [sic] famous blue, Gura Humorului with her [sic] serenity, Putna – the [most] imposing one, Moldovita with her [sic] beautiful flowers and the last but number one in my heart [is] Sucevita. There [I] felt like ... [I] was close to God, where [I] felt like my soul can [sic] finally rest [in] peace and quiet, [with] a[n] enchanti[n]g view. You definitely [sic] have to visit it. And [for] the last tip, on your way back from Moldovita[,] you can travel along [the] Transrarau, where you can almost touch the clouds. [It's p]ure magic. You need at least three days to visit and enjoy all of them! (female, Romanian, Sucevita Monastery)

### *Beautiful theme*

This encompasses the concepts of 'beautiful' (195, 31%), 'Romania' (84, 18%) and 'old' (36, 17%). A typical review says, 'This is for me the most beautiful monastery in *Romania* [emphasis added]. The surrounding[s], the building and the paintings are simply breathtaking. Romania has so many beautiful places!' (male, Romanian, Humor Monastery) Another review reads, 'This is a *beautiful* [emphasis added] place to see and enjoy. It is like a hidden gem. The painted monasteries are a must-see' (male, American, Voronet Monastery).

A Canadian visitor wrote, 'We were excited to see the frescos and were not disappointed. The artifacts displayed were amazing. There was a service when [sic] we attended and it was so *beautiful* [emphasis added] to hear the service [and] see the congregation enjoying the service' (female, Canadian, Moldovita Monastery). A further tourist said:

[This i]s really a great place. I loved it. [It is s]o virgin [and] so green and [it has] such ... clean air. The people are so kind and the houses, the culture [and e]verything is amazing. I sit [sic] on grass and I had the most perfect 10 min[utes] of my life. [It was a]mazing. And the monastery is so *old* [emphasis added] ... [that it is] ... UNESCO heritage. ... I really liked the smell inside. (female, Spanish, Sucevita Monastery)

### *Inside theme*

This includes the concepts 'inside' (97, 46%), 'outside' (46, 51%), 'best' (52, 44%), 'amazing' (46, 35%), 'pictures' (37, 38%), 'take' (36, 34%) and 'fee' (28, 22%). A typical review says, 'It is difficult to decide which of the [m]onasteries is the *best* [emphasis added] in the area of Bucovina. Voronet Monastery is included in the top three' (male, Greek, Voronet Monastery). One visitor wrote, 'What a beautiful monastery. It's quite amazing to think that the paintings have survived for so many centuries. [This is n]ot a long visit but, without doubt, a must-see if you are in the area' (male, British, Moldovita Monastery).

Another tourist reported:

The paintings on the walls are very well ... [restored], and the inside is very [skilfully] repainted by specialists as well. There is a hill nearby (exit the monaterly [sic] and then [turn] left) from where [you can] ... take a nice picture of the monastery and the cemetery. [This place is n]ot as big as Sucevita but [it is just] as beautiful. There is a fee to take pictures outside ([the] same price as a single ticket) and ... [you cannot] take pictures inside the church. (male, Spanish, Moldovita Monastery)

An additional visitor's review reads:

We loved touring the [m]onasteries in the Bucova Region of Romania. This monastery was special as it was within the fortress walls. We paid the fee to be able to take pictures on [sic] the outside area. The inside was overwhelmingly beautiful. We did purchase a book and a CD so that we could remember our visit there. (female, American, Sucevita Monastery)

### *Famous theme*

This theme contains the concepts 'UNESCO' (38, 26%) and 'nuns' (36, 26%). A typical review reports, '[These are r]emarkable painted monasteries from the seventeen [sic] century, a unique survival in a lovely land. [They are] *UNESCO* [emphasis added] protected' (male, British, Voronet Monastery). A Greek tourist said, 'You must visit this UNESCO World Heritage [s]ite. The church has the most well-preserved interior paintings' (male, Greek, Humor Monastery).

