DARK TOURISM IN ROMANIA: THE BELLU CEMETERY

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Abstract

This article focuses on the most important aspects of dark tourism and deals with the Romanian population's perception of the Bellu Cemetery of Bucharest, a must-see dark tourism attraction. The main purpose of this research was to collect and analyze the opinions of Romanians regarding dark tourism, especially their opinion about the practice of tourism in this cemetery. The objectives to be achieved were (1) to determine the main motives for visiting the cemetery, (2) to determine the most popular gravestones, (3) to determine if and why people believe the cemetery is haunted, and (4) to determine the ethical concerns of being a tourist there. Accordingly, a survey was conducted for the defined scope. It was found that Romanians of all ages are positive about the concept of dark tourism and are willing to practice it.

1. Introduction

Dark tourism, a special interest tourism, has steadily grown in popularity over the last two decades, with Google registering millions of searches on the subject every year. Numerous academics have formally researched this complex phenomenon since 1996, looking at issues such as motivations, ethical concerns, impacts and benefits.

Indeed, negative news is brought to the public every day via social media, giving many people information about dark sites that they might later visit out of curiosity. However, this concept is anything but new and has nothing to do with a current trend, but has been practiced since the earliest times in human history.

Death, catastrophes and atrocities have become sensitive topics over time and still arouse people's interest, as there is much to observe and learn from them.

The aim of this study is to illustrate how Romanians perceive dark tourism and its sub-form, cemetery tourism, using the famous Bellu Cemetery in Bucharest as an example. In the first part, the specialized literature was consulted and the most important information that could be used for the study was presented. In the second part, the methodology and the four objectives to be achieved were presented. Each of these objectives was intended to highlight the touristic dimension of the Bellu cemetery. The results obtained from the questionnaire were then briefly explained. Finally, the study was concluded by highlighting the essence of this work.

2. Literature review

2.1 Definitions

Dark tourism was first introduced to academic research in 1996 when two authors, Foley and Lennon, proposed an initial definition. In their vision, dark tourism is a form of tourism associated with activities where people visit places associated with death and disaster. Other later definitions added some other important aspects of dark tourism. For example, Tarlow (2005, p.48) indicated that dark tourism includes "visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives". Later, Stone (2016) noted that its sites should have political or historical significance. Mionel (2020, p.3) also suggested that dark tourism is consisting of "a higher

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or lower dose of macabre, pain and sufferance with an emotional impact on the life of individuals, either for commemoration, education or for leisure purposes".

2.2 Origins

Stone (2006) argued that dark tourism stands at the roots of people's ephemerality, as their life is conditioned by an inevitable end. Death is a biological reality, treated most of human's history with respect and curiosity, but in different manners. That being said, its approaches may differ drastically from one culture or religion to another, even from one period of history to another. Lennon and Seaton (2004) suggested that this tourism phenomenon has two different origins. One of them is "shadenfreude", a German only existing word that could be translated as receiving satisfaction from other people's suffering and tragedies. The other one is "thanatopsis", which means contemplation of other people's deaths (Stone, 2006 apud Lennon and Seaton, 2004).

That being said, dark tourism has been practiced before the ancient city of Pompei, destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, became a tourism attraction in The Grand Tour in the 18th century (Usborne, 2019). According to Stone (2006), the first dark tourism attraction to ever exist was the Colosseum. Many Roman people traveled long distances to this famous amphitheater just to watch a morbid spectacle with gladiators fighting for their lives. Other early manifestations of the dark tourism were observed in pilgrimages to saints' tombs and later on in public executions, as people gathered from afar to participate at such events.

2.3 Terminology

In the beginning, dark tourism received many different names such as "Black Spot Tourism" (Rojek, 1993, p.136), "milking the macabre" (Dann, 1994, p.64), "morbid tourism" (Blom, 2000) or "thanatourism" (Seaton, 1996). The last term is more specific than the rest and it refers to direct contact with elements of death. However, many authors use it interchangeably with dark tourism (Light, 2017).

