

Article

Dark Tourism Storytelling and Trauma Narratives: Insights from Romanian Promotional (Tourism) Campaigns

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Abstract

Dark tourism communication in Eastern Europe remains insufficiently examined, despite the region's complex post-authoritarian memory landscape and the growing use of storytelling in tourism marketing. This study aims to clarify how Romanian dark tourism campaigns construct meaning through narrative structures and affective framing. Using a qualitative multi-method design, the analysis integrates ten promotional campaigns and six semi-structured interviews with professionals from tourism, memorial institutions, and cultural organizations. Results reveal four recurrent narrative–affective clusters, sacral-memorial, historical-didactic, spectral-sensational, and hybrid commercial, each shaped by trauma referentiality, emotional framing, and specific calls-to-action. These configurations map consistently onto Stone's thanatological spectrum and highlight how practitioners negotiate authenticity and ethical boundaries. The study contributes a transferable narrative–affective model for dark tourism communication and underscores the need for transparency, contextual sensitivity, and responsible storytelling in the marketing of trauma-related heritage.

Keywords: dark tourism; storytelling; trauma narratives; emotional branding; thanatological spectrum

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the phenomenon of dark tourism, defined as the practice of visiting places associated with death, tragedy, and human suffering (Seaton, 1996; J. J. Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone, 2006), has transitioned from a niche cultural curiosity to a growing field of scholarly interest and a mainstream touristic practice (Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Dresler, 2023). The concept encompasses interaction with a wide variety of sites, including former prisons, haunted castles, locations of genocides, memorial museums, disaster areas, and cemeteries, all of which mediate encounters with collective trauma. In the Romanian post-communist context, locations such as the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance in Sighet, Aiud Monument, the Merry Cemetery of Săpânța, torture chambers, Dracula's Castle and communist heritage tours reflect both a historical burden and an opportunity for cultural reinterpretation toward alternative, experiential tourism.

These spaces do not merely preserve the past—as this paper argues—but they actively shape its narrative consumption, reflecting complex cultural negotiations between memory, identity, and commodification.



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From a critical perspective, the mediated encounter with suffering through images, narratives, or curated spaces often risks transforming trauma into spectacle (Sontag, 2003; Wailmi et al., 2024). As Baudrillard (1994) argued, late modern societies operate within regimes of simulacra, where even death becomes a consumable, an effectively engineered experience. This process of aestheticizing and commodifying suffering raises profound ethical questions, as noted in studies addressing visitors' affective and moral engagement with dark heritage sites (Bull & Angeli, 2020; Dresler, 2023; Wight, 2020; Schneider et al., 2021). Romanian dark tourism narratives are emblematic of these tensions: The Merry Cemetery of Săpânța frames death through irony and folklore (Light, 2017), whereas Dracula-themed campaigns foreground spectacle and entertainment, often blurring the line between historical violence and fictionalized cultural branding (Bull & Angeli, 2020). As Han (2015) notes, contemporary culture fosters a regime of transparency and affective exposure, in which emotions like fear, compassion, nostalgia, or even disgust are orchestrated to create emotional connection and increase tourist engagement.

This perspective is especially relevant in the context of post-2020 developments, where the increasing visibility of dark tourism destinations intersects with broader shifts in digital communication and experiential tourism. In this context, digital storytelling and emotional branding open new avenues for communication studies by examining how stories about tragedy, death, and memory are shaped for consumption, interpretation, and engagement.

This shift towards emotional branding in dark tourism has opened new avenues for marketing and communication studies, especially through digital storytelling, social media campaigns, and affect-laden visual narratives (Walter, 1991; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Wright & Salah, 2024). Beyond their commercial function, storytelling and emotional branding shape collective memory, construct identities and influence tourist behavior (Escalas, 2004; Ahmad et al., 2023). In a landscape saturated with symbolic capital and historical trauma, the narratives crafted around dark destinations demand careful scrutiny, not only in terms of what is told, but how, to whom, and with what ethical implications (Ironsides, 2023; Dresler, 2023).

Complementing this critique, the analysis of commodification in contemporary culture (Wight, 2006) suggests that such experiences are often curated to address specific tourist sensibilities, which raise ethical questions about the representation of grief (Sontag, 2003; Podoshen, 2013; Wight, 2020; Prodan, 2021). As dark tourism proliferates, the challenge lies in balancing memorialization with the dangers of trivializing human suffering, a theme echoed in various studies exploring the ethics of dark heritage (Dresler, 2023; Leonard, 2022; Cohen, 2011; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Such critical perspectives are essential in understanding how dark tourism campaigns navigate the thin line between memorialization and commodification.

While the cultural and historical dimensions of dark tourism have received considerable academic attention internationally, the communication strategies that frame these narratives remain underexplored in the Romanian context. Specifically, little is known about how tourism agencies, NGOs, and cultural institutions construct and circulate narratives of tragedy through marketing and branding practices in the online sphere. In contemporary tourism, storytelling functions as a key strategic and affective device: it structures how audiences perceive places, establishes emotional connections, and shapes the interpretive frame of memory and identity (Escalas, 2004; Fog et al., 2005; Entman, 1993; Hall, 1997). Emotional branding—mobilizing affective responses such as fear, nostalgia, reverence, or compassion—has become central to the promotion of sensitive heritage (Gobé, 2009; Thomson et al., 2005). Yet, despite its growing relevance, the role of storytelling in Romanian dark tourism remains insufficiently documented and theorized.

This article intervenes in current scholarly debates on the cultural mediation of death by examining how dark tourism in post-2020 Romania operates through interlinked narrative and affective infrastructures. Although previous research has extensively theorized dark tourism as a global phenomenon, little attention has been paid to how local actors in post-socialist contexts strategically mobilize storytelling and emotional branding to frame traumatic pasts. Addressing this gap, the study pursues three research objectives: (1) to analyze how Romanian dark tourism pre-visit campaigns construct narrative framings and emotional regimes around sites of suffering; (2) to investigate how these narrative-affective configurations seek to shape audience positioning, calls-to-action, and interpretive modes; and (3) to explore how communicators negotiate ethical boundaries when mediating memory, trauma, and commercial imperatives.

By analyzing pre-visit campaigns and communication strategies employed by tourism agencies and cultural institutions online, this study seeks to unpack how death and suffering are narrativized, aestheticized, and commodified within a disputed politics of memory. Beyond merely describing communication strategies, the article critically interrogates their narrative structure and ethical implications, emphasizing the tensions between affective engagement through storytelling, historical authenticity, and commercial imperatives. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on memory governance, heritage mediation, and the ethics of representation in contemporary dark tourism.

The following section reviews key conceptual frameworks on dark tourism, narrative mediation, and emotional branding that inform the analytical model of this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dark Tourism and Thanatourism: Conceptual Foundations

Human fascination with death has historically been long regulated through cultural, political, and aesthetic regimes rather than being a mere anthropological constant. Across historical periods and various cultural contexts, death and agony have been ritualized, staged, and collectively experienced, often occupying a central position in public life. From Roman gladiatorial games and medieval public executions to anatomical theaters and open-casket funerals, societies have repeatedly transformed mortality into spectacle and shared narrative, revealing the deep entanglement between death, power, and collective identity.

Foucault (1978), Agamben (1998) and others contend that the staging of death has historically served to discipline groups and regulate emotions while reaffirming the sovereignty of political and religious orders; these dynamics can be traced from ancient times to modern forms of public death and death-related display, which have functioned as instruments of social control and sites of communal meaning (Raušl et al., 2022; Martini & Buda, 2018; Stone, 2012; Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

The concept of the “aesthetics of horrors” originates in the Romantic era, when artistic sensibility began to grant a privileged place to representations of suffering, death and the grotesque (Simpson, 1987). The fascination with what is repulsive, abject or terrifying gradually became a means of exploring the limits of aesthetics and moral experience. Dostoevsky (1994) captures this dimension vividly in “The Demons”, where the characters go to witness the suicide of a man purely for amusement, illustrating the ethical decay that arises from the anesthetization of evil. This literary example serves as a cultural metaphor illustrating early forms of voyeuristic spectatorship. This orientation toward the contemplation of horror anticipates what, in contemporary culture, is exhibited as dark tourism, where visits to sites of tragedy or death acquire an ambiguous meaning oscillating between memory, curiosity, and aesthetic consumption (Light, 2017; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010). Furthermore, a subtle link can be traced between the aesthetic of horror and cultural or ethical kitsch, both transforming suffering into spectacle

and trivializing the tragic (Potts, 2012; Stone & Grebenar, 2021). In iconography, from Bosch's "Triumphs of Death" to the infernal imagery of Christian Orthodox Art, death is represented not as an end in itself but as an ethical counterpoint to salvation and mortal beauty (Marinis, 2016; Laqueur, 2015). Thus, the programmatic visitations of horrors, far from being a new phenomenon, are rooted in a complex aesthetic and moral tradition in which the contemplation of evil becomes a paradoxical form of the search for meaning.

In research practice, dark tourism and thanatological practices are framed as continuities of this long-standing engagement with death, illustrating how the commodification, ethical considerations, and public memory surrounding death have evolved yet remained entwined with power, culture, and identity over time (García-Rosell et al., 2024; J. J. Lennon, 2018; J. Lennon, 2010). Contemporary scholarship treats death-related spectacle as a lens into broader social structures, as tourism industries increasingly curate and monetize such experiences, thereby reconnecting death with sovereignty, spectatorship, and collective remembrance (Tarlow, 2005; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Linke, 2010; Kunwar et al., 2019; Akhther & Tetteh, 2021).

This cultural fascination is also intertwined with the visualization of suffering. Sontag (2003) and MacCannell (1999) argue that images of pain have always functioned within a dual economy of empathy and voyeurism. From medieval executions to 19th-century post-mortem photography, death has been both feared and desired, hidden and displayed (Ariès, 1981; Rojek, 1993; Tarlow, 2005). Such rituals of public witnessing were not simply morbid curiosities but mechanisms through which societies processed trauma, negotiated collective identities, and reaffirmed moral orders (Han, 2015; Light, 2017; Stone, 2012). What contemporary tourism takes over is not the fact of death itself, but its symbolic mediations, its capacity to structure cultural meaning (Raušl et al., 2022; J. Lennon, 2010; Richards & van der Ark, 2013; Stone, 2013; Grimwood et al., 2018).

