

# The show must go on(line) - Social media marketing during a pandemic: the case of two Dracula themed dark tourism festivals

*[Luisa Golz is a PhD student at Athlone Institute of Technology in Ireland, researching dark tourism festivals. Her research will support festival organisers in promoting dark tourism festivals, proposing the first experiential marketing guide of its kind.]*

## Introduction

The novel “Dracula” written by Bram Stoker has initiated travel to locations described in the book for many decades (Iordanova; Muresan and Smith; Hoppen et al.; Skal; Light). People travel to the locations familiar from the novel and the screen adaptations for many different reasons, but one key motivation is the desire to compare the imagery that exists in their imagination with what they can see in reality (Pocock; O’Connor and Kim). This is also called “landscape comparison” (Podoshen; Reijnders) and falls under the realm of the “tourist gaze” (Urry, J.; Larsen), whereby the landscape the travellers see is mediated through the lens of popular culture. This type of travel forms part of an activity that is known under the term “Dracula tourism” (Reijnders; Muresan and Smith; Iordanova). Dracula tourists choose to visit places that have a connection with Dracula – both the novel and films - or with the author of Dracula. For example, they travel to Transylvania in Romania, Whitby in the UK or Dublin in Ireland.

Visits to these places include the consumption of both places and festivals. In the tourism literature, the term “dark tourism” describes travel related to sites that are associated with death, disaster or the macabre (Foley and Lennon). The term was first introduced in 1996 and today, the visitation of dark tourism sites is a very popular form of tourism, with millions of tourists annually visiting such sites, the most famous and well-studied example being the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland (Hooper and Lennon). Although the term “dark tourism” would not have been familiar to Bram Stoker, the practice most likely was, as evidenced in his short story *The Squaw*. In this story, Stoker describes in gruesome detail how tourists visit a torture chamber in Nuremberg in Germany (Stoker, “The Squaw”).

There are several different types of dark tourism sites and activities, however, not all of them have a strong focus on disaster and death. Some, such as dark tourism festivals, can be located at the lighter end of the dark tourism spectrum, as introduced by Stone in 2006 (Stone). Instead of a very macabre theme, such festivals may focus on entertainment, all things spooky and supernatural. Examples of such “lighter” attractions and activities include a visit to the London Dungeon or taking part in the Edinburgh Ghost Tours or the Salem Witch Trials. Such tourist activities have also been situated in

other areas of tourism, for example under the realm of “gothic tourism” (McEvoy, “Gothic Tourism”). This term and its relevance in the context of “dark tourism” will be explored later as part of this study.

This paper also focuses on exploring online user engagement with two Dracula connected festivals. Two festivals of a similar scale have been chosen for this study and will be introduced in the following sections. Those are the Bram Stoker Festival in Dublin, Ireland and the Whitby Goth Weekend, which takes place in North Yorkshire in the UK. Both festivals have been severely affected by the Coronavirus pandemic and have strong ties with Bram Stoker’s novel “Dracula”. The aim of this paper is to analyse the two festivals in relation to their online social media marketing activities during the Coronavirus pandemic, taking account of the two objectives below:

**Objective 1:** To interpret the differing social media marketing activities of the two case studies between March 2020 and April 2021.

**Objective 2:** To gain insight into followers’ engagement with the content posted.

The study of human behaviour at such festivals has the potential to provide insightful findings. This sentiment is also echoed by researchers Spradley and Mann, who researched the importance of studying human behaviour in Western societies in particular (Spradley; Spradley and Mann). Participant observation at such events can provide an “effective mirror for humankind” (Spradley and Mann 3). Since actual participant observations at the two festivals are currently hindered by the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic, the online activities of the festival organisers have been analysed as part of this study.

In addition, festival participant’s social media comments are examined, providing an insight into the emotional significance of these events. It is vital to provide a “thick description” that goes beyond the surface of outlining factual information (Geertz). In order to provide the reader with an understanding of the events and their impacts, a detailed historical background of the two festivals is provided.

