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The Homeland of Dracula Experience

Abstract

Dracula has become an important brand name for Romania, attracting many tourists in recent years – especially after the fall of communism. The main dimensions of Dracula's castle (i.e. Bran Castle) experiences shared online by tourists were identified to ascertain the primary reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with visits and to test whether the narratives and satisfaction vary according to the occasion (i.e. Halloween). Quantitative and narrative content analyses were conducted on the Web reviews written by visitors. The results reveal that the experiences are multidimensional and they include the following themes: 'castle', 'visit', 'Dracula', 'inside', 'tourist', 'outside', 'trip', 'souvenirs', 'stairs' and 'Dracula's castle'. The main reasons for dissatisfaction are overcrowding, which is connected with the outside theme, and the disappointment of tourists regarding the old furniture, which is associated with the inside theme. The results also reveal that visitors are the most satisfied with their experience around the time of Halloween. The narratives shared online emphasise tourists' need to associate their imaginings with this region and castle, giving them greater meaning through this destination's image as Transylvania.

Keywords: Transylvania; Dracula; satisfaction; experience; content analysis; Web reviews

1. Introduction

Transylvania has not only a geographical location as a province of Romania but also a mental meaning as Dracula's land (Reijnders, 2011). Bran Castle is, thus, also known as Dracula's castle, attracting many tourists in recent years. Tourists' desire to visit Dracula's castle has

been inspired by Bram Stoker's novel and the international media, which have increased the popularity of Transylvania (Stoleriu, 2014) and the Dracula story inspired by Prince Vlad the Impaler of Romania. Therefore, Transylvania and Bran Castle are often considered part of media tourism, especially as the Dracula myth has both book and film versions.

Although the concept of Dracula tourism was rejected in the time of communism, the power of the media abroad sustained Transylvania's image as Dracula's land, and its popularity increased, particularly after the communist regime fell (Kaneva, 2001; Light, 2001). Despite the Dracula myth's international popularity, it has been the subject of much controversy among the Romanian tourism authorities and government because some consider the myth a threat to authentic Romanian traditions (Hovi, 2011). In addition, officials believe it 'contradict[s] internal collective representations of nationhood' (Stoleriu, 2013, p. 1). However, people's interest in Dracula's land and Bran Castle has continued to increase because these are the primary iconic destinations associated with Bram Stoker's fictional character.

The popularity of Dracula's story illustrates people's need to associate fantasy with reality, especially in how tourism promotion can create imaginary places stronger than the real locations (Crang, 2004). Bran Castle has proved to be the primary attraction associated with Count Dracula and, consequently, has gained more recognition internationally. This destination's image as Dracula's land has developed even further because of the Internet, which has played a major role in building the castle's tourism image in recent years as Web-generated contents have achieved prominence. In this context, tourists' anticipation and experiences have become increasingly essential to decision-making processes (Richardson & Crompton, 1988).

Transylvania and Dracula tourism have already been studied from different perspectives including origin, policy and practice (Light, 2007); identity building (Light, 2001); Dracula tours (Banyai, 2009; Hovi, 2014; Stoleriu, 2014); and Dracula traditions and heritage (Hovi, 2011; 2014). Previous studies have analysed international tourists' experiences of visiting Dracula's castle through surveys (Banyai, 2009; Light, 2009), but a review of the literature revealed no research in which Web reviews sharing these visitors' experiences have been subjected to content analysis.

Therefore, the main dimensions were identified of ways that tourists associate Bran Castle with Dracula's castle in reviews shared online. Moreover, tests were run to reveal whether these dimensions vary according to tourists' satisfaction levels. Halloween is the time of year when Transylvania's image becomes a land of fantasy and Bran Castle becomes

one of the top places worldwide to spend this special occasion. Therefore, online reviews were analysed to determine whether the dimensions of visitors' overall experiences vary according to the timing of visits.

The discussion below is structured as follows. The first section includes a literature review in which several topics are examined, including the origins of the Dracula myth, Dracula tourism, Transylvania and Bran Castle. Next, the methodology section describes the data collection and treatment procedures. The results section presents the concept map generated and qualitative (i.e. narrative) analyses of the Web reviews collected. The final section contains conclusions, managerial implications, limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Origins of Dracula's Myth

The Dracula myth is one of the most famous dark myths, globally advertised since the beginning of the twentieth century by a growing vampire industry including literature and various forms of media. The origin of the myth is Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, published in 1897, which tells the story of a vampire count from Transylvania and his journey to London. The worldwide fascination with Stoker's character has inspired literary, historical and sociological research seeking to identify the meaning and sources of this famous myth and its impacts. Many authors (Andreescu, 1999; Burns, 2009; Dittmer, 2003; Hovi, 2011; Light, 2005; 2014; McNally & Florescu, 1972; Miller, 2000; 2009) have argued that the dualistic character portrayed in the novel was inspired by both historical sources and oral traditions (i.e. international and local) reframed by the gothic literature of the nineteenth century.

Count Dracula has been linked to a real historical figure – Prince Vlad the Impaler, a Romanian ruler from the fifteenth century – and the international traditions depicting his life. Stoker apparently consulted German, Russian and Turkish medieval stories that portrayed Vlad the Impaler as a fierce, cruel ruler who used terrible punishments to reinforce internal justice and fend off his enemies (Andreescu, 1999; Hovi, 2014; Miller, 2000). Vlad inherited the name Draculea from his father's investment with the Order of the Dragon, an organisation formed to defend Western Catholicism, and Vlad earned the nickname 'the Impaler' for his infamous punishment of enemies and those breaking the country's laws.

The association between Vlad the Impaler and Stoker's character was first suggested by several authors (Csabai, 1942; Kirtley, 1956), but this idea was cemented by a book that was extremely successful during the 1970s: *In Search of Dracula* by McNally and Florescu (1972). However, some studies have disputed the link between the Romanian prince and the fictional vampire (Miller, 1998; 2003; 2009) and attributed the association to error and random chance. For example, the location of Transylvania was Stoker's fictional name for Austria. The Romanian people and national authorities have also repeatedly rejected this association because it contradicts Romanian oral traditions and history books that portray Vlad as an emblematic historical figure and a national symbol of justice (Baddeley & Woods, 2010; Gruia, 2006; Light, 2012).

