The Role of .ro Domains in Strengthening Digital Identity and Local Branding in Romania: Insights from Registrants Perceptions

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Abstract

This study analyzes both the perceptions and the preferences of Romanian registrants of .ro domain names, a fundamental element of Romania's national digital identity. Through a quantitative approach, with the help of an online survey, we have collected the responses of 50 registrants, users who have registered at least one .ro domain in their lifetime. The study analyzes factors such as ease of registration process, the reasons of choosing .ro domains, preference over other TLD and the general perception of the .ro extension.
The study shows the importance of .ro domain names as a powerful online marketing tool for online branding, regional competitiveness and increasing user's trust while also providing some insight into the decision-making process regarding domain registration. These conclusions contribute to a better understanding of the advantages of ccTLD's, having relevant implications for companies, individuals and digital marketing professionals interested in optimizing strategies on the local online market.

Key words: domains, ccTLD, digital identity, domain registration, ro domains
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1. Introduction

As Romania's digital infrastructure evolves, analyzing the factors that determine the preferences for web domains becomes more important for a deeper understanding of the digital ecosystem. As users become "registrants" for a large number of reasons, from personal projects to wide-scale web platforms that are bound to shift the digital ecosystem, it is important to understand the relevance of national, localized ccTLD's such as .ro compared to gTLD's such as .com, .org, .net etc.. These domains have been integrated into the virtual landscape of the country since the 1990s, being administered by the National Institute for Research and Development in Informatics (ICI Bucharest). However, Romanians' perception of the use and significance of ".ro" domains is influenced by various factors, such as financial accessibility, specific legislation and the feeling of belonging to the national digital space.This study analyzes the perception of Romanian registrants on .ro domains, evaluating a number of factors such as the registering process, the reasons behind the registration and also it's comparison to other gTLD's.

2. Theoretical background

Ever since the creation of the internet, web domains proved to, making web browsing more accessible to the everyday user by mapping a readable name to an IP address through the Domain Name System. National top level domains, also known as ccTLD (country-code top-level domains) are attributed to each country or region, based on the ISO 3166-1 standards of the representation of

names of countries and their subdivisions (Mockapetris, 1987). Romania was attributed the .ro domain extension, which is currently managed and maintained by the national registry, RoTLD (RoTLD, 2023). From a marketing point of view, using a ccTLD's offer some specific benefits for regionalized websites, from better localized SEO, user's trust, domain names availability and national branding. More so, national domain extensions are perceived as more trustworthy than generic alternatives such as ".com" because they reflect association with local regulations and standards. (Martins, Anastácio, 2022).

Digital consumer behavior studies show that national domain extensions are often preferred for websites in localized markets, as it signals geographical and cultural belonging (Chaffey, Smith, 2022). However, the choice of a TLD also depends on practical factors such as price, availability of the desired name and perceptions of the extension's professionalism (Kotler, Keller, 2016). As the Romanian digital space grew exponentially, the RoTLD administrators introduced in 2018 an annual maintenance fee. These changes highlighted the need of analyzing perceptions on the cost-benefit ratio, on the competitiveness of the ".ro" extension in relation to international alternatives and on its role in promoting local businesses (Cristea, Mihai, 2020).

More so, in the context of digital globalization, Romanians face the dilemma of choosing between local and international extensions, such as ".com" or ".eu". This decision is often influenced by psychological, economic and cultural factors, which require in-depth analysis. Previous studies suggest that local domains are associated with consumer trust and preference for national businesses (Toma, 2019).

3. Research methodology

In order for us to determine the perception of registrants of .ro domain names, we based our research on a quantitative method, using an online survey as the main tool for data collection. This survey was designed using Google Forms and the target group was represented by consumers who registered at least one domain with the .ro extension (registrants). This criteria was ensured by the first question of the survey, asking the respondent whether they have ever registered a .ro domain name, thus ensuring the relevance of the answers for the research objectives.

The survey was made up of several questions that aimed to collect information about:
1. Ease of the domain registration process - rated on a Likert scale from "Very easy" to "Very difficult".
2. The way the domain was acquired – through a hosting package or purchased separately
3. Number of domains registered in the last three years – to identify behavior patterns.
4. Type of the registrant – individuals, organizations or a combination of both.
5. Registrant preference – whether they chose RoTLD or a different registrar
6. Awareness of domain management – assessing the respondent's knowledge of RoTLD being the only registry of .ro domains
7. The reasons for choosing a .ro domain - including factors such as SEO, branding, price and external suggestions.
8. Preferences between .ro and .com extensions – for Romanian language sites.

The survey was pre-tested on a small group of respondents to check the clarity of the questions and ensure the consistency of the answers. In order to reach as wide and diverse an audience as possible, the survey was distributed randomly via the internet to various related communities such as forums, social media and group chatting servers. The data collection period spanned two weeks, during which the responses of participants who met the minimum eligibility criterion: registration of at least one .ro domain were recorded.

The sampling method was a convenience one, without using a probabilistic selection, that may introduce some limitations related to the generalizability of the results. However, the exclusive inclusion of users who have direct experience with .ro domains ensures the relevance of the collected data. Demographic variables such as age, gender and location were not collected directly, as we considered them irrelevant, with the focus being on domain registration experience and preferences.