The transition from private to mediated public death in the 19th and 20th centuries is well documented across heritage institutions, media, and tourism practices. Ariès (1981) and Walter (1991) established notable observations on the privatization of death and the persistence of public death in Western societies, while subsequent scholarship demonstrates how museums, heritage sites, and media became central conduits for death-related meaning and publics (Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Light, 2017). These sources collectively illustrate a shift from intimate death to curated, commodified representations that sustain public engagement with mortality through cultural institutions and experiences (Raušl et al., 2022; Light, 2017; Stone, 2013; J. Lennon, 2010; Linke, 2010).

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Han's transparent society theory provide a theoretical lens for understanding how modern mediated death operates through representations that blur reality and image, enabling death to be closer to mythology, perceived as spectacle, narrative, and consumption rather than a direct encounter (Baudrillard, 1994; Han, 2015). This aligns with later articulations that dark tourism is not simply about death itself but about mediated, affective experiences that structure cultural meaning around mortality (Wight, 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2012; Stone & Grebenar, 2021; Kunwar et al., 2019; J. J. Lennon, 2018). This conceptual distinction marks not only a terminological shift but a deeper epistemological realignment: from observing death to curating its meaning through media and heritage economies.

Within this genealogy, the conceptualization of thanatourism and dark tourism emerged in the 1990s as analytical categories describing experiential tourist engagement with death-related sites. Seaton (1996) introduced thanatourism as travel motivated by actual or symbolic encounters with death, emphasizing its ritualistic and commemorative dimensions. Building on this, J. J. Lennon and Foley (2000) framed dark tourism as a modern phenomenon embedded in mass communication, globalization, and postmodern

spectacle. Late research approaches (Rojek, 1993; Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Podoshen, 2013; Schneider et al., 2021) converge on a critical insight: dark tourism institutionalizes pre-existing cultural fascinations with mortality, embedding them in networks of heritage, media, and consumption.

A key conceptual advancement came from Stone (2006), who developed the dark tourism spectrum. This typology distinguishes between “dark fun factories,” which foreground entertainment (e.g., ghost tours, Dracula tourism) and a light form of dark tourism, and “dark camps of genocide,” which emphasize trauma and memorialization (e.g., Holocaust sites, communist prisons), which represent the darkest form of dark tourism (Duda, 2016). Further scholars refined and applied this spectrum to analyze the degrees of narrative framing, emotional intensity, and authenticity present at different sites (Biran et al., 2011; Cohen, 2011; Wight, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Light, 2017). This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how visitors experience and interpret places of suffering.

However, critical scholarship has stressed that dark tourism is not merely commemorative but also deeply implicated in the economy of spectacle and commodification. Sontag (2003) warns of the thin line between witnessing and consuming suffering, a concern echoed in Baudrillard’s (1994) reflections on simulacra and Rojek’s (1993) work on modern leisure. Wight (2006) and Cohen (2011) further argue that narratives of trauma are increasingly packaged for consumption, often detaching suffering from its historical and ethical context. This tension between memorialization and commodification is especially acute in post-socialist Eastern Europe, where sites related to persecution, resistance, and political violence have become touristic destinations (Light, 2017; Ironside, 2023; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Stone, 2013; Schneider et al., 2021; Dresler, 2023). These sites are not neutral spaces; they are contested arenas where memory, commerce, and identity intersect.

The historical genealogy of death as a spectacle outlined above is not merely contextual; it reveals the cultural logics that contemporary tourism inherits and reconfigures through communication campaigns. Dark tourism does not emerge ex nihilo; it operationalizes centuries-old practices of staging, mediating, and consuming death within political, technological, and symbolic frameworks. Crucially, these practices are sustained and amplified through narrative structures that enable affect to circulate and solidify into shared cultural memory. Storytelling, therefore, is not a peripheral marketing tool but a constitutive mechanism through which death is framed, interpreted, and rendered meaningful in touristic settings.

2.2. Narrative Strategies and Storytelling in Tourism Communication

Tourism is not merely about places; it is about stories told about places. Narrative is the mediating structure through which landscapes, heritage, and cultural symbols are made meaningful for visitors. As Hall (1997) argued, representation is not a neutral mirror of reality but a productive cultural practice that constructs meaning through discourse. In tourism, this discursive production is particularly powerful because it frames what visitors expect, how they perceive it, and ultimately how they remember their experience (MacCannell, 1999; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Chronis, 2012; Salazar, 2012a).

2.2.1. Storytelling as a Structuring Mechanism

Storytelling functions as a central mechanism in tourism communication because it transforms destinations into narrative experiences. As Propp (1968) argued, narratives operate as cultural languages governed by internal rules, where functions remain constant, and their order forms the “internal law” of storytelling. This structural logic allows narratives to select, highlight, and order events or symbols, giving them coherence and affective charge (Bruner, 1991; Fog et al., 2005; Escalas, 2004; Li et al., 2024). As a result, a place ceases

to be merely a physical location; it becomes a storied space, a metaphor—a site embedded in myth, memory, and identity (Chronis, 2012; Salazar, 2012b; Carù & Cova, 2006).

This process is particularly evident in dark tourism contexts, where sites are not only consumed as attractions but also experienced as affective narratives of trauma, fear, heroism, or collective suffering. Storytelling here is not simply descriptive but performative: it guides visitors' emotions, positions them within moral frames, and mediates their encounter with death and memory (Wight, 2006; J. J. Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Biran et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2021). Narrative devices such as temporal sequencing, point of view, personalization, and dramatic tension allow organizers, curators, or guides to shape meaning and affect (Li et al., 2024; Riessman, 2008; Bal, 1997).

2.2.2. Framing, Representation, and Power

Such narrative operations are not value-neutral: they delimit interpretive boundaries, constructing moral hierarchies that guide visitors' ethical positioning (Grimwood et al., 2018). Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text. In tourism, framing determines which events or interpretations are foregrounded (e.g., martyrdom, heroism, tragedy) and which are silenced or marginalized (e.g., perpetrators, conflicting memories). Scholars have emphasized that framing and narrative construction are also acts of power, shaping visitors' ethical and emotional responses (Hall, 1997; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Buzinde & Santos, 2009; Poria et al., 2010).

In dark tourism sites, this framing can oscillate between memorialization and commodification, a tension previously identified in Section 2.1. Heritage operators often use narrative strategies that balance moral weight with marketability, crafting affectively charged but accessible storylines (Light, 2017; Stone, 2013; Tarlow, 2005; Podoshen, 2013). This is evident in interpretative panels, guided tours, dramatized performances, or digital storytelling campaigns that blend historical facts with emotive or mythical elements (García-Rosell et al., 2024; Kunwar et al., 2019; Linke, 2010).

2.2.3. Emotional and Symbolic Functions of Narratives

Narratives not only organize information—they mediate affect. As Escalas (2004) shows, narrative processing allows individuals to emotionally identify with stories, creating bonds between visitors and places. This mechanism is central to emotional branding (Gobé, 2009; Thomson et al., 2005) and to the construction of collective memory through tourism (Chronis, 2012; Salazar, 2012b). In dark tourism, storytelling operates through moral emotions—such as sorrow, fear, reverence, or fascination—which structure how visitors relate to death, suffering, and historical trauma (Dresler, 2023; Biran et al., 2011; Cohen, 2011).

These emotional dynamics are reinforced through symbolic condensation, where complex historical realities are distilled into emblematic narratives (e.g., “the fight for freedom,” “innocence lost,” “the monster myth”). The result is a simplified but powerful symbolic package that circulates through tourism marketing, education, and media (Podoshen, 2013; Richards & van der Ark, 2013; Bull & Angeli, 2020). Such storytelling strategies can increase engagement but also risk flattening or commodifying historical complexities (Baudrillard, 1994; Sontag, 2003).

2.2.4. Storytelling as Cultural Mediation

Contemporary scholarship positions storytelling not only as a communication technique but also as a form of cultural mediation—a way to negotiate competing narratives, identities, and political histories (Salazar, 2012a; Buzinde & Santos, 2009; Bal, 1997). Especially in post-socialist contexts, storytelling at dark heritage sites reflects broader struggles

over collective memory, national identity, and political responsibility (Light, 2017; Stone, 2012; Ironside, 2023; Wright & Salah, 2024).

Tourism narratives thus function simultaneously as tools of heritage interpretation, emotional orientation, and power articulation. They can foster empathy and critical engagement, but they can also be mobilized for commercial gain or ideological legitimization (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Poria et al., 2010; Biran et al., 2011; Chronis, 2012).

Although storytelling is an important component, narrative alone cannot account for the intensity and persistence of dark tourism's appeal. This affective surplus is generated not merely through storytelling, but through the deliberate orchestration of emotions within branding logics. This strategic mobilization of affective economies transforms sites of trauma into consumable experiences, raising profound questions about power, ethics, and historical responsibility. Understanding this interplay between narrative structure and affective framing is essential for critically interrogating how dark tourism constructs and circulates contested pasts.

2.3. *Emotional Branding and the Ethics of Representation*

2.3.1. Emotional Branding as Technology of Affect

The narrative strategies examined in the previous Section 2.2.3 are inseparable from the affective economies that circulate around tourism experiences. Narratives are never neutral; they are deliberately crafted to mobilize emotional responses, position the visitor within moral frameworks, and shape collective interpretations of the past (Escalas, 2004; Chronis, 2012; Buzinde & Santos, 2009). In dark tourism, this emotional charge is not a peripheral effect but a core mechanism through which suffering and death are mediated for public consumption (Stone, 2012; Light, 2017; García-Rosell et al., 2024).

This move from narrative structure to emotional branding represents a strategic and political act. It is not simply about creating affective connections but about governing how emotions are experienced, circulated, and remembered, transforming the affective encounter into a marketable asset (Gobé, 2009; Han, 2015; Podoshen, 2013). Branding here is not a neutral envelope; it is a technology of affective framing.

In tourism, this means deliberately designing experiences that trigger specific emotions—such as reverence, grief, or fascination—through symbolic cues, immersive design, and narrative framing (Escalas, 2004; Tarlow, 2005; Thomson et al., 2005; Biran et al., 2011). In dark tourism contexts, these affective strategies are not passive—they actively structure the moral horizon of the visitor. By choreographing affective responses, branding reinforces particular narratives (e.g., victimhood, national trauma, moral outrage) while marginalizing others (e.g., structural causes, conflicting memories). This mechanism has been identified as central to the commodification of collective memory (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; J. Lennon, 2017; García-Rosell et al., 2024; Ironside, 2023).