Another source of the vampire myth has been found in the dark lore and superstitions often associated with Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century (Burns, 2009; Dittmer, 2003; Hovi, 2014; Miller, 2009). Countess Elizabeth Bathory, famous for her literal blood baths and quest for immortality, was also considered an inspiration for Dracula (Miller, 1998; Muresan & Smith, 1998). While Miller (2000) disputes any link with Romanian folklore, vampire-like haunting spirits – variously named *strigoi*, *moroi* or *varcolac* – have long been part of national oral traditions (Murgoci, 1926; Perkowski, 1998) still active in isolated rural parts of Romania. Dracula's literary character was also shaped by the more recent perception of vampires as aristocratic, seductive and terrifying, which was developed in the gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Miller, 2003).

Dracula became a famous myth due to the success of Stoker's novel and its major cultural impact on fiction literature and cinematography of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Hovi, 2014; Light, 2007; 2012). A multi-billion dollar industry catering to vampire and science-fiction fans has developed globally, including movies, television series, books, video games, Internet websites, online forums and tourism products (Fernandez & Kit, 2010). The overall result has been the construction of a Romanian brand that merges Vlad the Impaler's life and the fictional count's features (Lawrence, 2012; Muresan & Smith, 1998).

2.2 *Dracula Tourism*

Dracula tourism refers to visiting places associated with the fictional Dracula and/or the historical figure that inspired the myth (Light, 2012). Dracula tourism has been connected with several forms of tourism depending on visitors' motivations and various aspects of the

heritage upon which this tourism niche has capitalised. Given the myth's origins, the key role of imagination and tourists' interest in the places and characters represented in novels or movies, Dracula tourism is often mentioned as a prime example of literary and movie-induced tourism (Light, 2007; Muresan & Smith, 1998; 2009; Reijnders, 2011). As other forms of media have contributed to its increasing popularity, Dracula tourism has evolved into media-induced tourism (Reijnders, 2011), especially after the boom in the Internet's popularity.

However, as tourists visit attractions officially considered national heritage, Dracula tourism can also be classified as cultural and heritage tourism (Muresan & Smith, 1998; Hovi, 2014), given these visitors' focus on the past. Hovi (2014, p. 72) calls this niche 'neo-medieval-related' tourism because it capitalises on the otherness (i.e. mystery, darkness and mysticism) and popularity of the Middle Ages built up by many movies and novels.

Apart from the myth's cultural and historical significance, a fright component has also been added by tourist discourses about Dracula attractions, such as vampire stories, secret passageways and dark legends surrounding Vlad the Impaler. This explains the frequent association of Dracula tourism with dark tourism (Hovi, 2014), which includes visits to real or commodified places of death, suffering and tragedy (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

Previous research on Dracula tourism has analysed its origins, policies and practices (Light, 2007; 2009; 2012; Stoleriu & Ibanescu, 2014) or Dracula traditions and heritage (Hovi, 2011; 2014). Studies have also focused on the imaginative geographies generated by the Dracula myth (Light, 2009; Reijnders, 2011) and Dracula tours (Banyai, 2009; Hovi 2014; Stoleriu, 2014).

The evolution of Dracula tourism in Romania was analysed by Light (2007) based on interviews with tourism actors and publications from the communist regime era. The cited author retraced this phenomenon to the arrival of the first Dracula fans during the 1960s when Stoker's book was still unknown in Romania (Gruia, 2006; Paunescu, 1986). This tourism flow was greatly strengthened by the publication of McNally and Florescu's (1972) book, which cemented the link between Vlad the Impaler and Count Dracula in the public's perception.

The Romanian authorities' reaction to Dracula tourism started with a clear rejection of the vampire myth as a contradiction of national history and evolved into a toleration of Dracula fans because of the economic and political benefits. This process ended in the development of the first attractions and tours connected with Dracula or Vlad the Impaler (Gruia, 2006; Light, 2007; 2012). These were exclusively created for foreign tourists in the

1980s (Light, 2012), since, internally, the communist authorities were reinforcing representations of Vlad as a national hero (Cioranescu, 1977; Gruia, 2006).

In post-communist Romania, national reactions to Dracula tourism have continued to vacillate. They are closely linked to Romania's international policy and economic interests (Banyai, 2009; Kaneva & Popescu, 2011; Light, 2007; 2012; Muresan & Smith, 1998): from an initial rejection in the early 1990s to an appropriation of the myth first by tour operators and the souvenirs industry and only second by the government. A major Dracula Park project was launched in the early 2000s, but it was abandoned a few years later due to massive internal and external opposition (Constantinescu, 2001).

References to Dracula were found in Romania's first international tourism campaigns, but they disappeared after Romania's admission into the European Union (Stoleriu, 2013). A new official Dracula tour was launched by the Romanian Employers' Federation of Tourism and Services only in 2012. Political (i.e. governmental) changes, external influences and a permanently divided public opinion – favouring either the historical truth or the economic benefits of Dracula's fame – have sustained the vacillations in national attitudes towards Dracula tourism (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011; Light, 2007; Stoleriu, 2013). Tour guides and local residents use similar dual discourses, depending on their visitors' expectations (Banyai, 2009). All these explain the slow, weak development of tourism services for Dracula fans in Romania.

The geography of Dracula tourism started with two major attractions (i.e. Bran Castle and Hotel Castle Dracula) and progressively evolved to include other places linked to Vlad the Impaler and/or Count Dracula. Romanian tour operators have also added cultural destinations with a weak or imaginary link to Dracula (e.g. medieval cities) but still representative of Romania's national heritage (Hovi, 2014; Stoleriu, 2014). Light (2011) distinguishes between the physical geography of Dracula tourism – with Transylvania framing tourist experiences – and its imaginative geography – based on literature and media-induced expectations. Depending on the heritage's social construction and purpose (i.e. commercial or educational), several shades of darkness have been found within the historical traditions promoted through Dracula tours: from lighter ones, where death is only simulated, to darker real places of death (Stoleriu, 2014).