Although dark tourism is usually treated as a whole, it is actually an umbrella term, therefore it includes numerous sub-forms in different contexts (Light, 2017): prison tourism (Strange & Kempa, 2003), suicide tourism (Dyer, 2003), fright tourism (Bristow & Newman, 2005), grief tourism (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2007), disaster tourism (Robbie, 2008), genocide tourism (Beech, 2009), atomic tourism (Tuffnel, 2012), war tourism (Kamin, 2014) and tombstone tourism or cemetery tourism (Stanton, 2003).

2.4 Dark tourism's characteristics and travel motivations

Dark tourism is a very complex concept, a mix "between history and heritage, tourism and tragedy" (Verma & Jain, 2013, p.10). It stands at a "psychological consumption process" by satisfying psychological desires that aren't common for the vast majority of tourists (Kunwar & Karki, 2019, p.55). Therefore, some people may resort to practice such forms of tourism in order to arouse strong emotions and feelings. A more extreme example in this case could be the practice of war tourism, in which people travel to conflict-affected states just to experience war themselves (Sandu, 2023). On the other hand, most individuals have a much lower tolerance for death, disasters, atrocities and calamities, therefore they show a lack of such needs. However, dark tourism doesn't necessarily revolve around these psychological desires, because there are many different types of dark attractions that have so much else to offer, such as obtaining knowledge upon society's severe problems or simply observing the reality as it truly is.

Regardless of the nature of their needs, tourists that choose to practice this form of tourism may have one of the three following reasons: (1) to satisfy the curiosity for death and macabre, (2) to feel fear or empathy and (3) to commemorate victims and heroes with tragic ends (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005). Light (2017) brought more motivations in discussion, the most important ones being the desire to enrich their education, pilgrimages, interest for culture and history or simply no interest at all, by taking part in an itinerary.

2.5 Dark tourism's spectrum

Stone (2006) wanted to develop a precise distinction between dark tourism's different sites, thus he created a spectrum with six shades, from the darkest black to the lightest grey. He realized a gradual transition from the authentic sites of death and suffering to those that are only associated with them by stories and rumors. The darkest ones include a higher political influence and ideology, are hard to promote and their purpose is only to educate people, while the lightest ones have a much lower dose of political influence or ideology, are able to attract many categories of tourists and may serve to pure entertainment. Following Stone's remarkable work, Sharpley (2009) discussed dark tourism's shades in a more simplified way and established that a dark tourism attraction from a pale shade would attract tourists almost "accidentally", those from a grey shade would attract people that are interested in this subject and the darkest ones those that are truly passionate about it.

By creating this spectrum with six shades, Stone (2006) established seven categories of dark tourism destinations, starting from the lightest to the darkest:

(1) **Dark Fun Factories** include attractions, tours and events based on real or fictional deaths. They were invented on the premise that the macabre could arouse a wanted sensation of fear, therefore they can be easily commercialized to a larger audience (Stone, 2009b). A notable example is the London Dungeon.

(2) **Dark Exhibitions**, which are composed of museums and exhibitions, are usually designed to enrich someone's education and knowledge. They display arms, weapons, pictures, videos, recovered objects and miniature representations (Seaton, 1996).

(3) **Dark Dungeons** consist of prisons and courthouses, where they share penal and justice codes from the past. Their role is to highlight the importance of freedom, democracy and peace.

(4) **Dark Resting Places** refer to cemeteries, tombs, crypts and mausoleums. Seaton (1996) suggested that their visitors are attracted by the unique tombstones of famous people, heroes and saints.

(5) **Dark Shrines**, which are always positioned where the tragedy took place, were built for the remembrance of the deceased. They usually attract the attention of mass-media for a short period of time.

(6) **Dark Conflict Sites** are specific to war and battlefields. They usually imply live reenactments of historical battles and displays of real weapons and uniforms. The most representative destinations are Waterloo and those affected by The World War II (Smith, 1998).