2.3.2. Commodification, Simplification, and Ethical Tensions

One of the central critiques in the literature is that emotional branding often entails affective simplification, reducing complex historical realities into emotionally legible, easily consumable narratives (Sontag, 2003; Baudrillard, 1994; Ram et al., 2016; Richards & van der Ark, 2013). Instead of encouraging critical engagement, such narratives tend to stabilize interpretations, privileging dominant or politically convenient framings (Hall, 1997; Buzinde & Santos, 2009).

This simplification is not accidental; it is an integral part of how commercial tourism logics intersect with cultural memory (Zhou et al., 2022). By turning emotions into commodities, branding risks substituting historical complexity with affective spectacle (Wight,

2006; Cohen, 2011; Light, 2017). In dark tourism, this can result in a depoliticized form of remembrance that prioritizes experience over understanding.

The strategic mobilization of affect in dark tourism exposes a fundamental tension between emotional intensity and historical authenticity. As several scholars have observed, heightened emotional responses do not guarantee epistemic or historical depth (Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Cohen, 2011; Wight, 2006). Rather, they often reflect engineered affective economies, where branding techniques deliberately shape visitor emotions in ways that may obscure complexity and restrict interpretive plurality (Steriopoulos et al., 2023; Han, 2015; Baudrillard, 1994). Empirical research has demonstrated that perceived authenticity significantly influences the formation of emotional bonds with heritage sites, shaping both visitors' cognitive evaluations and their long-term behavioral intentions (Ram et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2019; Yi et al., 2021/2022; Renanda, 2020).

This produces an ethical paradox: the more affectively powerful the branding, the greater its capacity to discipline memory and consolidate dominant narratives. The decision to evoke certain emotions (mourning, national pride, fear, fascination) while silencing others is inherently political (Hall, 1997; Buzinde & Santos, 2009). In post-socialist contexts such as Eastern Europe, where collective trauma and historical responsibility remain contested, these affective framings can either open or close spaces for critical remembrance (Light, 2017; Ironside, 2023; Tarlow, 2005).

Consequently, branding strategies in dark tourism must confront—not bypass—questions of authenticity and accountability. This requires a deliberate negotiation between affective persuasion and historical responsibility, ensuring that emotional appeals function as mediators of critical engagement rather than instruments of simplification or ideological closure (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2020/2021).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that contemporary dark tourism operates through an entanglement of narrative, affect, and commodification. Sites of death are not simply communicated; they are curated through layered discursive and emotional strategies that shape both what is remembered and how it is felt. These affective infrastructures do not merely reflect the past but actively participate in its governance, delimiting interpretive possibilities and shaping collective memory.

Recognizing this interplay is indispensable for any ethical engagement with dark tourism communication, particularly in post-socialist contexts where histories remain politically and emotionally contested.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed narrative–affective mediation model guiding the analysis. Trauma referentiality shapes the selection of narrative forms, which in turn structure the calls-to-action and the dominant emotional regimes elicited by the campaign. These narrative–affective configurations ultimately position the campaign on Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum. The process is implicitly moderated by ethical considerations that constrain representational and emotional intensity.

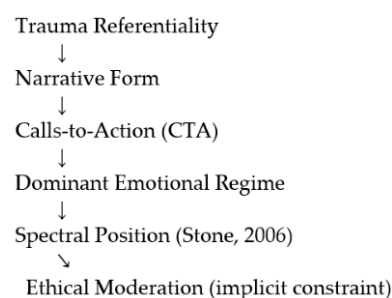


Figure 1. Caption Proposed narrative–affective mediation model (Stone, 2006).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative and interpretative research design with exploratory elements. The objective is to investigate how storytelling and emotional branding strategies are mobilized in the promotion of dark tourism sites in Romania between 2020 and 2025.

The design follows a two-layered analytical structure: (a) Narrative-discursive content analysis of promotional materials, examining how traumatic histories are framed, aestheticized, and emotionally mediated. (b) Interpretive analysis of semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the production of such narratives.

The unit of analysis consists of triangulation of digital communication sources (websites, social media posts, online touristic platforms, posters, and video spots) and organizational discourse (interviews with tourism actors). This design aligns with interpretive approaches to tourism and communication research, which emphasize the construction of meaning through discourse and affect (Hall, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Flick, 2018). The exploratory dimension allows the identification of narrative and affective patterns in a field that has been under-theorized in the Romanian context of dark tourism.

Working Hypotheses

Although the study adopts an interpretive qualitative design, several working hypotheses can be formulated based on the theoretical perspectives regarding narrative construction, emotional mediation, and branding logics in dark tourism communication. These hypotheses serve as conceptual starting points for guiding the subsequent analysis.

H1. *The narrative framing of dark tourism campaigns is influenced by the nature and perceived authenticity of the traumatic referent on which they are built.*

H2. *Dark tourism storytelling tends to rely on a limited set of recurrent narrative structures that function as archetypal templates in the public mediation of suffering and memory.*

H3. *The narrative structures employed in dark tourism communication shape distinct modes of experiential positioning for audiences, influencing how visitors are invited to interpret and relate to the narrated past.*

H4. *The types of calls-to-action used in dark tourism campaigns reflect and reinforce the underlying narrative framing, maintaining coherence between representational logic and expected audience engagement.*

H5. *The emotional regimes elicited by dark tourism communication emerge from the alignment between narrative structures and calls-to-action, producing patterned affective orientations toward sites associated with death or suffering.*

H6. *The narrative and affective configurations used in dark tourism communication correspond to different positions within established dark tourism typologies, suggesting a structured relationship between representational choices and the degree of perceived “darkness.”*

H7. *Dark tourism communicators operate within an implicit ethical framework that moderates narrative and emotional intensity, shaping both stylistic choices and modes of representation.*

Consistent with interpretive qualitative research, this study does not advance a single overarching hypothesis, but instead develops a set of analytically grounded working propositions that guide theory-building through the identification of narrative and affective

patterns. These working hypotheses are formulated in relation to the Romanian post-socialist context and are analytically grounded in the narrative and affective characteristics of dark tourism communication produced within the Romanian tourism market between 2020 and 2025.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The empirical corpus includes ten pre-visit promotional campaigns proposed by operators from Romania (2020–2025). Selection followed a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), ensuring diversity in: (a) Institutional actors (tourism agencies, public institutions, local NGOs), (b) Type of site (memorials, cemeteries, former prisons, fictionalized heritage), (c) Medium of communication (official websites, social media posts, posters, tourism platforms, video content, etc.). The corpus comprises dark tourism campaigns regardless of the physical location of the destinations themselves. The unit of analysis is the communicative and promotional framing produced within the Romanian tourism market, rather than the geographical site per se.

Additionally, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from a national and a local private tour operator, three public institutions, and a local tour guide. The selection sought to capture different perspectives on how dark tourism narratives are designed, framed, and emotionally branded in practice. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Given the interpretative and exploratory scope of the study, the interview sample was designed to ensure theoretical and discursive representativeness across key narrative-production clusters rather than numerical expansion. Each interview corresponds to a distinct institutional or professional position within Romanian dark tourism communication, allowing for analytical saturation at the level of narrative logics rather than individual frequency.

This mixed data corpus allows for a multi-perspectival understanding of how narratives of trauma are both constructed and communicated, aligning with similar qualitative studies in tourism communication (Salazar, 2012b; Light, 2017; Biran et al., 2011).

Because the study focuses on pre-visit communication materials, narrative and affective structures were analysed independently of seasonal or environmental variations, which may influence on-site experience but have a limited impact on the textual–visual framing used in promotional campaigns.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

This study applies a narrative-discursive content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019; Neuen-dorf, 2017), an integrative qualitative approach that combines systematic coding of communication materials with close interpretive reading of their narrative structures (Bruner, 1991; Booker, 2004) and discursive framings (Fairclough, 1995; Entman, 1993). This hybrid design allows for the examination of how stories, symbols, and affective cues are constructed and circulated in dark tourism communication (Stone, 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Salazar, 2012b).

Each campaign was treated as a discursive unit, and the analysis unfolded in three steps: 1. Familiarization through iterative reading and structuring of materials; 2. Systematic coding using a narrative-affective grid; 3. Clustering and axial interpretation connecting narrative plots, emotional strategies, and ethical dimensions. The study employed manual interpretive coding supported by structured analytic matrices, allowing for close reading and iterative refinement of emerging categories (Miles et al., 2018). Matrix-based synthesis facilitated constant comparative analysis across cases and ensured traceability between empirical material, conceptual labels, and axial relationships.

Interview analysis is integrated as a second empirical layer to triangulate production logics with narrative manifestations, following [Riessman’s \(2008\)](#) interpretive narrative coding and [Miles et al.’s \(2018\)](#) matrix logic. Interviews transcripts were analyzed interpretively, with attention to discursive rationalizations, narrative intentions, and affective logics ([Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014](#); [Brinkmann, 2018](#)). This dual-layered approach allows us to link narrative outcomes (campaign discourse) with production logics (institutional discourse). Specifically, five semi-structured interviews were conducted between September–November 2025 with practitioners and institutional representatives involved in curating or promoting sites related to trauma, dictatorship, and memory. The analysis followed an interpretive, thematic–narrative framework, proceeding through three iterative coding stages: (1) open coding of recurrent motifs and metaphors (e.g., “responsibility,” “authenticity,” “respect,” “curiosity”); (2) axial clustering into thematic categories; and (3) selective synthesis linking interview discourse to the campaign narratives previously analyzed. Triangulation between institutional, commercial, and spiritual actors ensured interpretive robustness, revealing contrasts and alignments between ethical, emotional, and communicative logics in dark tourism storytelling.

3.4. Coding Framework and Analytical Categories of Romanian Dark Tourism Campaigns

The coding framework listed in [Table 1](#) integrates narrative structures analysis ([Booker, 2004](#); [Fisher, 2009](#)) with affective branding ([Escalas, 2004](#); [Gobé, 2009](#); [Thomson et al., 2005](#)) and framing theories ([Entman, 1993](#); [Fairclough, 1995](#); [Hall, 1997](#)), allowing for a systematic examination of how stories, emotions, and discursive techniques shape dark tourism communication in Romanian touristic offers.

Table 1. Coding Framework and Analytical Categories for Narrative-Discursive Content Analysis.

