

## (Not so) Dark tourism: The Merry Cemetery in Săpânța (Romania) – An expression of folk culture

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### ABSTRACT

Starting from the latest studies, which support the idea that the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța is a dark tourist attraction, this article examines whether this idea is fully justified. The approach is based on a careful analysis of the literature and a rigorous study of the origins, historical and cultural features, as well as characteristics of the cemetery's uniqueness. The article uses a questionnaire applied throughout the year 2018 to the people who visited the cemetery to find out what it is associated with, the reasons why they visited it and whether the visit was enjoyable or, on the contrary, macabre. While analysing the results and examining them according to the literature, the article shows that the Merry Cemetery is perceived more as a place of folk culture and less as a dark tourist attraction. The experiences, feelings and emotions of visitors are overwhelmingly positive, in contrast to those specific to dark tourism. Research data shows that the elements that make it unique (humorous, satirical or ironic epitaphs, wooden carved crosses, naive paintings and the blue of Săpânța) must play a greater role in changing the promotion paradigm and its management as a tourist destination.

### 1. Introduction

Dark tourism is a form of niche tourism with an increasingly accelerated development, considered by many researchers as part of the cultural and patrimonial tourism (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Light, 2017; Logan & Reeves, 2011; Seaton, 2001; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1952), which appeared slightly less than two centuries ago at the scientific level (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Although there is no clear information on the dark tourism market (number of tourists and incomes), the popularity of such sites depends on the number of tourists who visit them. The motivations are overwhelmingly diverse (Light, 2017) and depend on factors such as cultural forces that stimulate human behaviour in the desire to explore the unknown, the unusual and the paranormal (Future Market Insight, 2018). For a better match between supply and demand, Stone (2006) proposed a classification of dark sites based on six shades according to the level of perception of the macabre. Before him, Miles (2002) had referred to a spectrum using only three categories, authenticity being the only criterion of separation.

The information above leads the debate to the large context of dark tourism, including various objectives which, unfortunately, do not clarify to what extent cemeteries can be classified as dark tourism destinations. Since Sapanta – a medium-sized rural settlement located in the north-western part of Romania, in the historical province of

Maramures, almost 500 km away from Bucharest – attracts an increasing number of tourists, mainly due to the Merry Cemetery, it represents an appropriate case study. The settlement is at the top of Maramures tourist destinations according to National Geographic Travel (2014), which includes the Merry Cemetery and the Maramures wooden churches on the list of destinations not to be missed. The carved wooden crosses, painted in living colours, and especially the epitaphs made the Merry Cemetery a true example of good practice in the field of local tourism and among the most important international tourism destinations of Romania (Ilieș & Hotea, 2000). The influence of the satire and the humor of the epitaphs, as well as the rich naive popular art, change the perception of the local people and visitors regarding the cemeteries and death as shown by the present work.

This research represents an important contribution to the domain literature as it analyses a geographic space that was less studied as dark tourism, both in Romania and abroad. The main objective of the research is to find out whether cemeteries are eminently sites of death or not. The main reason we chose to research the Merry Cemetery is because we noticed that some researchers define it as a dark tourist attraction, with “a dark holistic image” (Stoleriu, 2014), which can be included in dark tourist packages (Patrichi, 2013). When discussing the European cemetery route, Millan, Naranjo, Rojas and Vazquez de la Torre (Millan, Naranjo, Rojas, & Vazquez De La Torre, 2019: 41) states

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that cemetery tourism is a sub-section of dark tourism and mentions, among other cemeteries, the Merry Cemetery. Not only researchers, but also mass media (Necula, 2011; Pepper & Werden, 2017) and travel agencies (see the Transylvania Live travel agency offer published in the *Mesagerul de Cluj* according to Răvoiu and Almasi (2011)) have defined the Merry Cemetery as a dark tourism destination. When we began to investigate the subject and reflect on the data collected, it became clear that the Merry Cemetery requires a complex approach to better fit into certain theoretical segments of the domain literature. According to some researchers, this cemetery is a place of dark tourism (Bardan & Imre, 2014; Millan et al., 2019; Patrichi, 2013) and thanatourism (Johnston, 2015), because it is a place of death and about the idea of dying, because it houses the bodies of former members of the community who were buried in its premises, on one hand. On the other hand, this is a local cultural expression (Curşeu & Pop-Curşeu, 2011; Kwiatkowska, Timofte, Glińska-Lewczuk, & Marks, 2015; Rusu-Tanasă, 2015) and a cultural and patrimonial tourism destination (Cheregi, 2018; Koşinszki & Măran, 2013; Sabou, Aluculesi, Gheorghe, & Nistoreanu, 2015; Shaker Ardekani, Akhgar, & Zabihi, 2015; Straton, 2016). Cultural tourism has developed a lot in Maramures in the last three centuries, and people have begun to be attracted by the wooden churches and monasteries that are a few centuries old, by the beautifully carved portals of the households and the traditional folk clothing of Maramures in general and by the Merry Cemetery in particular. Dark tourism also reveals to visitors and potential tourists a growing number of Romanian sites, not to be missed. Along with the Communist heritage – the Memorial of Pain, one of the best-established museums dedicated to the communist horrors, located in Sighetu Marmatiei, also in Maramures – and Bran Castle (Dracula's Castle), the Merry Cemetery is among the few dark tourism attractions to be found in the portfolio of tourism agencies (Patrichi, 2013).

This article uses data obtained by applying a perception questionnaire to discuss the manner and the extent to which the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța can be considered a dark site. Using the methodology of the six classes of dark tourism shades, we tried to find out how macabre the Merry Cemetery was for the participants, and the results showed that this site is not at all as dark as a simple classification based on the criterion of authenticity, for example, can prove. Here is the point where the article makes a substantial contribution to the domain literature: by linking all of the data we could see that visiting the cemeteries is not always macabre and dark because those who chose to visit the Merry Cemetery did not do it to meet death, symbolically or for real, as Seaton (1996) considered, but for the humor of the epitaphs, the Blue colour of Săpânța and the sculpture of the crosses. Under these circumstances, the Săpânța Cemetery is a secular cultural site rather

than a dark one.

## 2. Dark tourism: an analysis of the field literature

### 2.1. The concept origins and evolution

Dark tourism is a product of the circumstances and/or economic, social, political and technological factors specific to the contemporary world (Blom, 2000). According to Stone and Sharpley (2008), Wight (2006) and others, dark tourism may have had its conceptual origins in the work of the British authors John Tunbridge and Ashworth (1952). In fact, the concept was introduced in the literature by Lennon and Foley, in Lennon & Foley, 2000, in the book *Dark Tourism. The Attraction of Death and Disaster*. At about the same time, another researcher in the field, Seaton (1996), launched the concept of thanatourism, borrowed from the god Thanatos (Cismaru, 2011) that personified death in ancient Greece (Brown, 1960), and referring to tourism in the spaces marked by death.

Two decades have passed since dark tourism was proposed, and after 2010 the interest in dark tourism (and thanatourism) has increased very much (Light, 2017). Hooper (2017) believes that the increase in research was mainly due to tourist sites in Eastern Europe and surrounding areas. If, as Seaton (1996) states, death is that unique heritage shared by everyone and, at the same time, the oldest tourism aspect compared to any other form of patrimony, then Light (2017) sees himself entitled to say that thanatourism is much older than dark tourism. However, the latter imposed itself at the expense of the former. At a simple search of “dark tourism” on Google it can be seen that the number of links amounts to almost four million, while there are slightly more than 18,600 for “thanatourism”. If we exclude the academic environment, we will see that dark tourism enjoys special attention also in the media: blogs, websites, newspaper articles, popularity magazines, TV programs and others.