Another tourist wrote, '[This has g]orgeous exterior painting[s]. The monastery is very ... [well kept], [as the] *nuns* [emphasis added] ... [are] very ... [good] householders [sic]. The church is old, but it is a gem. The landscape is also spectacular' (male, Romanian, Moldovita Monastery). A further review states:

Go and see [this place if] only ... for the amazing uphill route to get there. It is a fully-operating [sic] monastery, [as] *the nuns* [emphasis added] still live, work and pray there, so be careful about what you wear, but otherwise it's an amazing place to see. The paintings are simply stunning, [with] colourful frescos from both inside and outside. [It's b]eautiful! (female, Russian, Sucevita Monastery)

An additional visitor enthused, '[What a n]ice *UNESCO* [emphasis added] monument ... [with] pretty colours, nice location, [and] nice architecture! [It's v]ery accessible form [sic] the main road! [This is an i]mportant historic attraction!' (female, Romanian, Voronet Monastery)

### *Place theme*

This includes the concepts of 'place' (150, 34%), 'nice' (64, 28%), 'worth' (53, 23%), 'art' (37, 22%) and 'people' (29, 17%) A typical review is:

[This is a v]ery nice place with [a] great view when u [sic] get ... in[side] the building[. T]he small stairs that u [sic] use to get up are awesome[. T]hey give u [sic] the feeling that you are in a horror movie! [I] really recommend going to this place. (female, South African, Humor Monastery)

Another tourist wrote:

[This is a v]ery *nice place* [emphasis added] with beautiful gardens. [It was l]ess crowded [so] we felt the serenity of a monastery. The frescoes are really spectacular. Walking around and smelling the roses after the rain[,] it was a very pleasant experience. (female, Romanian, Moldovita Monastery)

In another review, a Romanian visitor advised, 'Ask for [the] nun Tatiana to guide you around. She is one of the most awesome *people* [emphasis added] I've ever met. [She gave us r]eally impressive information' (female, Romanian, Moldovita Monastery). Still another tourist said, 'I think this is the best looking monastery in Romanian Moldova ... [in terms of] the quality of external paintings. [It is w]ell worth a visit. It is basically a piece of *art* [emphasis added]' (male, Romanian, Sucevita Monastery).

### *Blue theme*

This theme has one concept – 'blue' (63, 80%). A typical review reads, 'Th[is is th]e only place in the world where you can find this specific nuance of blue, which is why it is called 'Voroneț *Blue*' [emphasis added]' (male, Romanian, Voroneț Monastery). One visitor exclaimed:

[It's b]eautiful! The *blue* [emphasis added] of Voroneț Monastery is unique in the world. [W]hen you go there you will see ... there[']s something special about it that can't be described in words. [J]ust [by] being there you feel good! [It's] peaceful, quite [sic], and relaxing. (female, British, Voroneț Monastery)

Another tourist wrote:

This is an amazing piece of art in my opinion dating from [the] 15 hundred[s]. It has a distinctive *blue* [emphasis added] on [sic] its frescoes known in Romania as 'Voroneț blue'. [This i]s also well known as the Sistine Chapel of the East. :). It is definitely worth seeing together with the other monasteries that are also UNESCO sites. (female, Belgian, Voroneț Monastery)

An additional visitor said:

[Here you b]reathe history. It's a [v]ery old monastery but well maintained. It's famous for the special colour on the walls called 'The *blue* [emphasis added] of Voroneț' [sic]. [This is a] quiet place in a peaceful area in winter but [it] can be very crowded in spring and summer! (male, Romanian, Voroneț Monastery)

### *Guide theme*

This theme encompasses two concepts: 'guide' (49, 28%) and 'entrance' (32, 16%). A typical review says, 'We liked all the monasteries. We learned from the *guide* [emphasis added] about the ... [time-line] of the decorations. We had time for coffee and time for taking [sic] pictures' (male, Dutch, Moldovita Monastery). Another visitor wrote:

[This is a] pleasant and peacefull [sic] place ... [to] visit ... and [enjoy a] rest [on] ... an autumn day. [Y]ou must pay a ... [fee] at [the] *entrance* [emphasis added] and [then] you will ... [enjoy] a quite [sic] place with beautiful pictures in the old church. (male, Romanian, Sucevita Monastery)

A further tourist reported:

Located nearby ... Voroneț (Gura Humorului), this monastery looks maybe more glamorous [sic] than [sic] [the] others, ... [while still] keeping their distinctive look. On the right side of [the] *entrance* [emphasis added] stands the bell tower, witch [sic] can give you better views of surroundings [sic]. (female, Romanian, Humor Monastery)

Another review reads, 'The monastery is stunning to look at, [and] bring a *guide* [emphasis added] book to discover more about the frescoes' (male, Romanian, Voroneț Monastery).