Analytical Category	Coding Dimensions (Operationalize)	Theoretical Grounding
Narrative structure	Archetypal plot (Booker’s seven plots); narrative pattern (linear, cyclical, fragmented); moral positioning; resolution/closure	Booker (2004) ; Bruner (1991) ; Fisher (2009)
Narrative type	Emotional/Historical/Ironic/Symbolic/Ludic	Escalas (2004) ; Salazar (2012b) ; Bruner (1991)
Dominant emotions	Fear/Nostalgia/Compassion/Revolt (coded based on textual and visual emotional tone indicators: imagery, language, color palette, soundtrack cues)	Gobé (2009) ; Thomson et al. (2005) ; Podoshen (2013) ; Han (2015)
Call-to-action (CTA)	Visit/Reflect/Social engagement (coded from explicit imperative language, hashtags, hyperlinks, slogans, or implied invitations to action)	Salazar (2012a, 2012b) ; Han (2015) ; Atzeni et al. (2021)
Narrative & visual techniques	1. Symbolism (presence of culturally charged or commemorative symbols); 2. Image-text ratio (text-dominant/image-dominant/balanced); 3. Montage and sequencing (chronological vs. associative editing); 4. Framing strategies (close-up, wide shot, aerial, immersive POV); 5. Use of contrast and color grading (dark, desaturated, vivid); 6. Narrative voice (first-person, institutional, impersonal)	Entman (1993) ; Fairclough (1995) ; Hall (1997) ; Fog et al. (2005) ; García-Rosell et al. (2024)

Interview data were analyzed through an interpretive thematic–narrative framework ([Riessman, 2008](#); [Miles et al., 2018](#)), combining inductive coding with matrix-based synthesis. The analysis proceeded in three stages—open identification of recurrent motifs and ethical metaphors (e.g., authenticity, responsibility), axial clustering into thematic categories, and selective linkage with previously coded campaign narratives. Coding fo-

cused on discursive rationalizations, narrative intentions, and affective logics, tracing how practitioners articulate moral positioning and emotional moderation in mediating trauma. Triangulation across institutional, commercial, and spiritual actors enhanced interpretive robustness and ensured alignment between production and communicative logics.

The semi-structured interviews followed a thematic block structure rather than a fixed questionnaire, ensuring analytical consistency while allowing interpretive flexibility (Table 2).

Table 2. Structure of Semi-Structured Interviews.

Interview Block	Analytical Focus	Example Guiding Questions
Professional role	Institutional position and involvement in dark tourism communication	“What is your role in promoting or curating sites related to trauma or memory?”
Narrative design	Storytelling strategies and narrative choices	“How are narratives structured when communicating traumatic histories?”
Emotional framing	Emotional tone and affective strategies	“Which emotions are intentionally elicited in audiences?”
Ethical moderation	Ethical limits and representational responsibility	“Where do you draw ethical boundaries in representing suffering?”
Audience reception	Target publics and audience differentiation	“Do domestic and international audiences respond differently?”
Digital mediation	Use of digital storytelling and future directions	“How do digital tools shape the communication of dark heritage?”

3.5. Ethical Aspects

Ethical considerations were woven throughout the research design, not appended to it. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews, and only publicly available promotional materials were analyzed, thus avoiding extraction of sensitive or private narratives. More importantly, the analysis acknowledged the political and affective charge of sites tied to historical violence, collective trauma, or cultural memory. Ethical engagement here entails not neutrality but critical situatedness, recognizing how representational practices can reinforce, silence, or commodify histories of suffering.

3.6. Research Credibility and Validation

To ensure analytic credibility and methodological transparency, a dual-researcher coding design was adopted. Both authors possess expertise in communication, narrative analysis, and cultural memory studies, enabling complementary interpretive perspectives. Independent initial coding was followed by iterative comparison and consensus refinement, consistent with best practices in interpretive qualitative research where conceptual alignment is prioritized over mechanical inter-coder coefficients (Guest et al., 2012).

The interpretive stance adopted here follows narrative inquiry and critical cultural analysis, where meaning emerges through recursive engagement with text and context (Riessman, 2008; Salazar, 2012a; Light, 2017). Credibility was strengthened through structured reflexivity, peer-debriefing between researchers, and systematic cross-case comparison grounded in established theoretical frameworks (Bruner, 1991; Booker, 2004; Stone, 2006; Light, 2017). Triangulation was applied across textual content, visual materials, and contextual framing (e.g., platform format, institutional positioning) of pre-visit content, reinforcing construct validity and reducing single-source interpretive bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As data consisted exclusively of publicly accessible promotional pre-visit content, no ethics approval was required; however, ethical sensitivity was maintained when engaging materials involving Holocaust memory, religious martyrdom, and political persecution, in line with scholarly norms in dark tourism and memory studies.

While grounded in the Romanian post-authoritarian context, the analytic mechanism identified—linking trauma referentiality, narrative archetypes, experiential positioning, and affective regimes—offers theoretical transferability to comparative memory-tourism settings in Central and Eastern Europe. Future stages of the research will incorporate visitor interviews to triangulate reception patterns and test emergent propositions across experiential contexts.

4. Findings and Results

4.1. Analytical Procedure: From Coding to Cross-Case Interpretation of Campaigns

Building on the methodological framework outlined in the previous section, the analysis proceeded through three consecutive and interrelated steps: narrative coding, conceptual clustering, and axial interpretation. These steps were operationalized to capture the structural, emotional, and symbolic layers embedded in the storytelling strategies of ten dark tourism campaigns conducted in Romania between 2020 and 2025.

The first stage consisted of systematic narrative coding, aimed at identifying and categorizing key dimensions of each campaign: narrative structure, narrative type, dominant emotions, call to action (CTA), and narrative/visual techniques. The coding framework was developed deductively from existing literature on dark tourism narratives (e.g., Stone, 2006; Seaton, 1996; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Light, 2017), and applied uniformly across cases. This allowed for a structured comparison of campaigns with different traumatic referents (authentic, fictionalized, or hybrid) while maintaining analytical consistency.

The cross-case matrix was then constructed to synthesize the coded material and to reveal recurring configurations and outliers in the dataset, as seen in Table 3. This matrix served not only as a descriptive tool but also as an interpretive device to trace patterns of narrative convergence and strategic differentiation across the spectrum of dark tourism practices. To ensure internal validation, the matrix underwent iterative consistency checks and systematic refinement through repeated cross-case comparisons, allowing the alignment of coding categories, stabilization of interpretive labels, and verification of relational patterns across campaigns. By organizing the data comparatively, it became possible to observe how memorial and fictional narratives differ in their affective architecture and modes of engagement.

In the second stage, a conceptual clustering procedure was conducted. Rather than relying on algorithmic grouping, clustering followed a concept-driven, interpretive logic (Miles et al., 2018), focusing on narrative form, CTA type, and emotional register. This approach allowed the identification of four coherent clusters—memorial-historical, soft-fictionalized, hybrid cultural, and religious-pilgrimage—each corresponding to a distinct positioning on Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum.

Finally, axial coding (Miles et al., 2018) was applied to examine relational patterns between key dimensions, particularly how trauma type influences narrative form, CTA, and emotional regimes. This axial mapping revealed a consistent hierarchical structure that connects trauma referents with communicative strategies and affective outcomes, providing a robust analytical foundation for interpreting the positioning of Romanian dark tourism campaigns within broader theoretical debates.

Table 3. Cross-Case Narrative Matrix.

No.	Campaign	Organizer	Period	Narrative Structure (Booker)	Narrative Type	Narrative Type (Bruner)	Dominant Emotions	CTA Type	Narrative & Visual Techniques	Critical Observations	Analytical Conclusion
1	Chernobyl Tour	Iri Travel	2020–2025	Voyage and Return	Post-disaster tourism	Historical-documentary	controlled fear, curiosity, awe	commercial, exploratory	hybrid documentary visuals, mediated memory	trauma aestheticization through safe framing	Dark exhibitions, controlled commodification
2	Halloween with Dracula	Transylvania Live	2020–2025	Overcoming the Monster & Quest	Fictional horror tourism	Mythical-playful	playful fear, thrill, euphoria	immersive, participatory	gothic trope usage, performative rituals	fictionalization of death, entertainment focus	Soft dark tourism—entertainment
3	The Last Day of Ceaușescu	Red Patrol	2020–2025	Tragedy & Rebirth	Political trauma re-enactment	Historical-dramatic	tension, empathy, civic reflection	educational, participatory	chronological re-enactment, historic spaces	blurred lines between memory and spectacle	Hard dark tourism—memorial
4	Guided Tour Bellu Cemetery	Asociația Coolturală	2021–2025	Voyage and Return	Urban death heritage	Experiential-sensory	curiosity, nostalgia, mild fear	experiential, cultural	atmospheric framing, funerary symbolism	aestheticization of death, soft memorial tone	Soft dark urban tourism
5	Maramureș Tour—Sighet & Săpânța	Europa Turism	2022–2025	Voyage and Return	Cultural-memorial hybrid	Narrative mosaic	solemnity, nostalgia, humor	cultural-reflective	contrast traumatic vs. ludic visuals	balanced memorialization and tourism	Cultural-memorial hybrid
6	Hoia-Baciu Project	Hoia-Baciu Project	2020–2025	Voyage and Return + Mystery	Paranormal & folklore	Sensory-imaginative	fear, intrigue, excitement	commercial, experiential	nocturnal framing, legend narration	paranormal commodification	Soft dark tourism—entertainment
7	1989 Revolution Tour (Timișoara)	Memorial of the Revolution	2020–2025	Rebirth & Overcoming the Monster	Political memory walk	Civic-memorial	hope, empathy, solemnity	civic-reflective	archival memory + site visiting	moral and civic educational purpose, remembrance duty	Hard dark tourism—memorial
8	“Saints of the Prisons” Tour	Orthodoxia Tinerilor	2021–2025	Quest + Rebirth	Religious martyrdom tour	Spiritual-testimonial	veneration, sorrow, reverence	Spiritual reflective, ritual	hagiographic framing, sites of suffering	sacralization of trauma, pilgrimage tone	Dark pilgrimage/hard dark memorial
9	Virtual Tours—Sighet Memorial	Memorial Sighet	2020–2025	Quest & Rebirth	Digital memorial heritage	Documentary-educational	empathy, indignation, solemnity	Civic reflective, educational	archival images, immersive virtual museum	virtual mediation of trauma	Digital dark tourism—memorial
10	Jewish Heritage Tour—Iasi	Rolandia/Momentum Tours	2020–2025	Quest & Tragedy	Holocaust memorial walk	Testimonial-historical	sorrow, empathy, moral outrage	civic-reflective	memorial plaques, historical chronotope	high moral stakes, remembrance duty	Darkest dark tourism—Holocaust memorial

4.2. Conceptual Clustering: Narrative Convergence and Divergence

The second analytical stage involved a conceptual clustering procedure designed to group campaigns with shared narrative, affective, and strategic characteristics. This interpretive step allowed the research to move beyond isolated narrative readings toward identifying systematic thematic structures across the ten campaigns. Conceptual clustering was not approached as a mechanical classification exercise but as an analytically grounded mapping of narrative logics, drawing upon the cross-case coding presented in the previous subsection.

