

DARK TOURISM, ROMANIA AND DRACULA. THE PERCEPTIONS OF POTENTIAL AMERICAN TOURISTS

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Abstract: *From a touristic point of view, Romania is a country with an extraordinary potential. In terms of consumers of touristic products, the United States of America (USA) is a country with a tremendous potential. If analysing the actual tendencies in the film industry and a part of mass-media in the last years, it is possible to identify the interests of movie fans, but also of a certain market segment with its own characteristics, for vampires. Moreover, people have always shown a high interest in the mystic or dark aspects of life, namely related to death. Which could be the connection between these elements? The answer seems simple: Dracula. Transylvania is known as the land of vampires or, better said, the birthplace of Dracula, the most popular vampire of all times, and this reputation can be a touristic opportunity possible to exploit in the current trend on the USA market, the land with the most successful screen adaption of the vampire legend. The current paper presents the results of an empiric research, which aims to identify the degree of interest shown by Americans for a touristic product specific to "dark tourism" build around Dracula's myth. The study was conducted on a sample of 254 respondents from the U.S.A, using as data collection means the questionnaire. Results have shown that over 70% of the persons interviewed agree that Romania is the land of vampires and the home of Dracula. Almost the same percentage considers attractive or very attractive a holiday in Romania for exploring the local myths and legends, visiting the land of vampires, respectively Dracula's house. The current study offers a valuable perspective on the way in which dark tourism is perceived, on Romania and on a thematic tourism product build around the myth of Dracula. An important contribution to the research is brought by the main characteristics of such a package tour, from the American consumers' point of view, information that could be used by almost any operator or tourism organization on the local or American market.*

Keywords: dark tourism, Dracula's myth, Romania, tourism product.

JEL classification: M31; M38; L83.

1. Introduction

In terms of marketing, any touristic product is conceived as an answer to tourists' preferences expressed or the intentions anticipated. Thus, before the benefits of a touristic product meet consumers' needs and desires, it is necessary to analyse, understand and adapt the product (Kolb, 2006).

Since a touristic product must ensure a memorable experience (Kotler et al., 2009), and tourists are more and more sophisticated, experienced, looking for rather unusual attractions, niche tourism and its component, dark tourism (Novelli and Robinson, 2005), can be a solution in this sense. Despite the growing attention given by specialty literature to the concept of dark tourism, its study and understanding from the point of view of the consumer are limited (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). One of the areas of Romania that could be successfully associated with dark tourism is Transylvania, a region that in the popular/collective perception is not just an area at the periphery of Europe, but a kingdom where antic superstitions and rituals are still widely spread (Walker and Wright, 1997; Light, 2007). Today, one of Transylvania's main attractions is Bran Castle, rated as one of the most visited touristic objectives "artificially" known as Dracula's Castle and associated with souvenirs that promote the legend of the famous vampire (Light, 2007). Numerous authors strongly support the idea according to which popular culture, including literary creations, as autonomous external sources of information (Gartner, 1996; Pike, 2002) have a significant positive impact on the process of formation of the image of a touristic destination and then on the travel intentions of potential tourists (Butler, 1990; Bolan and Williams, 2008; Kim and Richardson, 2003; Morgan et al., 2003; Pratt, 2010). This is possible also for Transylvania, where a large number of tourists travel every year to discover the myth of Dracula, eager to live with all their senses the story, to create a connection between the real landscape and the image they formed based on the book or the movie (Reijnders, 2010).

Although, along time, authorities and institutions directly responsible with the development and promotion of tourism at a regional and national level have failed to successfully capitalize both the fiction and the historical facts regarding on the castle or the Prince Vlad Dracul, associations between the character Dracula and the Bran Castle are tolerated due to tourists' arrival and the incomes they generate (Pratt, 2010). And, because at a first sight there isn't a domestic demand for the touristic product build around Dracula's myth (Muresan and Smith, 1998; Iordanova, 2007), the alternative would be attracting foreign tourists.