Overall, Voroneț Monastery is most often linked with the concepts of blue (80% likelihood of co-occurrence), UNESCO (54%) and famous (52%). Humor Monastery is strongly associated with the theme and concept of tower (83%). Sucevita Monastery is mostly linked with the concepts of visit (39%), area (32%), time (29%) and day (22%). Finally, Moldovita Monastery is associated with

the concepts of monastery (40%), painted (34%), frescoes (33%) and exterior (28%). Thus, these results reveal that the blue theme describes the Voronet Monastery and that tower is a theme specific to the Humor Monastery.

## Conclusions

This study seeks to identify the main dimensions of tourists' experiences in UNESCO religious heritage sites in northeast Romania. The objective of the research was to ascertain the perceptions of tourists through narratives written on a popular social media travel website.

The content analyses identified 10 themes (i.e. monastery, painted, tower, visit, beautiful, inside, famous, place, blue and guide) that describe the main elements of visitors' experiences at the Romanian monasteries under analysis. The main themes revealed by content analysis thus reinforce other studies' findings on tourism at religious sites, such as the importance of both religious and non-religious concepts, in this case associated with the monastery theme (e.g. Hughes et al., 2013; Shackley, 2002; Tirca et al., 2010; Voase, 2007). In the present research, the non-religious site attributes mentioned by reviewers are the history and artistic value of paintings and architectural features.

The main concepts of history and religious associated with the monastery theme illustrate two main dimensions of religious heritage also underlined by other heritage studies (e.g. Ballantyne et al., 2016). Religious aspects have often been identified as a key travel motivation to religious sites in both international and Romanian research (e.g. Andriotis, 2009; Ballantyne et al., 2016; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014; Tirca et al., 2010). However, many visitors also travel for non-religious reasons to religious sites (e.g. Drule et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Voase, 2007).

These varied reasons could explain the frequent mentions of both history and religious features in visitors' reviews of their experiences at the UNESCO monasteries. The high number of reviews mentioning history might also be linked to the reviewers' overall profile. This is dominated by foreign visitors who are usually more attracted by the cultural heritage value and UNESCO WHS label or who are influenced by the monastery founders' fame in the region's history. In contrast, domestic visitors are more linked to these places by their personal faith and religious traditions.

The painted theme is frequently mentioned because this is a distinctive heritage feature shared by the entire complex of Moldavian monasteries. Paintings are also included as one of the two UNESCO criteria that led to these structures' listing as WHSs (UNESCO, n.d.). The exterior mural paintings ensure the uniqueness of each church through their colours and/or the religious themes illustrated. Mentions of churches' paintings and architecture in relation to these places' authenticity correspond to other findings regarding objective heritage authenticity, which is associated with historical accuracy (Andriotis, 2009; Waitt, 2000; Wang, 1999). The role of artistic elements such as paintings, sculptures and architecture in the shaping of visitors' perceptions of religious heritage has been underlined in previous research. For example, Tirca et al. (2010) emphasised this aspect for tourists visiting Romanian monasteries and Ballantyne et al. (2016) and Hughes et al. (2013) did the same for British cathedrals.

Although the blue theme is strongly associated with the painted theme, the former is most strongly connected with Voronet Monastery. This feature is highlighted in every travel guide and further emphasised by visitors' Web reviews. The tower theme is also a frequent topic representing an important tourist attraction apart from the churches themselves. In particular, this theme is strongly linked with Humor Monastery as this is the only place where the tower is open to visitors. The tower theme thus enhances the historical heritage aspect of this religious site. Both the blue and tower themes are specific features of two monasteries under analysis.

The frequent mentions of the visit theme underline the significance of the organisational aspects of monastery tours for individuals travelling in the region. Similarly, the guide theme emphasises the importance of using tourist guides for better visitor experiences, which is also one of the findings of Tirca et al.'s (2010) survey. In addition, the inside theme is associated with pragmatic aspects of visits, such as conditions and fees for taking pictures.