(7) **Dark Camps of Genocide** refer to places where people were mass-killed and they usually include sites of genocide and holocausts. They are placed at the darkest shade of the spectrum and are open to the public only for commemoration, education and studies. Therefore, they allow tourists in because they want to teach them a lesson about humankind's horrible mistakes, a suitable example being Auschwitz (Beech, 2009).

2.6 Dark tourism's presence in Mass-Media

Mass-Media plays a great role in increasing dark tourism's popularity. Seaton (1996) argued that some dark tourism destinations could not even attract enough tourists if they were not being covered by the media. Similar opinions were also shared by Walter (2009) and Sharpley (2009), who believed that dark tourism maintains a very close relationship with mass-media, as they both constantly present tragedies. In this century, people are actively aware of any kind of crisis and they are even able to watch such destructive events as they're happening. The acts of terrorism from 11th of September 2001 were being broadcasted to almost two billion people after the first attack (Giddens, 2006).

Therefore, in many cases, tourists feel the need to visit destinations they see at TV or in mass-media, mostly because they want to verify themselves if the events that took place there were actually true.

Sometimes they don't manifest passion for the macabre, but they are simply curious if they're real or not (Lewis, Schrier, & Xu, 2021).

2.7 Ethics

The ethical concerns of the dark tourism were also an ample field of discussion. Today, society takes a different approach upon death, considering it to be more of a private matter (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). This also means that people distanced themselves from it in many aspects (Walter, 2009). Therefore, the most concerning question would be *if it's moral or not* to promote and commercialize sites of death, destruction and atrocities. Marcel (2004) considered that dark tourism is "filled with moral ambiguities" and took a negative attitude towards a market in which "death makes a holiday" (Stone, 2006 *apud* Marcel, 2004). However, Stone (2009a) had a much different opinion about this issue, considering that dark tourism is composed of a large variety of destinations with distinct social, cultural and political contexts, therefore they may offer and receive lots of potential moral meanings. This statement takes into consideration the actual purpose of the destination, apart from the mercantile one, and also the real reasons why tourists come to visit it.

2.8 Benefits

Dark tourism is definitely a way to obtain knowledge about the cruel reality, because it uncovers the darkest side of society and life in general. However, as mentioned earlier, its contribution to knowledge may vary depending on the given circumstances and the actual purpose of the destination (Yoshida, Bui, & Lee, 2016). Since the last century, many dark exhibitions and museums have been promoted by highlighting their educational mission, so their tourists could properly understand how and why tragedies took place (Walter, 2009). Some dark tourism attractions have been established primarily to teach people about the consequences of severe political regimes, wars and terrorist attacks (Yuill, 2003). Apart from that, there is a particular case of a traveling exhibition called *Body Worlds*, which displays numerous dissected bodies in an attempt to educate people about their anatomy. The problem with it is that it raised lots of ethical concerns, mostly because authorities noticed a lack of consent from some of the models before their death (Burns, 2007).

3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to collect and analyze opinions of Romanian people in relation to dark tourism, especially their perception regarding the Bellu Cemetery from Bucharest. The reason why I chose to investigate Bellu Cemetery was due to its high tourism potential. Also known as Șerban Vodă Cemetery, it is one of the greatest cemeteries of Romania where numerous notable Romanian figures have been buried since 1858, after Baron Barbu Bellu donated his land solely for this purpose. It is very admired because of its impressive tombstones, decorated with symbols and emblems of the rich families, statues, trinities and obelisks realized by important national and international artists (Tiron, 2006). In some recent years, in *the Night of Museums,* there are being held several commemorative events for our greatest artists, skits, concerts, movie projections and tours (Pârvulescu, 2015).

The so called "open air museum" was the perfect candidate for this study, as it is a must-see dark tourism attraction from Bucharest, it has large dimensions, it is easily accessible and close to all forms of transportation available in the Capital City.