Dracula tourists' experiences in Romania have been analysed in various stages – from anticipation to in situ experiences – using visitor surveys and participatory observation (Light, 2009; Muresan & Smith, 1998; Reijnders, 2011), content analysis of blogs (Banyai, 2009) and travel websites (Hovi, 2014; Stoleriu, 2014). The results highlight the opposition

between international tour operators more focused on the fictional Dracula and Romanian tour operators mostly concentrated on the historical Dracula or clearly delineating history from fiction (Hovi, 2014; Light, 2012; Stoleriu, 2014). Visitor surveys have highlighted the essential role of tourists' prior knowledge of Dracula (Light, 2009) built by movies, literature and the Internet (Reijnders, 2011). This information shapes visitors' decisions and expectations, helping them to trace the story in their imagination and plan their itineraries accordingly (Reijnders, 2011).

Visitor motivations include a search for the literary or movie origins of Dracula, supernatural creatures or, more simply, unusual holiday experiences (Light, 2007; 2009), as well as connecting fiction to real places and events (Reijnders, 2011). Even if Dracula tourists do not believe in the supernatural, they all expect thrills and frights (Light, 2009). Once in Transylvania, visitors retrace the novel or movie, searching for deeper emotional or tangible experiences of Dracula's land (Reijnders, 2011). Apart from seeing and being in Transylvania, tourists re-enact episodes from the novel, such as sleeping in Dracula's castle; eating in the same restaurant as Jonathan Harker; participating in costumed parties, witch trials and knighthood ceremonies; visiting Dracula's tomb; and listening to stories about Vlad the Impaler around campfires (Light, 2009; Reijnders, 2011; Stoleriu, 2014). Shopping for souvenirs with Transylvania's name is considered these tourists' attempt to validate their experiences and anchor them in their memory (Light, 2009).

Research on the national heritage capitalised upon by Dracula tours (Hovi, 2011; 2014; Stoleriu, 2014) has highlighted the cultural hybridisation (Hovi, 2014, p. 202) generated by the mix of traditions linked to Vlad the Impaler, Dracula, vampires, Western culture and Romanian folklore. In a response to the controversies regarding authenticity and Dracula tourism in Romania (Light, 2007; 2012), Hovi (2014) conducted research that found support for the value of this hybrid Dracula tradition, arguing the importance of both objective and experiential aspects of authentic tourist experiences.

2.3 Transylvania: Dracula's Homeland

Transylvania is a historical province situated in Central Romania, which is fringed by the Carpathian Mountains (see Figure 1). Stoker's placement of Dracula's castle in Transylvania created the basis of a powerful place myth (Shields, 1991), making Transylvania one of the most famous destination associated with vampires and mystery (Gelder, 1994).

Figure 1. Location of Transylvania and Bran Castle

Source: Authors

However, the origins of this myth reach beyond Stoker's novel, starting with the travel literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This presented Transylvania to the West as a mysterious and undeveloped territory situated on the Eastern periphery of Europe: a land of superstitions and mysteries (Andras, 1999; Light, 2011; Miller, 2003). Through its major impact on cinematography and literature, Stoker's novel merely reproduced and reinforced this place myth and made it famous worldwide. As for Stoker's depiction of Transylvania, this was apparently shaped only by indirect knowledge gathered from travel literature, oral and written tradition (Belford, 1996; Hovi, 2014; Miller, 1998; 2000). Stoker's perspective reproduced the colonial, Balkanist discourses of Victorian Britain (Pile, 2005; Todorova, 1997), which placed a modern, rational Western society in opposition to a backward, ambiguous and dangerous Eastern Europe associated with superstitions and barbarism (Andras, 1999; Arata, 1990). Under these influences, Stoker constructed an imaginary Transylvania that was a liminal, ambiguous territory between West and East (Dittmer, 2003; Light, 2011, Pritchard & Morgan, 2006) and between the known and unknown (Light, 2009). The movie interpretations of the novel added new meanings, with Dracula representing the communist East threatening the democratic West (Light, 2011; Wasson, 1966).

The strong mediatization of Stoker's novel – together with the entire vampire sub-culture developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – has reinforced the dark myth of Transylvania. It has evolved into a destination of worldwide fame and a place where reality and fantasy merge (Light, 2011; Pile, 2005) and every dark creature can be found (Skal, 1996). Dracula tourism has included Transylvania in a global network of dark destinations that attract thrill and supernatural seekers (Light, 2009). Made of real and imaginary places, Stoker's Transylvania plays a key role in framing and validating Dracula tourists' experiences (Light, 2009).

2.4 Bran Castle

Known as Dracula's home, Bran Castle has been developed into a central attraction for Dracula tourism in Romania by using two opposite marketing strategies. Public actors'

approach has focused on history, while private tourism actors' strategy has centred more on fantasy or mixing reality and fiction (Hovi, 2011; Muresan & Smith, 1998; Stoleriu, 2014). With about 500,000 visitors per year, this castle has been the most visited museum in Romania since 2010 and remains the most famous Dracula attraction (Eurostat, 2016).

The fortress was built in the fourteenth century for commercial and strategic purposes, and it is located in the Carpathian Mountains, on the main road linking the provinces of Walachia and Transylvania. In 1920, it became the residence of the Romanian royal family. It was confiscated by the communist regime in 1948 and transformed into a museum. The castle was returned to the heirs of the Hapsburg family in 2006, reopening as a museum in 2009. The only historical connection found with Vlad the Impaler is that the prince passed by the castle on his march to Transylvania, in 1459 (*Bran Castle*, 2013). The presence of the Carpathians and the castle's architecture are the only connections with Stoker's novel, which was located several hundred kilometres north from Bran.

The fortress became Dracula's home in the 1960s when the first Dracula tourism visitors' started appropriating Transylvania by projecting their imaginings on a real place resembling the fictional castle (Light, 2007). Since then, the social construction of Dracula's home has been reinforced by conflicting tourist narratives, reproduced on a national scale and down to a local level. Because of the castle's historical heritage and its proximity to Bucharest and other major tourist facilities, the association with Dracula's myth was tolerated by the communist regime (Gruia, 2006). Since 1990, the castle's communication strategy has vacillated, reflecting the national tourist authorities' indecision on this topic, with several Halloween parties organised in the early 2000s but not after 2003 (Light, 2012).