### 2.2. Definitions and terminology

Dark tourism is used as an umbrella term for many forms of tourism that are somehow related to death, suffering, atrocities, tragedies or crimes (Light, 2017). Consequently, according to Seaton (1996: 240), it is defined as a journey “to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death”. It is almost impossible to analyse dark tourism without considering thanatourism.

According to Light (2017), who revises and classifies the most important definitions in the domain literature, dark tourism is defined by

death	disaster/ calamity	violence	crimes against humanity	entertain ment	suffering
			pain	satisfaction	commem oration
			depravity	education	emotion
			pleasure	remembrance	impact our lives
macabre/ horror					sadness

Fig. 1. The main key words in domain literature defining dark tourism and thanatourism. Source: adaptation of Light, 2017: 282.

five functional categories: (Bardan & Imre, 2014) tourism practices, (Baudrillard, 2019) tourism activity in certain places, (Beech, 2009) motivation, (Blom, 2000) lived experience, and (Blom, 2008) heritage. Starting from Light's (2017) analysis, we have drawn Fig. 1 that shows the frequency of most common keywords in definitions and the results are shown below. In summary, most of the definitions are contextual and, therefore, in my opinion, dark tourism is the activity which enables the tourist to face death, disasters and violence, involving a higher or lower dose of macabre, pain and sufferance (historical or emotional) with an emotional impact on the life of individuals, either for commemoration, education or for leisure purposes.

Stone and Sharpley (2008) considered that this type of tourism is helpful to people as it determines them to face some issues of personal importance. Japanese studies, Yoshida, Bui, and Lee (2016), suggest that dark tourism has an educational, commemorative role and awareness of certain social hazards. Under these circumstances, dark tourism may have as much to do with life and livelihood as it has with the dead and with death.

As for terminology, there are many words referring to dark tourism. Regarding the conceptual umbrella of dark tourism in the domain literature, there is contextual terminology such as:

- penal/prison tourism (Strange & Kempa, 2003);
- fright tourism (Bristow & Newman, 2005);
- genocide tourism (Beech, 2009);
- grief tourism (O'Neill, 2002; Trotta, 2006);
- disaster tourism (Miller, 2008; Van Hoving, Wallis, Docrat, & De Vries, 2010);
- pagan tourism (Laws, 2013);
- suicide tourism (Dyer, 2003);
- atomic tourism (Tufnell, 2012);
- conflict heritage tourism (Mansfeld & Korman, 2015);
- difficult heritage tourism (Logan & Reeves, 2011);
- dystopian dark tourism (Podoshen, Venkatesh, Wallin, Andrzejewski, & Jin, 2015) etc.

On the other hand, considering thanatology, dark tourism was differently named, rather semantically: thanatourism (Dann & Seaton, 2001; Hartmann, 2014; Seaton, 1996, 1999; Slade, 2003), morbid (Blom, 2000, 2008), black-spot (Rojek, 1993), paid masochism (Straton, 2016) or milking the macabre (Dann, 1998: 35) etc.

### 2.3. Dark tourism classification and spectrum

Dark tourist attractions have been classified in many ways. The most frequently cited classifications are by far those based on authenticity, the perception of the macabre and the quality/intensity of the experiences.

Authenticity, considered by Cohen (1988) eminently a modern value, is an important theme in the tourism literature (Bryce, Curran, O'Gorman, & Taheri, 2015; Cohen, 2007; Hughes, 1995; Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak, & Morrison, 2017; Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016; Ramkissoon, 2015; Wang, 1999; Zhu, 2015). In short, this implies that the artifacts, sites, objectives and tourist activities are true, accurate and real (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). However, it is neither constructive nor academically appropriate that authenticity should be regarded in a simple manner. The conceptualization of authenticity in profile studies is often classified into four major approaches: objectivist, constructivist, postmodernist and existentialist (Reisinger, 2018). The main idea of the objectivist approach is that there are objective, clear criteria, which are therefore devoid of any doubt, by means of which the attractions can be cataloged as authentic (Wang, 1999). If subjective experiences and personal interests cannot be removed, then, in response, the constructivist approach appears in order to establish that the complex nature of authenticity is the result of social creation (Hughes, 1995) and,

consequently, authenticity becomes symbolic (Wang, 1999). Currently, a significant part of the research focuses on this issue of built authenticity (Cohen, 2007). The postmodern approach is also increasingly present in tourism research. Technology makes inauthentic attractions look authentic or hyper-real (Baudrillard, 2019). The last approach, the existentialist one, claims that authenticity focuses on human nature and its existence. Authenticity is a human attribute focusing on the idea of being your true self or being true to the essential nature of a person (Reisinger, 2018), an object, a place or an event.

When authenticity interacts with dark tourism, one may expect that dark sites will not only be essential regarding their own events, realities and characteristics, but they will also convey mainly negative emotions and experiences to visitors. By applying reason and knowledge (Reisinger, 2018), the perception induced to the visitors regarding the authenticity of the dark sites must be directly proportional to the 'story' they evoke. Thus, Miles (2002) appreciates that dark tourism sites should be *classified according to their authenticity*. Places marked by death are authentic, while those *associated* to death are less or not at all authentic. Thus, he proposes a differentiation of dark sites starting from their level of authenticity, arguing for a three-degree value spectrum: dark, darker, the darkest.

The dark sites, especially the cemeteries, cause unpleasant sensations to many people. The macabre suggests the idea of death, mourning and grief, making it a fundamental feature of cemeteries and inspiring fear. *According to the perception of the macabre*, Stone (2006), by taking over and developing Miles's idea, proposes a spectrum of six value groups. This time, the defining criterion is the perception of the macabre. The spectrum goes from the darkest, darker, dark to light, lighter and the lightest products of dark tourism. The lightest dark tourism products are dominated by the infrastructure which is specifically designed for tourism, education and commercial purposes, while those not covered by the special infrastructure are at the opposite end. According to the theoretical line drawn here by Stone, it would be a major misconception to place in the same category those who want to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps and those who want to live "strong sensations" by accommodating in Dracula Castel Hotel on Halloween or make an itinerary starting from the famous *Schindler's List* movie (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2007).

*According to the quality/intensity of the experiences*, Tunbridge and Ashworth (2017) recommend that the approach and classification of dark sites should be made taking into account the quality/intensity of the feelings they provide. According to Wight (2006), contemporary analyses in the field emphasize tourists' motivation and interpretation when visiting classified tourism places. Sites can have variable visitor intensity: light/dark, weak/strong, while it is very difficult to quantify duration. Tourists' response can also be varied. It can take the form of horror, disgust or unusual fascination. Consequently, because it is almost impossible to fully quantify feelings and intensity, Tunbridge and Ashworth (2017) believe that any tourist experience can be regarded as dark by any person at a certain time. Therefore, the authors note, the problem is about the shade of darkness, intensity and duration of experiences that can elucidate the concept of dark tourism.

### 2.4. Motivations

The visitors' reasons for choosing dark tourism destinations were little known for a long period of time. The research related to these reasons is still incomplete and focused on particular case studies. Under these circumstances, Light (2017) has recently managed to gather the main reasons and to make them clear by arranging/organizing them. His ample article on progress in the field of dark tourism and thanatourism proposes a long list and an overwhelming variety of reasons: (a) the desire and opportunity for education, learning and understanding of what happened in the place that is visited; (b) simple curiosity; (c) the connection of visitors to the family legacy or personal connection to the place; (d) the desire to see in order to believe, to understand better or to

connect with the visited place; (e) the desire for leisure; (f) pilgrimage; (g) interest in history and/or culture; (h) remembrance; (i) sense of moral duty, obligation, consciousness; (j) interest in death, morbid curiosity; (k) visit as part of an organized itinerary; (l) visiting a place related to national identity; (m) visit to a place “not to be missed”; (n) the desire to honour ancestors; (o) the desire to contact and connect to death, black events and violence; (p) recommendations; (q) to see famous places associated with death; (r) spending time with friends and other motivations.

