

## TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN A PANDEMIC CRISIS – HOW TO MAKE A CITY BRAND OUT OF INSTAGRAM SPOTS

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### ABSTRACT

*We live in a time when the online presence is much better observed than the real presence. To this way of life is added the pandemic that has strongly affected the lives of all of us and has restricted, more or less, our free movement and freedom to be tourists. From the establishment of social platforms until recently, the focus has been on the individual and less on products, services or cities. Currently, a company or city does not exist if it is not found by users of social platforms within the applications. A city becomes attractive from a tourist point of view if it has "Instagramable" places. These places can be defined as areas inside the city that have certain characteristics that attract the tourist and make him take photos and upload those pictures on social networks. These areas are called "Instagram spots" and represent a new type of city way of marketing. We can see, in specialized practice, cities that did not exist a few years ago, but due to the increase in the number of users on Instagram, the increase in the number of photo posts in that city and a much larger activity due to the pandemic, they have become real tourist attractions. Through this paper we wanted to highlight this concept of "Instagram spots" and the importance it has in achieving the brand of a city. For this we will conduct a research based on a questionnaire applied to a number of 370 people active on social networks, but also an analysis of things that can be done using Instagram and we will try to establish a link between social networking users and the attractiveness of a Town. We will also try to determine the impact that these "Instagram spots" have on the cities where they exist and we will try to establish a link between the total number of these places, the number of tourists and the brand of the city.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Instagram spots, City brand, digital tourism, touristic strategies, tools for smart marketing.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2010, Instagram platform has become more than a platform for people to post pictures and post small videos that attract views and reactions. Instagram has easily, but surely, become a way of life adopted by a growing number of users. This means that in just 5 years, Instagram has over 200 million users worldwide and 70 million photos distributed every day (McCracken, 2015). Even if at the beginning, the Instagram application was thought by the producers as an application for the individual, the simple user, but also for the entrepreneur and the influencer, the creativity of the users had no limits, and the trends made Instagram the place of companies, products and services, but also toys photographed in different parts of the world or cities. If the use of Instagram in the case of people or companies created what we could call "trend-setters", in the case of cities Instagram has become a tool used in the creation of the city-brand and the development of tourism. Interesting is not this strategy adopted by cities, but how they did it. The city administrations did

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not rely on complicated activities, complex graphics or strategies, but on the traveler, the classic tourist, who was an Instagram user and did nothing but, whenever he found an interesting place in the city, to take a picture and post it on Instagram.

Thus, Instagram has become a tool for the development of the city's brand through a participatory system (Burke et al., 2006; Lane et al., 2008). While the user produced a large volume of data on Instagram and use the hashtag to link his photos to places in a particular city, Instagram centralized the data and provided statistics to the profile of that city that could be used in different ways.

On the other hand, the pandemic situation prevented the tourist development and the flow of tourists from the respective city. For the decision makers and leaders of a city, the priority was to protect the population and not attract tourists. Lockdown or traffic restrictions have worked wonders for some cities when we talk about tourism. This has resulted in a much greater use of social networks, especially Instagram, where users have begun to share memories with places visited in the past. In this way, cities and places unknown or little known, have become places that must be visited by everyone and places that will be on the wish lists of all tourists. Next, we will demonstrate how the strong use of Instagram and the distribution of a large enough number of photos or the same place several times, led to the creation of a city brand.

## **2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

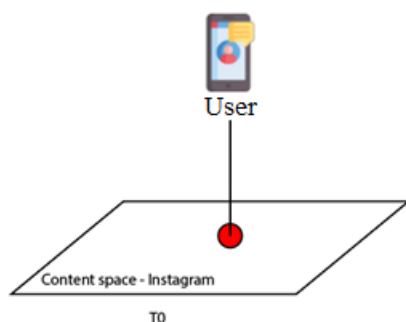
To develop the brand of a city using Instagram, that city needs to have a large enough number of Instagram spots. An Instagram spot is considered to be an area within the urban, rural, natural or anthropic landscape, which has certain characteristics and which makes the users of the social network and promotion network Instagram to be attracted to that place and to want to reach in that place to take a photo that they can then upload to their Instagram profile. The more Instagram spots a city has, the more attractive it is for users who will want, at any cost, to take a photo there.

The users of the platform are complex beings and will not visit these Instagram spots unless they are sure that the pictures they will take in that area and upload on the platform will be attractive to other Instagram users and perfect for traffic inside the network, by distribution (Boy et Uitermark, 2016; Hudson-Smith et al., 2009). Whenever a user sees another beautiful landscape in which he has been photographed, he will make a print screen (or will share) and will send to another person. That third person will send to the 4<sup>th</sup> with whom he or she has a friendship and so on, until that place becomes known throughout the network.