### **Case Study 1: The Bram Stoker Festival (Dublin, Ireland)**

The Bram Stoker Festival in Dublin takes place over the Halloween weekend and is a playful celebration of all things dark and mysterious. With gothic undertones, the festival explores the legacy of Bram Stoker’s life and work in Dublin, who became most famous for his novel “Dracula”. The Bram Stoker Festival creates a link between Bram Stoker’s gothic literary legacy and fun Irish Halloween traditions. Every Halloween weekend since 2012, the festival invites participants to treasure adventure and the supernatural, and areas of Ireland’s capital are turned into a place where vampires can comfortably hang out. The 2019 Bram Stoker Festival included a plethora of activities, from ghost stories to

scavenger hunts; from parades to history tours and from readings to film screenings – creating an entertaining spectacle of all things spooky and mysterious (Dublin City Council; Bram Stoker Festival; Dublin Town).

Holding the annual Bram Stoker Festival in Dublin over the Halloween holiday represents an obvious choice, since there are so many connections between Bram Stoker, Dublin, Halloween and Dracula. Stoker was born in the Dublin suburb of Clontarf, on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1847 to a civil servant father who worked at Dublin Castle and a mother with a liking for folk tales and horror stories. From 1864, Stoker attended Dublin's prestigious Trinity College, where he studied mathematics and graduated in 1870. He then secured employment at Dublin Castle, and shortly after began to work on his early fictional writings (Hughes).

Finding his post at the castle somewhat uninspiring, Stoker began to volunteer as an unpaid theatre critic and journalist (Skal). Further strengthening his ties to the Dublin literary scene, in 1871 he begins writing as a drama critic for the Dublin Mail (Lynch). Whilst working as a theatre critic, Stoker meets the English actor Henry Irving and through him, he is introduced to his future wife. Stoker marries Florence Balcombe in St Anne's Church in Dublin in 1878. With strong ties to Dublin's literary circles, Stoker is often associated with another Dublin literary giant, Oscar Wilde. Attending literary salons hosted by Wilde's parents, Lady and Sir William Wilde, Stoker met Oscar Wilde during his younger years and immersed himself in literary circles from a young age (Hopkins).

Even though Stoker never lost his Irish accent (Wynne) and although his connections to Dublin are so plentiful, the "father of Dracula" is not often associated with the city of Dublin, or with Ireland in general. According to Dublin City Council, one reason to commission the Bram Stoker Festival was to help elevate the connections between Bram Stoker and Dublin in the minds of the public. Attracting local as well as international visitors was also cited as a key motivation (Dublin City Council).

The well-known character of Dracula and more general, the mythical creature of the vampire, represents a fruitful opportunity for the Irish tourism industry. Bram Stoker's great-grandnephew Dacre Stoker also echoes this sentiment:

*"My family and I are thrilled that the Bram Stoker festival has become such a big success. It is very gratifying to see that Bram is receiving the recognition he deserves, in Dublin, as the author of one of the world's most influential novels"* (McDonald)

Arguably vampires are known to every generation: from children watching "Count Duckula" or Disney's "Vampirina" on television, or to Stephanie Meyer's Twilight series popular with young adults, to the older generations engaging with the many film adaptations or indeed with the original Stoker

novel. The previous examples illustrate the great potential of vampire related tourism, showing that there is plenty of unrealised tourism potential for Dublin.

Having explored the Irish case study of the Bram Stoker Festival, another dark tourism festival of a similar theme is examined in the following section. A detailed account of the bi-annual Whitby Goth Weekend in North England is presented and its connections to Bram Stoker and Count Dracula are explored.

### **Case Study 2: The Whitby Goth Weekend (Whitby, United Kingdom)**

Stoker was undoubtedly a Dublin man through and through, however, another important place that must be mentioned when examining Bram Stoker's life and his writings of the novel *Dracula* is the seaside town of Whitby in Northeast England. The pretty Yorkshire town of Whitby is nestled around the estuary of the River Exe whilst facing the North Sea. On a sunny day, an idyllic setting with picturesque old houses that frame the harbour and above on the East Cliff, proudly stand the remains of a medieval abbey.

In a contrasting scene, when the weather conditions are poor, evening light begins to fade and when the seas are rough, the cobbled lanes of Whitby are ideal to stimulate the imagination for a different type of scene. Whitby is the ideal setting for all things dark and gothic (Parkes). The following account illustrates the arrival of Count Dracula in England as described in the 1897 novel "*Dracula*": During a violent storm Dracula's ship, the *Demeter*, is blown into the harbour of Whitby. Aboard the ship is the corpse of the captain, the last remaining passenger of the vessel. As the ship arrives, Dracula in the shape of a giant dog leaps ashore and runs away into the darkness (Stoker, *Dracula*).