In summary, according to the same author, the first two motivations above are the most relevant: the educational desire and opportunity and curiosity. Then there is a set of seven motivations, from (c) to (i), with higher frequency, followed by the others (j)-(r) with less relevant academic identification. Such a broad structure of motivation may be a useful methodological tool in the analysis of dark tourism sites, which is why we have appealed to it in this research.

### 2.5. Emotions

Similar to motivations, emotions play a decisive role in shaping tourist experiences (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Knobloch, Robertson, & Aitken, 2017; Robinson & Picard, 2017), but as many researchers agree (Li, Scott, & Walters, 2015; Parrott, 2001), a unanimously accepted definition has proved to be elusive. Having to do with complex, spontaneous and often momentary affective reactions, accompanied by ‘physiological disorders’ that mirror individuals’ attitude towards reality, emotions are not a simple phenomenon that can be clearly noticed (Davidson, Bondi, & Smith, 2016).

The psychology of emotions is based on certain laws governing the evaluation of experiences in relation to the purposes, motives and concerns of individuals (Frijda, 2017). In addition, emotions are composed of a complex set of interactions between subjective and objective factors that are mediated by neural and hormonal systems that can: “(a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labeling processes; (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) leads to behavior that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptive” (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981: 355).

Among the first references to the importance of emotions in shaping the desire to commemorate someone or something are those reported by Frijda (2017). Suggestive in this respect is the appreciation that the commemoration of deceased persons involves a mixture of feelings and behaviors that often take place in cemeteries. After Levitt (2012), the main features of cemeteries are commemoration and solemnity. They appear to people by generating contrasting, sometimes contradictory emotions, especially when they become tourist attractions and pilgrimage areas (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Recent research has attempted to develop a conceptual and methodological model for measuring the emotions of tourists (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Li et al., 2015), which proved to be quite difficult. Among the preferred subjects were the measurement of the emotions determined by tourist advertising (Li, Walters, Packer, & Scott, 2018; Moyle, Moyle, Bec, & Scott, 2019) and the observation of the eyes of the visitors with the psychophysiological measurement of skin conductance and cardiac rhythm variability (Scott, Zhang, Le, & Moyle, 2019).

The most accurate knowledge of feelings through the perceived effects on the body is applied in critical studies on art (Locher, Krupinski, Mello-Thoms, & Nodine, 2007) and natural landscapes (Leder, Mitrovic, & Goller, 2016). As such, in tourism, knowing emotions is necessary to determine how visitors perceive and interact with realistic scenarios (Scott et al., 2019). The exploratory study by Nawijn, Isaac, Gridnevskiy, and Van Liempt (2018) on concentration camps shows a duality of the emotional response expected by visitors, involving both positive and negative emotions. Among the elements considered, what the authors refer to as variables, the most important were: disgust,

shock, compassion, sadness, interest, worship, anger, gratitude, fascination and calm. Many of these variables have been agreed to be of utmost importance for dark tourism (Nawijn & Filep, 2016). Tourists’ experiences, according to Filep and Deery (2010), may sometimes be negative so that tourist happiness can finally be achieved. Although tourists (may not) feel intense feelings of pleasure in dark tourist contexts, this does not mean that such experiences are lacking in positive emotions (Nawijn & Filep, 2016).

### 3. Research methodology

This research is structured on two main levels. The first level is the analysis of the domain literature dedicated to the two central elements of the study (dark tourism and the Merry Cemetery), and the second level is related to the research of the visitors’ perception regarding the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța, according to the theories of the dark tourism.

The first level, the analysis of the domain literature, is concerned not only with the history, the evolution and the way in which dark tourism (and thanatourism) was shaped as a concept, but mainly with the necessity of taking over the tools and methods of research that could be applied to the case study. Some other stages in approaching the case study derived from here. The first stage was the research of the definitions for a more accurate subsequent classification of the Săpânța cemetery under the conceptual umbrella. The second stage looked at how dark tourism sites were classified according to the previous analyses, aiming at applying the criteria of those classifications to this study. The third stage highlights the general theoretical motivations, also identified by other scholars, which they could be applied to the visitors of the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța. A great help was the summary of motivations made by Light (2017). We chose the motivations from the previous author’s list, as he makes a detailed analysis of the literature over the past two decades and accounts for the broad motivation palette identified by other authors in some of the most diverse studies and sites. And although it is not all-encompassing, since dark sites have specific peculiarities and visitors are extremely particular about the experiences and a list of fully satisfactory motivations is impossible to accomplish, we considered that, under the circumstances, the list is the most applicable to this study. In addition, tourists were given the freedom to mention other motivations if they were different from those in the list of the mentioned author. Last but not least, we made an analysis of the Merry Cemetery, accompanied by a summary of the domain literature dedicated to it.

The second level of the research implied the application of an online questionnaire (see Appendix) to highlight the participants’ appreciation regarding the Merry Cemetery, by reference to dark tourism, using analytical tools such as those mentioned above. Particular issues have been pursued such as: (a) the main element this tourist destination is associated with; (b) the most important reason for the visit; (c) the feelings and vibes perceived; (d) whether the visit to the Merry Cemetery was agreeable, macabre or otherwise; and (e) if the label of “tourist destination” affects its authenticity (Table 1).

Even though literature records several classifications of dark tourism, we preferred the six-shade spectrum developed by Stone (2006), which is based on the perceived level of the macabre, both for the pragmatism of its application in a questionnaire and because it is neither as restrictive as Miles’s (2002) classification which focuses on authenticity nor as vague as other typologies mentioned by Tunbridge and Ashworth (2017). We adapted Stone’s (2006) idea, which he had applied to the sites, to that of visitor perception, asking them on a scale of 1 to 6 how ghastly or cheerfully pleasing they felt during their visit. In terms of authenticity, we preferred to adapt Miles’s idea in order to measure how visits affect the authenticity of the place.

Because we cannot measure exactly the quality and intensity of feelings, we preferred a question that highlighted the feelings experienced by the participants. Visitors have been urged to choose from a

**Table 1**  
Source and methodology: the structure of the questionnaire.

No.	Question content	Question type	Answer type	Observations
1.	What is the first thing you associate with the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța?	Filter	precoded	one open question
2.	Of the listed features/aspects that would best describe the Merry Cemetery?	Opinion	precoded	one open question
3.	What was the most important motivation why you chose to visit the Merry Cemetery?	motivating the trip	precoded	–
4.	What were the feelings and emotions experienced during the Merry Cemetery visit?	Opinion	precoded	one open question
5.	How pleasant did you find visiting such a tourist destination?	psychological test	scale of 1–6	adapted from
6.	How groovy did you find the Merry Cemetery?	psychological test	scale of 1–6	Stone (2006)
7.	Cemeteries are considered to be dark tourist attractions. On a scale of 1 to 6, how dark do you consider the Merry Cemetery to be?	Control	scale of 1–6	
8.	How convenient / ethical do you find visiting the Merry Cemetery?	Opinion	precoded	–
9.	Would you recommend your friends to visit the Merry Cemetery?	opinion, control	precoded	–
10.	If YES, what would be the main reason why would you recommend it?	opinion, optional	open	–
11.	If NOT, what are the reasons why you would not recommend it?	opinion, optional	open	–
12.	The fact that the Merry Cemetery is a tourist attraction, do you think it is altering its authenticity?	opinion	precoded	–
13.	If YES, how much do you think the authenticity of the Merry Cemetery has been altered?	opinion, optional	scale of 1–10	–

number of ten emotions and feelings that best matches the experiences in the Merry Cemetery. In order not to influence the participants' response, the list was alphabetically built and included the following variables: amusement, anxiety, delight, depression, disgust, fear, good mood, grief, oripilation and restlessness. Similar to the motivation question, respondents were given the opportunity to mention other experiences and emotions. Secondly, the issues related to the merits and shortcomings of the Merry Cemetery, as well as the role of visitors as promoters of the increasing fame and the number of tourists in the future.