It can be seen from the Instagram user's behavior that, although there is an addiction to post pictures on Instagram at almost any minute for followers and those views, the user will not post pictures from that city when he goes to the supermarket for shopping or when he stays in the station or in other uninteresting areas, unless these places have something special that could attract. Instead, they will photograph places that can be part of distinction strategies such as: places with a very beautiful view, special places or friends, but also the latter in a different setting from an ordinary situation (Bourdieu, 1996). In other words, humans are the basis of more evolved animals, seeking to mark their territory in a social structure and within a city. This territory marked through a picture and distributed on Instagram makes that place known to as many people as possible. Also here appears another interesting thing, namely the associations that are characterized by the communities made according to the hashtags and appreciations in the pictures. Assuming by absurdity that a city has an Instagram account, but it is not promoted effectively because the people who handle the account do not have this competence, that city cannot make a brand on its own and cannot be attractive at first. Through the hashtags with the city name given by the users, who have or do not have to do with that city, the user's account is linked to the city account and the latter benefits from free promotion, with a reach equal to the reach held by the user who posted the picture from that city (Lofland, 1998; Cassia et Magno, 2019).

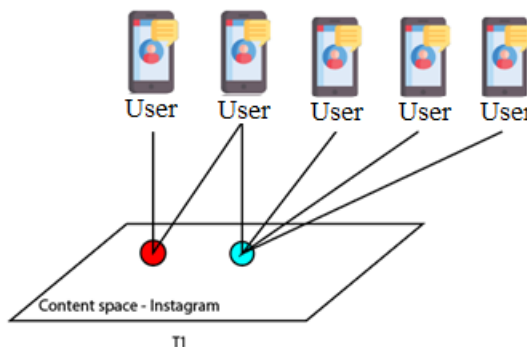
Why are the pictures with Instagram spots, from a city, so important when it comes to promoting the city? Because each photo uploaded to Instagram by users generates data and information and reveals a dynamic of the city. In its attractive areas, where there are Instagram spots, the dynamics are greater, there is a greater flow of people. On the other hand, the data that are obtained through the photos uploaded from certain parts of the city, allow local decision makers to observe a behavior of groups living or visiting that city (Goodchild, 2007; Park, 1915).

In order to understand everything we have explained, we will try to make in graphic form all the stages through which an ordinary area of a city turns into an Instagram spot. The steps can be seen below:



**Figure 1. T0 – initial state and photo upload**

*Source:* Made by authors based on Instagram way of working



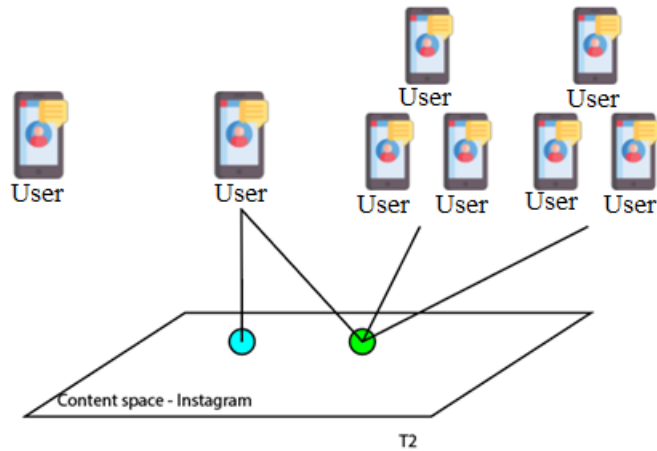
**Figure 2. T1 - transition state**

*Source:* Made by authors based on Instagram way of working

It can easily be observed the existence of three states in the process of transforming an area or objective, in an Instagram spot, respectively: T0 (initial state and photo upload), T1 (transition state, the moment when the place / area / objective becomes known by community) and T2 (final state, the moment when the respective area becomes an Instagram spot). Figure number 1 captures the moment when an Instagram user platform posts a picture with a place in a certain city. This place may or may not be known to users, but once posted on Instagram it will be known, even if it will be appreciated or not. The recently uploaded picture will definitely be noticed by another user who, being a friend of the one who posted it (because otherwise he can't see that picture) will offer an appreciation or will share in the story of his account. Thus, the location in the picture can be a possible Instagram spot. Figure number 2 shows us that, once the picture is shared by the second user, a large number of other users will see the picture and have a similar behavior: either appreciate the picture and comment, or redistribute it as a story.