This study focuses on the U.S market, because a travel agency in New York was among the first organizations in tourism that noticed the potential of Dracula's myth of attracting tourists and created for the American market the touristic package "Spotlight on Dracula: An adventure in Transylvania" (Light, 2007). Also, in specialty literature the expression "the Hollywood-style Dracula" was born (Banyai, 2010), a proof in this sense being also the television series "Dracula" which the American television station NBC launched on the 25th 2013.

Film and literary creations of the last decade with vampires attracted thousands of millions of consumers and fans in the USA (e.g. novels and movies from the series "Twilight", television series "True Blood", "The Vampire Diaries" etc.), creating the ideal content for exploiting and valorising any product and services on this theme, including the touristic ones. Thus, the desire to visit a particular destination can be determined by reading a novel, watching a movie or both (Banyai, 2010; Bolan and Williams, 2008).

Thus, the main objective of the research presented in this article aims to identify the degree of interest and American consumers' perceptions on spending a holiday in Romania, having as main motivation discovering Dracula's myth.

The information obtained would allow the development of a niche touristic product in the "dark tourism" category, either by tour operators or by authorities and institutions responsible with tourism development at a national or regional level.

2. DARK TOURISM CHARACTERISTICS

The phenomenon of travelling to places associated with death, sufferance, disasters, mysticism, has diversified and spread very much in the last century (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). However, only relatively recent travels generically called “dark tourism” have captured the attention of researchers (Foley and Lennon, 1996a; Lennon and Foley, 2000). Foley and Lennon (1996b) were the first to use the term « dark tourism », referring to the relation between tourism and places or experiences associated with death and defining the concept as “supply and consumption (by visitors), of places associated with death or natural disasters. Most definitions of “dark tourism” focus on sites or objectives that represent attractions for the tourists rather than on their motivation (Uzell, 1992; Rojek, 1993; Ryan and Kohli, 2006; Stone, 2006).

The diversity of attractions associated with death is extremely vast, including elements such as “Dracula Experience”, “Ground Zero”, Normandy beaches, Auschwitz etc. thus making it difficult to formulate a typology (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). Regardless, sightseeing places former places of deaths, sufferance or real or simulated tragedies, where tourists pay or not for having access represent attractions of dark tourism (Stone, 2005). Attempts to classify touristic objectives specific to dark tourism have been made by Dann (1998) or Stone (2006). The latter includes in his classification as a component «entertainment factories of the darkness», where there are included attractions and experiences that highlight imaginary or real death, macabre events, but are focused on entertainment and the commercial side (Stone, 2006). To exemplify the category, the author mentions also the project “Dracula Park”. In order to support the benefits brought by the association of various cultural or historical touristic objectives with the legend of Conte Dracula, Muzaini et al. (2007) claims the fact that dark tourism favours “the visual” and “the experimental” in confront to the need for historical rigor.

Bittner (2011) argues that some of the attractions of dark tourism are represented by touristic objectives that fall in the category of cultural tourism. Moreover, such representative touristic objectives can bring their contribution to building a national identity and the message received by tourists contribute to the image of the destination (White and Frew, 2013). Two aspects that cannot be neglected by the management of destinations specific to dark tourism are the place’s authenticity in tourists’ view and the manner in which they interpret the events that occurred here (Miles, 2002). The analysis of consumers’ perceptions related to touristic objectives and the experiences associated to them allow site management to create and promote interpretations that can attract tourists (White and Frew, 2013).

As for the demand of dark tourism, Dann (1998) identifies 8 motivations that could determine tourists to visit these places or experiences associated with death, among which can be mentioned “bloodlust”, desire for novelty, nostalgia.

Stone (2012) claims that tourists are driven by the desire to visit attractions of dark tourism either for a new life experience or for an adventure that would help them understand certain things. Anyway, an aspect that definitely characterizes dark tourism is tourists’ experience in interpreting the events that took place at the site visited (Miles, 2002).

A very interesting study is the one made by Stone and Sharpley (2008) that analyze the relation between the socio-cultural perspectives on death and the potential of dark tourism as means of confronting or accepting death in today’s modern society. The purpose of the study has been materialized in a pattern/model for dark tourism consumption in a thanatological context. Also, it should not be overlooked the fact that “black” sites and experiences are often promoted or provided for political and educational purpose, for entertainment or for economic gain (Ashworth and Hartmann, 2005).

