

## **Dark Tourism Growth: Understanding Motivation Dynamics**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This commentary aims to illustrate the dynamic landscape of dark tourism and its profound relevance in modern culture. It seeks to clarify the extent to which contemporary dark tourism destinations, focused on recent tragedies, contribute to processes of peacemaking, reconciliation, and healing in regions scarred by trauma. Moreover, it explores strategies to optimize these impacts. Research suggests motivations driving individuals toward dark tourism are diverse, encompassing historical, cultural, educational, emotional, and reflective aspects, rendering dark tourism a multidimensional phenomenon. Recognizing these varied motivations is pivotal to grasp the intricate nature of people's interests in dark tourism and the significance of these sites. This article conducts a comprehensive review of literature and primary data, offering insights into the intricate complexities surrounding dark tourism from both the traveler's perspective and the sites themselves.*

### **Keywords**

dark tourism, thanatourism, tourism, cultural tourism

### **INTRODUCTION**

This industry commentary article addresses the growing phenomenon of dark tourism sites based on modern and recent tragedies. Dark tourism has become more and more popular despite the controversies surrounding it. Dark tourism often ignites controversies regarding its ethical and moral implications, as some argue it commodifies tragedy and exploits the suffering of others. Achieving a balance between education and respect is a significant pursuit. This commentary is prompted by the growing interest in such tourism and the need to understand the design and interpretation of each unique site, as communities and travelers deal with delicate and frequently traumatic events from the recent past. By exploring current literature, awareness can be generated as to the motivations and intentions behind the creation of these sites, the ethical dilemmas they entail, their role in fostering collective healing, and their contribution to advancing the understanding of modern history and its effects on society. Exploring these aspects sheds light on the evolving nature of dark tourism and how important it is to modern culture. Furthermore, this commentary will focus on the extent dark tourism destinations centered on modern tragedies contribute to peacemaking, reconciliation, and healing in regions affected by recent trauma, and offer insights as to how this impact can be maximized.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Light (2017) suggests that the scholarly term of “dark tourism” is relatively modern, emerging in the 1990s as the relationship between tourism and the death and suffering nature of sites gained attraction among scholars. It states that the relationship was first approached from a sociologic leisure perspective by Rojek (1993), who explored the growing popularity of tourism in sites associated with the deaths of celebrities and labeled these sites as “black spots.” Initially, he

evaluated this trend from the postmodernist perspective, particularly the spectacle and blurred distinction between the imaginary and the real. However, in 1997, Rojek proposed the term “sensation sights” to refer to these places, suggesting these spaces reaffirm individual and collective identities after having their everyday life routines disrupted by a certain or a collection of events. Glasgow, Foley and Lennon (1996) first introduced and applied the scholarly term of “dark tourism” to these sites. They defined the term as the “presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley & Lennon, 1996, p.198). Similarly to Rojek’s approach, they argued the concept was a postmodern phenomenon due to its emphasis on spectacle and reproduction. They explored it further by examining issues regarding the presentation and interpretation of these dark sites through a case study of sites related to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963.

Seaton (1996) contributed to the literature on dark tourism by focusing his research on thanatourism, defining it as “travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death” (Seaton, 1996, p.240). Light (2017) highlights that although dark tourism and thanatourism are often used interchangeably, there are important distinctions. Dark tourism is a broader umbrella term encompassing any form of tourism related to death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy, or crime. As previously mentioned, the phenomenon emerged in the late twentieth century. However, thanatourism involves a specific desire for an encounter with death. While closely related, Light (2017) treats the two concepts as distinct. The study underscores the interconnectedness of dark tourism and thanatourism, asserting that discussing one concept necessitates consideration of the other. As such, people are often motivated to engage in dark tourism for various reasons, such as historical and cultural interest, emotional connection, education and learning purposes, sensationalism, cathartic experience, cultural and social exploration, and reflection, making dark tourism a multifaceted phenomenon.