Using narrative form, CTA typology, and emotional register as primary grouping criteria, four clusters were identified. Each of these clusters reveals distinct modes of mediating trauma and mobilizing audience engagement, aligning in different ways with the gradations of the dark tourism spectrum proposed by Stone (2006).

Cluster 1—Hard Dark Tourism (Memorial–Historical). This cluster includes campaigns centered on sites of authentic traumatic events such as the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Sighet Memorial, and Holocaust-related heritage in Iași. Their narratives are characterized by historical accuracy, civic memorial framing, and a reflective CTA. The emotional register is dominated by moral indignation and empathy, anchoring these campaigns at the “darkest dark” end of the spectrum (Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009).

Cluster 2—Soft Dark Tourism (Fictionalized/Paranormal). Campaigns in this group (e.g., Dracula tours, Bellu cemetery, Hoia-Baciu forest) rely on paranormal or fictionalized traumatic referents and are primarily shaped by ludic horror narratives. CTAs are commercial or participatory, aiming to generate affective responses of playful fear and fascination. These features position the cluster toward the soft dark tourism end, where entertainment and spectacle prevail over memorial intention (Light, 2017; Stone & Grebenar, 2021).

Cluster 3—Hybrid Cultural Tragic-Ludic. Campaigns such as Chernobyl tours and Săpânța Merry Cemetery occupy an intermediate position between memorial solemnity and commodified spectacle. The narratives in this cluster mobilize mixed affective registers, alternating between critical reflection and ironic distance. Their hybrid framing illustrates how the boundaries between memorial and entertainment are increasingly porous, confirming observations made by Bowman and Pezzullo (2010) and Light (2017) regarding the hybridization of dark tourism narratives.

Cluster 4—Religious-Memorial (Dark Pilgrimage). This cluster refers to campaigns centered on sites of religious martyrdom during the communist regime, such as Sighet, Aiud or Râmnicu Sărat. The narrative form is memorial and spiritual, with a venerative CTA and emotions tied to sacralized suffering. Although narratively distinct from Holocaust heritage, these campaigns also belong to the “darkest dark” end of the spectrum, as they engage with authentic traumatic sites and elicit solemn, commemorative responses (see also Collins-Kreiner, 2015).

These four clusters, presented in Table 4, reveal not only thematic convergence but also narrative and affective differentiation in how trauma is mediated and communicated in dark tourism-themed communication campaigns. While Clusters 1 and 4 share the same level of memorial intensity, they diverge in narrative form (civic vs. religious). Clusters 2 and 3, on the other hand, exemplify the increasing role of entertainment logics and hybridization in contemporary dark tourism storytelling, resonating with trends observed in other European contexts (Light, 2017; Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

Table 4. Overview of the four clusters.

Cluster	Defining Narrative Characteristics	Identified Campaigns	Key Features	Stone (2006) Correspondence
Cluster 1	memorial/historical	3, 7, 9, 10	Elevated solemnity, reflective/civic CTA, civic and moral emotions, authentic memorialization	Dark Conflict Sites/Dark Shrines, Darkest dark (Camps of Genocide + Shrine)
Cluster 2	paranormal/fictionalized	2, 4, 6	High fictionalization, commercial/participatory CTA, playful emotions, spectacularization	Entertainment-oriented dark tourism
Cluster 3	Cultural hybrid, tragic-playful	1, 5	Contrast between solemnity and commercial touristic elements, cultural/participatory CTA, mixed emotions	Hybrid memorial—soft dark tourism
Cluster 4	Religious-memorial (pilgrimage)	8	Pilgrimage structure, spiritual CTA, veneration, sacred dolorism	Darkest dark (Camps of Genocide + Shrine), Dark pilgrimage/shrines

4.3. Axial Coding: Structural Relationships

Building on the cross-case matrix and the four conceptual clusters, this subsection presents the axial relationships that organize the corpus across five interdependent dimensions: Trauma Type → Narrative Form → Narrative Archetype (Booker) → CTA → Dominant Emotions → Spectral Position (Stone, 2006). Rather than re-stating procedures already detailed in the Methodology, we focus here on what the analysis revealed once the coding categories were related to one another.

4.3.1. From Traumatic Referents to Narrative Design (H1)

The axial mapping shows a robust alignment between the nature of the traumatic referent and the narrative form selected by organizers (P1). Campaigns grounded in authentic historical trauma (communist prisons, the 1989 Revolution, Holocaust memory) consistently mobilize civic-memorial or religious-memorial framings, with high solemnity and no fictionalization (Clusters 1 and 4). By contrast, campaigns drawing on fictionalized or paranormal trauma (Dracula, Hoia-Baciu, cemetery lore) adopt ludic/spectacular framings (Cluster 2). Hybrid cases (Chernobyl tours, Săpânța) inhabit a middle zone where memorial referents are interwoven with cultural commodification (Cluster 3). This finding reinforces H1, which posits that narrative framing is shaped by the authenticity and gravity of the traumatic referent.

This gradient mirrors theoretical accounts that place dark tourism on a continuum from entertainment to moral commemoration (Seaton, 2018; Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). In our corpus, referential authenticity operates as the primary driver of narrative choice: the “heavier” the trauma, the more indexical, historically anchored and solemn the narrative design.

P1. Authentic trauma → memorial narrative (civic or religious); fictionalized trauma → ludic/spectacular narrative; hybrid trauma → mixed narrative.

Beyond the structural dynamics discussed above, the analysis suggests a noteworthy alignment between the narrative type employed in dark tourism campaigns and the narrative archetype that ultimately frames visitor interpretation. While narrative types (Bruner, 1991) offer broad thematic orientation (e.g., historical-commemorative, spiritual-pilgrimage, paranormal-folkloric), the analyzed data indicate that, in the cases examined, these thematic modes (discourses) consistently materialize through one of Booker’s archetypes—most prominently Tragedy, Quest, and Overcoming the Monster (Booker, 2004). In other words,

the thematic intention of a campaign appears to shape the archetypal narrative pathway through which traumatic pasts are mediated. This relationship underscores the structured nature of meaning-making in dark tourism storytelling, where representational choices are not arbitrary but follow recognizable cultural narrative patterns that guide emotional and ethical engagement with past violence (Chronis, 2012; Light, 2017; Stone, 2006).

4.3.2. Narrative Archetypes/Structures as Underlying Structures (H2)

While initial axial mapping suggested a relatively direct relationship between narrative archetype and CTA, a closer interpretive reading of the campaigns indicates that this relationship is mediated through the way visitors are positioned within the narrative space. This intermediate layer, conceptualized here as “Experience Framing,” defines how audiences inhabit or perform the narrative: as witnesses to tragedy, pilgrims on a quest, thrill-seekers confronting fictional monsters, or ironic observers of cultural satire. These framings structure both the affective atmosphere of the encounter and the pragmatic orientation of the CTA (P2).

Building on narrative archetypes/structures identified by Booker (2004), such as Tragedy, Quest, Overcoming the Monster, or Comedy/Rebirth, this mediating layer clarifies how dark tourism storytelling does not simply communicate meaning, but actively places audiences within a specific experiential role (H3). Visitors may be positioned as witnesses to collective trauma, pilgrims engaged in spiritual quests, thrill-seekers attracted by fictionalized danger, or ironic observers negotiating cultural memory. The analysis identified a consistent alignment between trauma referentiality and underlying narrative archetypes (Booker, 2004), which mediate how calls to action and emotional regimes are structured. Relationships are detailed in Table 5. These archetypes operate at a deeper level than narrative tone, revealing why similar narrative forms can produce different affective responses if different narrative structures are used.

Table 5. Relationship between Narrative archetype, experience framing, CTA and emotional regime.

Narrative Archetype (Booker)	Experience Framing	CTA Typology	Emotional Regime	Spectral Position
Quest, Rebirth	Participant/Pilgrim	Reflective/Spiritual/commemorative	Empathy, devotion, dolorism	Darkest dark
Quest, Tragedy	Solemn witness	Memorial/Reflective/commemorative	Mourning, empathy, indignation	Darkest dark
Overcoming the Monster, Comedy	Thrill-seeker	Commercial/Participatory	Playful fear, fascination	Soft dark
Comedy/Rebirth	Observer	Cultural/Mixed	Irony, ambivalence	Hybrid/Intermediate

This experiential positioning shapes both the interpretation of CTA construction in the promotional touristic texts and the emotional regimes activated during the encounter (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010; Chronis, 2012). For example, while both Quest structures (e.g., Revolution 1989 Memorial, Saints of Prisons Pilgrimage) involve reflective or spiritual CTA, they do so through different experiential positions: civic participant versus religious pilgrimage conveyed by the Rebirth narrative discourse. Similarly, Tragedy archetypes (e.g., Holocaust, Last day of Ceaușescu) situate the visitor as a solemn witness, producing a commemorative engagement rather than merely instructing it. This phenomenological mediation clarifies why narrative structures alone do not determine CTA, but shape how the action and emotion are experienced by tourists (P2).

P2: Narrative archetype → experiential positioning → CTA & emotional regime.

This finding also resonates with theoretical work emphasizing that dark tourism is not solely about sites of death, but about how narratives and atmospheres shape affective, moral, and commemorative engagements (Wright & Salah, 2024; Collins-Kreiner, 2015; Light, 2017; Stone, 2006). By foregrounding this mediating layer, the discussion moves beyond a linear narrative-CTA relation to reveal a narrative-experiential-behavioral chain, in which storytelling structures, visitor positioning, and emotional responses are connected. This mediating structure is consistent with H2 and H3, which argue that dark tourism relies on recurrent narrative archetypes and that these structures shape experiential positioning.

In light of this refinement, the axial model was expanded to include Experience Framing as a distinct mediating layer between Narrative Archetype and CTA/Emotional Regime, highlighting how narrative structures do not prescribe actions mechanically, but position audiences affectively and interpretively. This conceptual refinement provides a stronger bridge between narrative typologies and audience reception, opening pathways for future empirical studies on how visitors make sense of dark tourism experiences.