The North Yorkshire town of Whitby was visited by Stoker during his only known visit in August 1890 (Skal). The Stoker family took a seaside vacation away from the bustling city of London, where Stoker also spent a significant part of his life, working at the Lyceum Theatre. However, the term vacation may not be technically correct when describing Stoker's time in Whitby, as he spent his time there researching and writing (Skal). Stoker stayed at 6 Royal Crescent in Whitby, where he met two sisters who would later serve as inspiration for the characters Mina Murray and Lucy Westenra in the novel *Dracula*, which would be published seven years after Stoker's visit to Whitby (Thompson; Lynch).

Whilst in Whitby, Stoker reportedly spoke to locals such as fishermen, local photographers and gallery owners and sat in the churchyard that overlooks the East Cliff. Exploring Whitby Abbey, an 11<sup>th</sup> century crumbling monastery, Stoker ponders and contemplates in this picturesque, yet haunting and atmospheric setting, looking out at the dramatic backdrop of the North Sea. All these encounters and imagery surely stimulated Stoker's imagination. He is said to have routinely travelled with a notebook,

which he used to record his observations and the myths locals would tell him (Miller). The story of the shipwrecked Dmitry is said to have inspired him to write about the Demeter, the ship that would bring Dracula to England as outlined previously (Thompson; Skal). It is interesting to note here that Stoker only slightly changed the name of the ship (Skal).

Another important encounter that needs to be mentioned is his visit to the local museum, which at the time also housed the local library. Now the site of a fish restaurant, it is argued that the Whitby Library was the place where Stoker first came across the name "Dracula". In Whitby Library Stoker first reads about the historical character and warlord of Wallachia, Vlad Tepes, which some argue served as primary form of inspiration for the character Dracula (Stoker, McNally, et al.; Iordanova; Smith and Hughes). Other more recent literature however argues that this is "patently untrue" (Skal 319) and an over simplified view (Stoker, Eighteen-Bisang, et al.). Skal claims that it is not proven that Stoker was aware of Tepe's reputation as "Vlad the Impaler", a character with a favour for extremely violent and sadistic torture and killing techniques (Skal). Nevertheless, it is clear that overall, Stoker's visit to Whitby served as an inspiration and had a significant impact on Stoker's ability to describe the atmospheric setting in the novel.

In more contemporary literature Whitby has proven to be a popular setting for Gothic fiction too. In Paul Magrs' nine novel strong series "The Brenda and Effie Mysteries" Brenda, Frankenstein's bride, looks for a quiet life. She decides to run a B&B in the town of Whitby and, together with her friend Effie, who happens to descend from a long line of witches, they investigate spooky events and appearances in the town of Whitby (Magrs).

Whitby is known as Stoker's place of inspiration for the novel "Dracula" and this has helped the town set up what is now one of the biggest alternative music festivals in the world (BBC News, "Whitby Goth Weekend Attracts Thousands"). In Whitby, as in other places with a gothic theme, visitors can imagine and experience the "space of Gothic fiction in architectural reality" (McEvoy, "Gothic Tourism" 479). This can be achieved by for example visiting Whitby Abbey and by experiencing the spooky atmosphere. Also having previously been referred to as "the holiday resort of Dracula" (Lashua et al. 86), the town of Whitby is the perfect choice of location for the bi-annual festival, the Whitby Goth Weekend.

What started out as a meeting of a small number of goths in a local pub in 1994, has grown in popularity over the last few years, until this was brought to a halt by the start of the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. For the first few years, the festival took place just once a year, then, since 1997, festival attendees descended on the small seaside town of Whitby bi-annually. The festival takes

place in April and during the usually more popular time, in October of each year, suitably coinciding with the holiday of Halloween.

The festival is so popular that accommodation shortages have become an issue for the town in recent years and rooms are often booked out a year or more in advance. Festival activities represent significant economic gains with thousands of bed nights and £1.1 million per weekend to the local economy (BBC News, "Whitby's Goth Visitors' £1m Seaside Bounty").