The present owners reopened the castle in 2009, establishing a marketing approach at first focused on highlighting historical heritage but afterwards slightly diversified in order to meet Dracula tourists' demands, including Halloween parties, souvenirs and several posters (Banyai, 2009; Stoleriu, 2014). Visitor surveys have shown that tourist satisfaction is negatively affected by insufficient or tacky capitalisation on the Dracula myth (Muresan & Smith, 1998), Bran Castle's false image as Dracula's castle (Banyai, 2009; Muresan & Smith, 1998) and confusing tourist discourses that mix history and myth. But despite all this, Bran Castle remains the most famous Dracula attraction in the international media and on travel websites.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

The data source was Web-generated content on the TripAdvisor site, which was considered the most appropriate website from which to collect data. Online information sources such as TripAdvisor have gained increased recognition recently, and reviews of tourist destinations have become a popular medium through which tourists express their opinions about destination attractiveness during or after their experiences. TripAdvisor is also currently the largest online travel community in the world (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014).

People are inspired by other individuals' experiences, and tourists like to explore and imagine destinations before they arrive there (Richardson & Crompton, 1988). In this context, Web-generated content provides the necessary trustworthy information to make the best decisions about where to travel (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002).

As previous studies have done (Pearce & Wu, 2016; Tkaczynski, Rundle Thiele & Cretchley, 2015; Wu, Wall & Pearce, 2014), only English reviews were gathered for analysis. TripAdvisor offered 1,907 reviews in English (58%) from a total 3,292 reviews. English is the most frequent language of Web reviews. In all, the total texts of the reviews added up to 151,915 words.

The reviews included were from January 2010 until February 2017, and each review was collected and stored in an Excel document. For each review, the following variables were available: the title, review, quantitative rating and date and month of the post, as well as the nationality and gender of the reviewer. The quantitative ratings include the following categories: 1= terrible, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = very good and 5 = excellent.

The nationalities were categorised into world regions for analysis. The geographical distribution of the reviews revealed the origins of tourists with interest in Dracula's castle. European tourists (e.g. the United Kingdom, Greece, Spain and Belgium) make up 49% of the reviewers, and Americans are 28.58%. Regarding their satisfaction, the categories of very good and excellent represent around 73% of the ratings. In terms of the time of year, the number of reviews increases in the summer (i.e. July to September).

To address one of the research objectives, a new variable was created: the special occasion with two categories – Halloween_yes and Halloween_no. Reviews were considered a narrative of a Halloween experience when they were posted in October or November and

when they included the word ‘Halloween’. Halloween is the time when Dracula’s homeland is flooded with many tourists trying to catch an authentic experience of his castle.

Within this time framework, the people who visited the castle in October to November were classified as Halloween_yes, and those who were there in other months were Halloween_no. Using the function to find a specific word in Excel documents, the word ‘Halloween’ was found in the reviews. The results showed that 16% of tourists visited the castle around Halloween. Table 1 provides general information about sample variables and categories.

Please insert Table 1 here.

3.2 Data Treatment

Content analysis is a research tool that determines the presence of words or concepts in a sample of text documents. The Web-generated content collected was analysed with a quantitative content analysis software, Leximancer, which served to identify tourists’ perceptions of their experiences while visiting Bran Castle.

In the content analysis process, mixed methods were used, including quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted by Leximancer that are designed to assist in the processing of texts ‘from words to meaning to insight’ (Leximancer, 2013). Leximancer uses word association information to identify collections of words that cooccur frequently in the data and suggests these as potential concepts to the researcher (Smith & Humphreys, 2006).

Based on Bayesian statistical theory, Leximancer offers quantitative procedures that facilitate content analyses of fragmented pieces of evidence. Nonlinear dynamics and machine learning (Wu et al., 2014) are methods employed by the algorithms used by this software. In the semantic pattern extraction process performed by Leximancer, the most important units are word, concept and theme. The extracted words and concepts are linked together, so the analysis is conducted using word-occurrence and cooccurrence frequency in order to produce a cooccurrence matrix from which concepts are identified. Next, Leximancer organises and groups these concepts into themes, based on how often they appear together in the texts.

The most common words in the text are automatically identified in the first step of the analysis. These words are called ‘concept seeds’, and, through a learning process, more terms

are added to generate definitions. The concept seeds provide the starting point for the concept definitions, with each definition containing one or more seeds.

Leximancer determines the frequency of cooccurrence between concepts, thereby generating a concept map. Semantic segments that appear frequently together with concepts in the same text settle near one another in the map. The themes appearing in the map are based on clusters of concepts. These themes facilitate further interpretation by representing groups of concepts, shown on the map as coloured circles.

Tourists' online reviews represent a rich vein of data that has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in recent years, and Web reviews have thus become quite important in the analysis of tourist experiences. This approach was adopted here to identify the main dimensions of Bran Castle experience shared by tourists on TripAdvisor.

Leximancer has also recently been used in tourism research (Brochado, Troilo & Saha, 2017; Li & Ryan, 2014; Pearce & Wu, 2016; Tkaczynski et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2014). These previous studies have combined quantitative analyses with qualitative methods (i.e. narrative analysis), so mixed methods were employed here to gain a better overall understanding of Dracula's castle experiences.

4. Results

Leximancer produced a concept map that shows the most common themes and concepts found in the reviews, as well as the count and likelihood of these concepts (see Figure 2). The analysis revealed the existence of 11 themes (i.e. theme size 35%) – shown in the map as small grey nodes: 'castle', 'visit', 'Dracula', 'inside', 'tourist', 'outside', 'trip', 'souvenirs', 'stairs', 'Dracula's castle' and 'experience'.