The questionnaire has 13 questions of several types and ran from January 26 to December 15, 2018, including a total of 221 respondents. It was created on the "Isondaje.ro" platform and it was distributed individually to the visitors by means of Facebook messenger. We collected data from people who are on Facebook groups dedicated to the Merry Cemetery and who appreciated and also commented on the visit they had paid there. Moreover, when distributing the questionnaire in order to be filled in, we did not take into account the assessments the visitors had already made or whether they had been positive or negative. The questionnaire was sent to all members of the online communities. All interviewees visited the Merry Cemetery between 2013 and 2018. The average age of the respondents was 36.2 years and varied between 12 and 70 years. The opinion of the participants under the age of 18 is not a vulnerability to the present research, but it is a particular qualitative aspect because, as Kerr and Price's (2018) study shows, more and more dark sites are visited by children. The authors note that the US Holocaust Memorial Museum is visited annually by more than 500,000 children and adolescents, Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial received over 18,500 school children as visitors, and Anne Frank House received over a million visitors in 2007, most of them high school students and young adults (Hartmann, 2014). There were 88 male and 133 female participants (Table 2). Geographically, the respondents came from both Romania (slightly over 90%) and abroad (slightly under 10%), most of them coming from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Ireland and the UK. The geographical distribution of those who live in Romania is quite balanced among the historical provinces.

**Table 2**  
Respondents' features: age, gender and education.

Age	Number of respondents	Gender	Education	Nationality
under 25	28	20 women 8 men	42,8% university degree 14,2% students 28,5% High School	89,2% Romanians 10,8% Foreigners
26–59	184	108 women 76 men	14,5% 10 years in school 73,3% university degree 23,4% High School 3,3% 10 years in school	91,3% Romanians 8,7% Foreigners
60 and over	9	5 women 4 men	55,5% university degree 44,5% High School	100% Romanians

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The historical and ethnographic origins of the Merry Cemetery

Săpânța is a rural settlement located in the north-western extremity of Romania, in the historical province of Maramures, only a few kilometres from the border with Ukraine. The geographic size of Maramures, which is called the depression of Maramures, located within the Eastern Carpathian mountain range, extends beyond the Romanian state border to Ukraine. The village covers an area of approximately 150 km<sup>2</sup>, relatively isolated in the valley of the Tisa River. As a result of the major changes it underwent, especially due to external factors and isolation, the village kept an acute sense of ownership and strict respect for traditions (Kwiatkowska, Timofte, Glińska-Lewczuk, & Marks, 2015). The settlement has a substantial history, being first mentioned in documents in 1373 under the Slavic-Romanian name of Zapancha (Suciu, 1967). The moment and the factors that determined its documentary attestation are very suggestive for the identity of the Merry Cemetery.

In the fourteenth century Săpânța was part of the Hungarian Kingdom. The documentary attestation refers to the outbreak of a conflict between the small Romanian nobles in the village, called *cneji* (Mazzoni, 2002), and the Hungarian and German settlers from a neighboring locality who had discretionary occupied certain properties of the Romanians (Pop-Curșeu, 2010). The conflict concerned the border dispute between two villages: Săpânța and Câmpulung la Tisa. Both settlements still keep their ethnic character today. At the 2002 census, Săpânța recorded 99.1% of ethnic Romanians, while Câmpulung la Tisa had almost 80% ethnic Hungarians. The Romanians are confessional Orthodox while the Hungarians are Protestant and Catholic, hence the religious connotation that ethnic tensions will take over time.

The conflict between the Romanians and the Hungarians had several moments of outburst. The occupation of two Orthodox monasteries in the mid-fifteenth century was a key moment in the attribution of a religious character to the medieval ethnic tensions. In the papers issued

to regulate the situation, there are several names of small Romanian nobles, including Stan (Mihalyi De Apşa, 2009). The nobles were intensely subjected to the Magyarization process, which, besides the spoken language, also involved the adoption of the Catholic religion. The non-acceptance of the Magyarization process, according to Pop-Curşeu (2010), led, in time, to the loss of the noble status and the transition to the status of a simple peasant for the Romanian cneji in the villages of Maramures. Some documents evoke the fact that many aspects of the noble families were preserved and that they also appeared two or three centuries later. Several surnames can be found in Săpânţa even today: Stan, Gherheş, Tivadar, Bosa, Finta and others. If we look at the crosses in the cemetery, we observe that they are the same as those that appear most often, indicating the perseverance and the endurance with which the orthodox Romanians stubbornly preserved their identity not only in Săpânţa, but all throughout Transylvania. Mazzoni (1999: 70) notes that Stan and Pop are the most common names on the crosses of the cemetery.

In spite of the general perception, the Merry Cemetery is a relatively recent creation, registering only six centuries since it began to attract the audience. The locals say the name of “the merry cemetery” was given by a group of French tourists in the 1970s and it was quickly embraced. Cap-Bun (2014) thinks that the name given by the French tourists was mainly inspired by the brightly coloured paintings on the crosses and not by the epitaphs, since it is unlikely, they could have read the lyrics on the cross. In addition, Paşcu (2014) says, the name assigned to the cemetery, and embraced by everyone else, is rather inappropriate. At present there are more than 800 crosses, some being cracked, contorted and eroded as they are old, while others are very new (Pop & Miclea, 1972).

The cultural origins behind the creation of cemetery are contested. Mocanu (2003), unlike other researchers (Curşeu & Pop-Curşeu, 2011; Pop & Miclea, 1972; Pop-Curşeu, 2010) who appreciate the cemetery as an Orthodox emanation, believes the naive paintings on the crosses are the expression of Celtic paganism, and the epitaphs represent the human behavioural profile that accompanies people, according to the Orthodox Christian rite, to the Last Judgment. In other words, here is the main influence, according to the historical chronology, of the Celtic origin at the expense of the Orthodox one. The author appreciates that the Merry Cemetery exists due to the fact that “in the village of Săpânţa a space that resembles a certain Celtic geographic place of the past was created” (Mocanu, 2003: 862). The cemetery, he adds, is the premise that led to Stan Ion Patras's creative impulse.

#### 4.2. The creator of the Merry Cemetery

Starting with the mid-1930s (Janjić & Darabuş, 2014; Pop & Miclea, 1972), Stan Ioan Patras, who very well knew his craft to carve porches for houses in the village and around, began to carve crosses of graves and to paint them (Mazzoni, 2002). The cemetery is, undoubtedly, the work of Stan Ion Patras: a folk sculptor, painter and poet at the same time (Janjić & Darabuş, 2014). His work was gradually built and was then continued by a disciple, since the idea launched by Patras became a *true institution* (Golopenţia, 2006) that was definitely extended at Săpânţa. At the beginning, Patras carved the name and the date of death of the deceased on the cross, then a short phrase, “certain words spoken by the dead himself” (Mazzoni, 2002: 531), and finally the famous rhymed lyrics appeared. The epitaphs created by Stan Ion Patras implied a general consensus among the inhabitants of the village, who rarely gave him suggestions (Mazzoni, 2002), which means that he was also a good observer of human typology and a good psychologist capable of capturing the identity of each dead person (Paşcu, 2014). When Asked about the poems on the crosses, Stan Ion Patras said, “they come to my mind while I am digging and painting. Years ago, I was only writing the name of the deceased and the date. Then I started writing lyrics; two lines at first, then four, then fourteen. Now I am doing as many as twenty, or more than twenty, depending on the story I am

telling” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 33). Paşcu (2014) even wonders whether the Merry Cemetery in Săpânţa is not a psychological cemetery.

