

Marketing the Count's way: how Dracula's myth can revive Romanian tourism

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Abstract: *Tourism destinations associated with the place myth phenomena often experience increased visitation and marketing opportunities. Considering the popularity of the Dracula myth worldwide, Romania has a great opportunity to improve its image as a unique destination on the international tourism market. Thus, the present study aims to analyze the exploitation of the Dracula myth in the Romanian tourism context, as well as the managerial and marketing implications of such an approach. It begins with an overview of the imaginary and historical links between Romania and the Dracula myth. Further on, it reviews the national initiatives to develop Dracula tourism, from both private and governmental perspectives. The paper concludes by highlighting the opportunities of developing Dracula tourism in Romania and embracing the Dracula myth as a unique competitive advantage of the country as a tourism destination.*

Key-words: *Dracula tourism, myth, Romania, Transylvania, tourism destination*

1. Introduction

Popular culture and tourism are intertwining and the use of film and literature amongst destination marketing organizations is a global trend (Mansson, 2015). Tourism is largely based on the production, re-production and re-enforcement of images which serve to project the attractiveness of the destination to the tourists (Ringer, 1998) and this is reflected in Dracula tourism in Romania. Dracula tourism is very much a construction, whether focused on fiction, tradition, history or all of them, depending on the providers of the tourism (Hovi, 2014).

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2. Dracula - Prince vs. vampire Count

Dracula is one of the most recognizable and widely known characters of popular culture. The term Dracula comes from the nickname of a Romanian historical ruler called Vlad the Impaler. Vlad's fame comes mostly from the medieval stories about him and because his nickname inspired Bram Stoker to name his novel, published in 1897, and its main character, the Transylvanian vampire count Dracula. These two characters have often been conflated especially after the appearance of the McNally and Florescu's (1972) book. Most of the links that have been created between the two Draculas are more or less artificial, yet they are persistent and strong. This linkage is so strong that the names Count Dracula and Vlad the Impaler have in some cases even become synonymous. This connection, however, is in reality almost non-existent (Hovi, 2014) and strongly contested (Miller, 2000).

The historical truth (related to the life of Vlad the Impaler, prince of Wallachia) favors the exploitation of the Dracula myth in the Romanian tourism context; however the location of Dracula's castle is debatable. Bram Stoker locates the vampire count's castle in Transylvania, in Borgo mountain pass, while the real-life Dracula prince had his royal residence in Tirgoviste, a city situated in Wallachia. Transylvania and Wallachia are both Romanian historical regions, the first is located in central Romania while the second is located in the southern part of the country. Starting from this context, several tourism offers have been developed, based on the Dracula myth.

3. The nature of Dracula tourism

The nature of Dracula tourism can be hard to define (Light, 2012). Popular culture tourism is a term used to portray this kind of tourism (Larson et al., 2013). Dracula tourism has elements of cultural tourism and heritage tourism, and could easily be defined as either (Hovi, 2014). It could also be defined as medieval-related tourism (Hovi, 2014), or it can be seen as cultural, literary, movie-induced or dark tourism (Light, 2012). The term media tourism has been suggested to combine both literary and movie induced tourism, because the two are often difficult to separate from each other (Hovi, 2014). In fact Dracula tourism is all of these. Although many tour agencies that offer Dracula tourism utilize Bram Stoker's Dracula in many ways, many of the visual elements in Dracula tourism are definitely movie-inspired. Based on the definition of media tourism as the phenomenon of people traveling to places because of an association with a film, television series, novel, song, or other media product (Reijnders et al., 2015) and according with the media-related tourism term proposed by Hoppen et al. (2014), the authors of the present paper consider that this the most appropriate conceptual framework for Dracula tourism. Dracula tourism is stimulated by the novel written by Bram Stoker and more than 200 films which have either exploited this nineteenth century Dracula story or the vampire myth. In Dracula tourism, visitors

expect to see the ghostly and strange Transylvania from popular culture and sometimes their preconceptions are so strong that they are not affected by the 'reality' of the place (Hovi, 2014).

Although the phrase "Dracula tourism" is used by researchers such as Light (2007), Hovi (2008), Banyai (2010), Reijnders (2010) and Huebner (2011), this form of tourism is not acknowledged or developed in a coherent manner at a national or regional level in any Romanian destination. Dracula tourism started to grow in Romania slowly during the 1970s and the state's reaction towards it was tolerant but not encouraging. Dracula tourism, based upon a belief in the supernatural and vampires, was fundamentally discordant with Romania's identity as a socialist state and was not something that the government wanted to endorse (Light 2012). Moreover, this form of tourism is not mentioned in any national strategies or in any of the destination's promotional campaigns.