Figure 2. Concept map of Dracula's castle

Source: Authors

4.1 Overall Representation of the Bran Castle Experience

4.1.1 Castle. The first theme of castle includes the concepts 'interesting' (count = 323, likelihood = 66%), 'beautiful' (309, 71%), 'nice' (259, 63%), 'guide' (144, 56%), 'full' (81, 58%) and 'hill' (123 100%). The castle's overall appearance is the first feature that tourists

notice in relation to what they had imagined. This is also the feature that first stimulated associations between Bran Castle and Dracula's home, and its architecture is a component that is appreciated in general (i.e. 'nice', 'beautiful' and 'interesting').

A typical review states:

[It's i]mpressive to see this castle full of history that seems to be born and rise from the living rock. The valley around it is very beautiful and the castle itself is well maintained. I had to concentrate and forget about the tourists around me, that way it was a pleasant experience. [It is w]orth visiting.

Another guest shared:

[This place has a]mazing views and a beautiful castle . . . [, n]ot overly glitzy but just lovely. Everything was well presented[;] information was in English so it was easy to understand. [This is a] lovely experience and well worth a visit especially in winter with everything covered in snow.

A different tourist wrote:

[It w]as a wonderful experience for us [to] visit . . . this place. [This is a n]ice castle with a big tour. . . . The ticket was fairly cheap, 35 lei. [This is a n]ice sight [sic] to visit and we recommend [that] everyone . . . go and see the DRACULA!!!!

4.1.2 Visit. The theme of visit includes the concepts 'worth' (257, 48%), 'place' (247, 35%), 'Transylvania' (61, 32%), 'Romania' (101, 31%) and 'Bran' (262, 29%). This indicates a strong link between Bran and Transylvania – both imaginary and real places – which also anchors the castle to a real location and the country of Romania. The overall evaluation of the visit appears positive (i.e. worth).

A visitor considered this castle the '[b]est in Romania. If you are anywhere in Romania, Bran is the place to visit, not only for the castle, but for the amazing landscape of Transylvania.' Another guest shared, 'Bran Castle was surprisingly beautiful both inside and outside. [I l]oved the story of how it became famous because of "Dracula" but it is actually a beautiful castle and worth a visit.'

An additional visitor stated, '[This is an i]nteresting place. It is one of the main attractions in Romania; chances are there will be lots of tourists but it is definitely worth a visit.' A different tourist wrote, '[What a f]antastic place; all the family loved it! [It's] brilliant! [There's] lots to see and do. I would recommend [it] to others, most definitely.'

4.1.3 Dracula. The theme of Dracula is an important theme for tourists. This includes the concepts of ‘royal’ (36, 27%), ‘family’ (36, 23%), ‘Vlad the Impaler’ (67, 48%) ‘history’ (153, 20%), ‘Romanian’ (52, 27%), ‘information’ (54%, 28%), ‘real’ (60, 38%) and ‘legend’ (70, 48%). These could be linked to tourists’ interpretation of the castle, which focuses on the history of the place and its royal owners and frequent connections between reality and legends (i.e. fiction).

A typical review concerning the historical theme is as follows:

I visited this place in January. I must say that it looks amazing during winter. It’s a place with a lot of history and culture, so this is why I think [it] is wonderful. I was surprised that here I found information about Dracula and ghouls, so this is a reason to visit for all . . . vampire lovers.

Another guest wrote:

[It’s w]orth a visit for its beauty and to see the art and furniture collected by Queen Marie, who was a very impressive woman. Our visit was especially interesting because David Jalea, our guide from East Adventures, explained the history to us.

A different visitor shared:

It is the real Dracula’s [c]astle, full of history, [and it] gives you a strange feeling walking on those old stoned [sic] ways [and] narrow stairs. I recommend you take a tour with a guide[,] so he can answer all your questions. It is a wonderful place.

[There are l]ots of souvenirs.

In a similar post, one tourist wrote, ‘This is the most famous Romanian place to visit. The vampire legends make things more interesting and [it] is a great historical place to visit too.’

4.1.4 Inside. This theme is linked with the concepts ‘rooms’ (57, 12%), ‘views’ (41, 10%), ‘furniture’ (29, 17%) and ‘old’ (18, 11%). The castle’s interior is also evaluated in relation to visitors’ subjective imagination (‘old’), with tangible (‘furniture’ and ‘rooms’) and intangible attributes (‘views’).

A delighted tourist stated:

You can see old furniture pieces and their original layout, the view of Bran village, the garden, torture room, etc. I was enchanted of [sic] the old furniture [and] architecture. [There’s a g]reat view from the top of the castle rooms.

Another guest shared:

[I w]ent here with some friend of mine some time ago. The castle is really beautiful and contains wonderful views and rooms. It’s filled with information about [C]ount

Dracula and the royal family who used to reside here from time to time. [This is h]ighly recommended.

4.1.5 Outside. This theme includes the concepts ‘entrance’ (28, 18%), ‘people’ (32, 10%), ‘crowded’ (17, 06%) and ‘outside’ (15, 06%). These concepts point out key features contributing to tourists’ experiences: the crowds and exterior design of the site. A tourist noted that the castle is ‘[a]bsolutely beautiful. . . . [M]y friend [and I] went after wanting to go ever since we were younger. Inside and outside[,] everywhere you look it is full of outstanding architecture.’

Another visitor shared:

[This is a g]reat place to visit, full of information about the many people who have lived in this castle. It was very crowded (only to be expected) but I really enjoyed my tour. As I have wanted to go for years I was delighted to visit Bran Castle.

A guest wrote:

This is a beautiful castle in a great setting. The rooms are interesting, with multiple staircases to help you get around. The views from the upper floors are fantastic! This place gets really crowded (a lot of day-trippers from Brasov and Bucharest, as well as tour groups and cruise groups), so be prepared to spend some time getting around to all of the rooms.

An additional tourist wrote:

Bran Castle is a beautiful[,] well preserved structure worth . . . [the] drive [there]. [The i]nterior of the castle is much less interesting. Endless stalls are scattered all around the entrance presenting the regular tourist brikbraks [sic]. If you drive to the castle, drive [on] the road south[:] it is a beautiful drive through the mountains.

