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### How the Destinations' Authenticity and Popularity Influence the Structure of the Travel Agencies' Tourism Products

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#### Abstract

The present paper seeks to put in a relationship, the authenticity of rural destinations and their popularity among tourism consumers, vis a vis of the integration, promotion and marketing through tourism products of travel agencies. Maramureș is perhaps the most authentic area of Romania, both in terms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The isolated geographical location of the area, in the northern most corner of the country, has involuntarily contributed to a good preservation of this heritage. Therefore, my case study focused on rural localities in this

area and how they are included, promoted and commercialized through the products of tourism agencies, considering UNESCO's criteria of authenticity, as an attribute of cultural identity and popularity as an attribute of commercial identity. The analysis started from the premise that a tourist identity of an authentic destination appears when, in addition to the cultural identity of the respective destination, there is also a commercial identity through which the destination gets added value.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, Popularity, Cultural Identity, Commercial Identity, Rural Destination

**JEL Classification:** M31, N94, Z32, Z33

#### 1. Introduction

A destination has, in addition to a commercial identity through which it is known among tourists and on the tourism market, also a territory identity, a DNA of the territory, taken over the past and updated over the years. This identity is specific to each territory, depending by the natural, cultural, historical factors that acted on the territory and shaped it into a well-defined geographical space. When we refer to a territory with strong characteristics of authenticity, this territorial DNA takes the valences of cultural identity to an authentic space, which together with the commercial identity of the same space build the touristic identity of the destination. Specifically, each territory has its own DNA, but it will always be a component of the destination's touristic identity. The two identities, cultural and commercial, apparently condition each other, in certain territorial contexts. Thus, when the cultural identity of a destination is built on elements of uniqueness and territorial authenticity, that destination promotes itself through these elements of uniqueness on the tourism market, not being necessary, marketing and commercial efforts to build a commercial identity, through which to become known. But when the cultural identity of a destination does not have elements of uniqueness and authentic cultural elements through which it can promote itself, the role of marketing is imminent to make it known. Starting from those exposed, I asked myself how does manifest itself a well-known destination, mostly authentic, with areas containing more or less uniqueness on the tourist market, taking into consideration the way is promoted, on the tourist market, by the travel agencies. In this sense, I initiated an online study, in order to highlight the interdependence relationship that is established between the two identities, in the area of Maramureș and its component sub-areas. To determine this relationship of interdependence I started from the following premises: The authenticity is the main attribute that builds the cultural identity of a tourist destination, as a component of the tourist identity of this destination and the popularity is the main characteristic of a destination, as a result of promotion on the tourist market. Therefore, in the online study made, I wanted to observe how these attributes are manifested and how they influence the localities in the Maramureș area, in terms of inclusion and promotion through integrated tourism products of travel agencies, in order to be able to conclude on the relationship that is formed between the two components of the touristic identity of a destination.

## 2. Method

In the present paper, I focused on a quantitative research of the presentation sites to some tourism agencies, in order to select and collect information regarding the promotion of villages in the authentic Maramures areas through integrated tourism products. The analyzed period was 26.12.2023 – 30.04.2024 in order to be able to capture the offers of travel agencies around the New Year and the Easter holiday, in the sub-areas of Maramures. The analyzed agencies were selected by searching on the Google browser the travel agencies in each county of the country, successively, in alphabetical order. All the agencies displayed by the browser in each county, were noted. Then, the website of each displayed agency was analyzed. All categories of tourist products included in the offers were searched: Individual stays, which only included accommodation, organized stays, which included accommodation and meals, circuits with full or partial itinerary in the Maramures sub-areas, school camps and one day trips. The objective of the online research was to identify and collect information about the villages in the areas of Maramureș, promoted in the tourist products from the offers of the travel agencies, before the New Year 2024 and the Easter holiday 2024. The collected data were important to identify the villages the more often included in the offers, as well as villages with authentic characteristics, not included or less included in the tourist products offered by travel agencies. In the same time, I carried out, also a qualitative research, through the analysis of some open access papers and publications, having the main theme, the authenticity and reputation of a destination, some UNESCO publications and the UNESCO website. Then the reality of the physical and cultural space of the four Maramures subareas was observed, in order to identify the elements of authenticity, uniqueness and popularity of some Maramures destinations. The field research was carried out between September 2022 and July 2023 and was aimed to catch the information that was useful to me in writing a previous paper. In the same time, were observed the aspects related to the preservation of traditions, the authenticity of some places, customs, crafts, popular and less popular tourist attractions, tourist attractions with elements of uniqueness and authenticity, in order to be able to formulate a personal objective opinion vis a vis of the physical and cultural space of the four Maramures subareas. I got extremely valuable information through a semi-structured interview with the master potter Butnar Dumitru Tănase, in order to be able to present a complete and complex case study.