Based on the typology of literary destinations outlined by Herbert (1996), Romanian Dracula tourism is combining „real-places” and „imagined life” as it is mainly developed in Transylvania (the place of birth of the historical character Vlad the Impaler, which is a real place) but the vampire count Dracula character was created by Bram Stoker, thus it is imagined-life. Romania is an East-European tourist destination, which is the homeland of the “real-life” Dracula character - Vlad the Impaler as well as the imaginary setting of the vampire count Dracula story, described by Bram Stoker in his nineteenth century novel. Considering these two-fold perspective of Dracula tourism, Romania hosts both “real-life” destinations related to Vlad the Impaler, a medieval prince of the country's southern province – Wallachia (e.g. Tirgoviste Princely Court, Poenari Fortress, Vlad's birthplace in the Transylvanian city of Sighisoara or the supposed burial place in Snagov Monastery) and “imagined” destinations related to different locations described by Bram Stoker in his novel (e.g. Borgo Pass, Bran Castle, Bistrita). These tourist destinations are not benefiting from the star standing statute as Bran Castle does. Moreover, there are certain destinations in Romania which benefit from a real history related to Vlad, the Impaler and do not value it through specific tourism initiatives. This is the case of the city of Brasov, which was the home of Dracula's mistress, Katharina, as well as the location of Vlad's attack against the Saxon residents in 1459.

The interest in Dracula tourism is for the most part something that comes from outside Romania and is still mainly directed at foreigners, especially people from a Western cultural background (Hovi, 2014). Dracula tourists were not a homogeneous group and Dracula tourism is a diverse phenomenon which embraced a broad range of interests and motives. Some tourists could be identified as literary tourists, some as film tourists, some were looking for the supernatural roots of the Dracula myth and some were interested in the historical Dracula character, Vlad the Impaler (Light, 2012). Moreover, previous studies (e.g. Banyai, 2010) outlined that while the majority of Western tourists visit Bran Castle in search for Count Dracula, most of them leave disappointed because the tour guides focus only on presenting the

historical truth. Despite the existence of a Dracula tourism specific demand, this is not registered in any statistics as a distinct market segment.

4. Does the Dracula myth count for Romanian tourism?

There are several tourism operators (hotels, travel agencies, tour operators) which have embraced this name in their firm's name: 3 travel agencies, 8 accommodation units and 2 restaurants. An initiative to incorporate the Dracula myth in a cultural event, which has a potential to attract international visitors is the Dracula Film Festival. It was hosted in Brasov and it reached the third edition in 2015, becoming the place where two Dracula - related blockbusters were released.

Figure 1 indicates 14 locations related to Dracula character (written with red fonts) or to the historical character Vlad the Impaler (blue font). These destinations are included in the 59 tours offered by 16 Romanian travel agencies. The numbers on the map indicate day trips, short (i.e 2-5 days) and long trips (i.e. 6-10 days), or thematic Halloween tours. Furthermore, figure 1 indicates that destinations such as Bran and Brasov are included in most tours. This may be due to the perception induced by McNally and Florescu's work (1972) that Bran Castle is Dracula's Castle. Another explanation is that the geographical location of these places is in the center of Romania, close to the country's capital - Bucharest.

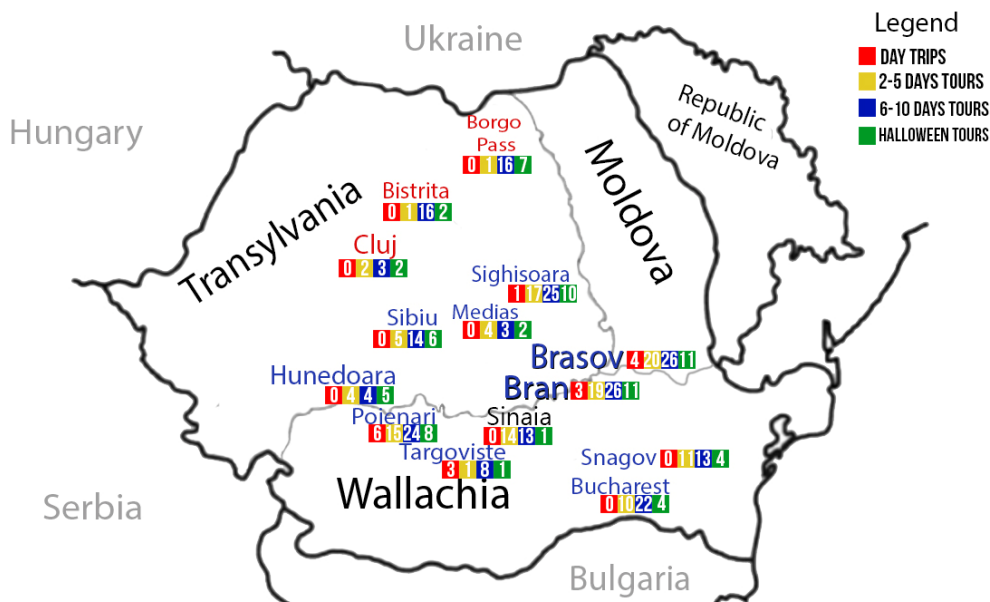


Figure 1. The main Romanian tourist destinations included in Dracula tours

In 2000, the Romanian Ministry of Tourism took an official position and it was declared that Romania should see in the Dracula name an opportunity to attract tourists and the myth should have been exploited at least at the level of 1970s (Cosma et al., 2006). A tour named 'On Dracula tracks' was proposed and the project of Dracula Park was launched. In the Romanian national tourism strategy (Ministry of SMEs, Commerce, Tourism and Liberal Professions, 2007) Dracula is mentioned as one of the country's strengths as a tourist destination, in both the cultural section of the document and in the marketing and promotion section, and, together with Transylvania, as a Romanian tourism brand. The specialists who formulated the strategy recommended the creation of a center which illustrates traditional crafts and typical Romanian livelihood as well as historical events (including the medieval period when Vlad the Impaler, alias Dracula, ruled). They also outlined that the Dracula myth should be included in tourism development programs, focused on this historical character. Despite this, Dracula tourism is not included in any of the recent tourism development programs in Romania.