4.1.6 Stairs. The theme of stairs contains the concepts ‘steep’ (29, 23%) and ‘experience’ (1, 01%). The stairs are an attribute pointed out by many tourists, either as a positive feature contributing to the castle’s expected mystery and architecture or as a negative element making tourist access difficult.

The tourists usually state their positive reaction clearly: ‘[This place has l]ots of history and [it’s] an amazing experience! [There are l]ots of tourists from all over the world so that is a pretty nice feeling. You must visit the castle once in your lifetime!’ Another wrote, ‘I . . . travel[led] this summer to Transylvania and wanted to see the place where [the] Dracula story begins. It was a great experience for me and my family.’

One visitor also said:

This castle was nice [and] well worth a trip[,] and when you get to the top[,] the views over Transylvania are wonderful[. It's] not really suitable for people with walking difficulties as it is a fairly steep climb with narrow stairways. All the information was in English as well[,] which was a bonus.

Another reviewer exclaimed, 'Wow. . . just wow! The architect of the castle design[ed] wonderful rooms and space[s]. Even the roof is unique. The secret path and stairs [were] create[d] with wisdom [sic] . . . Go and don't miss [this].'

Still another stated:

There's lots of stairs so [I] wouldn't suggest it for wheelchair users or [the] elderly. Some hallways are very small and some stairways small and steep. So if your [sic] larger built your [sic] also [going to] have a reduce[d] experience. I loved it tho[ugh]. [I t]ook many photos! [The tour is v]ery informative and well laid out.

A different tourist wrote, 'Bran [C]astle is a cute little castle, with its narrow hallways, many tight stairs and weird rooms.'

4.1.7 Tourist. This theme is connected with the concepts of 'tour' (19, 05%), 'area' (24, 09%), 'local' (18, 10%) and 'town' (21, 13%). These indicate the importance of the entire destination (i.e. town, area and place) to tourism and the area's integration into the castle experience.

One guest shared:

The castle is well-kept, and has great historical information. The tour is easy and self-paced, [and] gives you a real sense of the past and how it was to live in such a place. The grounds are green, nicely landscaped[:] a nice family-friendly place to visit. Our stay in Bran was quiet, relaxing and one of our favorites. We hope to go back soon.

Another visitor also embraced this theme:

We really enjoyed our trip to Bran. The town is quite small but quaint and the local people were very friendly and helpful despite the language barrier. The castle is a perfect setting for 'Dracula's [c]astle'. The various rooms are set out really well. Some are basically furnished, others provide really good information around [sic] legends (of which there are many in Transylvania). The local market is also very interesting, as is the central bar which serves Dracula Beer! It's lovely and definitely worth a try!

4.1.8 Trip. The theme of trip includes the concepts ‘Brasov’ (49, 18%), ‘Bucharest’ (20, 18%), ‘day’ (52, 20%) and ‘bus’ (22, 13%). Bucharest is the most frequent departure point for Dracula tours organised for foreign tourists (Stoleriu, 2014), and Brasov is another key tourist destination – for transit stays or departures – in the proximity of Bran. Many tours are organised as day trips from these two cities.

A tourist shared, [This is an o]utrageous castle[. I]f you visit Romania, don’t miss this castle and Brasov city. You will [be] very pleased.’ Another guest wrote:

Just 2 hours from Bucharest, there is a small city called Bran, in . . . [which is] situated a very small and very prity [sic] [c]astle. People say that this [c]astle is the [c]astle of Dracula. It seems that only yesterday Dracula left the [c]astle, leaving everything behind him. Everything is very well preserved. [This is a] very nice place to visit.

4.1.9 Dracula’s castle. This theme reproduces the castle’s nickname on TripAdvisor and in many people’s imagination, which is reinforced by the media. An American woman stated:

This is the castle of a child’s imagination (and mine as well). [It has l]ots of tiny stairways, rooms of varying sizes with lots of items to see, great vistas seen out of the small windows, a central court with a well and plenty of atmosphere. The Dracula story adds to the history of the place whether he was actually there or not and [the] information posted in English (as well as Romanian) in many of the rooms give[s] the visitor a sense of the place. Our whole group really enjoyed this castle where you could wander around at your leisure and spend as much time as you like. It is a relatively steep climb up the road from the tourist shops at the base of the castle hill and there are quite a few steps (some narrow and dark) within the castle itself so those with mobility problems may not enjoy. We all loved it.

A Romanian tourist shared, ‘[This is a]n old castle which gives you a wonderful view. [It is in a v]ery nice location in the mountains. If you want to meet Count Dracula then go and visit him!’

4.1.10 Souvenirs. The theme of souvenirs contains the concepts ‘shops’ (76, 41%) and ‘market’ (41, 25%). This indicates the role of shopping and local commerce in tourist behaviour. Souvenirs reinforce the special meaning that tourists associate with Bran Castle.

A typical review says, ‘It’s a beautiful castle at the edge of a hill . . . [with a g]reat view and the environment is accordingly foggy. The structure is very well preserved. Around

the castle you will find a lot of shops to buy souvenirs.’ One tourist wrote, ‘[This place is n]ice and interesting, [with a] beautiful view and [it’s] not too expensive. The market nearby is also worth a visit.’ Another guest stated:

[This is a g]reat castle. [I l]oved . . . walking around the rooms and corridors. The ticket price was reasonable. The surroundings were also beautiful [so] don’t miss . . . [going on] a walk. The market place outside the castle is beautiful and one can find very interesting artefacts.

4.1.11 Experience. A typical review about the overall experience is:

Placed in between the hills in this lovely part of Romania[,] I found this a wonderful experience full of culture, history and peace. Bran [C]astle or Vlad the Impaler’s castle is a must visit for anyone travelling through Romania wanting to see a true piece of history and great architecture, and of course . . . [understand] the true tales of Dracula. [I a]bsolutely loved the experience and the town also is very warm . . . to tourists. . . . [I h]ighly recommend [it]!

Another guest wrote:

Although much of the castle is restricted to tourists, you still get an eerily personal feeling of what it would have been like to live there. Perfectly positioned, it’s no wonder it has lasted so long and was a vestibule for trade for so long. Bran Castle is a must-see when it comes to a Romanian experience.