3. DRACULA, TOURISM AND ROMANIA

In 1897, Bram Stoker published the novel *Dracula*. This tells the story of a vampire from Transylvania who travels to England with the intention of spreading his vampirism cult. *Dracula* enjoyed a high popularity since its publication and determined an extraordinary spread of the “vampire subculture” in the second half of the 20th century (Melton, 1999). More than 200 movies that featured *Dracula* as main character, more than 1000 books on vampires or *Dracula*, numerous television programs, comics (Light, 2007), social networks, video games etc. contributed to building the popular culture (Bolan and Williams, 2008) around this character.

Even though there aren't any concrete data available, mass media influence upon tourism is unquestionable (Reijnders, 2011). After the fall of communism in Romania, the number of foreign tourists in search of “*Dracula's myth*” increased (Banyai, 2010). However, even though *Dracula's* image attracted numerous tourists since then, the Romanian state has been reluctant to supporting and developing this image (Huebner, 2011). So, “*Dracula Tourism*” (the phrase “*Dracula Tourism*” is used by authors such as Light (2007), Hovi (2008), Banyai (2010), Reijnders (2010), Huebner (2011)) represents a determined form of tourism or created by demand, form that is, to some extent, in discordance with the manner in which the Romanian state perceives itself or wants to be perceived by others (Light, 2007).

At the moment, the exploitation of *Dracula's* myth is done by tourism operators and private travel agencies. There are few tourism packages, which vary between 3 and 7 nights, offered by tourism agencies such as J'info Tour or Fabiola Turism, but that mostly focus on the Prince Vlad Țepeș and historical reality. However, the Minister of Tourism, Maria Grapini and local authorities from 6 counties in Transylvania seek to promote *Dracula's* myth through a tourism product as excitant as possible for those fascinated by vampires, respectively by dark tourism. In this category falls also the “*Dracula Tour*”, a tourist circuit of 7 days by car through various places in Romania, package offered by a tourism agency from the United States of America that is specialized on the segment called “*terror tours*” (Reijnders, 2010).

Nobody can dispute the fact that tourism based on *Dracula's* myth has a tremendous impact on Romania's international image and on the local touristic industry (Reijnders (2010). Huebner (2011) suggests - the current study suggests this as well, that the entire region (especially Transylvania) should try to capitalize, from an economic and cultural point of view, *Dracula's* myth. Dan Matei Agathon, former Minister of Tourism and the current President of the Federation of Enterprises in Tourism and Services in Romania claims that “the *Dracula Project* for promoting Transylvania represents the most profitable development strategy for regional tourism and must be managed without reservation or prejudice” (Negrescu, 2013).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The successful development of tourism around *Dracula's* myth requires relevant market researches. Among these, cannot be overlooked the one regarding the expectations of potential tourists, which then allows the creation of a market segmentation strategy, target and positioning as efficient as possible. Thus, at this moment, the study on American consumers' perceptions on the possibility of spending a holiday in Romania for discovering *Dracula's* myth seems highly appropriate.

The premise of the study assumes the existence of a connection between Americans' attraction towards dark tourism, vampires and a travel to discover *Dracula's* myth. Its verification would allow a clear positioning of the tourism product created. Thus, the objectives of the market research conducted aimed:

- to identify consumers' perceptions regarding dark tourism and Romania as mythic space, land of vampires;
- to determine the main characteristics of an attractive tourism product, build around Dracula's myth.

As data collection method, the survey was chosen, using the questionnaire research instrument. Survey sample was represented by American citizens, who have travelled at least once in the last 3 years. The sampling method was a non-probabilistic one, mixt, combining sampling by convenience with the snowball sampling method. Questionnaires were performed online, using a site specialized in survey polls. The questionnaire was available on social networks such as facebook.com, couchsurfing.org, tripadvisor.com, respectively was send directly by email to the employees of a resort in Wisconsin (Mt. Olympus Resort), who, at their turn, were asked to pass it on, including to tourists accommodated in the unit.