A shortcoming of the research, which made it difficult to observe and collect information, was the fact that the same tourism products were included in the offers of several agencies, and it would seem that the information obtained are not very relevant. The study does not aim to identify categories of tourist products included in the offers of travel agencies, but aims to identify the relationship established between authenticity and popularity on the one hand and the choice, inclusion and promotion of Maramures rural localities in the online environment, on the other hand. That is why the information collected are very relevant and has a high accuracy for the purpose of the study.

In the present study I will start from three hypotheses, trying to determine through the case study if they are confirmed. Through the first formulated hypothesis, I will try to demonstrate the fact that a village that meets the criteria of

authenticity is often included in the tourist products of travel agencies, without having popularity, as an attribute of the commercial identity. Through the second hypothesis I will try to prove that a village with great popularity is not included in the products of travel agencies if it does not also meet the criteria of authenticity. And through the third hypothesis I will try to prove that a village that meets the criteria of authenticity and popularity is very often included and marketed in the tourism products of travel agencies.

### 2.1 Authenticity, as the main characteristic of the cultural identity to touristic destination

The tourism identity of a touristic destination or of a tourism region, become the touristic identity of this territory when includes the borders marked by the significant symbols of this territory and when it is obligatory integrated on a certain touristic market (Băieș, 2023)<sup>[1]</sup>. The significant symbols of a territory build its cultural identity, while its integration into a tourist market is the responsibility of its commercial identity, built with great marketing and territory management efforts and with the allocation of considerable financial, material, time and informational resources. The cultural identity of a territory is the expression of the cultural characteristics and symbols of that territory, born and preserved inside to the community. That is why we can consider the cultural identity, the DNA of the respective territory, which, like the human DNA, marks the existence and integration of the territory in the national and international geographical and cultural space. (Bruges, 2015)<sup>[2]</sup>.

The significant symbols of a territory are the expressions of what UNESCO calls cultural landscapes. Cultural landscapes of a destination are defined by UNESCO as "combined works of nature and man". Cultural landscapes are the significant symbols of the evolution of human society and its preservation over time, on a certain territory. UNESCO identifies three types of cultural landscapes of a territory. The first and most easily identified is defined as "landscape design and intentionally created by humans." From this category, the most common are religious buildings or monuments. The second is defined as "organically evolved landscape" and is the result of the social, economic, administrative, religious connection of the inhabitants with the habitat, with the natural environment of the territory. This type of cultural landscape is given by the traditional way of life of the inhabitants, fossil landscapes or relict landscapes. The third type of cultural landscape is defined by UNESCO as "associative cultural landscape" and are identified as cultural, religious or artistic elements in direct relationship with nature and community, without material cultural evidence. Among these can be integrated the customs and traditions of a community. (Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention: p.22-23). These three categories of cultural landscapes of a territory are landmarks of integration into the UNESCO world cultural heritage and they are representing a comparative standard for international cultural landscapes. Starting from these UNESCO landmarks, I will analyze in this article, two of the most significant cultural properties of the cultural heritage of Maramureș.

#### 2.1.1 The notion of the authenticity

The cultural identity of the territory could be appreciated as a value, by appreciating certain characteristics of authenticity. The authenticity of cultural properties has been

approached rather less enough in specialized literature, trying to establish some links between cultural properties and the perception of tourist consumers on their authenticity, in other words what tourists consider to be authentic in the market of tourist destinations.

Understanding, analysing and appreciating what is authentic and what authenticity is, can be approached from three perspectives. The first one is that of the characteristics of authenticity, being authentic a tourist objective which is real, reliable, trustworthy, original, first hand, true in substance and prototypical as opposed to copied, reproduced or done the same way as an original. The second perspective is related to the experience level of tourists, through the lived experiences and the services offered by the respective destination, thus giving economic value to the tourist objective. The third perspective is that of the affective link created between tourists and the destination, as a balance between rational and emotional, being defined as an alternative tourism experience (Ram, 2016) <sup>[11]</sup>. In this paper, authenticity is approached as an attribute of cultural identity, and therefore the first perspective of approach mentioned above, that of the characteristics of the authenticity of a destination, is appropriate, the other approaches being rather effects of the consumption of tourist products, not being the case in the present study. Authenticity is the essential attribute that gives value to a touristic objective, cultural landscape or destination. But it is difficult to appreciate what are the characteristics that give authenticity to a cultural property. These characteristics that give authenticity to a cultural property are different from one culture to another, from one civilization to another, from one area to another. That is why it is impossible to appreciate the authenticity by taking into consideration some fixed criteria of appreciation. Authenticity must be appreciated in the cultural context in which it is present, respecting the values and beliefs of each socio-cultural space. (Authenticity in relation to the world heritage convention: p. 94).