A different visitor shared:

It was a great experience. The castle is extremely interesting with a beautiful yard and surroundings. [It is h]ighly recommended . . . [that you] visit the ‘torture chamber’, [even] consider[ing] that you will have to buy additional tickets to visit this part of the castle.

4.2 Different Satisfaction Rating Groups’ Representations of the Bran Castle Experience

The second research objective was to determine whether satisfied and dissatisfied tourists include different representations in narratives about their experiences of Bran Castle and, thus, share different content online. Several Kruskal-Wallis H tests were also performed to show whether satisfaction levels vary according to gender, nationality and a special occasion.

The results revealed statistically significant results only for the special occasion (i.e. Halloween). The new concept map is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Satisfaction rating groups' representations of the Bran Castle experience

Source: Authors

4.2.1 Halloween and five ratings. People who are more satisfied (i.e. rating 5) with their experience of the castle and their trip there express greater enthusiasm around Halloween. In a review entitled 'Amazing Castle', an American tourist who visited in October 2016 wrote, 'Bran [C]astle is just what you would expect for Dracula's castles (even if it's not). [It has l]arge turrets, winding stone corridors and if it wasn't full of tourists[, it] probably would feel creepy too.'

The American visitor who wrote the review, 'Scary Fun', said, '[There are g]reat details and lots of history on poster boards throughout the castle. [There was a]lso . . . [a] new wing [all] about torture.' A Turkish tourist contributed a review called 'Dracula's House', which reported that 'Romanians [are] marketing this place as Dracula's home. [That's h]ard to believe. But [this is] a must-see place . . . [with g]ood sight-seeing roads from Bucharest to Bran.'

4.2.2 Dissatisfaction and no Halloween context. Tourists expressed dissatisfaction and made complaints more often in the months not associated with Halloween. Visitors' discontent was connected with the crowds, disappointment with the furniture inside and the outside stairs.

One guest shared dissatisfaction about the crowds in a review entitled 'Interesting but Overcrowded' with a three rating:

It is interesting to visit the castle and learn about the history of its inhabitants[:] there are a lot of showrooms and information boards around. Sadly the whole place is totally overcrowded with tourists and souvenir shops, there is a long cue at the entry and the narrow paths in the castle are totally clogged with people. I wouldn't visit this place again; its charm gets destroyed by all the people around.

Another guest wrote a post with the title 'Tourist Trap' and a two rating:

[I v]isited Bran on a Friday afternoon and the whole village and castle was full of tourists, [so I] couldn't get any feeling . . . [for] the place because of all [the] vendors selling souvenirs. T[his is a t]ourist trap. The castle was beautiful to see from the outside but the inside bored me. . . . [It's f]ull of people and quite 'modernly' [sic]

furnished. I would only recommend Bran [C]astle if [you are] driving by, [as it's] not worth an extra drive/trip. Instead [you should] go to Peles and other castles.

A different tourist's review had the title 'Overrated' and gave the castle a one rating, stating that '[t]here are way too many difficult stairs for no more quality than one encounters [around] here. The little town is interesting and worth a stroll, however.'

5. Conclusion

The main dimensions of the Bran Castle experience were identified based on Web reviews shared online by international tourists. In addition, the main dimensions linked with satisfaction and dissatisfaction were isolated. Finally, greater satisfaction was connected with the special occasion of Halloween.

These results have both theoretical and managerial implications. From a methodological perspective, the approach followed has the advantage of allowing researchers to collect a larger sample with a minimum of human intervention, as compared with previous studies on this subject matter that employed visitor surveys, participatory observation (Light, 2009; Muresan & Smith, 1998; Reijnders, 2011) and content analysis of blogs (Banyai, 2009) and travel websites (Hovi, 2014; Stoleriu, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, the results provide a deeper understanding of the Bran Castle experience from the visitors' perspective. The analysis revealed the existence of 11 themes: castle, visit, Dracula, inside, tourist, outside, trip, souvenirs, stairs, Dracula's castle and experience. The narratives in reviews offer a broad overview of the Bran Castle experience.

While tourists start by describing their experience with the trip to Transylvania, the first theme describes the Bran Castle experience as starting with the castle tour. The role of Dracula-themed tours have similarly been highlighted by previous studies (Banyai, 2009; Hovi, 2014; Stoleriu, 2014).

The theme of visit links the Transylvania trip with Bran Castle. This is in accordance with the popular imagination that links this region of Romania with both geographic and mental meanings (Reijnders, 2011). Transylvania is not only a province of Romania but also the mysterious location of Dracula's land. Imaginary images of Dracula's castle link Dracula and Bran Castle and motivate Dracula tourism (Stoleriu, 2014).

The theme of Dracula describes Dracula tourism, underlining the role of the media (i.e. books and films) in tourists' experiences (Light, 2007). This theme links Bran Castle visits with the Dracula stories previously encountered by tourists. These findings are in accordance with prior studies that have pointed out that tourists seek to visit Dracula's castle because they are searching for the literary or movie origins of Dracula. They may also be looking for supernatural creatures or simply unusual holiday experiences (Light, 2007, p. 254; Light, 2009, p. 245) and/or connecting fiction to real places and events (Reijnders, 2011).

The themes of castle, inside, outside and stairs describe the tangible aspects of tourists' experiences. Visitors might share their descriptions online because they have previously imagined Dracula's castle and Transylvania as including architecture like that of Bran Castle (Reijnders, 2011). These themes underline the importance of tourists' experiences of the castle and their interest in the rooms and furniture. In addition, the theme of souvenirs highlights the importance of shopping for items with Transylvania's name to keep tourists' experiences fresh in their memory (Light, 2009).

The analyses also revealed that tourists are more satisfied around Halloween. From a theoretical point of view, this result emphasises the importance of special occasions as a market segmentation variable. Furthermore, Bran Castle extremely rarely especially caters to Dracula or/and thrills fans since, the rest of the year, castle tours and information focus mainly on history and culture.