A survey was chosen as the most appropriate research method for the defined scope. A questionnaire with 24 questions was used to collect data. Three of them dealt with dark tourism as a general topic, one served as a filter to separate the visitors from the non-visitors, two were for the non-visitors only and 11 for the visitors. The last seven were identification questions.

Four main objectives have been defined to be achieved in order to outline the touristic dimension of the Bellu Cemetery:

O1: Identify the main motives of visiting the cemetery.

O2: Determine the most popular tombstones.

O3: Determine if the cemetery is thought to be haunted and why.

O4: Identify the ethical concerns of being a tourist there.

The questionnaire was created on the Google Forms platform and distributed via social media between June 12 and 17, 2022, primarily to very active student groups, but also individually to friends and family members. It was completed by a total of 157 respondents, 96 of whom were women and 61 men. The majority of them (55.4%), composed of 87 respondents, were aged between 16 - 25 years old, 24 were in the 26-35 years old category, 18 were in the 36-45 years old category, 15 were aged above 60 years old and only 13 of them were in the 46-60 years old category. The majority of them came from urban areas (75.8%) and only 24.2% from rural areas. In terms of educational level, there were no respondents who had not yet completed high school or vocational school. More than half, 109 respondents (69.4%), had already completed high school. The remainder, 30.6% of respondents, had a post-secondary degree (11), a bachelor's degree (29), a master's degree (7) and a doctorate (1). In addition, 80 people were still students, 52 were employed, 9 were entrepreneurs, 4 were unemployed and 12 were retired. The most prevalent work domains, mentioned voluntarily were Retail and Sales, Hospitality and Tourism, Information Technology, Healthcare, Education and Accountancy. The last socio-demographic factor taken into consideration was their income. There were 46 (29.3%) respondents with incomes under 1500 RON and 44 (28%) between 1500 – 2500 RON. That could be easily explained by the large number of students involved in the research. 45 (28.7%) earned between 2501 – 3500 RON and the rest of them, namely 22 (14%), make over 3,500 RON.

Upon receiving the responses, a return visit to the Bellu Cemetery was made, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the aspects highlighted by the respondents and enabling validation or contradiction of particular responses.

4. Results and discussion

As mentioned earlier, the first three questions played an important role for the research, because they were meant to introduce the respondents to dark tourism.
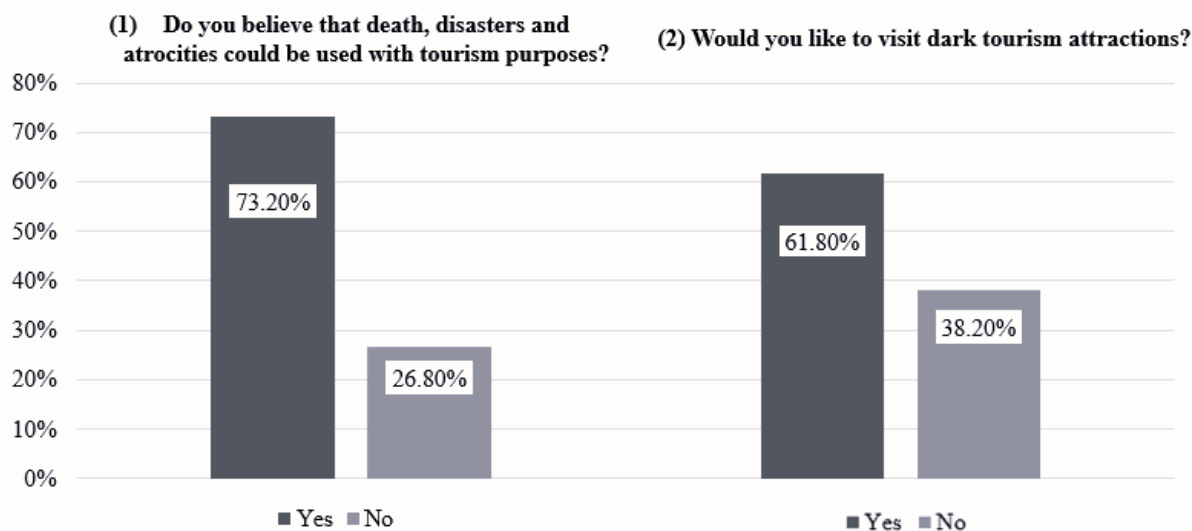