From my point of view, taking into consideration the previously mentioned and the fact that the authenticity of a touristic objective is based on the originality and on the value given to the touristic objectives by experts (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010), in the objective assessment of the authenticity to a cultural property, it should be used as a comparative standard, the criteria and conditions of authenticity imposed by UNESCO. UNESCO, in the Original Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, presents some characteristics of a cultural property so that it meets the conditions of authenticity, characteristics used as a benchmark for the inclusion of a property in the UNESCO list. A cultural property meets authenticity conditions if its cultural value is the expression of the following characteristics: Form and design, materials and substance, use and function, tradition, techniques and management system, location and setting, language and other forms of intangible heritage, spirit and feeling, other internal and external factors. (Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention: p. 30-31).

## **2.2 Popularity, as the main characteristic of commercial identity to a touristic destination**

The commercial identity of a territory, the second component of the tourism identity of the destination is

responsible for building a positive or negative image of the destination. Destination's image is the most important attribute in promoting and marketing it on the tourist market and in consequence, it is essential that the population's perception of a territory to be positive. Tourist destination's image represents "the sum of a person's beliefs, ideas and impressions about a territory" (Crompton, 1979). Another definition given to the image of a destination belongs to Esh according to which the image of a tourist destination represents "a set of complex mental impressions and feelings that a potential tourist has about a territory" (Esu, 2015) <sup>[4]</sup>. Rudez states that "tourist destination's image is a subjective interpretation of reality, resulting largely from a process generated by the promotion and management of the destination with sustained tourism marketing efforts" (Rudez, 2014) <sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, destination's image is a complex concept that includes different perceptions of potential tourists on all components of the destination: Natural and human resources, cultural identity, infrastructure, authorities, inhabitants, facilities and services. The positive perception or favorable interpretation of all signals sent by the destination makes a destination popular among tourism consumers. If the destination's notoriety is the quantitative expression of the destination's image, expressing the level of knowledge of the destination among tourism consumers, popularity is the qualitative, measurable expression of a destination, expressing the level of favorable appreciation of the destination among tourism consumers who know the destination, have heard of that destination, but they do not have a positive or negative, favorable or unfavorable opinion. The popularity of a destination therefore refers to a favorable perception among tourists. Negative or unfavorable perceptions of tourism consumers do not give the destination popularity, but only a negative image.

Destination's popularity does not necessarily include consumption. A tourist can appreciate a popular destination without having visited it, being only a potential tourist. After the consumption experience, the perception about the destination can change, so that the unpleasant experiences of a large number of tourists will cause a decrease in the destination's popularity and building a negative or unfavorable image. A low popularity of a destination is not strictly the effect of the unfavorable consumption experience of the respective destination, but may be the effect of the non-involvement of the destination or the tourist objective in commercial and marketing actions.

Destinations with high or growing popularity are likely to be included most often in the composition of tourism products, while those with low or decreasing popularity will not be included or will rarely be included in the composition of tourism products. In choosing the destinations included in the tourist product itineraries of travel agencies, too few of them are making studies and market research. Most of them empirically choose the destinations from the tourist product itineraries, taking into consideration several factors: The destinations included in the tourist products of the competing agencies, the consumption experiences of the actual tourists, the attractiveness of the destination, the relations established with the locals and the authorities, the ease of access to the destination, attractive accommodation opportunities or corresponding to the objectives pursued by the agency. Each of these factors also represents stimulus that triggers the perception of destination's image, in the

cognitive stage of the transformation of a potential tourist into an actual tourist. Thus, a destination that is difficult to access, with unattractive accommodation possibilities will not be perceived by potential tourists as popular, but rather one with an unfavorable image. Destination's popularity in this case will be formed in the behavioral and affective stage when the tourist will choose the destination on his trip and will create a sentimental, emotional connection with the place. Therefore, taking into consideration the listed factors in the choice of itineraries, travel agencies seek to prevent the tourists' need to visit a destination. I believe, starting from the above mentioned, that destination's popularity or the level of positive or favorable opinions, point of views or reviews of tourism consumers, is the main attribute of the commercial identity through which the destination is promoted and marketed among tourism consumers. The mechanism by which destination's popularity influences travel consumer choices is shown in the Fig 1.