4.3.3. CTA as a Pragmatic Joint Between Narrative and Affect (H4)

Across analyzed cases, calls to action (CTA) function as the pragmatic hinge translating narrative orientation into expected audience behavior. Memorial narratives (civic or religious) pair with reflective or spiritual CTAs (“remember,” “engage with memory,” “pray,” “witness”) while ludic narratives trigger commercial/participatory CTAs (“book now,” “experience,” “join the tour”). Hybrids combine reflective cues with cultural participation and shift narrative related to the topic. For example, in the Maramureș-Săpânța touristic offer, the affective tone of the narrative changes depending on the touristic site (nature of trauma): a reflective one when talking about the Sighet Memorial for Communism Victims, a more humorous one when talking about the next cultural destination, the Săpânța Cemetery museum. The call to action uses words like “memento”, “remember the victims”, for the memorial, and “let’s visit”, “jolly” for the Merry Cemetery. These patterns extend H4 by showing how calls-to-action emerge as pragmatic articulations of narrative framing.

P3. Memorial narratives → reflective/spiritual CTAs; ludic narratives → commercial/participatory CTAs; hybrids → mixed CTAs.

The directionality is stable across clusters: once the narrative form is set, CTA reproduces and amplifies its logic, channeling visitors towards moral contemplation or entertainment-oriented participation (P3). This is consistent with research on the communicative economy of dark tourism, where mediation choices shape consumption modes and ethical posture (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Light, 2017).

4.3.4. Emotional Regimes as Outcomes of Narrative–CTA Pairing

The coupling of narrative form and CTA yields distinct emotional regimes (H5). Memorial campaigns elicit moral indignation, empathy, veneration, dolorism; fictionalized ones cultivate playful fear, fascination, thrill; hybrids produce ambivalent or alternating affects (solemnity/irony). Relationship is highlighted in Table 5 and shown below in P4 logical scheme. These patterned outcomes align with thanatourism scholarship regarding affective mediation, underlining how curated framings organize grief, fear, awe or moral reflection (Seaton, 2018; Light, 2017).

P4. Narrative × CTA → Emotions: civic/religious memorial + reflective/spiritual CTA → solemn affects (3, 7, 8, 9, 10); ludic + commercial/participatory CTA → playful fear/fascination (2, 6); hybrid + mixed CTA → mixed affects (1, 5).

The emotional regimes identified here directly support H5 and further clarify how variations in CTA and narrative form produce distinct affective orientations.

4.3.5. Mapping to Stone's Spectrum

Finally, the alignment between affective regimes and spectral positioning empirically substantiates H6, while the ethical moderation observed across cases confirms H6. The emotional regime positions each campaign on the dark tourism spectrum (Stone, 2006): memorial solemnity correlates with the “darkest dark” end (e.g., Holocaust heritage in Iași; communist prisons; Revolution memory), while playful fear/fascination correlates with the soft dark end (paranormal/fictionalized). Hybrids occupy the intermediate belt. Notably, the religious-memorial cluster (dark pilgrimage) sits beside Holocaust and civic memorial campaigns at the same darkest dark pole, but with a different narrative grammar (sacralized suffering, veneration), a distinction also theorized in pilgrimage-related dark tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2015).

P5. Emotions → Spectral position: solemn (empathy/indignation/veneration) → darkest dark; ludic (playful fear/fascination) → soft dark; mixed → hybrid/intermediate.

4.4. Theoretical Implications

Empirically, the axial pathway demonstrates that trauma referential authenticity constrains narrative choices, which in turn govern CTAs and stabilize emotional regimes (H1–H6). Theoretically, this supports the view of dark tourism as a mediated moral economy (Stone, 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), where storytelling design is not an aesthetic afterthought but a structural device that organizes remembrance, commodification, or their hybridization. The distinction between civic and religious memorial grammars refines the “darkest dark” pole by adding narrative plurality to a shared ethical core.

The diagram (Figure 2) illustrates the sequential relationship through which trauma referents are translated into narrative forms, archetypal logics, experiential positioning, behavioral invitations (CTA), and emotional regimes, culminating in the site's placement on Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum (H6). Narrative form precedes and constrains narrative archetype, while experience framing mediates between narrative construction, CTA, and affective-behavioral outcomes (H2, H3).

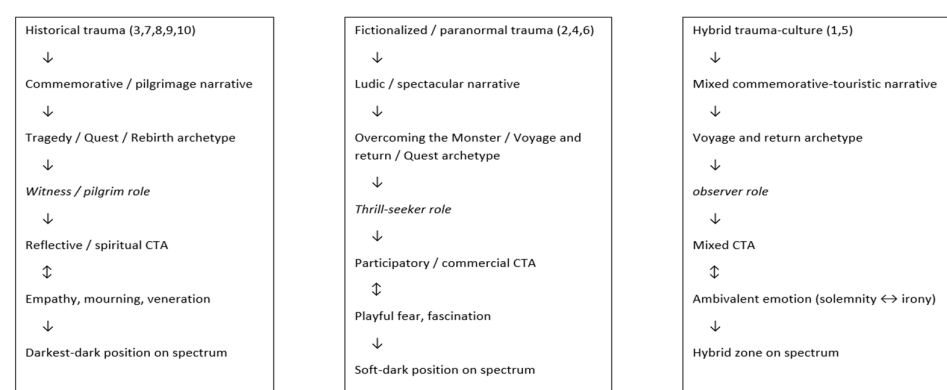


Figure 2. Axial Model of Narrative Causality in analyzed Dark Tourism Campaigns.

Two aspects strengthen the robustness of this axial model. On one hand, hybrid cases (Chernobyl, Săpânța) behave as theory-testing edge cases. Their alternation of solemn and ludic cues does not break the model; rather, it confirms the gradient logic: where memorial referentiality is tempered by commodification, CTAs and emotions become ambivalent, and spectral placement shifts toward the middle (H4–H5). On the other hand, religious-memorial vs. civic-memorial share the same information with different narrative

representations. Although both belong to darkest dark, they diverge narratively, which leads to different emotional outcomes (ritual veneration vs. civic reflection) (H5). The model accommodates this by splitting narrative form within the same pole, thus recognizing multiple memorial syntaxes without diluting the shared ethical intensity (Collins-Kreiner, 2015; Light, 2017).

Beyond its explanatory function within the Romanian context, the axial model illustrated in Figure 1 offers analytical transferability to other post-authoritarian or contested memory settings. Its sequential logic, linking trauma referentiality, narrative form, archetypal structure, experiential positioning, and affective regimes, can be applied to dark tourism campaigns in regions where narratives of violence, dictatorship, and collective trauma remain socially negotiated. Because the model does not depend on site-specific particularities but on relational dynamics between narrative and affect, it provides a flexible interpretive framework for comparative research. Future studies may thus use this model to map the moral, emotional, and commercial structures of dark tourism communication across diverse cultural environments, testing both its robustness and its capacity to capture cross-cultural variations in the politics of memory.

4.5. Synthesis of Findings

The analysis of the ten Romanian dark tourism campaigns reveals a coherent structural logic underpinning their narrative and affective architectures. Across the cases, trauma reference emerged as the central organizing axis (H1), shaping both narrative form and visitor engagement strategies. Campaigns anchored in authentic historical or political trauma consistently mobilize memorial framings—civic or religious—that generate solemn emotional registers (H5) and position them at the “darkest dark” end of Philip R. Stone’s spectrum (H6).

At the opposite end, fictionalized or paranormal referents yield entertainment-oriented narratives (H3) and playful affective responses (H5), while hybrid campaigns articulate both registers in varying degrees.

More importantly, the CTA operates as a mediating factor that translates narrative orientation into affective regimes, determining how trauma is/will be consumed: as remembrance, commodified spectacle, or a hybrid of both (H4). This layered configuration demonstrates that dark tourism storytelling is not merely a representational device but a structural mechanism that organizes the ethical, affective, and commercial dimensions of the experience (H2).

By combining cross-case analysis, conceptual clustering, and axial coding, the study has mapped a stable and interpretable hierarchy linking Trauma Type → Narrative Form → Narrative Archetype → CTA → Emotions → Dark tourism Spectral Position. This hierarchical model not only reinforces existing typological theories (Seaton, 1996; Seaton, 2018; Stone, 2006; Collins-Kreiner, 2015; Wright & Salah, 2024) but also highlights specific narrative pluralities within the “darkest dark” pole—especially the coexistence of civic and religious memorial grammars. This finding foregrounds the specificity of the Romanian context, where political trauma, religious persecution, and Holocaust memory intersect with spiritual and emerging entertainment logics, revealing a nuanced landscape of commemorative and commercial narratives.

4.6. Interview Methodology and Interpretation

4.6.1. Analytical Framework and Method

To deepen the discursive analysis of dark tourism storytelling in Romania, six semi-structured interviews were conducted between September and November 2025 with tourism practitioners and institutional representatives directly involved in curating or

promoting sites associated with trauma, dictatorship, and memory. The sample includes two private tour operators (one focusing on cultural-historical experiences, one on thematic reenactments), one independent local guide, and three representatives of public or memorial institutions.

The interview guide (see Supplementary Material) explored participants' approaches to representing suffering, emotional framing, ethical concerns, audience reactions, and the perceived potential of digital storytelling. The analysis followed an interpretive, thematic-narrative framework (Riessman, 2008; Miles et al., 2018), focusing on how interviewees articulate professional rationalizations and moral positioning when mediating traumatic history.

Coding proceeded inductively through three iterative stages: (1) open coding of recurrent motifs and metaphors (e.g., "responsibility," "authenticity," "respect," "curiosity"); (2) axial clustering into thematic categories; and (3) selective synthesis linking interview discourse to previously analyzed campaign narratives. Triangulation between institutional and commercial voices ensured interpretive robustness, highlighting contrasts and alignments between ethical, spiritual, and experiential perspectives.

4.6.2. Overview of Themes

Five major themes emerged across the interviews:

(a) Negotiating Memory and Market: Demand and Motivation

All participants acknowledged that dark tourism in Romania remains a niche segment but with a growing international audience. Foreign visitors—particularly from Western Europe, North America, and Australia—seek to understand local history and "fill the missing fragments" of the communist era (Interviewee 5, tour operator). By contrast, Romanian visitors remain hesitant, often due to the emotional proximity of trauma: "For Romanians, that period is still an open wound" (Interviewee 5).