Figure 1. Concept versus preference
Source: created by author

When asked if "death, disasters and atrocities could be used with tourism purposes", the majority of them, namely 115 respondents (73.2%), answered yes, which means that they validate the concept of dark tourism. Individuals from all age categories agreed with this tourism phenomenon. Only 42 respondents (26.8%) disagreed upon using such elements for tourism purposes (Figure 1).

The following question took into consideration their intention of practicing dark tourism. As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of respondents who would actually visit dark tourism attractions lowered

slightly, reaching 61.8%. Even though 18 people previously agreed with the practice, that did not necessarily mean it was in accordance with their preferences. Another way to explain the drop in numbers could be their low tolerance for negative aspects of life or a prior unpleasant experience.

Next, the respondents had to answer what they think of when they hear the word "cemetery". As highlighted in Figure 2, the most written word was "death" (39.49%), key element of dark tourism, followed by "graves" (10.83%), "sadness" (9.55%) and "burial plot" (7.01%). Other relevant terms used were "crosses", "corpses", "eternity", "farewell", "last journey", "peace" and "afterlife". Therefore, it is noticed that most of the terms used are from the lexical field of the word "cemetery". Additionally, they introduced two inputs of The Merry Cemetery of Săpânța, a unique dark tourism attraction from Romania. Words used only once were "darkness", "tears", "incense", "alms", "house of the dead", "solemnity" and "ghosts". Even if some answers were more specific than others, they successfully captured the true essence of dark tourism.
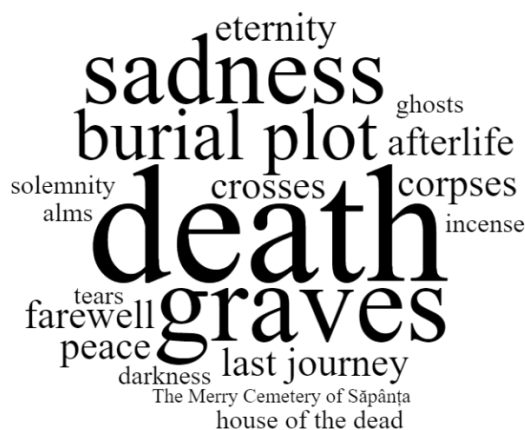

Figure 2. Words Romanians associated with the word "cemetery"
Source: created by author

In the following phase, the focus shifted to introducing the Bellu Cemetery as the primary subject. Upon categorizing respondents into visitors and non-visitors, it was noted that 69 respondents (43.9%) had previously visited the cemetery, while the majority, comprising 88 respondents (56.1%), had not visited it before.

Next, the non-visitors received two special questions, namely (1) "If you have never visited Bellu Cemetery before, would you like to do that?" and (2) "What would be the main motive for visiting the cemetery?" From those 88 respondents, 53.4% (47) of them were willing to visit it and 46.6% (41) were not. For a deeper comprehension of the negative responses, an analysis was conducted on their earlier answers concerning the validation of dark tourism as a concept (the first question). From those 41 respondents, only 15 of them considered that death, atrocities and disasters could be used with tourism purposes, however that did not necessarily mean they wanted to visit any dark tourism attraction, including Șerban Vodă Cemetery. Those that were positive about visiting the cemetery had to specify the main motive to do so. As shown in Figure 3 (left), the majority of the non-visitors, composed of 59.6% of respondents (28), indicated that curiosity played a substantial part. From those 28 people, 3 of them did not validate the concept of dark tourism and were not willing to visit its attractions. However, the reason why they would consider visiting it could be that its prestige aroused their interest. The other responses were that they would like to participate at its artistic events or practice tourism (25.5%) and to arouse the feeling of fear (14.9%). None of them answered that they would commemorate the dead, which could be justified from the lack of knowledge that there have been buried numerous important Romanian figures.