The beautiful and inside themes' association with the four monasteries in question could indicate perceptions of heritage value and authenticity connected to artefacts from the past. The beautiful theme also reveals the strong influence of aesthetic aspects on tourists' experiences at religious sites, which can account for these features' presence among travel motivations. The search for both cultural and natural beauty has been highlighted by other researchers such as Drule et al. (2012). Aesthetic values also influence tourists' evaluations of sacred places, as mentioned in various heritage studies (e.g. Ballantyne et al., 2016; Liogier, 2012).

The famous theme underlines the international significance of the monasteries. This is also one of the main themes identified by Ballantyne et al. (2016), Bideci and Albayrak (2016) and Nyaupane et al. (2015). The present study thus confirms the role of place attributes in tourist experiences (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008). These attributes have previously been linked to place atmosphere (Liogier, 2012) and hosts (Ballantyne et al., 2016). In addition, Tirca et al. (2010) found that most Romanian monasteries owe their fame exclusively or partially to the beauty of their locations, followed by the monasteries' architectural beauty and architecture and the monks and nuns' lifestyle. The present study confirmed the importance of similar attributes (i.e. nuns and beautiful places), as well as adding the UNESCO label to these factors, although the latter is not among the most important topics in visitors' narratives.

Another key aspect reflected by the guide and visit themes is the importance of trip and site management, which shows the significance of understanding tourists' interpretations of what are worthwhile visitor experiences. Overall, only three (i.e. spirituality, culture and knowledge) of the five dimensions of religious heritage experiences identified by Andriotis (2009) were highlighted in the reviews under analysis. Secular activities and natural environments appear to be less important in this context. While a place theme did appear, this was mainly associated with aesthetic aspects (i.e. nice place and art). Hosts-related concepts (i.e. people and nuns) are also attributes associated with the visit and famous themes in the monasteries reviews.

These findings have both theoretical and managerial implications. From a theoretical perspective, this research's main contribution is that it expands on the work done in previous studies of tourist experiences at religious sites (e.g. Andriotis, 2009; Ouellette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005; Shackley, 2002; Stoyanova, 2009). The present study provided a new perspective on this subject matter through the use of Web reviews as narratives of visitors' experiences. The importance of gathering this type of data – as opposed to traditional survey data – lies in how reviews shape destination image and travel decisions, as has already been highlighted by many previous studies (Brochado, Stoleriu, & Lupu, 2018; Brochado et al., 2017; Lupu, Brochado, & Stoleriu, 2017; Pearce & Wu, 2016).

The current results also have managerial implications. Overall, visitors' perceptions of Romanian monasteries – given their high ratings (i.e. the maximum five score for 71% of reviewers) – indicate that these sites deliver positive tourist experiences, confirming other similar findings (e.g. Hughes et al., 2013). The predominance of European reviewers reflects the general structure of Romania's tourism flows, which are dominated by Europeans (i.e. 75% in 2016). In addition, Adie and Hall (2017) found that Europeans are a dominant segment among foreign visitors to other WHSs. This pattern reflects that heritage authenticity and cultural landscapes could be particularly European concepts (Adie & Hall, 2017; Aplin, 2007).

Although the present study found that the monastery theme is the most important, the content analysis also revealed a strong presence of non-religious themes in visitors' discourses, that is, nine themes compared to one. This finding has significant implications for which features destination managers should enhance. The main site non-religious attributes mentioned in the reviews are architecture (i.e. painted, inside and blue themes), aesthetic value (i.e. beautiful theme), the places' fame (i.e. famous theme), their history (i.e. tower theme) and people (i.e. nuns and people concepts). Another important aspect is how visits are organised (i.e. visit theme), including their duration.

The main limitation of this study is that the findings apply only to visitors who post their impressions online, thereby excluding tourists with limited computer abilities and access and/or with limited online activity. Given the already confirmed strong impact of subjective tourist

experiences posted online, the present results can be considered a good indication of how online information contributes to the destination image of Romanian UNESCO monasteries. These findings can help site managers understand and match their visitors' profiles, demands and behaviours more completely.

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