### **Motivations**

According to Stone, the founder and executive director of the Institute for Dark Tourism Research at the University of Central Lancashire, the popularity of dark tourism and its appeal is growing (as cited in Sampson, 2019). Stone attributes the growing appeal to cultural fascination with the darker aspects of history and the desire to understand the human experience in challenging circumstances. Regarding thanatopsis as a motivation, Seaton (1996) recognized that thanatourism was not an absolute form but varied in intensity depending on whether it was a tourist’s single motivation or existed alongside other motivations. At one end of the thanatourism continuum was travel motivated wholly by a general fascination with death, no matter whose death, while at the opposite end was travel to destinations linked with the death of those valued by the visitor. Similarly, Iliev (2020) concluded that the idea of thanatopsis as the primary driver of tourists to dark tourism sites is not empirically supported. This refutes earlier assertions that death plays a significant role in attracting tourists to such places. Instead, it suggests numerous motivations for the appeal of dark sites, such as the desire to learn and become educated about historical events and cultural and social interests. It suggests that internal conflicts can significantly influence tourists’ experiences at these sites. These findings emphasize the complex nature of dark tourism motivations and experiences, challenging the oversimplified assumption that death is the primary motivator for tourists to visit dark sites.

### ***Ethical Considerations, Commodification, and Historical Accuracy***

Light (2017) identified that the early identification of dark tourism and thanatourism sparked extensive debate regarding the ethical dimensions of such tourism, both in academia and the media. Visitors were criticized for potentially ill-informed perceptions, viewing these sites as entertainment, and behaving disrespectfully. However, such claims often relied on stereotypes and

lacked empirical support from visitor research. The ethical debate primarily centered on the design and interpretation of dark sites. Scholars raised concerns that the commodification of tragedy had the potential of desensitization and normalization of horror and suffering through increased exposure. Additionally, they argued that commodification compromises these places' educational role, resulting in the distortion of historical accuracy. Concerns were raised about authenticity, both in what was presented at dark tourism attractions and the location of these attractions. Postmodern perspectives were used to interpret these issues, emphasizing spectacle and simulation.

Following early scholars, researchers examined issues of commodification and their implications for authenticity and historical accuracy. The consensus was critical of how individual sites presented death and suffering to visitors. Some argued that using kitsch in interpretation could transmit feelings of comfort, safety, and hope to make dark sites more understandable. In the late 2000s, the critique of "commodification" in dark tourism faced criticism. Scholars argued against oversimplification, challenging the authenticity versus commodification dichotomy. The debate also addressed the stereotyping of visitors as passive, recognizing them as critical agents capable of negotiating and challenging presented messages. However, the perspectives of practitioners responsible for curating tragic events were notably absent in this critique. The research by Wyatt et al. (2020) focuses on dark visitor attractions (DVAs), particularly those associated with modern tragedies. Wyatt et al. contrasted these darker attractions with lighter DVAs (LDVAs) that prioritize a commercially driven edutainment agenda to educate and entertain consumers. Despite the controversy surrounding the implementation of edutainment in dark tourism, some research supports its effectiveness. The study examined three new LDVAs and identified two key factors influencing their edutainment interpretation. The findings indicate that, despite the commercially driven infrastructure of LDVAs and their focus on historically distant events, the promotion of historical accuracy is of utmost importance (Wyatt, et al.). LDVAs aim to stimulate curiosity and learning through historical recreations without unnecessarily exaggerating goriness. Despite their commercial nature, LDVA management prioritizes historical accuracy and balances education, entertainment, humor, and shock. Contrary to the perception that LDVAs contribute to mythmaking and neglect historical accuracy, the research concludes that historical accuracy is their highest priority and can be maintained through various edutainment methods.