Apart from its focus on alternative music, the festival also incorporates a large market with more than one hundred stalls, known as the "Bizarre Bazaar Alternative Market" (Whitby Goth Weekend). Here many art, design, clothing, jewellery and food products relating to gothic culture are on display. Many attend the festival to suss out the latest fashion in gothic culture and in turn, the traders at the market are aware that they have a large captive audience for their specialist products (Lashua et al.; Hodkinson). Gothic is a term that can be used to describe an array of phenomena: from architecture, to film, literature and many more. In the context of the Whitby Goth Festival, "gothic" refers to a group of people who are part of a subculture that originated in the UK in the 1980s and that is characterised by a specific style of clothing, fashion and music (Hodkinson). The Whitby Goth Weekend provides a platform and meeting place for members of the gothic community.

Apart from the market, official displays of mostly gothic or alternative music take place as part of the festival program and bands and artists perform on stage, up until 2018 at the Whitby Spa Pavilion (Newton). Another important aspect of the festival is photography and filming. The Guardian Newspaper uses professional photographs to regularly publish photo galleries, showcasing the creative, spooky and sometimes colourful costumes of the festival participants (see Lawson, 2017).

### **Festivals in the context of "dark tourism" and "gothic tourism"**

The festivals included as part of this study have been described in the introduction as "dark tourism festivals". Other researchers have argued that separate branches of tourism exist in this context – namely those of "gothic tourism" and "ghost tourism" (McEvoy, "West End Ghosts and Southwark Horrors: London's Gothic Tourism"; Hill).

According to McEvoy there are two criteria for the establishment of gothic tourism, one being the "absence of valuable heritage" (McEvoy, "Gothic Tourism" 477). Contrary to this argument, in the context of this study, the greater area of North England and more specifically Whitby actually boast a plethora of heritage and dark tourism sites. Nevertheless, the very popular Whitby Goth Weekend has been established in the town of Whitby. McEvoy's second criteria for the establishment of gothic tourism is that there needs to be a motivation to generate income for a specific geographical area

(McEvoy, "Gothic Tourism"). This is of course also a motivation for the organisers of the Whitby Goth Weekend, who are willing to generate income for the town (BBC News, "Whitby's Goth Visitors' £1m Seaside Bounty").

Forms of tourism that are grounded in the heritage sector often exist due to a particular site or area. On the other hand, gothic tourism "often involves a distancing from the actual site and/or encourages imaginative creation of other places and characters" (McEvoy, "Gothic Tourism" 477). The use of imagination, what McEvoy calls "fictionalisation", can also be observed at the Whitby Goth Weekend (McEvoy, "Gothic Tourism"). As referred to previously, the use of costumes, photography and fantasy play a major role at the festival.

The participants do not just experience the festival, at the same time, they are part of the creation of a performance. This is aptly explained in earlier festival studies conducted by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett – festival participants "become living signs of themselves" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 18). By the very fact that the festivals exist, they are a staged experience and "perform meaning", therefore distributing powerful messages (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). This act of performance is also sometimes mentioned when analysing concepts of "embodiment". This is central to the experience, as outlined by McEvoy in the context of tourists partaking in ghost tourism activities, for example by attending ghost tours (McEvoy, "Gothic Tourism").

Gothic elements are certainly prevalent at the Whitby Goth Weekend and "gothic tourism" may be used to label the festival activities. However, it is important to note that the Whitby Goth Weekend and also the Bram Stoker Festival have a much broader audience. The term "gothic tourism" is therefore a rather narrow description used to encompass a wide audience and a plethora of festival activities. As outlined by festival goer Rachel:

*"Whitby is for everyone, it's all about coming together in a place with like-minded people who you feel safe with."* (Silver)

Both festivals are not exclusively targeted at members of the Goth community. In particular at the Whitby festival, many (mainstream) attendees visit in order to enjoy the different costumes and the general atmosphere in the town. This activity has been referred to as "goth-spotting" (Hodkinson 1), where visitors enjoy looking out for the unusual creations and costumes of the other festival attendees. Tourists may visit both festivals due to some of the gothic elements present, nevertheless, it seem evident that a wider audience exists. The broader definition of "dark tourism festivals" provides a more suiting description of the events encompassing a wider range of activities and audiences.

In general, the visitors of the Whitby Goth Weekend use the festival as an opportunity to reconnect with old friends or to socialise. This is a phenomenon that is grounded in long-standing research, as for example maintained by Falassi. There is a social function to festivals that is closely linked to the social and historic values of a community (Falassi). Events such as the Whitby Goth Weekend support the development of a cohesive social capital and promote a shared worldview, as outlined below in a study conducted at the Whitby Goth Weekend.