Sample size, after the validation of the questionnaires, was of 254 de respondents. As for the sample structure, most respondents (approximately 60%) are female, aged between 22 and 35 years. Approximately 50% of those who filled in the questionnaires have a weekly income between 300\$ and 799\$, and as an occupation, most of them are students and specialists in various fields such as engineers, doctors, economists, etc.

5. STUDY RESULTS

In order to test the degree of openness and the nature of American consumers' touristic motivations, in the first phase the terms "unusual holiday" and "destination with a different culture" were used and a 5-points scale, starting from "not at all" to "very much". The answers allowed the characterization of potential American tourists as innovators. Thus 80% of them said that they would be very interested in spending the next holidays in a destination with a culture different from the American one, and 67% of them want very much "an unusual holiday".

Then, by using an open question there have been identified the main associations of the concept of dark tourism in the view of the respondents. For most of them (14%), dark tourism is either "something that has to do with death", or "something scary". Approximately 11% of the persons interviewed first thought of "danger", namely "medievalism and castles". "Sufferance", "adrenaline", "unknown", accounted for approximately 8% of the answers. Among other notions associated with dark tourism, respondents mentioned also: evil, fear, vampires, Dracula. Thus, for most respondents, dark tourism primarily symbolizes strong emotional feelings.

Next, respondents were presented the definition of dark tourism as shown in the studies of Foley and Lennon (1996b) and Stone (2005), and they were asked to mention whether they have ever taken such a travel. More than half, precisely 55% said that they have done at least one travel that can fall in the category of dark tourism. The emotions experienced during these travels were measured with a 5-point scale, respondents being presented a number of 13 factors for evaluation (Table 1). These were partially taken from the studies of Rojek (1993), Seaton and Lennon (2004), Stone (2009), White and Frew (2013).

Table 1. Intensity of emotions lived in places specific to dark tourism

Emotion	Average (scale 1-5)		
Curiosity	4.44	Contempt	2.46
Reflection	3.97	Fear	2.33
Empathy	3.54	Uncertainty	2.31
Revelation	3.46	Superiority	2.30
Content	3.24	Fury	2.10

Nostalgia	3.23	Joy	1.94
Compassion	3.20		

While visiting attractions specific to dark tourism, most interviewed persons experienced curiosity towards the place visited (the only item with an average above 4, on a scale from 1 to 5). The following sets of emotional feelings, in order of intensity were reflection, empathy and revelation. A single item had an average under 2, namely “joy”, and other feelings less felt were anger, superiority, insecurity, fear and contempt. The relevance of the results obtained for American respondents is sustained by the research of the authors quoted earlier on the behaviour of the tourist who practices dark tourism, especially for the superior part of the ranking. So, it would seem that experiences that fall in the category of dark tourism are born out of curiosity and enhance individuals’ introspective side.

The next theme of the questionnaire was the degree of interest shown by American citizens regarding vampires and Romania’s image associated with various myths. By using a dichotomous question was determined the interest towards vampires of 78% from the respondents, due probably in a significant proportion to popular culture. Regarding the degree of association of Romania with a legendary land, birthplace of vampires, it has been identified the fact that in Americans’ perception this connection is very strong (Table 2).

Table 2. Romania’s image, vampires and Dracula

Type of association	Average
Romania is a country with an authentic medieval heritage	4.16
Romania is a country of legends and myths	4.02
Transylvania, a region of Romania, is the land of vampires	4.37
Romania is Dracula’s house	3.95

So, 89% of the respondents agree that Transylvania is the land of vampires, and 75% have the same opinion on the fact that Romania is Dracula’s home. The 4 statements confirm the fact that Romania could easily valorise, from a tourism point of view as well, the perception according to which it is a land of vampires, Dracula’s home, a legend place and the guardian of an authentic medieval inheritance. Based on these pillars, it could be possible to build Romania’s image as a tourism destination, at least for a well-defined segment on the market of American consumers. Creating, promoting and supporting an image in correspondence with the knowledge and the expectations of consumers, would then allow the development of attractive tourism products, based on the image’s essential components. This statement is supported also by the questions to the answer regarding the degree of interest of respondents in spending a holiday in Romania for discovering or exploring the attractions mentioned before (Table 3).