The level of awareness regarding the respective objective / place / area will increase in direct proportion to the number of redistributions and to the number of people that the respective post reaches. Thus, a very large number of users will know about that place within the city and will want to visit it. Thus, as we can see in figure number 3, T2 final state, the picture that was posted by the first user becomes a promotional element for the city, and the place in the picture becomes an Instagram spot. All users who appreciate that post will go, if not attracted to that place, at least out of curiosity to see with their own eyes if that place really deserves attention or not. If that place will deserve attention, the process will be repeated only that, this time, it will start from the respective T1 and also, it will be in the T2, the final state. It will be in the transition state (T1) because the visitor will post an image of that place on Instagram, but in this stance, the place from the photo is known by a number of people. By posting it once again, will only make the trust level for the place to grow and the photo to be shared once again by those that didn't see the photo till that moment and by the people that like so much that place. It will be in the T2 (final state) because it is already

known by a lot of people and all of them will visit it, share it, promote it properly. So, it is in the final state (T2) where it is an Instagram spot. Figure 3 can be seen below.

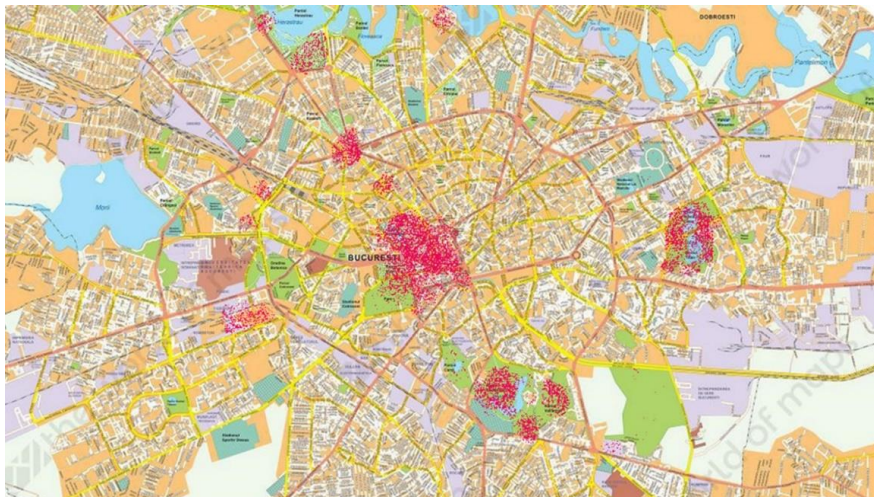


**Figure 3. T2 – Final state**

*Source:* Made by authors based on Instagram way of working

At the same time, through the posts on Instagram where you can see Instagram spots, you can make a map of the dynamics of tourists in the city. Instagram can make available to people the places where users have posted the most inside a city. As an example, in order to understand the importance of Instagram spots, we made an analysis of Bucharest, the capital of Romania, which can be seen in figure number 4:

#### Instagramable locations in Bucharest



**Figure 4: Instagramable locations of Bucharest based on Instagram photos**

*Source:* Made by authors based on Instagram number of photos on those locations

We can observe at least one interesting thing. Users posted pictures on the platform from all corners of Bucharest, but inside those pictures were they or landscapes from places that were marked with red on the map. It can be seen that the Old Center of Bucharest is one of the most important center of Instagram spots in the city.

This can be understood because the nightlife of Bucharest takes place in the Old Center and in famous clubs. Clubs can also be considered as Instagram spots according to the number of pictures that have the location of the clubs. These can be seen at the top of the map. Continuing based on the same idea, it is clearly that certain malls also represent Instagram spots due to the facilities (cinema,

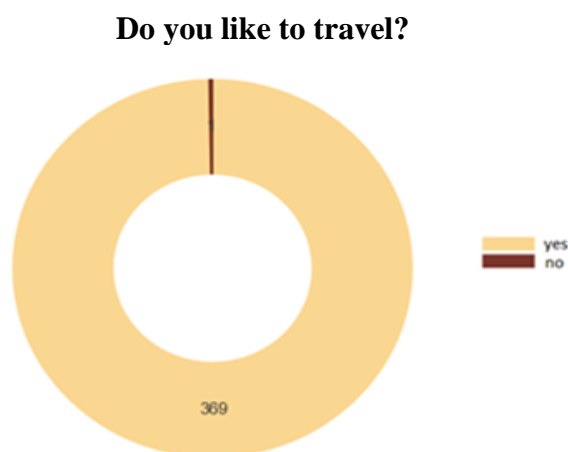
dining area, clothing stores or skating rink). This category includes the largest malls in Bucharest: ParkLake, Afi Palace Cotroceni and Sun Plaza. Other Instagramable places in Bucharest are represented by the parks of the capital. We can see that parks such as Tineretului Park, IOR Park, King Michael's Park and Cismigiu Park are among the most attractive places when it comes to Instagram. All these places where tourists or residents took pictures represent the places that look best, are best prepared to attract tourists and can be included in the brand of the city. Also, when we characterize Bucharest, we will characterize it in terms of the beauty of its parks, for shopping tourism and for the nightlife of Bucharest clubs.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For our analysis to have an impact, to find some obvious trends and to test the fact that the Instagram platform has a strong impact on the city's brand and its promotion, we created a questionnaire based on 370 people. These are Romanian citizens who are between 11 and 58 years old, with an average age of 25.6 years. The distribution by gender was made purely random and is represented by 277 women and 93 men. They had to answer a number of 12 questions, each built in such a way as to determine the impact of tourist posts on Instagram, how they influence the holiday photos of others and what is their travel habit when it comes to Instagram. The questionnaire was distributed between 09.12.2020 and 24.02.2021.

### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The first question that the representative sample had to answer was an introductory question and related to travel. The sample was asked if he likes to travel and the answers to this question can be seen below:



**Figure 5: People who like to travel**

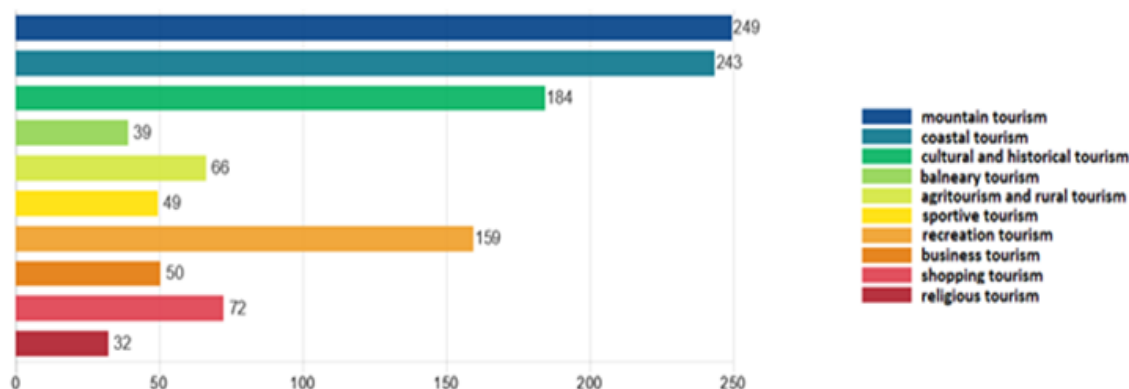
*Source:* Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

It can be seen that, out of the total of 370 people who made up the representative sample, only one person does not like to travel but it needs to. Other people love to travel whenever they have the opportunity. Next, we wanted to see what are the types of tourism preferred by those who travel. The answers were multiple and were centralized in the chart below:

We can see that among the most sought-after types of tourism are those types that are also the most Instagramable. For example, on their first is the mountain tourism, chosen by 249 and the coastal tourism, chosen by 243 people. These two types of seasonal tourism produce annually, according to the inventories of the hashtags on Instagram, over 500 million photos in Romania alone. In third

place is the historical cultural tourism that generates Instagramable places. The analysis of the hashtags indicates over 20 million pictures with tourist objectives and cultural areas in Romania alone. In fourth place is recreational and leisure tourism. It is identified on Instagram as generating 120 million photos. This option was chosen by 159 people. At the opposite pole, the least chosen option is represented by religious tourism, respectively 32 people. Religious tourism generates 9.8 million photos on Instagram.

### What type of tourism do you prefer?



**Figure 6. Types of tourism preferred by people**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

Next, for us it was very interesting to see how many people have an account on social networks and, more precisely, how many have an Instagram account. The answers to this question were further centralized:

### Do you have any Instagram Accounts?

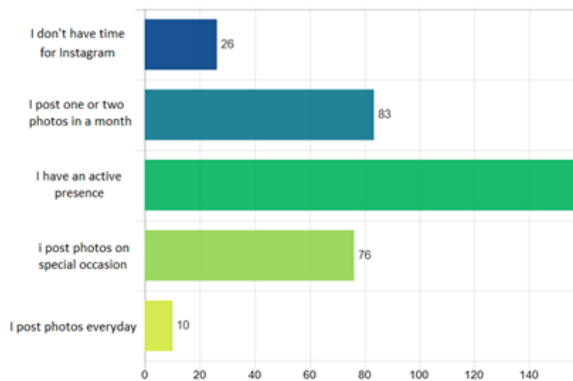


**Figure 7: The existence of an Instagram account**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

We can see from the answers provided by the representative sample that only 5 people do not have an Instagram account, the others have, at least, one account on this social network. Another thing we wanted to find out about the respondents is the period of activity on Instagram and how often they post on the social network. All responses were further centralized.