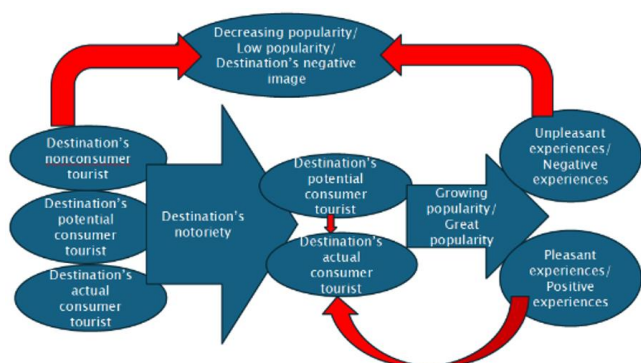


Fig 1: The mechanism of a destination popularity dynamics  
Elaborated by the author

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 The authenticity and popularity of rural areas – case study of Maramureş' villages

In my case study, I wanted to capture how the presented attributes influence the authenticity and popularity of tourist destinations, their inclusion in the tourist itineraries offered by travel agencies. To make this study, I stopped at some villages in the authentic areas of Maramureş. The online study was made by studying the offer of travel agencies on the web presentation sites and observing all types of tourist products presented and commercialized: Individual stays, where only accommodation units were promoted, organized stays, where they were promoted packages including meals, transport, included and optional services, circuits in which itineraries included overnight stays in Maramures rural localities and adjacent services as well as other kind of the previously presented tourist products, school camps, one day trips, pilgrimages. In order to catch the integration of a village in the travel agency's offer, I looked for how many times that village is included in the agency's products. Within the individual and organized stays, the accommodation units promoted in the village and also the visited village nearby were searched. Within the circuits, the overnight stays in the village were searched, but also the visit of some touristic objectives from the nearby villages, considering that both, the overnight stay villages and the nearby visited villages were attractive, compared to other villages from Maramureş. Thus, for example, a village appeared promoted n times within the stay offers, considering that the accommodation units promoted in one

village were preferred to others of the same category from other villages and m times within a circuit, through the overnight stay villages and through the visited villages. The sum of the two variables represents the number of appearances or promoting of the respective village on the travel agency's website whose offer was analyzed. Thus, 268 sites of online travel agencies were analyzed, from which only 116 travel agencies offered tourist products that promoted villages in Maramureş, meaning 43,28 percent from the analyzed travel agencies. The rest of 152, meaning 56,72 percent did not include villages from the Maramureş area in the New Year and Easter offers. The following villages were thus identified: Breb, Ieud, Recea, Săpânta, Budeşti, Bârsana, Vişeu de Jos, Săcel, Dăneşti, Onceşti, Moisei, Ocna Şugatag, Mara, Tăuţii Magheruş, Vadu Izei, Glod, Dragomireşti, Blidari, Sat Şugatag, Copalnic Monastery, Deseşti, Hoteni, Poienile Izei, Mara, Rona de Jos, Petrova, Rozavlea, Bogdan Vodă. From the identified villages, Breb, Ieud, Săpânta and Săcel, have tourist attractions on their territory, which are either included in the UNESCO cultural heritage, or have traditional cultural and architectural elements that meet the authenticity characteristics necessary for inclusion in the UNESCO heritage. Among the identified localities, with great popularity are Săpânta, known for the Merry Cemetery, included in the UNESCO cultural heritage and for the folklore promoted at national and international level by a folklore artist born in the village of Săpânta, Bârsana and Moisei, known nationally for the orthodox monasteries localized inside of those two villages and for a historical monument of regional importance, and Vişeu de Jos, known for its virgin forests and the narrow-gauge steam train - mocăniţa, which still runs today for both, tourist and utilitarian purposes. Among all these localities with high authenticity and popularity, Săpânta was promoted the most, by the 116 agencies, having 147 appearances in the tourist products of the travel agencies, Moisei was promoted in 134 tourist products, Bârsana in 132 products tourist products and Vişeu de Jos in 81 tourist products, while Breb was promoted in 32 tourist products, Săcel in 19 products and Ieud in 11 tourist products. Villages' promotion in the travel agencies' offers is represented by the Fig 2.