The investigation of the visitors began with the motives for their visit. The main reasons for visiting the cemetery could therefore be fully determined at this stage. As highlighted in Figure 3 (right), most of them, namely 29 respondents (42%), were there to commemorate the dead, followed by 27 respondents (39.1%) who declared that they visited it out of curiosity. Only 7 (10.1%) participated at

artistic events or practiced tourism and 4 (5.8%) had no special motive. The last 2 respondents (2.9%) visited the cemetery to arouse the feeling of fear.
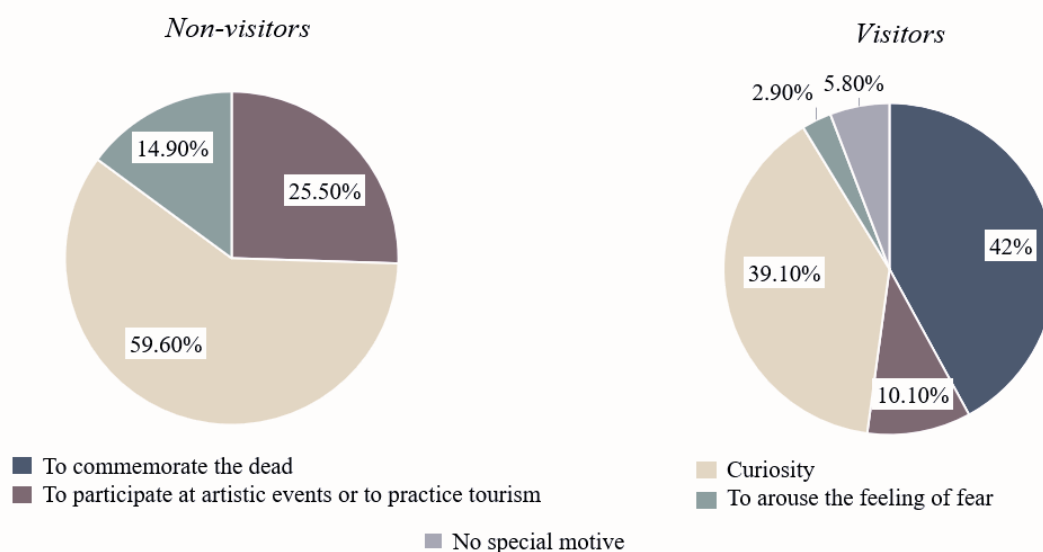

Figure 3. The main motives for visiting the cemetery
Source: created by author

When asked whose tomb attracted the most attention, the most common answer was "Mihai Eminescu", who was mentioned 20 times. His tomb is not the most impressive, as it is much simpler than many others, but he is a popular Romanian poet, which could explain their choice. Second place went to the tomb of the writer Iulia Hasdeu, with 13 mentions. This tomb is memorable and unique. Where there should be a cross, it stands a miniature temple. At the top of the monument is a globe with two sphinxes and the message "Mai ședi puțin", which means" Sit down a little longer". In third place is the grave of Katalina Boschott, which was mentioned 6 times. In most cases, respondents did not remember her actual name, so they called her "The lady with the umbrella". Other recognized graves, which were mentioned 5 times each, are that of the Poroineanu family and that of Aurel Vlaicu. The first one displays an impressive sculptural representation of a man that comforts a bedridden woman and the second one stands at the entry of the cemetery; his cross being decorated with an enormous vulture. Few other tombs that were indicated by the respondents were those of Cantacuzino Family, Sophia Mavrodin, Pompilian Family, Ion Luca Caragiale, Geogre Călinescu, Dem Rădulescu and Gheorge Dinică.