Hodkinson found that at Whitby 43% of attendants indicated that “socialising” was the most important activity for them (Hodkinson 85). The visit to Whitby is sometimes described as a pilgrimage for people who share common values and tastes and this also helps participants to feel a sense of belonging and creates a shared identity (Hodkinson; Lashua et al.). This sense of belonging through repeated visits of the festival, including meeting new and old friends, reinforces the sense of identity and results in increased enthusiasm and attachment (Hodkinson).

As touched on previously, the costume and dressing up aspect of the Whitby Goth Festival is hugely important to the attendees and this is where the Bram Stoker and Dracula connections are relevant once more. The various costumes often represent different genres that follow for example 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century or Victorian fashion. Another stream is represented by a group of people who is attracted to the vampire theme, dressing up in long black robes with fake fangs and coloured contact lenses (Hodkinson; Lashua et al.). Some visitors turn out to be “modern vampire hunters”, who attend in order to take photos of participants who dress up in varying Dracula costumes (Lenora).

A visitor of Whitby Abbey confirms the relevance of the previously outlined Dracula connections and supports the argument that all types of visitors will have an enjoyable experience:

*“The setting for Dracula’s arrival, Whitby is a must for vampires, goths and history lovers”*  
(TripAdvisor)

Nevertheless previous research also confirms divisions that exist at the Whitby festival: according to Hodkinson, people who follow the Vampire theme are looked down upon by the “real” gothic scene as they see “vampirism as a crude confirmation of popular stereotypes” (Hodkinson 46). As Lashua et al. describe it, overall there are two distinct groups of attendees: the “proper Goths”, also called insiders and what the former group classes as “tourists” or outsiders (Lashua et al. 99). The researchers believe that the Whitby Goth Festival “has become something bigger than just a Goth festival” (Lashua et al. 99) and it is sometimes argued that the festival is now commodified and inauthentic (Lashua et al.).



Whether authentically “gothic” or “dark” tourists, one aspect is certain: fans attend the Whitby Goth Weekend in large numbers regardless. They were forced to miss the celebrations in Whitby in 2020 and unfortunately, the festival had to be cancelled for April 2021 too, due to the ongoing restrictions around the Coronavirus pandemic. Some continued to travel to the town regardless, as this TripAdvisor comment outlines:

*“We visited Whitby for the goth weekend in April 2021 although the event was officially cancelled due to the covid19 virus situation - a lot of [people] still attended the weekend to dress up in their costumes to parade around the coastal town and abbey area to show off their outfits...”* (TripAdvisor)

In addition, the organisers of the festival have been making use of new ways to market the festival online through their social media channels.

### **The impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on festivals**

Vulnerability and risks in case of disaster or crisis have long been recognised as a threat to the tourism industry as a whole. Travel has the ability to spread disease around the world and therefore the tourism industry is usually one of the hardest hit industries, when health crises occur (Michael Hall). During the current global health crisis human health and well-being are naturally being put first, and the tourism industry is therefore suffering on a scale not seen before. The effects on the tourism industry come at an economic price with planes grounded, hospitality sectors shut and general movements of people impeded (UNTWO).

Taking a look at the various forms of tourism, it is not surprising that event tourism, and therefore also festivals, have also been severely affected (Chi et al.). Festivals usually facilitate human movement and therefore attract large numbers of travellers, which has the potential to spread the virus. Most festivals, among them also dark tourism festivals, had to be cancelled in 2020 and with slow vaccine roll-outs in many countries plus the risks of new virus variants emerging, more festivals are being cancelled and postponed in 2021.

Understandably, festivals are deemed as “high risk” due to a number of factors such as a high density of visitors in small spaces and the fact that by their very nature, festivals are social phenomena that are the antidote to social distancing (Davies; Mehta). A lack of control also plays a role, where organisers and managers cannot guarantee that attendees will adhere to rules such as social distancing or mask wearing. As festivals are usually visited by large numbers, a great focus on health and safety and cleaning protocols is needed.

Over the last year organisers have been trying to be creative and have looked for alternative ways to engage with audiences. Perhaps also due to lack of other (permitted) alternatives, many festivals last year and this year have begun to increase their engagement in online social media marketing, in the spirit of “the show must go on”, despite the cancellations and restrictions.