#### 4.3. Death related to the Romanian culture and to the Merry Cemetery

Owing a lot to Christianity, the conceptions about world and life have assimilated and preserved pre-Christian customs, enriching the philosophical-religious content of rituals (Janjić & Darabuş, 2014). The Romanian mythology of death and the funeral rituals associated with it are complex and captivating (Cap-Bun, 2014). In Romania there is “an archaic conception about death, which was glorified in songs and sayings by the ancestors so that you may wonder whether this appreciation of death might be a central myth of Romanians” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 12–13).

Free Dacian people used to “welcome death with their mad laughter, as loud as they could, a unanimous choral laugh of all the warriors; the day before the great battles, they officiated the male ritual of laughter, mocking at the possible death that was waiting for them” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 12). The same reverberate laughter of the Dacians can also be found in the cemetery of Săpânţa. A very important aspect in explaining the Merry Cemetery phenomenon is also what Herodotus, a Greek historian, said in his fourth part of Histories (written in 440 CE) about the moment of the death of a person in Dacia. He noted that the Dacian used to laugh out loud whenever someone passed away because they were convinced that the dead would go to a better world, and this was a reason for joy (Herodotus, 2012).

As Pop and Ruxăndoiu (1978) remark, the ritual of burial in the Romanian culture implies a temporary abolition of the boundaries between worlds. The deceased is metaphorically described as a traveller between the “white world” (of the living people) and the “dark world” (of the dead). What makes the funeral rituals unique is probably the mix of cultural layers that starts from the Dacian belief in immortality and goes to the subsequent Roman and Slavic influences added in time (Cap-Bun, 2014).

#### 4.4. The black humor of the Merry Cemetery

In the lyrics on the crosses there is a strange combination of praise and criticism towards peoples' characters or lives. The message communicated through epitaphs may favor the idea of eternal belonging to the group and thus it reduces the existential anxiety of the group members and, in the broad sense, of the visitors (Curşeu & Pop-Curşeu, 2011). Epitaphs are messages from the dead to the living which usually contain an embodiment of “symbolic immortality” (Lifton, 1996), being a cultural mechanism that can master the fear of death. Curşeu and Pop-Curşeu's study (2011) shows that messages in this cemetery, sent to the visitors, both tourists and local people, are divided into three categories:

1. those describing dead people as community members;
2. those illustrating the personal identity of the dead;
3. those describing the dead person as a family member.

Some of the epitaphs are ironic and satirical, determining publications such as the Associated Press to call the original manner of the Merry Cemetery to defer the vices or negative character traits of the deceased as *black humor* (Ghirda & Dumitrache, 2017). The most famous ironic and humorous epitaph in the Merry Cemetery is the following: “Under this heavy cross, / My poor mother-in-law lies, / if she had lived three more days / I would be lying there and she would be reading this. / You who are walking here / Do not try to wake her up/ because, if she comes back home / She will tease me again. / I will behave so well / that she will not return / May you, who are reading this/ not have my destiny/May you find a good mother-in-law/and live a happy life, getting on with her”.

Events of everyday life are painted on the cross in a realistic-naive

style. Most representations focus on the occupation of the dead, biographical elements and, a very suggestive aspect of dark tourism, violent death is expressed in epitaphs: car accidents, crimes, death caused by lightning-strike and others. Occupations are often pictured. Beyond the abundance of biographical data, most crosses evoke aspects related to what the dead had experienced in the community, such as tragedies or small joys of life. In the paper dedicated to the Merry Cemetery, Janjić & Darabuş, 2014 analyse the fascinating power of symbols that had the purpose to define and acknowledge the major life events, with a commemorative role. The cross, they say, is a symbol and a central element of the Orthodox cemeteries in the Romanian rural space. Naive paintings on the Săpânța crosses have vibrant colours, and the dominant one, the blue of Săpânța, is made of natural elements (Kwiatkowska, Timofte, Glińska-Lewczuk, & Marks, 2015). The crosses are made of oak wood, with floral and geometric decorations (Cap-Bun, 2014) and are carved with fantastic designs on the edges.

Above the epitaphs, in the upper part of the cross, there is a bas relief representation of the deceased either in the exercise of his ordinary labour or in the accidental circumstances of death. What seems to be very clear to Golopenția (2006) is that the idea of painting the image of the deceased on the cross started from the photographs people are used to putting on crosses, especially in the city. And because the inhabitants of Săpânța could not afford to pay for the photographs, then the crosses came to include, in their upper part, a painted picture of those buried beneath them. The crosses were also meant to be more resistant to rain or freezing.

#### 4.5. The results of the questionnaire

The information resulting from the questionnaire helps explain the reasons why domestic and international tourists have to visit this place of death and suffering. They also show how most people appreciate the Merry Cemetery and describe it to those they come into contact with, thus shaping its true tourism profile and its place within the dark tourism spectrum. In this part, about the results, the information will be presented according to how the respondents answered the questions in the questionnaire.

First of all, visitors associate the Merry Cemetery with folk culture (67.6%) and then with tourism (18.9%). Death, which is the central element of cemeteries, represents only the third aspect with which the visitors associate this cemetery. The percentage is very low, only 6.3%, while religion (4.1%) is the last thing visitors associate the Merry Cemetery with (Fig. 2). Concerning other issues, 3.2% of respondents had appreciations combining two or more of the previous elements, such as culture and tourism, and, very interestingly, some of the appreciations explicitly referred to the blue colour of Săpânța.

The characteristics of the Merry Cemetery are relevant in the context in which it tends to become, as Ilieş and Hotea (2000) wrote, a true

international tourism brand and the central part of the tourism activity in Săpânța. And, of course, in these circumstances, we cannot avoid wondering whether the fundamental characteristic of commemoration/remembrance of the dead has been replaced by the new characteristic related to tourism or there is a set of characteristics governing the Merry Cemetery. The results (Fig. 3) indicate that memory and commemoration remain the defining elements according to 72.4% of the respondents, while tourism is on the second place - 15.3%. Suffering and sadness, grief, death and the macabre are defining elements of dark tourism which were appreciated by less than 8% of the visitors. Similarly to the first less important aspect presented above, appreciated by slightly more than 4% of the participants, most of the respondents emphasized *humor* and *satire*. These two characteristics together become more important than death, the macabre and pain, each of these being appreciated by only 1% of the respondents.

Motivations, along with the perception of the macabre and the authenticity, play an important role in shaping the dark tourism profile of any tourism destination. So, by adapting this study to the list of motivations made by Light (2017), we have tried to find out the most important reasons that make people choose to visit this tourism destination (Fig. 4). Most respondents were attracted by the history and culture of the site (30,6%), while other 17.6% said they were simply curious, as Patrichi (2013) also pointed out. 11,3% came to Săpânța as part of an organized group, and others (almost 10%) considered the Merry Cemetery a place not to be missed. 9% were influenced in their visiting by the decision that the cemetery is perceived as a place related to national identity. The opportunity for education and learning is somewhat lower in the hierarchy of motivations, while the desire to see a famous place associated with death was the main impetus for only 4.5% of the surveyed tourists. Some other motivations (recommendations, personal connection with the place and the desire to see in order to believe) were the bases for the decision to visit for very few of the respondents. It is curious that reasons such as the interest in death and the desire to be in contact with death, dark events and violence were not among those identified by visitors.