Motivations among domestic participants are often moral or spiritual rather than recreational. As one organizer of religious heritage tours explained, "People join because they revere those who suffered in prisons and want to strengthen their faith" (Interviewee 2). This moral-spiritual engagement contrasts with the curiosity-driven attitude of international heritage travellers described by commercial operators.

(b) Ethical Reflexivity and the Representation of Suffering

Across both institutional and private contexts, participants emphasized the moral boundaries of storytelling. The recurring concern was to avoid sensationalism and "selling suffering," a critique faced by some memorial initiatives in the 1990s (Interviewees 3–4, public institution). The dominant communicative principle is respect: "Our promotion is sober and educational, emphasizing reflection, not dramatization."

Private guides echoed this sense of responsibility: "We must be responsible," noted one tour agent, while another insisted, "We don't dramatize the program, but we don't use cheerful tones either" (Interviewee 1). This deliberate moderation supports the hypothesis that affective control functions as an ethical device within dark tourism communication—what Stone (2006) conceptualizes as the moral calibration of 'darkness'.

For some respondents, ethical engagement extends to theological or philosophical dimensions. "Every act of tourism should serve the physical and spiritual benefit of the person," argued one organizer of religious-memorial tours (Interviewee 2), merging pilgrimage ethics with the secular framework of dark tourism.

(c) Emotional Regimes and Storytelling Strategies

Emotion emerged as both a tool and a tension in storytelling practice. While all participants acknowledged the need for affective engagement, they distinguished between constructive emotion (reflection, empathy, reverence) and excessive affect (shock, horror).

Institutional actors maintained a solemn tone: “We aim to educate through emotion, but always respectfully.” In contrast, creative tour operators described affective design as a dramaturgical structure: “It’s like a play—we explore fear, despair, irony, tragedy” (Interviewee 5). The use of narrative re-enactment—such as the “Last Day of Nicolae Ceaușescu” tour—illustrates how contemporary storytelling transforms historical trauma into performative reflection rather than spectacle.

Even in commercial contexts, emotional control remains central. One guide remarked that audiences “respond better to quiet sadness than to horror” (Interviewee 1). This confirms that affect in dark tourism is not simply elicited but curated, aligning with Han’s (2015) notion of “emotional governance” in cultural memory industries.

(d) Audience Differentiation and the Politics of Reception

Participants highlighted stark differences between domestic and international publics. For local audiences, memory of communism carries unresolved affect and social polarization: “Discussions online are still angry—two radicalized sides,” noted one respondent (Interviewee 5). Public institutions confirmed that Romanian visitors are “more emotionally involved” because of personal or familial links to the past (Interviewees 3–4), while foreign visitors display a more analytical, educational curiosity.

This divergence shapes promotional tone and narrative design. Campaigns targeting Romanians often appeal to remembrance and moral responsibility, while those for foreign audiences focus on contextual learning and empathy.

Interestingly, in religious heritage tours, participants did not observe foreign attendance at all, suggesting that dark pilgrimage remains nationally bounded, driven by post-communist collective identity rather than global curiosity (Interviewee 2).

(e) Digital Storytelling and the Mediation of Memory

All respondents recognized the transformative potential of digital storytelling—VR tours, podcasts, or social-media narratives—but expressed concern about maintaining solemnity and authenticity. Institutional voices framed digital tools as educational complements: “Virtual reality can offer access without diminishing the place’s gravity” (Interviewee 3).

Private actors viewed technology as an opportunity for innovation yet constrained by cost and ethics: “We hope to reconstruct historical moments through VR, but it must remain faithful to archival truth” (Interviewee 5). Similarly, religious organizers appreciated virtual memorial initiatives like the “Sighet Museum at Home,” but insisted that “a real visit is irreplaceable” (Interviewee 2).

Thus, across the field, digital mediation is embraced cautiously—as an extension of moral storytelling, not a replacement for physical experience.

4.6.3. Integrative Discussion

The interviews collectively reveal that dark tourism communication in Romania is shaped by ethical reflexivity, affective moderation, and audience segmentation. Practitioners operate within a complex moral economy, balancing education, authenticity, and accessibility.

- Institutional discourse (Interviews 3–4) prioritizes pedagogy and commemoration, producing sober emotional regimes and codified ethical standards.
- Religious-memorial discourse (Interview 2) infuses dark heritage with spiritual transcendence, transforming suffering into sanctity.
- Commercial storytelling discourse (Interviews 1 and 5) negotiates authenticity and attraction through narrative design, transforming traumatic history into experience and experiential learning.

Despite differing contexts, all actors converge around a shared communicative ethics: respect, accuracy, and avoidance of spectacle. Yet they diverge in affective style—ranging from spiritual consolation to reflective solemnity to performative re-enactment.

The triangulation between these three discourses—institutional, spiritual, and commercial—demonstrates how Romanian dark tourism functions as a reflexive cultural practice: it does not merely display suffering but interprets it. Storytelling operates as a moral technology through which society negotiates its relationship to the past.

4.6.4. Summary Table—Thematic Synthesis

To synthesize the interview findings and illustrate how practitioners articulate ethical, narrative, and affective logics in dark tourism communication, Table 6 presents a thematic overview of the main interpretive patterns identified across the interviews.

Table 6. Thematic synthesis of practitioner interviews in Romanian dark tourism, showing representative excerpts and interpretive significance.

Theme	Illustrative Excerpt (Condensed)	Interpretive Significance
Demand & Motivation	“For Romanians, that period is still an open wound.” (Int. 5)	Memory proximity shapes participation; foreign curiosity vs. local hesitation.
Ethical Reflexivity	“We don’t dramatize, but we must be responsible.” (Int. 1)	Ethics as communicative moderation; avoidance of spectacle.
Emotional Strategy	“It’s like a play—fear, despair, irony, tragedy.” (Int. 5)	Storytelling as affective choreography; curated empathy.
Audience Difference	“Romanians are emotional, foreigners analytical.” (Int. 3)	Divergent affective regimes: national vs. global reception.
Digital Mediation	“Virtual tours help, but the visit is irreplaceable.” (Int. 2)	Digital storytelling is an educational extension, not a substitution.

4.6.5. Concluding Remarks

The interview data reinforce the study’s broader argument that dark tourism storytelling in post-communist Romania operates at the intersection of ethics, emotion, and memory mediation (H7). Practitioners across sectors act as moral curators rather than neutral promoters—constructing narratives that both preserve authenticity and engage affectively.

This convergence of moral reflexivity and narrative design marks a distinctive Eastern European model of dark tourism communication—one rooted in historical trauma, religious ethics, and evolving digital mediation. Rather than commodifying suffering, Romanian dark storytelling tends to ritualize remembrance, transforming sites of pain into spaces of reflection, dialogue, and learning.

4.7. Reinterpretation of Hypotheses H1–H7

The findings offer differentiated support for the working hypotheses H1–H7. H1, H2, H3, and H5 are fully supported through the consistent alignment between trauma referentiality, narrative forms, experiential positioning, and emotional regimes. H4 receives partial support, as CTAs follow narrative logic but exhibit hybridization in culturally mixed campaigns. H6 is strongly validated by the systematic correlation between affective responses and spectral placement on Stone’s continuum. Finally, H7 is confirmed in the discursive–ethical moderation articulated by practitioners across institutional and

commercial sectors. Together, these results consolidate the proposed narrative-affective model and clarify its explanatory scope.

5. Discussions

The results of this study highlight how dark tourism narratives in post-2020 Romania operate through an entangled field of memorial, commercial, emotional, and symbolic logics, revealing that narrative design is not a mere communication device but a central mechanism for governing the public encounter with traumatic pasts (H2, H3, H7). The analysis demonstrates that trauma referentiality functions as the primary organizing axis for narrative construction, shaping both the moral horizon and affective regimes associated with dark tourism campaigns (H1). Sites tied to authentic historical violence—such as communist repression or the 1989 Revolution—consistently employ solemn narrative frames grounded in witnessing, civic responsibility, and remembrance. This pattern aligns with research arguing that tourism associated with genocide, political persecution, or collective trauma remains anchored in authenticity, moral seriousness, and memorial ethics (Light, 2017; Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Collins-Kreiner, 2015; Steriopoulos et al., 2023). In contrast, campaigns centered on fictionalized or paranormal elements—most notably those invoking Dracula mythology or the Hoia-Baciu Forest—mobilize ludic logics, affective thrill, and commodified spectacle, confirming earlier critiques that tourism practices can aestheticize suffering and destabilize historical specificity in the pursuit of affective engagement (Sontag, 2003; Baudrillard, 1994; Podoshen, 2013).

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in showing how narrative archetypes function as ethical infrastructures. Rather than simply structuring story progression, they position the visitor in specific moral roles—witness, pilgrim, observer, or thrill-seeker—and thereby govern the interpretive and emotional engagement with traumatic memory (H3). This finding reinforces arguments that tourism narratives not only represent the past but actively shape meaning-making and emotional orientation (H2) (Bruner, 1991; Chronis, 2012; Hall, 1997; Entman, 1993). In the Romanian context, the observed relationship between trauma referentiality, archetypal structure, experiential positioning, and emotional regime illustrates that affect is not incidental but strategically mobilized to articulate normative ways of feeling and remembering (H5). Such insight strengthens debates on emotional governance and affective design in dark tourism communication, showing that solemn memorial scripts produce empathy and indignation, while ludic narratives cultivate playful fear and fascination, situating each campaign along Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum.

Interestingly, the Romanian case also reveals a hybrid narrative economy. Alongside secular civic memorialization and touristic spectacularization, religious martyrdom narratives occupy a prominent role, incorporating pilgrimage grammars, veneration, and sacred dolorism into the public memory landscape (H5). This co-presence of civic trauma, spiritual suffering, and folkloric horror suggests that post-socialist memory environments do not conform neatly to Western typologies but exhibit fluidity at the boundaries between mourning, identity formation, and commodification. As scholarship on post-authoritarian heritage and Eastern European memory politics suggests, such contexts remain marked by ongoing negotiation between commemoration and reinterpretation, between historical justice and cultural consumption (Light, 2017; Ironside, 2023). The Romanian case contributes to this line of inquiry by demonstrating how tourism communication can simultaneously sacralize, aestheticize, and commercialize violence, producing a complex semiotic landscape in which tragedy, spirituality, and spectacle coexist without necessarily collapsing into one another.