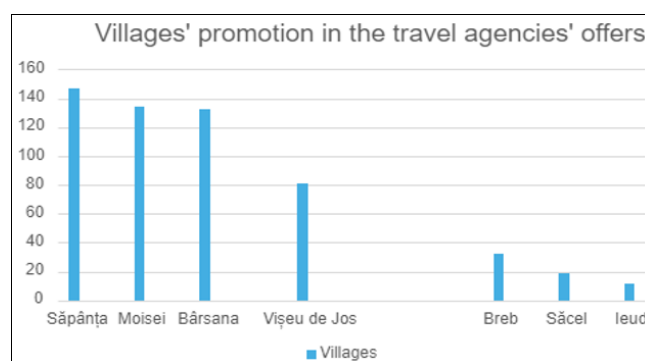


Fig 2: Villages' promotion in the travel agencies' offers  
Elaborated by the author

Among these localities, the most often integrated village in the travel agencies' offers is Săpânta and is not at all surprising, because Săpânta is a landmark of originality, uniqueness and authenticity recognized by UNESCO. Likewise, Bârsana, known because of the orthodox monastery, benefits from a great popularity. But what

surprised me after the analysis of the results was the non-integration of some localities with strong characteristics of authenticity. Breb village has authentic, traditional Maramureş architectural elements, very well preserved. Ieud village houses a great meaning and valuable wooden church, in Maramureş architectural style, included in the UNESCO world cultural heritage. Săcel is the place where the craft of pottery is carried on from father to son by 12 generations of potters and from my point of view it has a great identity significance for the Romanian people, therefore I chose to present this objective in what follows.

### 3.2 Dacian ceramics from Săcel – landmark of national cultural identity

Săcel village is located at the entrance to Maramureş county from Bistrita Năsăud county. The locality does not stand out in the context of authenticity of the Maramureş area with authentic architectural elements like the rest of the rural localities mentioned in this case study. But Săcel has been a unique traditional pottery center for generations. Dumitru Tănase Butnar is the 12th generation of potters who create Dacian clay vessels for domestic use in Săcel. The Dacian pottery from Săcel is therefore not a decorative pottery but an unglazed red pottery, designed by the manufacturing process to be used in the household.

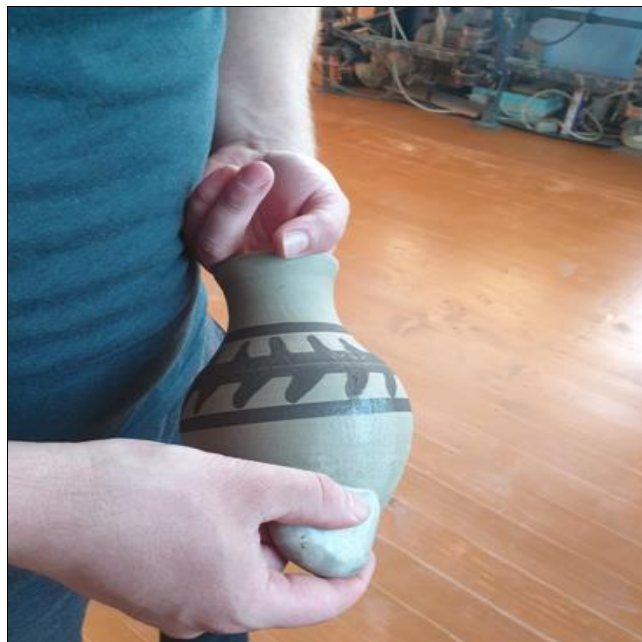
Pottery center from Săcel produces a small number of unique objects, crafted with care and dedication by the potter Dumitru Tănase Butnar. The clay used is a very fat clay that the potter extracts from the Drovodeava hill in Săcel village, from a depth of 8-10m and which is not found in other places. The clay is shaped into household vessels of various shapes and sizes. After receiving shape and size, the vessels are simply decorated with a black paste obtained by grinding a black stone and mixing the resulting powder with water. The vessels are left to dry for several weeks, then polished with a white river stone. By polishing, the dish gets external gloss and finesse. Finally, the vessels are fired for 24 to 48 hours. The burning time depends on the size, thickness, household destination of the dish. The furnace used for burning is taken over from previous generations and uses wood as fuel.

The properties of the clay used and the manufacturing technology give the vessels unique characteristics. First of all, by burning, the dishes gain strength and are ready for domestic use. Second, the color of the fired clay will change color over time, through use, from red to brown. And thirdly, the food prepared in these vessels has a different taste and consistency than that prepared in commercial cookware.