Motivations create expectations which are part of the experiences and emotions that tourists expect to experience while visiting certain destinations. According to results (Fig. 5), the participants enjoyed (an overwhelming proportion of over 2/3) positive experiences such as *amusement*, *good mood* and *delight*. Negative emotions were less present, *mercy* being mentioned by less than 1/10 of the respondents. No one was terrified by the Merry Cemetery, and those who said they had feelings of anxiety, depression, disgust and agitation represented less than 8% out of the total. Fear, an aspect usually classified as a negative event, was invoked by only one person. Having to indicate other feelings they had, the respondents mentioned admiration, joy and respect, so positive appreciation, but also regret, because, as a tourist said, "authenticity is not preserved". Other people said they were really

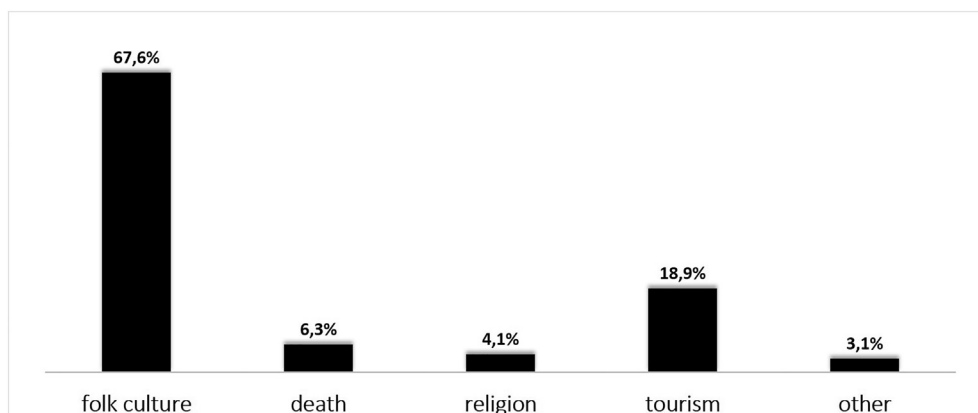


Fig. 2. The first thing the Merry Cemetery is associate with.

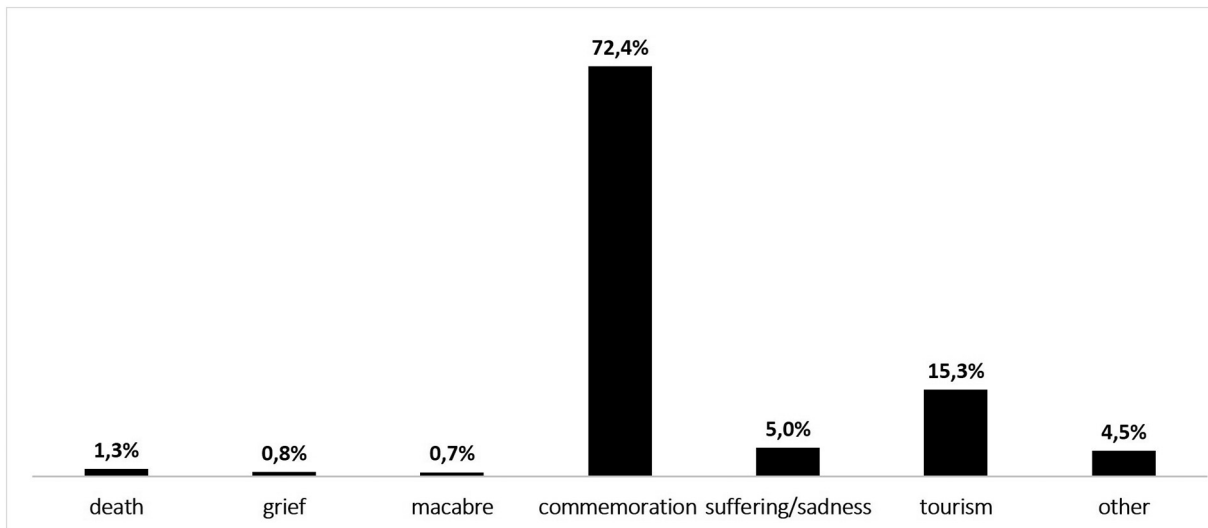


Fig. 3. The aspects that best describe the Merry Cemetery.

amazed that “death can be treated like this” through an original “concept and image”, where “tragedies are turned into real comedy” by grinning and bearing it.

Using the six-shade spectrum proposed by Stone (2006) for dark tourism, we were able to identify how agreeable, macabre and/or dark a visit to the Merry Cemetery may be. Tourists can choose a value from 1 to 6, where 1 means extremely macabre and disagreeable, the darkest, and 6 is specific to assessments such as: the least macabre, the most agreeable and the least obscure. According to the answers (Fig. 6), the average value considering the visit as pleasant is 5.23, the perception of the macabre being with an average of 4.1, and finally, regarding the “darkness” of such a tourism location, the value is 4.95. In other words, the tourism activity in the Merry Cemetery perimeter is very light, between lightest and light, and from the perspective of dark tourism it would be between lighter and lightest. The average of the three elements that visitors of the Merry Cemetery had to consider is 4.76, which places the tourism site in the category of lighter/lightest tourism products. The absolute majority (93%) of the respondents were satisfied with the visit, being glad to recommend visiting the cemetery to others. Only 3% say they would not recommend it, while 4% declare themselves not sure.

According to Kwiatkowska, Timofte, Glińska-Lewczuk, & Marks,

2015, the cemetery is visited by 200,000 tourists annually. Consequently, the latest aspects of the research focused on the impact of tourist activity on the authenticity of the site. According to the data obtained, the majority of visitors (over 70%) consider that the tourism phenomenon that Săpânța has experienced for the last thirty years has not affected the authenticity (Cohen, 1988) of the place compared to the only 16.2% who say it has. The rest of over 13% could not appreciate exactly. On a scale from 1 to 10, tourists have appreciated that authenticity has been very little altered (3.9), confirming that the the objectivist approach is the most appropriate for the Merry Cemetery and that this is an attraction where death is still very present. The overall image of the cemetery remains unchanged as the tourist number is growing, due to a continuous emanation of the collective self, a naive-popular creation and an original picturesque attraction.

### 5. Debates

The Merry Cemetery is undoubtedly one of the most important tourism attractions of Maramures (Sabou et al., 2015), as confirmed by the number of visitors Kwiatkowska, Timofte, Glińska-Lewczuk, & Marks, 2015 mentioned earlier. This number is seventy times larger than the population of the Săpânța. Similar to the cross symbolism

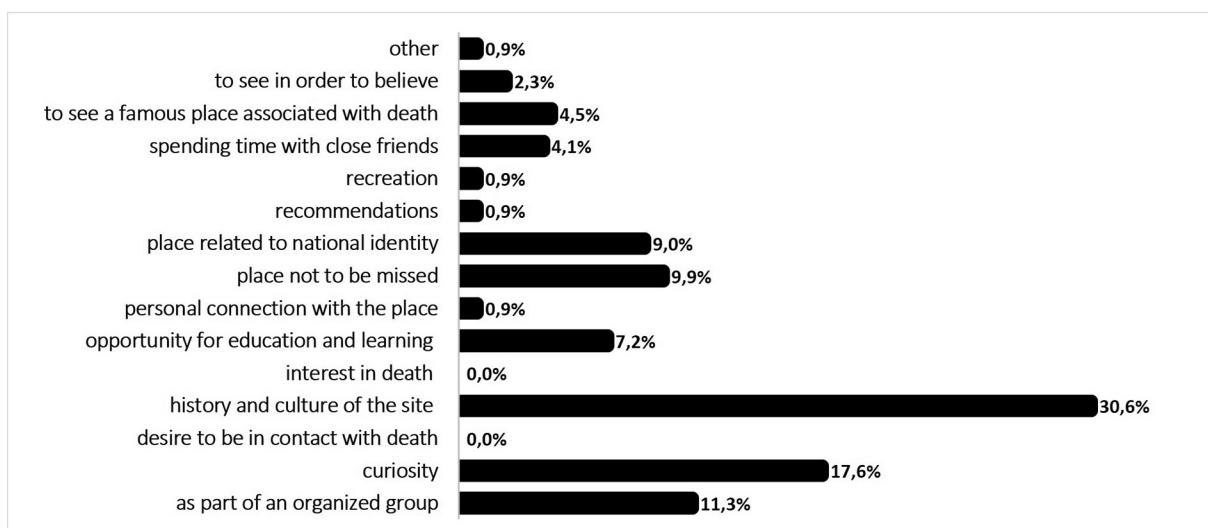


Fig. 4. The most important motivation of visit.