These findings underscore a broader theoretical point: dark tourism in Romania should not be read simply as a derivative extension of global models but as a situated cultural formation in which narrative, affect, and symbolic capital intersect with local histories of dictatorship, religious persecution, and mythologized violence. This perspective aligns with recent scholarship highlighting how communication practices in tourism actively shape cultural memory, narrative positioning, and affective interpretation, especially in post-socialist and contested heritage contexts (Filimon-Benea & Vid, 2025). The axial model developed in this research—linking trauma referentiality, narrative archetype, experiential positioning, CTA construction, and emotional regimes—offers a conceptual scaffold for understanding how meaning circulates within such hybrid configurations. It also advances interpretive methodologies by demonstrating that qualitative narrative analysis, when combined with coding logic, can reveal structural dynamics that underlie marketing communication in ethically charged environments.

Finally, these results foreground the ethical stakes of dark tourism storytelling. The power of narrative to evoke empathy, indignation, reverence, or thrill entails responsibility: the boundary between commemoration and commodification remains fragile, particularly in contexts where traumatic memory is politically or culturally unresolved. Ensuring that affective persuasion does not eclipse historical complexity requires critical reflexivity from tourism communicators and scholars alike. This study, therefore, reinforces calls for ethical vigilance in the design and analysis of tourism narratives, emphasizing that dark tourism communication is not a passive reflection of memory culture but an active force in shaping how societies perceive, process, and aestheticize suffering in the post-digital age.

The interview analysis provides a second interpretive layer that reinforces and deepens the narrative–affective logic identified in the promotional campaigns. It becomes evident that the production of dark tourism narratives in Romania is not a neutral or merely technical process, but a reflexive and ethically charged practice negotiated by the actors involved. Notably, the discourses of practitioners—tour guides, commercial operators, memorial institutions, and organizers of religious heritage tours—reveal a heightened awareness that communication in dark tourism is not simply promotional work but a form of moral mediation.

Thus, the ethical dimension already observed in the campaign analysis is strongly echoed in the interviews, where participants articulate an explicit ethics of storytelling. Across sectors, respondents emphasized the need to avoid sensationalism, dramatization, or the commodification of suffering. Instead, they foreground responsibility, authenticity, and respect for victims' memories. This ethos aligns with the narrative and visual solemnity identified in the “darkest-dark” campaigns, where affective moderation operates as a deliberate boundary against spectacle. The interviews make clear that this moderated tone is not stylistic coincidence but a consciously adopted moral stance: comments such as “we do not dramatize,” “we must act responsibly,” and “we keep a sober tone” reflect an internal regime of ethical self-regulation.

Moreover, the interviews clarify an aspect only indirectly suggested by the narrative analysis: the dramaturgic role of emotion in designing the tourist experience. Some operators describe the visit as a “structured performance,” marked by carefully paced emotional intensities—fear, tension, sadness, reflection—confirming that emotions are not by-products of the narrative but pre-configured components of it. Practitioners actively construct “moral atmospheres” (solemnity, spirituality, suspense) that correspond to the archetypal narrative structures identified earlier—Tragedy, Quest, and Overcoming the Monster. What the campaign analysis conceptualized as “experiential positioning” becomes tangible in the interviews, where actors explicitly describe how they imagine the visitor's

role: as solemn witness (in historical sites), pilgrim (in religious tours), affective explorer (in re-enactments), or playful participant (in paranormal experiences).

The interviews also provide insight into audience differentiation, a dimension that the narrative materials only indirectly reflect. Practitioners report pronounced contrasts between Romanian and foreign visitors, which shape both tone and narrative construction. Romanians are described as emotionally involved and particularly sensitive to narratives of communism, prompting careful, reflective, and morally oriented communication strategies. Foreign visitors, by contrast, are perceived as analytically motivated “learners,” seeking contextual understanding—an orientation that supports the prominent documentary and educational elements in campaigns targeting international publics. This confirms that CTA construction and tonal choices are not solely based on trauma type but are also calibrated to the emotional and cultural profile of the intended audience.

A distinctive insight emerging from the interviews concerns the position of religious-memorial tours, which practitioners do not conceptualize as “tourism” in a commercial sense. Instead, they frame them as acts of veneration and spiritual strengthening. The emphasis on “spiritual benefit” rather than emotional experience reinforces the analytical observation that Romania exhibits a hybrid narrative landscape, where civic memorialism coexists with a sacred memorial logic. This plural configuration diverges from standard Western typologies and reflects the unique interplay of historical trauma, religious heritage, and cultural identity in the post-socialist space.

Finally, the interviews nuance the interpretation of digital mediation already present in the campaign analysis. While actors acknowledge digital storytelling (e.g., VR tours, online exhibitions) as valuable for accessibility and education, they also express concern about preserving solemnity and authenticity. The dominant position is that digital tools must not “diminish the gravity of the place.” Consequently, digital mediation is perceived not as a substitute for physical presence, but as a carefully managed extension of memorial storytelling, consistent with the documentary tone observed in digital campaigns.

Taken together, these findings show that Romanian dark tourism pre-visit campaigns rely on a consistent narrative–affective logic linking trauma referentiality, archetypal storytelling structures, calls-to-action, and patterned emotional regimes. This configuration not only shapes how audiences interpret sites of suffering but also positions campaigns along Stone’s (2006) dark tourism spectrum. Across cases, an implicit ethical moderation emerged as a stabilizing force, constraining emotional intensity and guiding representational choices. Overall, the study demonstrates how narrative and affect work together to mediate memory, legitimize engagement, and negotiate the tensions between authenticity, commodification, and cultural responsibility in Romanian post-socialist tourism communication.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how dark tourism communication in post-2020 Romania is constructed through interconnected narrative, affective, and ethical infrastructures that mediate public encounters with traumatic pasts. By combining narrative-discursive content analysis with interpretive interviews, the research identified a coherent hierarchical model linking trauma referentiality, narrative form, archetypal structures, experiential positioning, call-to-action design, and emotional regimes. Across ten campaigns, the type and authenticity of trauma emerged as the primary organizing axis that shapes both communicative choices and affective expectations. Authentic traumatic referents—such as the Sighet Memorial, the 1989 Revolution, or Holocaust heritage in Iași—produced solemn memorial narratives anchored in witnessing, civic responsibility, and remembrance. Conversely, fictionalized or paranormal referents—Dracula mythology, Hoia-Baciu Forest—generated ludic, entertainment-oriented framings tied to playful fear and commodified

spectacle. Hybrid narratives, such as the Chernobyl or Săpânța campaigns, alternated between critical reflection and ironic distance, illustrating the porousness between memorial and commercial logics.

A major contribution of this research is demonstrating that narrative archetypes function as ethical infrastructures rather than neutral storytelling devices. They position visitors as witnesses, pilgrims, observers, or thrill-seekers, thereby shaping the moral and interpretive horizon of the touristic encounter. This finding reinforces broader theories of cultural mediation by showing that affect in dark tourism is strategically choreographed: solemn narratives produce empathy, indignation, and civic reflection, whereas playful narratives generate fascination and controlled fear. The axial model proposed here extends existing typologies by highlighting not only the distinction between “darkest-dark” and “soft-dark” tourism but also the internal plurality within memorial forms—particularly the coexistence of civic and religious-memorial grammars. The presence of pilgrimage-oriented narratives centred on spiritual suffering represents a distinct Eastern European configuration of dark tourism, expanding global understandings of how traumatic histories can be sacralised, aestheticized, or hybridized within public communication.

The interviews add depth to these insights by revealing the reflexivity and moral deliberation that practitioners bring into the production of dark tourism narratives. Tour guides, institutional actors, and organizers of religious tours consistently emphasized ethical responsibility, emotional moderation, and the avoidance of sensationalism. Their discourse confirms that dark tourism communication in Romania is not merely a promotional practice but a form of moral mediation. Furthermore, interviews revealed clear audience segmentation: Romanians tend to engage with trauma emotionally and biographically, while foreign visitors adopt educational or analytical modes of interpretation. These differences shape narrative intensity, tonal choices, and CTA construction. Digital storytelling emerged as a cautiously embraced extension of memorial communication, valued for accessibility but constrained by concerns of authenticity and solemnity.

Overall, the findings show that Romanian dark tourism storytelling constitutes a distinctive cultural formation situated at the intersection of post-socialist memory politics, religious heritage, and emerging digital media. Rather than simply replicating global dark tourism patterns, Romanian campaigns enact a dynamic negotiation between remembrance, identity, and commodification. They transform traumatic pasts into mediated experiences that carry both ethical responsibility and affective resonance. The conceptual and empirical model developed here offers a framework that can be applied comparatively to other post-authoritarian and contested memory contexts, contributing to broader debates on narrative governance, affective mediation, and the ethics of representing suffering.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides a detailed interpretive account of narrative and affective strategies in Romanian dark tourism communication, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data set consists exclusively of campaigns published between 2020 and 2025 and five practitioner interviews. Although this corpus captures major actors and representative narrative patterns, it cannot fully encompass the diversity of dark tourism communication across all Romanian regions or institutional environments. A larger, more heterogeneous sample—including smaller local initiatives, grassroots memorial projects, or independent content creators—could reveal additional narrative variations or counter-discourses.

Second, the research focuses on production-side narratives and does not include direct audience reception data. While the interview findings offer insight into practitioners' perceptions of visitor reactions, they cannot substitute empirical evidence from tourists

themselves. Future studies should incorporate visitor interviews, surveys, or ethnographic observations to triangulate how narratives are interpreted, felt, and ethically negotiated by different publics. Such data would allow testing the experiential positioning model developed here and determining how narrative structures translate into lived emotional and cognitive experiences.

Third, the analysis is limited to publicly available promotional materials, which reflect curated institutional discourses rather than behind-the-scenes decision-making processes. Additional research on organizational communication practices, internal deliberation, and ethical guidelines—particularly within memorial institutions—would help clarify how narrative boundaries and ethical standards are negotiated.

Fourth, although the study addresses digital storytelling, it does so primarily at a conceptual level. As digital mediation becomes increasingly central to heritage communication, future research should examine immersive technologies (VR, AR), online exhibitions, and user-generated content to understand how digital environments reshape affective regimes and narrative agency in dark tourism.

Finally, the Romanian context, while theoretically rich, is historically and culturally specific. Comparative studies across Eastern Europe and other post-authoritarian contexts would clarify whether the hybrid memorial-spiritual-commercial model identified here is unique to Romania or part of a broader regional paradigm. Such comparative work would refine the transferability of the axial model proposed in this study and contribute to cross-cultural theorizing on traumatic memory and tourism communication.

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