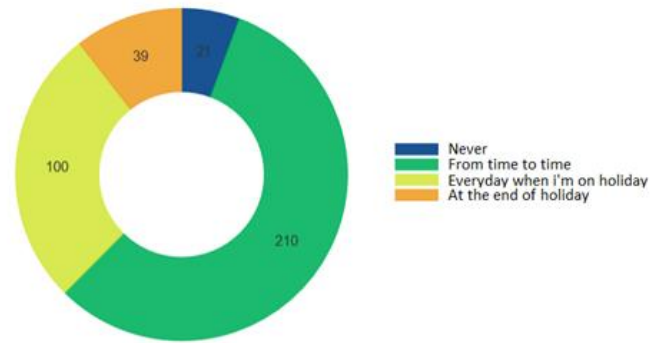
**How active are you on Instagram?**



**Figure 8. How active are people on Instagram**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

**How often are you posting photos on Instagram on holidays?**



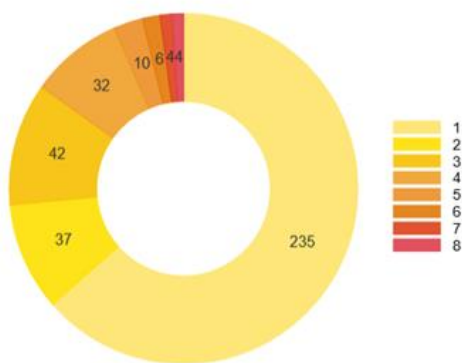
**Figure 9. how often do people post photos on Instagram on Holidays**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

It can be seen from figure number 8 as a number of 175 people in the sample have an active presence, while 83 post very little on Instagram. At the opposite pole are those who post on special occasions, 73 people and 26 who do not have time for Instagram. The fewest are those who post every day. There are 10 people. In the figure number 9 we can see that most post from time to time, respectively 210 people. At the opposite pole are the people who post every day in holiday. There are 100 people. There are also 21 people who never post-holiday pictures.

Next, our attention was focused on the activity on Instagram. It is very important to observe certain types of behavior when discussing users. They had to give a note to certain statements. In the following we will present the question and the notes:

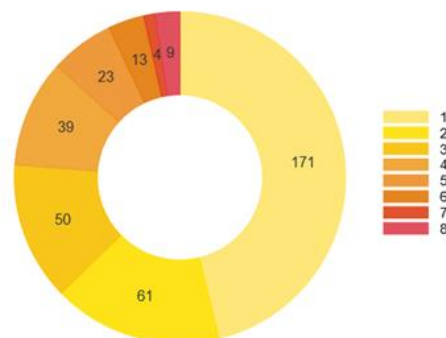
**Do you travel to post photos on Instagram?**



**Figure 10. Do they post photos on Instagram**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

**The activity on social platform is an important part of my holiday.**



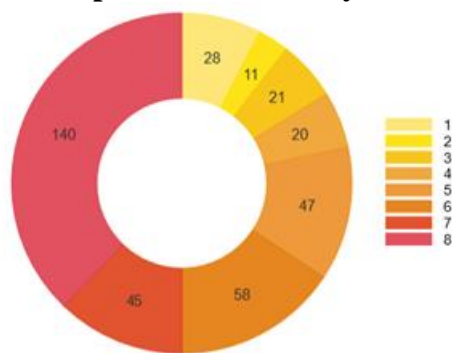
**Figure 11. How important is the presence on Instagram on holidays**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

It is found, according to figure number 10 that most people do not travel to post on social networks. There are, however, people who travel to post on social networks. These are the people who post every event during their vacation. Simultaneously with these answers, we can also look at figure

number 11, where the representative sample gave a note to the statement "activity on social networks is an important part of the trip". It is found that the number of people who traveled to post has increased now when it comes to the importance of posting pictures on social networks during the holidays. Also, the number of those who were careless when it came to Instagram on vacation decreases by 64 people who disperse in the other responses.

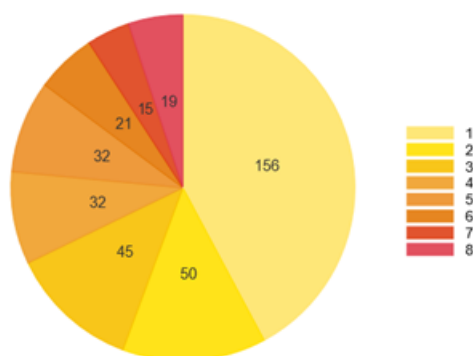
**Have you visited a city after seeing pictures of that city?**



**Figure 12. Do they visited a city after seeing a photo from inside that city?**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