The collected data were exported from Google Forms in a tabular format and analyzed using descriptive statistical tools. Interpretation of responses aimed at identifying dominant trends, relationships between variables and determinants of user preferences.The methodology used provides a relevant picture of consumer perceptions and behaviors, given that the data comes directly from active users of .ro domains.

4. Findings

Our study tried to provide a clearer picture of user perceptions and behaviors in relation to the registration of .ro domains. The analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire distributed online revealed the following main conclusions:

Ease of registration process - The majority of respondents (44%) rated the registration process as "very easy", with another 28% rating it as "easy". With a weighted average of 1.96/5 the conclusion of this question suggests that the registering process is generally perceived as accessible and easy by users. The fact that no respondents indicated significant difficulty (scores of 4 or 5) suggests the effectiveness of current registration systems, which provide an easy and intuitive experience. This result also reflects improvements in the digital infrastructure and interfaces used by registrars, eliminating technical barriers or excessive documentation.

Domain purchase method - 76% of respondents stated that they purchased the domain separately, without including it in a hosting package. Only 24% opted to purchase the domain along with a hosting plan, indicating a preference for flexibility in the registration process.

Number of registered domains - 40% of participants registered between 2-5 domains in the past three years, while another 40% said they registered only one domain. Only 16% reported registering 6-9 domains, and a small percentage exceeded the threshold of 10 domains, which reflects moderate behavior in the use of the .ro ccTLD. This trend indicates an increased desire for independence and customization in managing digital resources. Users want to optimize costs and choose solutions tailored to specific needs, which provides an opportunity for hosting providers and registrars to create more flexible and personalized offers.

Type of users - .ro domains are used by a variety of entities, including individuals (40%), organizations (28%) and, in some cases, both (32%). This distribution shows the need of .ro domains for both individual users and legal entities. This highlights the versatility of .ro domains, which serve a wide range of users, from personal websites or blogs to institutional and corporate platforms. For organizations, .ro domains represent a strategic tool for establishing credibility and alignment with the local market.

Preferred registrar - The most used registrar was RoTLD, chosen by 48% of respondents, followed by other registrars such as Romarg, Hostgate, Roleaf.ro, Clausweb and others. This preference reflects high confidence in the national lead registrar. The use of a variety of alternative registrars (such as Clausweb, Hostgate, etc.) highlights a competitive landscape. This competition can stimulate improved services and prices, benefiting end users. However, the preference for RoTLD emphasizes its role as a trusted leader in managing .ro domains.

Domain administration knowledge - Only 64% of the participants knew that all .ro domains are managed by the RoTLD registry, which suggests an average level of awareness regarding the functioning of the domain infrastructure. This knowledge gap suggests the need for increased awareness campaigns and transparency in the domain registration ecosystem. Clearer communication during the registration process could help increase user trust.

Reasons for choosing .ro domains – on this multiple choice question, the most common reason was the Romanian branding of the website (76%), followed by the regional SEO benefits (52%) and the availability of the desired domain name (48%). Factors such as price or legal requirements had little influence.

Table no. 1 Reasons of chosing .ro domains

Reason	Percentage
Romanian branding of the website	76%
Better regional SEO	52%
Domain name availability	48%
Price	12%
Legal requirement	4%

Source: Author's research

The results confirm that .ro domains are not just a technical choice, but also a strategic decision, deeply integrated into digital marketing efforts. Their benefits in improving search engine rankings for local users, combined with their association with local identity, make them essential assets for organizations.

TLD preference - If both the .ro and .com domain names are available, all respondents (100%) stated that they prefer to register the .ro domain for a website in Romanian. This result clearly reflects the preference for the local ccTLD due to its relevance to the national market.

These results show the importance of .ro domains as tools for branding, SEO optimization and strengthening the digital identity on the Romanian market. At the same time, they point to the need to increase the level of awareness regarding the role of the RoTLD registry in the management of these domains.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study show just how significant .ro domains are for strengthening the national digital identity and online presence in the context of the Romanian online market. Analyzing user responses reveals some key takeaways that can help both in understanding consumer behavior and improving digital marketing and domain management strategies.

First, the general perception of the registration process is positive, with most respondents finding it easy and accessible. This favorable assessment underlines that the infrastructure and registration procedures are efficient and well adapted to the needs of users.

Second, the clear preference for purchasing domains separately, without including them in hosting packages, reflects a need for greater flexibility and control over digital resources. Also, the diversity of users, from individuals to organizations, underlines the broad relevance of .ro domains in various contexts, whether personal or professional.

An important aspect highlighted by the study is the importance of Romanian branding as the main reason for choosing .ro domains. This preference demonstrates that the national extension is perceived as a symbol of authenticity and belonging to the local market, being particularly valuable for companies operating in Romania. In addition, regional SEO benefits and the availability of the desired domain name are decisive factors in the selection process.

The unanimous preference for .ro domains in the case of Romanian-language websites reinforces the idea that ccTLDs are effective tools to target local audiences and increase user confidence. However, the moderate level of awareness of the RoTLD registry's role in domain management indicates an opportunity to educate users and promote transparency in this area.

In conclusion, .ro domains play a crucial role in the Romanian digital ecosystem, offering significant competitive advantages for users and organizations. This study provides a solid foundation for understanding domain registration preferences and behaviors, with practical implications for digital marketing strategies, registrars, and RoTLD as a national registry. In addition, the results highlight the importance of supporting users through efficient processes, clear information and opportunities for creating a robust and relevant digital identity in the local market.

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