Table 3. Attractivity of a holiday in Romania

	Average
Visiting Romania for the medieval authentic inheritance	3.86
Visiting Romania for discovering legends and myths	3.70
Visiting Transylvania for discovering the land of vampires	4.17
Visiting Romania because it is Dracula’s home	4.05

So, at least 70% of the respondents consider attractive or very attractive a holiday in Romania for discovering medieval attractions, for knowing local legends and myths, visiting the land of vampires, respectively Dracula’s Castle. It can be concluded that tourism products build around these theme, designed for a market segment specific to dark tourism and properly promoted can record a real success on the American market.

The results of the previous analysis can be explained also by the presence of scenes from movies with vampires, internationally promoted, which talk about the place where Dracula or vampires live/lived, this place being located in Transylvania. Numerous movies, as well as television series mention Romania in the same context.

The last theme of the study aimed to investigate the tourism behaviour, the services and facilities expected by American tourists for a holiday in Romania with the occasion of discovering Dracula's myth. The information obtained this way would allow creating a tourism package as close as possible to the needs and the expectations; consequently, there would be the premises of obtaining a degree of high satisfaction, with important consequences on the intentions of revisiting and recommending both the destination and the tour operator that implements it.

As for the factors that would determine them to travel in a country with a different culture, for example, Romania, (using a question with multiple answer), 76% of the respondents opted for "activities available at destination", 56% for "price", 37% for "tour operator", 32% for "destination reputation", 19% for "distance". Consequently, Romania as a tourism destination could count on competitive advantages represented by the originality and the diversity of recreational activities, respectively attractive prices.

Promotion should be made over the Internet, the source of information that would be used by 91% of the respondents in planning a holiday in Romania. Only 18.9% would contact a travel agency from the US for obtaining information on holidays in Romania, and 18,6% a travel agency from Romania. Using the internet allows touristic consumers to gather a lot of information, diversified, from different sources, at any moment and in almost any place. Of course this prior information could be obtained from the sites of online Romanian travel agencies or from sites, travel blogs, pages of social networks specially conceived to promote Romania as the land of Dracula.

As for the persons they would like to travel in this thematic holiday, 78% would prefer to be accompanied by friends, 12% by girlfriend/boyfriend, 6% by family and the rest by colleagues or business partners. The period for taking the holiday would be during summer (48%) or for Halloween (46%). Considering the fact that for international tourism, guide services play a very important role, potential American tourists would like in a proportion of 70% to be made by a Romanian local, with the experience required by such an activity. Only 20% would like very much for the guide to be a professional from Romania, and 10% would choose a guide from the US. The budget that most respondents would allocate (65%) for a holiday of this type in Romania ranges between 1500 and 2000 dollars. 14% would be willing to spend between 2000 and 2500 dollars and 14% would spend 1500 dollars for such a package tour. 7% of the respondents would pay more than 2500 dollars.

Next, the survey tested a series of concepts and ideas that would enhance the originality and the authenticity of the tourism product created and the degree of personalization of the tourism services provided. Of course, this information could be used in the communication and positioning strategy of the tourism product. Thus, for accommodation services, from the 4 types of rooms presented to respondents, the preferred type of room was the one with a "coffin" bed (average 4.53 on a scale from 1, meaning "at all" to 5, meaning "very much"). The room type "cave" ranked second (average of 3.37), followed by the medieval room (average of 3.38) and then gothic (average of 3.07).

Table 4. The degree of interest for unusual activities on vampires and Dracula

Type of activity	Average
"Vampire hunting" in the mountains	3.74
Torture rooms	3.60
Vampire themed party	3.80
"The road without return" - a night in the city of Dracula	3.90

Battle with medieval warriors	3.76
Bonfires at Castle Dracula	4.05
A night with a descendant of Dracula	3.70
Visit the places where Dracula lived and interaction with local people	4.10
Night with Dracula movies in the castle's basement	3.81

Given the unique experiences that could significantly enrich the tourism experience, in addition to the plus of originality they bring, it has been evaluated also the degree of interest of respondents for a series of activities specific to a holiday having as main motivation discovering Dracula's myth (Table 4). The most interesting activities, the only ones with an average above 4.00, are visits to the places where Dracula lived and interaction with local people and organizing bonfires at Castle Dracula. Also the activity on the third position, a day in Dracula's city, is characterized, as the previous ones, by the highest degree of truth or realism compared with the other variants. Over 80% of the respondents show high and very high interest for the three activities and over 60% feel the same for the other activities proposed.