**When I'm visiting a city, I post photos with food from restaurants.**



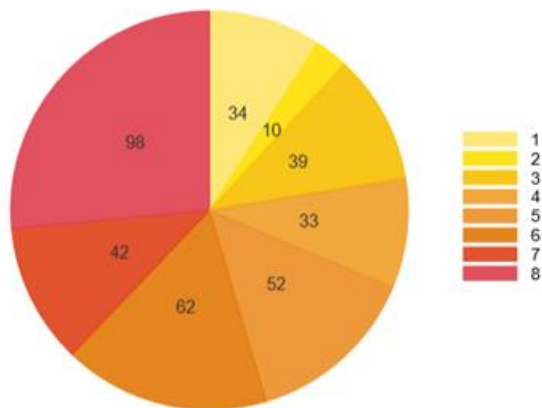
**Figure 13. Do they post photos on Instagram with food from restaurants?**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

According to the answers provided by the representative sample, in figure number 12, to the statement "you visited a city after seeing pictures of that city" we can see a change in the grades given. The people in the sample even visit a city after seeing pictures of it on social networks. This can be seen by the fact that the highest grade was chosen by 140 people. To these are added the 45 people who chose grade 7. This shows us that for half of those surveyed, Instagram photos of places in another city are a reason to visit that city. Simultaneously with this question, we wanted to see if the respondents post pictures from restaurants. According to figure number 13, people are disinterested in this trend because 156 people chose the lowest grade. At the opposite pole are the grades of 7 and 8, which total 34 people who post pictures of food from restaurants on social networks.

It is very interesting that, when we talk about pictures from restaurants posted on Instagram, we see an obvious trend, but if we analyze the answers of the statement "when you visit a city, you post pictures from hiking" the answers are much more scattered. Most people post pictures of hiking on Instagram. This category includes 98 people who chose grade 8 and 42 people who chose grade 7. At the opposite pole are 34 people who do not post pictures from hiking, who chose grade 1 and 10 people who chose grade 2. When it comes to pictures with sights, the answers are obvious. People post pictures on Instagram with tourist attractions. We state this because, according to figure number 15, 124 people chose grade 8, and 60 chose grade 7. At the opposite pole, those who do not post pictures with tourist attractions are represented by 26 people who chose grade 1 and 16 people who chose grade 2.

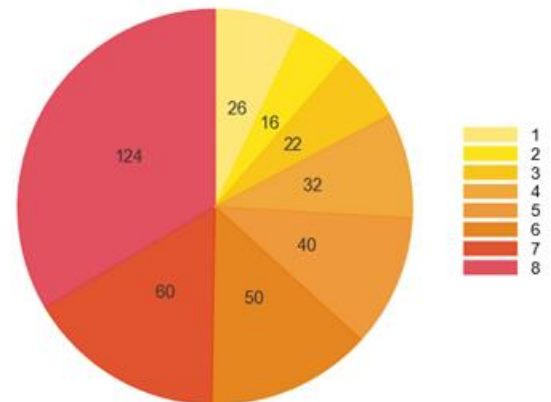
**When I'm visiting a city, I post photos from hiking**



**Figure 14. Do they post photos from hiking?**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

**When I'm visiting a city, I post photos with touristic objectives on social platforms**

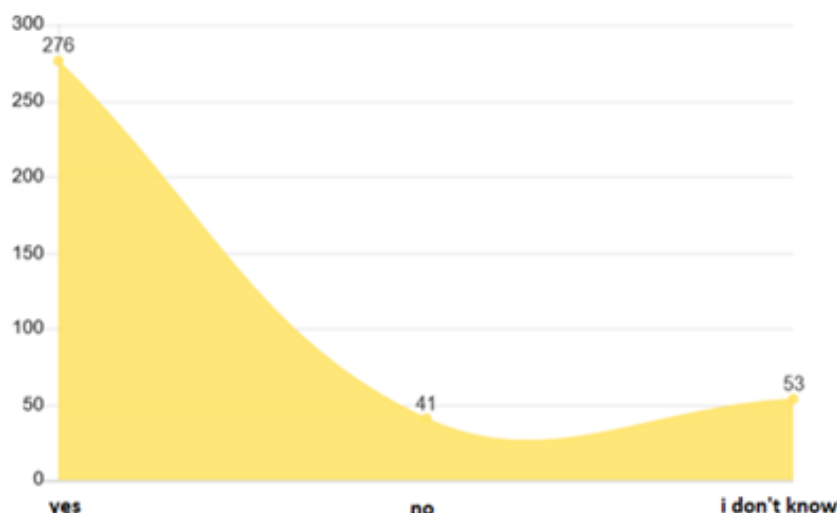


**Figure 15. Do they post photos with touristic objectives?**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

Next, we wanted to see if people can be stimulated with discounts at museums if they post pictures of that museum on Instagram and tag it. It can be seen, according to figure number 16, that people agree to promote the museum for a 20% discount. There are 276 people out of a total of 370 who said they want to promote. At the opposite pole are the 41 people who would not do this and 53 people who said they did not know if they would do this.