### ***Reflection and Recovery***

Jordan et al. (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with residents in 2010 and 2011 after the Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand to explore their perceptions of disaster-related dark tourism. The findings indicated that residents viewed tourists positively or neutrally, expressing enthusiasm for increased tourism and a sense of importance for the disaster sites. Residents appraised their experiences as threats, losses, or challenges, with a secondary appraisal of the experience as largely uncontrollable. Upon revisiting the sites, residents experienced positive and negative emotions, including sadness, gratitude, and intrinsic and collective feelings. Coping strategies were primarily emotion-based, involving positive reappraisal, learning, growth, hope, and self-control, with some residents using problem-focused approaches. Overall, the study suggested that disaster sites play a role in facilitating individual and community recovery. Residents' appraisals and coping strategies, more emotion-focused than problem-focused, indicate that disaster-related dark tourism creates a social environment fostering self-assessment, emotional release, and reduced stress. Stone (as cited in Sampson, 2019) emphasized the significance of studying how people confront mortality through these visits and the complex interplay of business, sociology, and psychology in the dark tourism industry. He suggested visitors of these dark sites experience a reflection of themselves, rather than strangers, and are enticed to contemplate their potential actions in similar situations. Overall, understanding these diverse motivational factors is essential in comprehending the complexity of individuals' interests in dark tourism and the significance of these sites in contemporary society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In exploring the intricate realm of dark tourism, this commentary takes a comprehensive approach by integrating primary research to investigate visitor motivations and perceived impacts on reconciliation. The conducted survey offered both quantitative and qualitative insights and was designed to complement and enrich the conceptual aspects of dark tourism. The method chosen for data collection was an online survey for various reasons: facilitated accessibility for completion, high speed for response collection, the anonymous nature promotes authenticity in responses, and analysis is facilitated through digital tools (Jones et al., 2013). Regarding the design of the survey, the chosen method used Google Forms as this platform combines the creation, sharing aspect, data collection and ability to export data into Google Sheets or Excel for a more in-depth analysis. The first three questions collected demographic variables of age, gender, and nationality. The seven questions that followed were topic-focused assessing the respondents' 1) prior knowledge of dark tourism, 2) dark tourism destinations visited, 3) motivations for visiting these sites, 4) extent to which they believe dark tourism can contribute to peacemaking, reconciliation and personal healing, 5) suggestions for dark tourism to better contribute to the three latter aspects, and 6) emotional recollection of their visits.

## **RESULTS**

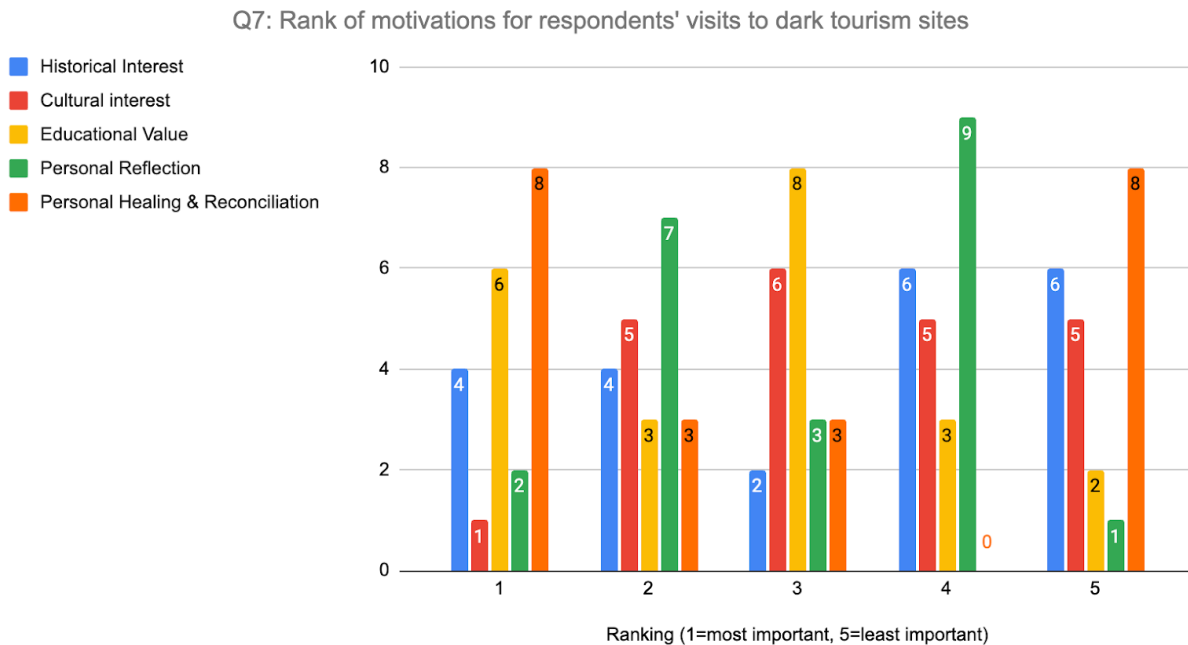
The tourism industry is global and welcoming by nature, and the branch of dark tourism is no exception. For this reason, the targeted sample was diverse in gender, age range of 18 to more than 65, and nationalities across the continents, a well representative of global tourism consumers and dark tourism consumers. The sample included 24 individuals, of whom eight were female and 16 were male, 20 of whom were in the age group of 18-24, 2 in 25-34, and 2 in 55-64. The respondents spanned 17 countries and were 16.7% French, 12.5% Mexican, 8.3% each Brazilian and Swedish, and 4.2% each Chinese, Korean, Kyrgyzstani, Romanian, Bosnian, Azerbaijani, Costa Rican, Spanish, American, German, Venezuelan, British, and Canadian. 43.5% of respondents were from Europe, 26.1% from North America, 13% from South America, 13% from Asia, and 4.3% from Europe and Asia (Azerbaijan).