To bypass issues around government restrictions and health and safety concerns, many festival organisers now facilitate the online streaming of festivals. Some festivals have taken place fully in a virtual fashion, while others offered a reduced program to fans, and some have simply posted updates about the festivals without offering an online festival experience. Many organisers have stepped up their efforts in bringing festival communities together online, taking opportunity of the fact that many people now feel socially isolated. In turn, many have taken the opportunity to join online events as in general, low-risk and health focused activities are now favoured by many (Chua et al.).

Organisers aim to keep audiences engaged, ensuring that festivals are not simply forgotten about while restrictions around travel and large-scale events remain in place. In the context of this, it is also important to highlight the importance of festivals for future participants, ensuring a future audience will be available for such events. In the context of this study, the two previously discussed Dracula-related festivals have also “gone online” during the pandemic.

For this paper social media engagement of the two festivals between March 2020 and April 2021 has been analysed. Both festivals have accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and all of those have been included within the realm of this study (see Facebook, Bram Stoker Festival, Dublin; Facebook, Whitby Goth Weekend; Twitter, Bram Stoker Festival; Twitter, Whitby Goth Weekend; Instagram, Whitbygothweekend; Instagram, Bramstokerdub).

While there are several other groups and online social media channels in existence for the Whitby Goth Weekend, many focusing on photography and the gothic scene, for the realm of this study, only the official social media channels have been included. The two festivals also have official social media accounts on the platform Youtube, however since there was no significant activity over the last year, they were not included in this study.

## **Results**

The study of the three social media channels revealed a number of insights in relation to the social media strategy that both festivals used during the pandemic. Overall, the organisers of the Bram Stoker Festival (BSF) posted nearly twice as many times as the marketing team of the Whitby Goth Weekend (WGW). The most popular social media channel for both festivals was Twitter, where shorter posts were published in general; the BSF made frequent use of their Instagram channel, posting 68

times in total whereas the WGW organisers did not seem to engage with this channel, having only posted one update in the timeframe specified. The WGW organisers also made less use of their Facebook social media channel, having only posted 30 times in comparison to 58 posts from the BSF organisers. In relation to the times when these posts were published, the WGW gave regular updates on Facebook about the festival and organised an online market in April 2020, whereas the BSF had posted most regularly when the virtual festival was taking place in October. The summer months were a time of uncertainty in respect to whether the festivals would be allowed to go ahead in the autumn and this is also reflected in the number posts: between May and August almost no updates were posted.

In relation to the topics and themes that dominated the posts, the number of online festival events organised by the BSF organisers outweighed those of the WGW by far. The BSF posted about the online events almost four times as often as the WGW. The WGW also seemed to be mainly endorsing events from other artists rather than their own, in-house events. Supporting businesses and other artists was a strong theme that emerged in the analysis of the WGW data, the organisers openly showed their sympathy for others in the festival community, who had also been severely affected by the pandemic. A post on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 announced the cancellation of the WGW but organisers ensured to mention:

*“We shall be opening a virtual bazaar - with a range of products from our fantastic independent traders (...). Please, if you can, have a browse and support small businesses from a distance in the face of the Covid-19 crisis.”* (Facebook, Whitby Goth Weekend)

This empathetic tone was not necessarily mirrored by the organisers of the BSF, which overall added to a more corporate feel of their social media channels. This impression was also supported by the overall “look” of the posts, which were consistent with the brand image of the festival, predominately using the colour red, for example in their logo (see Facebook, *Bram Stoker Festival, Dublin*). The BSF organisers also made use of online marketing tools, such as “Facebook events” and the announcement of a competition, where participants could win a professional photo shoot in their Dracula outfits. In general, the BSF posts had a more professional feel and several posts were directly promoting the festival.

This is a strategy that was not utilised by the WGW, who merely posted two short promotional videos and updated their logo. This gave the WGW strategy a more familiar and intimate feel, also aided by the fact that they frequently emphasised about the pandemic experience with fans, sellers and artists. When attendees were addressed it was done in a friendly and familiar manner, calling on “the

community” and expressing feelings of sadness when giving updates about the cancellation of the festival.