**Would you agree to post a photo of yourself and your friends appearing in front of a museum in a city for a 20% discount of the price ticket of that museum?**

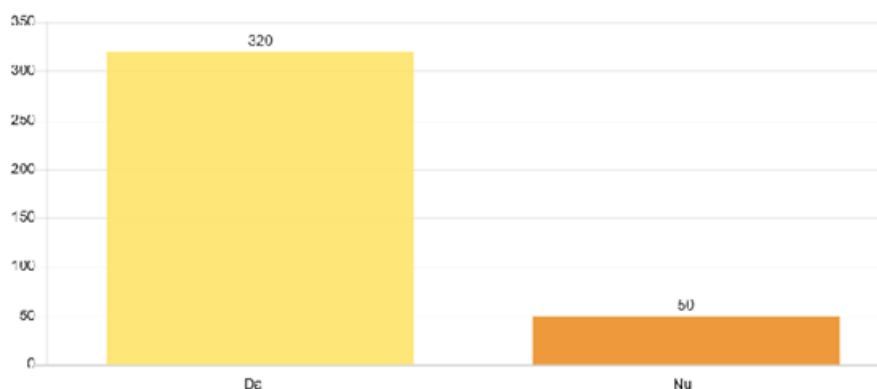


**Figure 16: Do they agree to post on Instagram for a discount?**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

Next, we wanted to see if people associate certain tourist attractions with the cities where they are located, such as the "Evangelhia" ship in Costinești. Their answers were summarized in Figs. 17:

**Do you associate a place, an area or a tourist attraction that you often see on social networks with the city they belong to?**

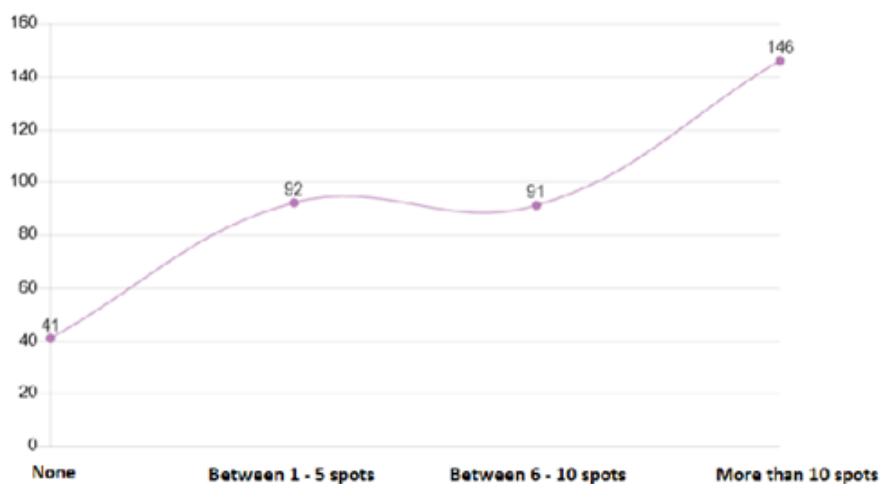


**Figure 17. Do they associate a landmark with a city?**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

It can be seen without a doubt that tourists associate a landmark with the city it belongs to when they see it somewhere. This is very important if the city wants to create its city-brand based on visual elements. Next, after explaining to each person who took part in the research what an Instagram spot is, we wanted to see how many such places the respondents know. Their answers were summarized in figure number 18:

**How many Instagram spots do you know in Romania?**

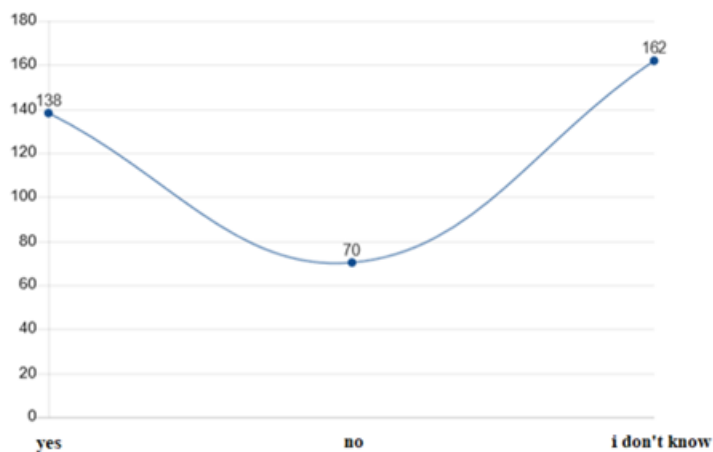


**Figure 18. How many Instagram spots they know in Romania**

Source: Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

According to the answers provided by the sample, it is found that a number of 146 people know over 10 Instagram spots. Between 6 - 10 Instagram spots are known by 91 people and between 1-5 Instagram spots are known by 92 people. On the other hand, a small number of people, respectively 41, state that they do not know such Instagram spots. Next, we wanted to see if they believe that Instagram photos can influence friends and followers in terms of the decision to visit a place or city. The results are centralized in Figs. 19:

**Do you think that your Instagram posts influences  
the decision of your friends / followers to visit a city/place**

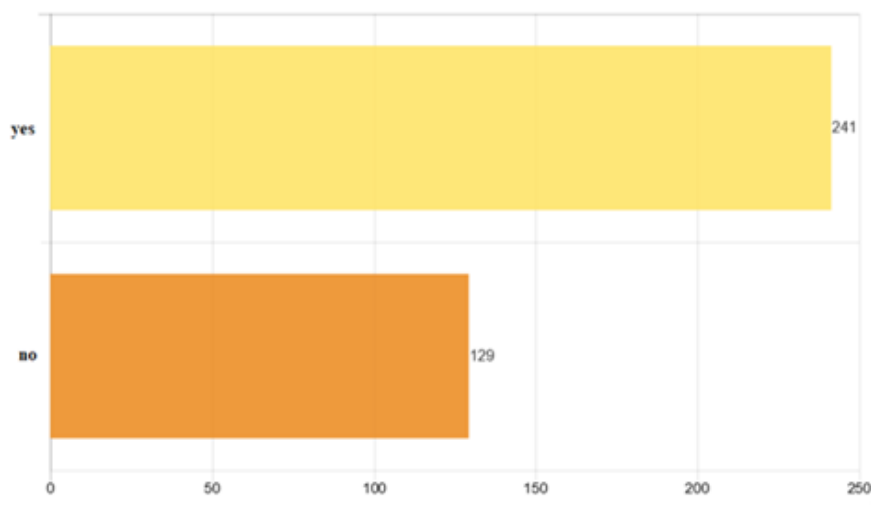


**Figure 19. Are they influencers for their friends or followers based on their photos**

*Source:* Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

It can be seen that a fairly large number believe that they are influencers for their friends and followers. They believe that pictures of cities or areas, posted on Instagram, strongly influence the decision to visit their friends. On the other hand, there are those who do not know if their friends are influenced by holiday posts. A number of 70 people consider that they do not influence the decision in any way.

**Are you influenced by the holiday photos  
of your friends/ followers on Instagram?**



**Figure 20. Are they influenced by followers or friend's holiday or landmark photos**

*Source:* Made by authors with the help of <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/830613696/>

At the opposite pole we can see, according to figure number 20, that there are many people influenced by the holiday pictures of their friends. Thus, we meet 241 people out of a total of 370 who stated that they are influenced by the photos of their friends on Instagram. At the opposite pole are those who are not influenced by friends' photos and are represented by 129 people.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

We notice from the analysis of the answers of the questionnaire that Instagram is an important part of many people's vacation and life. We also notice that people are influenced by the photos posted by friends on Instagram, but they are also aware that they can influence the decisions of followers and friends. This is part of human nature and cannot be changed.

Moreover, the study we conducted shows us that every person who posts a certain picture on Instagram is (or can be) an influencer for their friends and a marketer for a certain time or area. Each picture posted can attract a number of potential tourists equal to the number of friends that each of those who post a picture of that place or that each of those who shared that picture has.

It is interesting that a person recognizes a certain city when he or she sees a tourist attraction(s) in that city. This favors the development of city brands. Moreover, people are aware of the existence of Instagram spots and use them excessively on Instagram and other social networks. This obsession of people to take pictures in beautiful places or during special activities, in a city, can be an opportunity for that city in terms of promotion and brand. Cities can be promoted based on these places, and even more, they can invest very little in promotion, and use, instead, intensely the materials provided by tourists on Instagram. At the same time, the city management can develop, based on Instagram, a map of the dynamics of tourists or a map of the Instagramable points in the city.

It is very interesting how the dynamics of tourists through a certain city can be built with the help of an application that, in theory, has another purpose, that of relaxing and developing a personal brand and less a brand of a city. Equally interesting is the way in which, using a series of data to which everyone has access, the management of a city can increase in direct proportion to the number of potential tourists as the number of artistic or interesting pictures from a certain place in that city increases. These things that we discovered in our analysis represent only a small part of the science of neuromarketing. Thus, we proved based on empirical information that a photo taken at the perfect angle by a person with many followers on social networks and uploaded to the platform at a certain time, can trigger a series of changes in the mentality of platform users and can stimulate their desire to visit the place in the photo.

All these things, included in a strategy can make a classic city, not promoted at all, but with a lot of potential, a city of Instagram spots built of brick, but promoted digitally.

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