Regarding their knowledge of dark tourism prior to taking the survey, 54.2% had prior knowledge, 29.2% had moderate knowledge and 16.7% had no knowledge. All respondents have engaged in tourism, and 91.7% of them have visited a dark tourism destination in the past, while 8.3% have not. There are up to 11 dark tourism destinations across the globe that the respondents have visited, with the top three being the 9/11 Memorial & Museum in New York City, the Berlin Wall in Germany and the French Catacombs, with nine, seven and five visitors, respectively.

When ranking five proposed motivations for the visits of the respondents to dark tourism sites, the results varied significantly (refer to Chart 1). Historical interest is a motivator of high importance (ranked 1 and 2) for eight respondents, and least important (ranked 4 and 5) for 12 respondents, demonstrating an overall lower importance than other motivators. Cultural interest is ranked between 2 and 5 by an almost equal number of respondents, demonstrating high variability of importance as a motivator. Educational value is a motivator of moderate importance (ranked 3) by eight respondents, high importance (ranked 1 and 2) by nine respondents, and low importance (ranked 4 and 5) by five respondents, demonstrating an overall moderate to high importance across all respondents. Personal reflection is a motivator close to most important (ranked 2 by seven respondents) and close to least important (ranked 4 by nine respondents), demonstrating an overall non-extreme level of positive nor negative importance for respondents. Personal healing and reconciliation as a motivator for the respondents' dark site visits was an equally important priority for eight respondents as it was the least for the remaining eight respondents. Overall, historical interest ranked lower on importance, cultural interest was highly variable, educational value was

of moderate to high importance, personal reflection was also variable but no extreme importance indicated on either end, and personal healing and reconciliation was also variable but, unlike personal reflection, was on the extreme level of importance on both ends.

### CHART 1: Rank of Motivations



Respondents were asked the extent to which they believe visiting dark tourism destinations can contribute to peacemaking, reconciliation, and personal healing, independently. For peacemaking, 54.2% responded “moderately,” 25% “very much or “extremely,” and 20.8% “slightly” or “not at all.” For reconciliation, 37.5% responded “very much” or “extremely,” 37.5% “moderately,” and 25% “slightly” or “not at all.” For personal healing, 54.2% responded “slightly” or “not at all,” 25% “moderately,” and 20.8% “very much” or “extremely.” Overall, the results suggest respondents have a more positive and confident response about the ability for dark tourism to contribute to peacemaking and reconciliation than personal healing, in which they demonstrate more skepticism.