The the Romanian National Tourism Authority (RNTA) conducted several researches between 2003 and 2005, in collaboration with international market research companies, among actual and potential tourists from twelve international source markets (Nicolescu et al., 2008). These studies outlined that British tourists were mostly interested in tourism packages related to medieval Transylvanian cities while American tourists prefer Transylvanian destinations and Dracula tours. These researches include recommendations regarding a coherent promotion under the umbrella of the national brand, in the case of the regional tourism destination - Transylvania, which is already famous at international level and may create its own tourism brand. Thus, although Romania's image cannot be overlapped on the international perception of the Dracula myth, it could be used for promotional purposes as a competitive advantage.

Furthermore, previous studies conducted among both international and Romanian citizens indicated that Dracula is an important character which is associated with the country's image. According to a recent research commissioned by the Romanian National Tourism Authority (RNTA, 2014), Dracula is ranked on the fourth place in international tourists' positive associations with Romania, following the key values of the current national tourism brand. This was an impact study regarding the main promotional campaigns of the national tourism brand, which was conducted in august 2014, among respondents from the main seven source markets for incoming tourists in Romania. Overall, among the most attractive tourism assets in Romania, Dracula's Castle was positioned on the second place in the preferences of international tourists. Considering each source market, Dracula's Castle was ranked on the first place by American tourists, on the third place by Austrian tourists, on the fifth place by Italian tourists and on the fourth place by British tourists.

5. Implications to the marketing and management of the destination

Based on the above-mentioned studies, which confirm the popularity of the Dracula myth and its association with the country's image, we consider that Romania needs to deal wisely with this apparent negatively stereotype and adopt a similar positioning strategy to the Colombian approach (the country's tourism slogan is: "Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay") (Susac, 2013). Romanian tourism authorities do not develop Dracula tourism in a coherent manner, as a distinct form of tourism. In addition, they do not manage to valorize Dracula myth in either national strategic planning framework or in its international tourism promotional campaigns. Thus, Dracula myth could be included in Romania's promotional campaigns on the targeted international markets (e.g. USA, Austrian, Italy, and UK).

Hoppen et al. (2014) suggest that certain destinations may lack the necessary "attraction" to entice tourists and the collaborative approaches to destination marketing via tourist "routes", "trails" or "clusters" offer significant opportunity for new product and experiential destination development. Thus, we consider that Romanian national tourism authorities should facilitate the creation of themed cultural and heritage routes which may include not only the well-known Bran Castle, but also other tourist attractions which are historically connected to Vlad the Impaler (e.g. Poenari fortress, the princely court in Tirgoviste, Hunyadi Castle). This is likely to be sustainable in the longer term. Furthermore, a more responsible approach to combine places connected to Dracula in these themed cultural and heritage routes would be to inform tourists about the historic facts regarding Vlad the Impaler's real life and at the same time capitalize on the imaginary settings described in Bram Stoker's novel. This way, these routes might become interesting for several types of tourists: those interested in literature and the Dracula novel, as well as those interested in the Dracula and vampire movies. These recommendations may be used by Romanian national and regional tourism authorities in different planning and management processes, with the main purpose of promoting the country's image at international level.

The academic relevance of the Dracula tourism approach provided by the present paper is mainly given by its media tourism framework and its case-study contribution to the specific literature. Moreover, a series of practical implications are outlined, aimed at addressing different marketing and management issues related to the development of Dracula tourism in Romania. Romanian authorities, tourism businesses and researchers should build partnerships aimed at innovating in this field, in order to implement niche marketing initiatives. If collaboration can be achieved effectively across the country, or even between different destinations, then Dracula destination branding might be the next logical step.

Despite the existence of specific tourism offers which cater for an international demand for Dracula related tourism in Romania, relevant data about tourists interested in Dracula is inexistent. Future studies should be based on longitudinal researches in order to investigate motivations that influence visitors' choice of Dracula tourism packages as

well as their preferences and satisfaction level regarding specific tourism services. Moreover, different tourism packages, including “real places” and “imagined” life, need to be developed for those tourists who are interested in the Dracula myth. Considering the fragmented character of the Dracula tourism offer, there is no coherent approach of this form of tourism in Romania. Thus, tourists may be puzzled by contradictory information regarding tourism sites related to Dracula and gaps may appear between tourists’ expectations and their on-site perceptions. This is a destination marketing opportunity which the Romanian tourism authorities should address.

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