Another aspect set to be discussed is how frightening the Bellu Cemetery is thought to be. By using a scale from 1 to 5 (1 meaning not frightening and 5 very frightening), a large number of respondents, namely 29 out of 69, answered that it is not scary, followed by 12 of them which noted that it is only mildly frightening. However, another large portion, composed of 21 respondents, found it frightening. Only 6 considered it quite frightening and 1 very frightening. After calculating the average score, the result showed that Bellu Cemetery is only mildly frightening.

In fulfilling the third objective, it was necessary to verify whether the respondents held the belief that the Bellu Cemetery was haunted. The majority of them (82.6%) believed that it is not haunted, which validates the previous result. A cemetery that is only slightly frightening cannot be considered haunted, although 12 out of 69 respondents said it was. To find out what makes it haunted, I asked them to justify their answer. They mentioned that "the spirits of the dead are present in the cemetery", "there are buried people with devastating stories" and "on some tombs are written disturbing messages". These are only general beliefs of cemeteries.
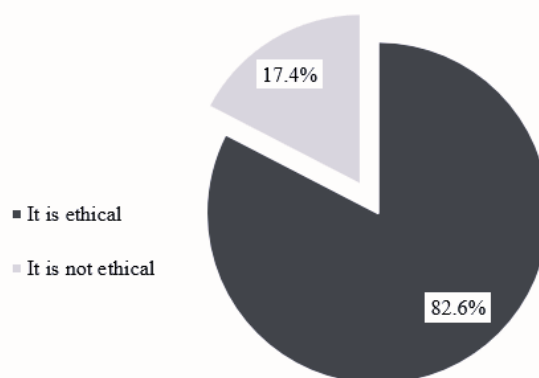
Figure 4. The ethical concerns
Source: created by author

The last significant part of the research was about the ethical concerns of practicing tourism in the Bellu Cemetery. The greater part of the respondents (82.6%) believed that it is ethical and only 17.4% did not (Figure 4). When they were asked why, most of them noted similar responses such as "death should not be exploited", "cemeteries are not tourism attractions", "the deceased should rest in peace" and "the cemetery should be a private place, where only the dear ones come to commemorate their deceased".

5. Conclusions

Corroborating all of the aspects mentioned earlier in this article, dark tourism is a recently field of research, but it has been practiced from the earliest periods of human history. It is special interest tourism, because it is addressing to a specific category of tourists, with higher tolerance for death, disasters and suffering. The main motives to practice dark tourism are to satisfy the curiosity for macabre, to arouse the feeling of fear, to commemorate heroes or victims or to obtain knowledge. However, there are tourists that have no passion for macabre or that practice it "accidentally" in an itinerary. Many times, it has been criticized because it raises ethical concerns and it is associated with immorality, although by practicing dark tourism people can better understand many problems of society, namely terrorist attacks, wars, nuclear accidents or crimes. Additionally, mass-media plays a great role in making dark tourism popular, because it promotes it through news, movies, blogs or social media.

The research conducted for this article on the Bellu Cemetery in Bucharest has shown that, although it is a niche form of tourism, Romanians of all ages are open to the concept and willing to visit its attractions. According to the responses, the main motives for visiting the Bellu Cemetery are, in the following order: (1) to satisfy their curiosity, (2) to commemorate the dead, (3) to participate in artistic events or tourism and (4) to arouse the feeling of fear. The most appreciated tomb was that of Mihai Eminescu, although his funerary monument is not spectacular. The reason for this could be that it aroused many emotions because he was one of the most talented Romanian poets of all time. Also, most of them stated that there are no ethical concerns about doing tourism there. Ultimately, the cemetery is only slightly scary and is not believed to be haunted. This could explain why the last motive to visit the cemetery was not so popular.

Acknowledgement

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