Source: Personal photos of Mr. D. T. Butnar

Fig 3: Vessels to dry



Source: Personal photos of Mr. D. T. Butnar

Fig 4: Polishing with a white river stone

The potter's workshop is little known nationally and internationally, the vessels being sold only to locals or to those who happen to pass by county road on their way to the town of Vişeu and through some regional cultural locations. The potter wants to carry on the tradition inherited from his ancestors, and the most important thing for him is, that the one who buys a red unglazed Dacian ceramic pot, to use it for observing its properties. Săcel Dacian ceramics is a national brand, an element of national cultural identity that conveys the ties of the Romanian people with their Dacian ancestors and it meets the necessary characteristics to be included in the UNESCO cultural heritage.



Source: Personal photos of Mr. D.T. Butnar

Fig 5: The next generation of potters holding a dry vessel (right hand) and a burn vessel (left hand)



Source: Personal photos of Mr. D. T. Butnar

Fig 6: The potter’s workshop

In the table below, the UNESCO authenticity criteria are reproduced and elements corresponding to these criteria are identified for two of the mentioned rural localities, Săpânta, having Merry Cemetery on the UNESCO’s list and Săcel.

Table 1: The elements of authenticity for Dacian red ceramics unglazed from Săcel Elaborated by the author

Authenticity criteria according to UNESCO	Merry Cemetery from Săpânta village	Dacian red pottery unglazed from Săcel
Form and design	Wooden crosses, painted in blue of Săpânta, carved, each unique and original	Clay vessels, unique design using red greasy clay , decorated with black decors
Materials and substance	Oak wood, painted	Greasy red clay Ground black stone
Use and function	Funerary monument	Household usage
Tradition, techniques	Traditional craft-carving	Unique techniques inherited from the ancestors
Location	Traditional village of Maramureş County	Traditional village of Maramureş County
Language and other forms of intangible heritage	Epitaphs on the crosses Know-how of a traditional craft	The Dacian origin of the Romanian people Know-how of a traditional craft
Spirit and feeling	A Homeric laugh by death	The Dacian origin of the Romanian people

4. Conclusion

From the Fig 2 presented above, it can be seen that Săpânta, which meets both the criteria of authenticity and popularity, is found in the largest number of appearances in the tourism products of travel agencies. This confirms hypothesis 3 – a rural locality with strong characteristics of authenticity as an attribute of cultural identity also needs popularity as an attribute of commercial identity, to be included and marketed within tourism products. Săcel village, however, for which I previously showed that it meets UNESCO authenticity criteria, is included and promoted through tourist products in the online environment very few times, being found 19 times and rather as individual stays and not as a village visited for its authenticity. Hypothesis 1 is therefore not confirmed. So a village with strong characteristics of authenticity is not included in the products of travel agencies, because it is not popular, do not meet the

criteria of popularity, having no other element by which is it known.

Regarding popularity, as an attribute of the commercial identity, from the study carried out by me, it is very clear that the popularity of a place is an attribute that manifests itself much more intensively in the choices of promotion and commercialization through the tourism products of travel agencies compared to places with authentic features that are not popular. Thus, both Săpânta, which is a cultural landmark from the point of view of authenticity, as well as the other localities of Bârsana, Moisei and Viseu de Jos can be found in the offers of travel agencies with great frequency due to their popularity, obtained with the help of other territorial elements. Hypothesis 2 is thus not confirmed, as it is not necessary for a rural locality to meet authenticity criteria in order to be found with high frequency in the offers of travel agencies.

In conclusion, the study carried out by me in the online environment aimed to identify an interdependence relationship between the authenticity of a territory as an attribute of cultural identity and the popularity of another territory as an attribute of commercial identity in relation to the frequency of appearances of these territories in product offers tourism agencies. The study highlighted the fact that the popularity of a territory manifests much more intensively than the authenticity of a territory in the preferences of tourism agencies, which emphasizes the role of the authorities and the community in promoting territories and tourist objectives as tourism destinations. The existence of strong authentic characteristics of a territory does not determine as a consequence its choice in the marketed tourist products, but the popularity of a territory can have as a consequence, the integration in the itineraries of tourist products. An authentic touristic territory also needs commercial identity to be marketed and therefore visited, but a territory with great popularity among tourism consumers does not need to have authentic cultural identity elements to be marketed and visited.

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