The last set of items measured the degree of attractiveness of a number of 7 touristic objectives, connected to some extent to Dracula, in the right of the name being mentioned the significance of these connections (Table 5).

Table 5. The degree of interest for tourism objectives related to Dracula

Poienari Castle	4,41	Evangelical Church in Sibiu	4,06
Bran Castle	4,41	Tihuța Step	3,88
Sighișoara	4,35	Snagov Monastery	3,81
Hotel Dracula Castle	4,21		

The degree of interest for these tourism objectives turned out to be higher than the one for entertainment activities, with the exception of Tihuța Step and Snagov Monastery, all the other attractions having an average, on a scale from 1 to 5, of over 4 (before calculating the averages, have been excluded from the sample respondents who opted for the variant "I don't know"). Almost 70% of the persons interviewed said that they wanted to visit very much Sighișoara (Vlad Țepeș home town), Poienari Castle (the castle where Vlad Țepeș, known as Dracula, lived), respectively Bran Castle (Dracula's Castle, after the description made by Bram Stoker).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to identify the opportunity of creating and promoting a thematic tourism product, centred on the myth of Dracula and positioned in the category of dark tourism, on the market of American consumers. The idea of the research resulted from the popularity and the attention around Dracula and vampires in the last years, both in the film industry and in popular culture. Transylvania and, consequently, Romania, as land of the most famous vampire, should use this competitive advantage and create at least one tourism product centred on this myth with international visibility.

As a form of tourism, this package tour would probably fall in the category of dark tourism, a niche that has won more and more fans in the last years. As main launching market, the most inspired one would be the American one, considering the success Dracula has, the movies that feature Dracula as main character, namely the characters represented by vampires. Also, they were the first to notice the potential of Dracula's myth to attract clients and they created a tourism package on this theme. This was also the reason of choosing the market for conducting this research. The results of the study also verify the hypotheses, American tourists falling in the category of tourists open to new, eager of new

experiences, contact with a different culture. Then, more than half of the respondents made at least one travel that could be called dark tourism, determined first by curiosity and that mainly triggered the introspective side of the individuals.

As for Romania's image, over 70% of the respondents agree that Romania is the land of vampires and the home of Dracula. So, it seems that there would be a market ready for a tourism product of this kind having as destination Romania. This conclusion is also supported also by the fact that at least 70% of the respondents consider attractive or very attractive a holiday in Romania for knowing the local legends and myths, namely Dracula's house, elements that could be used in the positioning strategy of the tourism product.

Due to the fact that the activities performed at destination and the price are the most important factors in choosing a holiday destination for the respondents, these could be the main elements or assets used in the strategy of differentiating from competition.

As for the main characteristics of the package tour, identified for American consumers, these would be:

- As a period, it should be organized during summer or on Halloween.
- The groups of tourists that would participate would be mainly formed by friends.
- The guide should be a local, with experience.
- The Internet would be the main source of information for such a product;
- The budget for such a holiday: between 1500 and 2000 dollars.
- For accommodation, the room should have beds "coffin type" and the setting of a cave.
- Among the activities included at destination there should be also visits to the places where Dracula lived, interaction with locals, organizing bonfires at Dracula's castle or visiting Dracula's home town.
- In the list of tourism objectives included in the circuit should be Bran Castle, Poienari Castle and Sighișoara.

Although the information obtained from this study have a high degree of uniqueness and applicability, however, they should be checked through a more extensive descriptive research, which would test the level of interest for such a tourist circuit, on a representative sample of consumer from the US and that would later on allow market testing of the tourism product created.

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