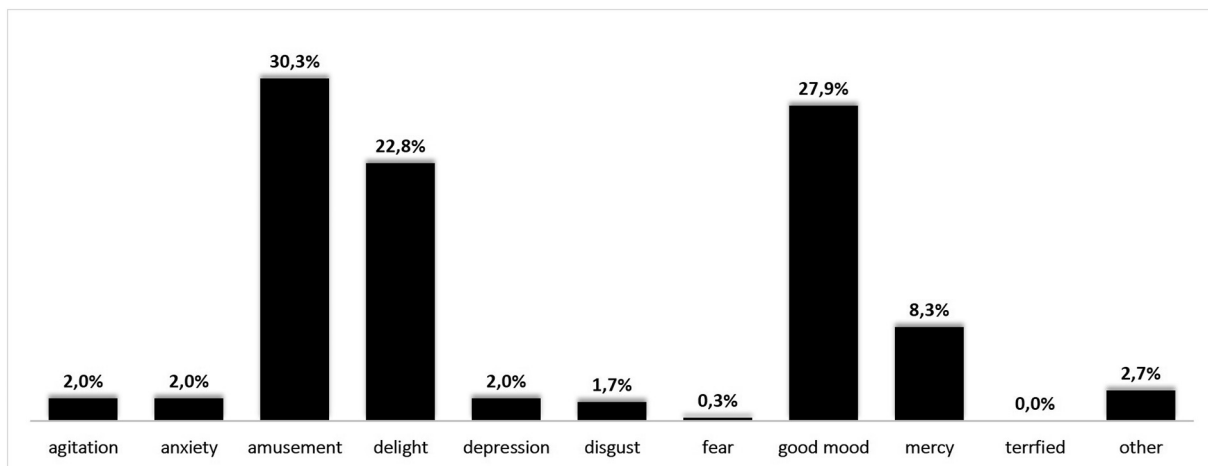


Fig. 5. The feelings and emotions experienced.

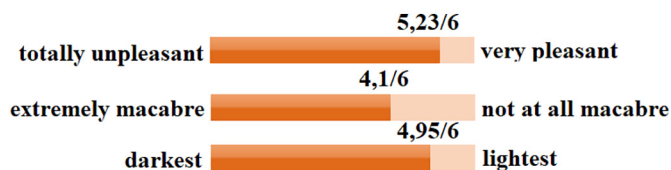


Fig. 6. The results of the Merry Cemetery visitors' perception by using the 6 shades scale of darkness proposed by Stone (2006).

which suggests the four points of the compass, the basis of all orientation symbols for man at different levels (Chevalier, 1994), having a focal point at the crossing of the two axes, the Merry Cemetery is today the focal point of the local and tourist community.

Săpânța is part of a historical and geographical region with a distinct socio-cultural identity, where “the laws of life are harsh... the idea of justice and injustice, right and wrong, honest and wicked, beautiful and ugly, good and evil... strongly affects the conscience of the collectivities” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 32). Maramures and the neighboring province of Oaş are the most stable of the well-preserved regions of Romanian national permanence: language, clothes, customs, folklore and virtues. The identity of Săpânța should not be understood so much due to its geographical dimension as rather to the ethno-cultural one, which is certified above by the visitors' perception that consider folk culture the defining aspect of the Merry Cemetery.

This cemetery is well-known as a cultural phenomenon and only then as a tourist attraction (Curșeu & Pop-Curșeu, 2011). The expression of folk culture and local heritage takes the form of the famous, colorful, blue-coloured crosses and of the epitaphs expressing subtle humor (Sabou et al., 2015). Stan Ion Patras began painting the crosses in order to protect them from bad weather and to make them last longer (Golopenția, 2006; Mazzoni, 2002). The “silky-phosphorescent” blue, to which the famous craftsman would remain faithful for all his life (Pop & Miclea, 1972) and which is also the most common colour on the crosses of the Merry Cemetery, being perceived as “an illusion... because it is unusual and hypnotic among the fundamental colors of the place: green – life, yellow – fecundity, red – passion, black – death” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 6–7) is nowadays known as the blue of Săpânța, as opposed to the blue of Voronet (the two kinds having different shades). Both the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța and the monasteries of Bucovina, including Voronet, are part of the world cultural heritage, partly because of their blue colours (blue of Voronet and blue of Săpânța).

Despite the controversy over cultural origins (Mocanu, 2003; Pop & Miclea, 1972; Pop-Curșeu, 2010), the Merry Cemetery remains a place related to death and to the idea of death and also a cultural artifact describing briefly the identity of the deceased members (Curșeu & Pop-

Curșeu, 2011). In spite of regional ethnic tensions and cultural changes, the local community has preserved its own traditions, religion, cultural practices and mentality (Pop-Curșeu, 2010), the cemetery itself clarifying the changes of mentality imposed by the historical circumstances (Cap-Bun, 2014). Religion has been a fundamental cultural aspect over time. It helped people to define their social identity by group membership (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010) and was able to meet the fundamental emotional needs (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010), helping them to cope with threats and reduce their suffering. The church was also a permanent aspect of the community identity for the people of Săpânța. The symbolic manner of death representation, with painted crosses and epitaphs, is part of the old Orthodox tradition of mystification and “beautification” of death in the Romanian rural communities. The contact and the ethnic tensions made Stan Ion Patras want to customize the Romanian cultural symbolism in the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța. The fact that Stan Ion Patras is the one who laid the foundations of the Merry Cemetery is nothing but the emanation of his old religious age and his noble family.

Considering and, despite the above, nowadays, the cemetery is only at a formal level what it actually wants to represent or what we are used to thinking it should mean (Pop & Miclea, 1972) and that is why it is perceived as secular. Mazzoni (2002) shares the same perception saying that the inscriptions and images sculpted on crosses are genuine and secular, “some religious symbols – images of saints, angels, and the crucifixion – are no longer used”. In the same way, only a few of the visitors who were questioned for the survey considered religion as a defining aspect of the cemetery. In their work, *The Merry Cemetery*, Pop & Miclea, 1972 consider the cemetery “absurd” or “an enormous joke” because it is opposed to logic and breaks the unwritten laws of society, thus becoming both “unusual” and “friendly” (Golopenția, 2006). Death is part of us as members of society, and therefore – a respondent appreciates – the life stories of the deceased, told in a different way than the normal and natural one should not have a negative impact on people.

The visitors' perceptions converge as they consider the commemoration and remembrance of the dead people's lives as the most important feature of the Merry Cemetery. Under these circumstances, death, pain, suffering, sadness and the macabre are replaced by positive experiences due to the subtle humor and epitaph satire. Irony is present “all over this sculptural-pictorial-poetic discourse... more piercing... and therefore more mundane, more real, more human” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 13–14). Epitaphs express things directly and bring out the truth about the dead in the most objective and concrete form. As soon as the tourist has entered the cemetery, his/her mood gets better, he/she feels delighted, displaying amusement, which makes the Merry Cemetery not a necropolis or a macabre ossuary, but a real deposit of life, an essential

and strong metaphor of life (Pop & Miclea, 1972).