At first glance the BSF social media strategy seemed more successful and in line with traditional social media practices, however, it was visible that the WGW has a very engaged audience. On the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2021 a user commented on a Facebook post referring to the cancelled April event:

*“It really is very strange being here with the town quiet and nothing happening, missing everyone and so hoping we can all be back together again in October!” (Facebook, Whitby Goth Weekend)*

As of 28<sup>th</sup> April 2021, the WGW had more followers on Twitter (8,150 followers versus 4,888 on the BSF twitter account). The number of WGW followers on Facebook was also greater and the followers regularly engaged with the updates about the festivals. In a post about the future of the 2021 events the organiser announced the cancellation of the April event and this resulted in a lot of engagement, with 110 people sharing this post. Several people showed their understanding and empathy:

*“Sending love to all, we will all be back when its safe so until then keep you and your families safe” (Facebook, Whitby Goth Weekend)*

Another person took the cancellation with a sense of humour and referred to Whitby’s Dracula connection:

*“We’ve got to stay safe but that guy Dracula would laugh at a virus like this lol” (Facebook, Whitby Goth Weekend)*

The nature of the WGW lends itself to promotion on Instagram, which is generally a very visual social media tool, where for example the attendees in their costumes could be featured. It was therefore surprising to see that the organisers of the WGW decided not to engage regularly with their followers on Instagram, where they did not have as large an audience as the organisers of the BSF.

## **Conclusions**

This paper analysed the social media strategy of two Dracula related festivals during the Coronavirus pandemic and overall it was clear to see that the organisers of both festivals undertook efforts to engage with their audiences. While this study shows that organisers tried their best to keep audiences engaged, it was also visible that there were differing approaches to their social media strategy.

The Bram Stoker Festival organisers made considerable efforts to engage with their audience and this study has shown that their social media channels followed a more structured approach. This gave their social media platforms a professional appearance and also helped people to experience much of the

festival in a virtual environment (O'Connor). The social media followers of the BSF were also given the opportunity to experience a multitude of events online. On the other hand, the Whitby Goth Weekend social media pages also showed significant commitment to keep the audience engaged, however their approach appeared to have a different focus. The organisers of the WGW managed their social media channels in a more spontaneous and reactive manner, however, their messages conveyed a friendly feel, keeping the audience engaged through the organisation of an online market. This also showed their commitment to support other people in the arts and crafts scene.

Given the difficult circumstances and the severe impacts that the pandemic has placed on the cultural landscape and on festivals in particular, both organisers adapted as best as they could. Providing their audiences with some kind of experience during the pandemic was important to them. Although the pandemic has affected the festival scene in an unprecedented manner, the festival organisers undertook significant efforts to negate the effects of the pandemic. The great volume of posts and their wide variety showed the organisers' commitment to reminding the attendees that the festival would be there for them to enjoy in the future.

In relation to the follower's reactions to the posts, it was visible that people had a strong desire for the festivals to take place again in the future. Many followers expressed sympathy with the organisers and stressed how much they missed the "real" festival experience. While the study showed that there was significant engagement with the posts via sharing the posts or commenting, there is scope for further research in this area. This study provides a snapshot of the social media strategies of two niche festivals during a pandemic, however, significant further research is needed to establish a framework on how to engage audiences online for other types of festivals. More detailed research is needed to establish how exactly festival experiences can be transported from a real atmosphere to a virtual one.

This study also shows that a crisis management plan paired with a robust social media strategy should be mandatory for festival organisers. More research is required to establish the exact methods and ways to deal with crises situations. How festival organisers can best utilise the technology that is available plays an important role in this and a rule book on crisis management would be beneficial to combat the negative effects of crises on the sector.

It was also established that organisers of both events express their wishes for a real festival experience after the restrictions are lifted and their tone suggests that online festival events are no real replacement for the usual atmosphere that festivals convey. While social media marketing efforts can keep existing fans engaged and perhaps attract new audiences for future festivals, they do not offer the same experience.

Currently the future of these Dracula themed dark tourism festivals is uncertain with many fans and organisers hoping that both festivals can go ahead in October 2021. It is hoped with the advancing vaccine roll out in the UK and in Ireland, the festivals can take place perhaps with some additional health and safety measures. A recent study at a festival in Barcelona where participants were subjected to certain safety measures gives hope to the festival industry (Hedgecoe). Until the day when dark tourism festivals can take place again, fans will have to be patient and use the time wisely to work on their “fang-tastic” costumes!

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