From a managerial perspective, the results offer a clearer picture of tourists' journey. Tourists start by describing their experience with the castle tour. This highlights the importance of coordinating different activities and guiding visitors to improve their overall experience. Because tourists travelling to Transylvania around Halloween are more satisfied, managers should continue planning activities during this period to reinforce this satisfaction. Tourism agencies could also organise more themed events focused on this specialised market segment of tourists seeking for the imaginary Dracula's castle.

The results also emphasise the importance of shop souvenirs that complete tourists' authentic experiences and stimulate memories of the place. Therefore, authentic souvenir shops with a wide range of items could improve visitors' experiences. A palette of specialised souvenirs could be offered, addressing different market segments and matching their special interests (i.e. in Transylvania, Dracula, history and/or the royal family).

The results also reveal room for improvement in the Bran Castle experience, namely, during crowded periods. More efficient visitor management and a better staging of the entire

site (i.e. exterior and interior) could strongly improve tourist satisfaction and the castle's online reputation. An integrated approach to visitors' experience includes the tourism management of Bran village, which could also be a competitive advantage, as suggested by the theme of tourist and its concepts of town, local and area.

The methodology applied here has some limitations. First, only reviews in English were collected. Second, although the results show that tourists visiting around Halloween are more satisfied, it was not possible to verify whether this derives from a better experience provided by the castle's managers or from these tourists' stronger engagement with the Dracula story. Future studies could assess tourists' experiences more globally by including different Dracula-related tourism attractions in order to compare the role of the geographical location of attractions in visitors' overall experience.

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Figure 1

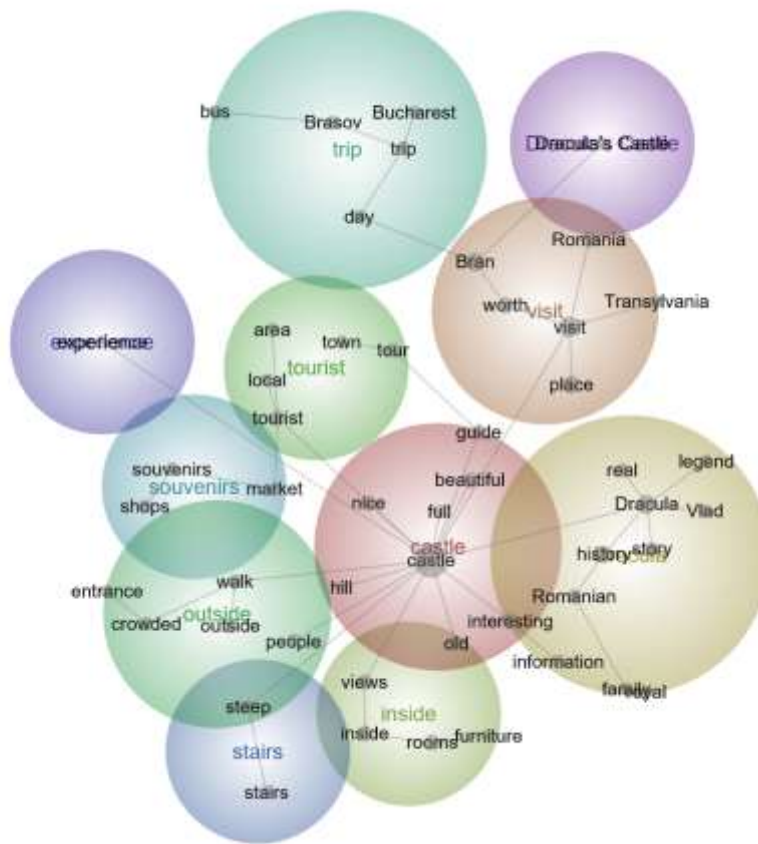


Figure 2

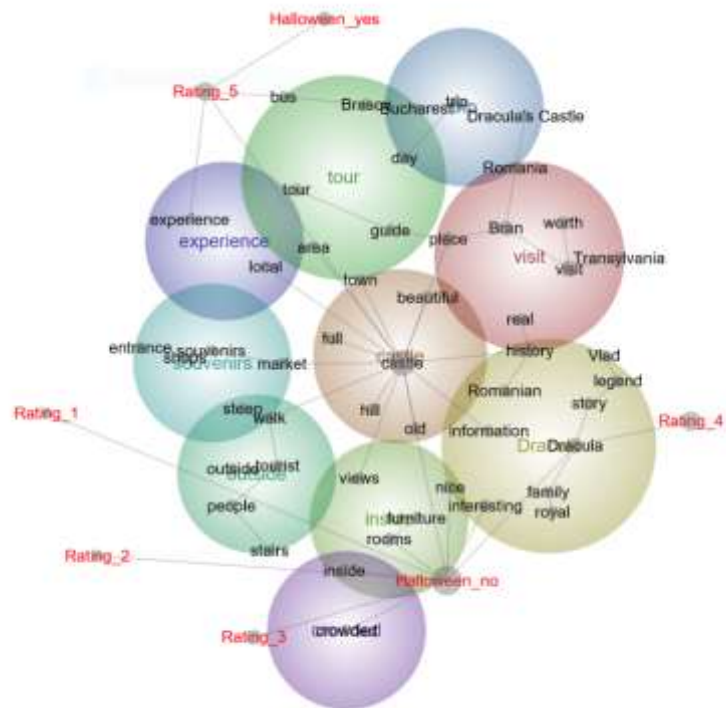


Figure 3

Table 1. Sample profile

Variable	Category	Count	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	724	43.54%
	Male	939	56.46%
Satisfaction Rating	1	48	2.53%
	2	108	5.69%
	3	370	19.50%
	4	713	37.59%
	5	658	34.69%
Month (January 2010–February 2017)	January	73	3.84%
	February	98	5.16%
	March	93	4.89%
	April	139	7.31%
	May	189	9.94%
	June	184	9.68%
	July	217	11.42%
	August	292	15.36%
	September	215	11.31%
	October	199	10.47%
	November	116	6.10%
	December	86	4.52%
Geographical Area	Europe	936	65.41%
	Northern America	409	28.58%
	Africa	12	0.84%
	Australia	74	5.17%
Halloween	yes	313	16.41%
	no	1,594	83.59%

Source: Authors