It is the expression of “life after death” as Curșeu & Pop-Curșeu, 2011 like to state. This intriguing phenomenon, as Cap-Bun (2014: 169) considers it, defies death by highlighting human existence in this “public place of celebration of life” (Cap-Bun, 2014: 180) as it actually was. Unlike many other dark tourism attractions, the Merry Cemetery does not leave the sensation of a macabre site; it does not urge visitors to imagine the pain of the deceased or of those who suffer from the loss of someone they loved. Here depression, disgust and horror are repudiated by culture. The blue colour of Săpânța, its sculpture, painting and epitaphs transform and give the place a whole new meaning because it is associated with a happy place where the dead are commemorated joyfully (Grancea, 2007), where death is “laughed at” (Kwiatkowska, Timofte, Glińska-Lewczuk, & Marks, 2015: 60). In the Merry Cemetery people can laugh at death and, after leaving this place, they can calmly return to their usual life taking a “vaccine” that somehow protects them from the fear of death.

Death is portrayed as unfair and hateful here, which helps people to become aware of it and acts as an antidote against anxiety, not just for those who remained behind by the deceased (Curșeu & Pop-Curșeu, 2011), but especially for the visitors. One of the tourists suggestively noticed that as soon as you have entered the Merry Cemetery, you will wander among the crosses, read, get amused, and accept more easily the idea that your turn will come, too. Quoting from the guest book at the cemetery, Pop & Miclea, 1972 inform us that a Swiss visitor came to the conclusion that “the Romanians die making jokes”. Stan Ioan Patras himself, being asked why tourists come to see the Merry Cemetery, explains that people “like when death is judged” (Pop & Miclea, 1972: 13–14). Another participant in the survey says: “death is a natural thing... we should get rid of this fear” and “visiting this cemetery can escape the cold thrill that you often experience while visiting such places.” The Merry Cemetery is an original place, reminding people to see death as something natural and urging them to live their lives as beautifully as possible. It is very important to understand that death is part of life, and it is easier to overcome the death of someone you loved by joking and having a good mood.

The recommendation to visit the Merry Cemetery becomes quasi-dominant, a certainty generating wide descriptions that include adjectives such as: unique, original, authentic, novel, humorous, chromatic, beautiful, rich, interesting, special and even relaxing. There are few people who do not appreciate this kind of tourism activity or the Merry Cemetery itself, considering it either too commercial, so risking to turn into kitsch – but, according to the questionnaire, a kind of kitsch that “can be tolerated” when there is a chance to “laugh in the house of death” – or sad. The broadest criticism of the dark tourism activity provides arguments in favor of a definite incompatibility between tourism and cemeteries as people should go to such places in order to mourn the deceased and not for fun. Dark tourism becomes embarrassing especially in situations when crowds of visitors seek amusement and laughter, and, at the same time, grieving people attend funerals in the cemetery.

## 6. Conclusions

The Merry Cemetery is a living creation that permanently enhances the power of the naive-rural spirit. It is also the expression of folk culture, which has the ability to animate elements of a system of thought and expression. The tourists' approaches are overwhelmingly unidirectional and convergent from the cultural and patrimonial point of view because, as we mentioned in the analysis, the Merry Cemetery is only formally what it seems to be or what we believe it is for real. In fact, it is a gateway to meditation, comprehension, communication, commemoration and remembrance, which works on three levels: (Bardan & Imre, 2014) the personal level: the appreciation of the stories on the cross, not at all amusing, full of tragedy and pathos (Baudrillard, 2019) the community level: the appreciation of the local community

and (Beech, 2009) the cultural/patrimonial level: the most important level, as it opens a gateway to the understanding of rural culture.

In Săpânța the imminence of death is *accepted* as a component of life. In fact, the only certainty that life offers is ironically portrayed in the Merry Cemetery, offering the visitors an important lesson, namely that both aspects of existence (life and death) must necessarily be celebrated (Cap-Bun, 2014). On the other hand, death is not acknowledged as an important perceptual characteristic of the cemetery, so it loses its force by being “mocking” at. Sadness is also shadowed by the extraordinary power of native local naive culture, and the tragedies enclosed in every coffin buried in the Merry Cemetery are neutralized by irony, humor, and subtle (or sometimes direct) satire of the epitaphs. Consequently, as other research studies on dark tourism show, the example of the Săpânța Cemetery proves that tourism in burial spaces can be more about life than about death, tragedy and macabre.

It is not at all recommended to go on a journey in order to visit the Merry Cemetery starting from the idea of getting a macabre experience. The dark tourism spectrum presented in this article shows how useful this tool can be to promote and manage similar sites. In addition, the experience we get by exploring the Merry Cemetery shows how much dark tourism is influenced by and dependent on culture and cultural heritage. Undoubtedly, the Merry Cemetery is not a very dark tourism site.

Considering the data in the study, one may also point out the idea that the Merry Cemetery has changed under the pressure of some tragedies. Thus, according to the locals, the cemetery must be interpreted as a place that has undergone physical transformation in order to look as it is today, and this transformation is influenced by the locals' psychology. The representation and tourist perception of this place is totally dissonant with Naefs (2011) approach, and at the same time it has nothing to do with the imagination of the cemetery in the manner of a dark place created by mediatization. Though it may seem like this, the history of the collectivity and Săpânța itself were not eroded by time, intentionally modified and romanticized, as Tzanelli and Korstanje (2016) remarked for Greece, for the simple reason that the Merry Cemetery became a pure tourist attraction with half a century when some French tourists have assigned it its current name. Indeed, Naefs' assessment (2011: 17) that the “tourism management approach such as the one proposed by dark tourism scholars is not sufficient to fully understand its complexity” is justified and is fully observed in this case.

For better promotion, the discourse needs to be adjusted so as to support the previous idea, namely tourism agents should turn the Merry Cemetery to advantage by promoting it more as a cultural destination and less as a dark tourism destination. As these are the findings, the use of the idea of humor as a promotion strategy can play a key role in the management context of this tourism destination. Pabel and Pearce (2018) suggest that the use of humor in tour guides and in portraying the attractions facilitates memorable experiences for visitors and it is beneficial for successful tourism businesses. The epitaphs and the name of the cemetery in Săpânța provide support for such an approach, perfectly emphasizing the cultural tradition of the Romanian rural area.

Last but not least, the conclusion is to change the paradigm of promotion and the management of the destination. It is not enough to prove that the Merry Cemetery is a destination of folk culture, but to explicitly mention in all kinds of promotion that it does not generate macabre feelings and experiences. Its image must be shaped in contradiction with the ideas that charitable organizations base their strategy on, which seeks the way of providing the consumer with negative emotional states (Merchant, Ford, & Sargeant, 2010). Although it is a cemetery, it does not give the visitor negative emotions. According to this research, the stories have to be told by involving the idea of positive emotions, using the real image, although they are related to a cemetery. The evidence of this research shows that the line must be preserved in the scope of folk culture despite the fact that some researchers, the media and certain travel agencies define or try to sell the Merry Cemetery as a dark tourism destination. This finding is also

reinforced by some journalism research that shows that people are emotionally connected to stories (Craig, 2007). Such evidence is also found in management research supporting the influence of stories and narratives on emotions (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019), and epitaphs are nothing but mini-narratives of life, while the Merry Cemetery is a true humorous story of all individual narratives. As one of the difficult problems of management is competition and being unique on the tourism market (Garcia, 2012), the branding of the Merry Cemetery must be based on its uniqueness elements: humorous, satirical or ironic epitaphs, carved wooden crosses, naive paintings in vibrant colours (particularly the blue of Săpânța) and contradictory experiences of joy and good mood that (paradoxically!) it can generate. Well, given the data, the authorities can use the conclusions of this study to manage the image of the Merry Cemetery as much as possible.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100656>.

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