The respondents provided qualitative recollection of their emotional experience in their past visits to dark sites. To analyze the qualitative data, distinct emotions were extracted from the responses in a broad manner to avoid overgeneralization bias. Moreover, each identified emotion was categorized based on its nature: positive, neutral or negative. Sadness was expressed by seven respondents, followed by reflectiveness by four respondents, and shock and empathy by three respondents each. Other emotions expressed by single respondents included interest, gratitude, humility, discomfort, and anger. Overall, 13 respondents expressed neutral emotions, 10 negative, and five positive. The emotions of the respondents tended to overlap, demonstrating the emotional complexity of these experiences.

### DISCUSSION

Acknowledged by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism is recognized for fostering international understanding of the world (Friedrich, 2016). There is an identified distinction between negative and positive peace, which aligns with the dual themes observed in peace tourism, where some sites condemn past tragedies. In contrast, others focus on reconciliation and

peacemakers. In post-conflict contexts, reconciliation is crucial in restoring harmony and fostering cooperation. Friedrich (2016) also states that reconciliation through tourism, a subset of peace tourism, focuses on intercultural exchange for harmonious relationships. While the concept of reconciliation tourism is often perceived positively as a potential agent for peace, studies, particularly from the Middle East, suggest the positive impact of tourism on attitudes between visitors and host communities might be minimal, influenced by negative views, political tensions, and nationalistic sentiments (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2021). Challenges, such as mistrust, prejudice, negative cross-border experiences, limited government support, and a volatile political environment, hinder tourism's potential for enhancing peace and reconciliation.

By evaluating the negotiation of cultural trauma within the tourism context, research underscores the importance of nuanced examinations that consider conflicting views on trauma, often absent unified national historical narratives (Su & Yu Park, 2022). The call for a shift from focusing solely on historical details to the broader experiential context emphasizes the central role of tourism in negotiating cultural trauma across political and social structures, time, and space. Farmaki & Stergiou (2021) emphasize that tourism's contribution to building peace is inherently linked to justice, putting a spotlight on emerging sources of inequality. They assert that tourism, as a progressive force, can establish and stabilize peace by addressing economic, political, and sociocultural inequalities. Belhassen (2022) explored the field of "transitional" and "restorative" justice, examining social and legal mechanisms for societies transitioning from conflict to sustainable reconciliation. Transitional justice involves judicial and non-judicial methods, emphasizing accountability, rectification for victims, and addressing human rights violations and systematic abuses. In contrast, restorative justice entails victim-perpetrator meetings aiming for consensus and improved relationships. Accordingly, the motivation of dark tourists and sites is complex.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dark tourism involves visiting sites that are associated with tragedy, death, or events of significant historical importance, often linked to suffering, trauma, or morbid curiosity. These sites can include locations related to natural disasters, war zones, genocide memorials, sites of terrorist attacks, former prisons, concentration camps, and places linked to infamous historical events or figures. The term "dark tourism" describes the act of visiting such places for various reasons, including historical interest, education, remembrance, or curiosity. Visitors engage in dark tourism to gain insight into historical events, pay respects to victims, learn about the impact of tragedies on societies, or satisfy curiosity about the darker aspects of human history. Although the practice of dark tourism raises ethical questions concerning respectful behavior at these sites and the balance between education and exploitation of tragedies, it remains a significant aspect of travel and cultural exploration for many individuals interested in understanding past events and their effects on society.

The exploration of dark tourism in modern tragedies highlights the complex nature of its impact on peacemaking, reconciliation, and healing in regions marked by profound tragedy. Recognized by the WTO for fostering international understanding, tourism emerges as a powerful agent for reconciliation, particularly when emphasizing intercultural exchange for harmonious relationships. However, the challenges are evident, including the short-lived gains and the risk of perpetuating negative peace. The complex nature of mass tourism, with its potential to aggravate economic competition and social injustice, calls for cautious evaluation of its role in conflict-prone areas. These considerations recognize the diverse layers of engagement at dark tourism sites and advocate for a more inclusive remembrance space. Additionally, acknowledging the link between tourism, justice, and peacebuilding aligns with the idea that tourism can address emerging sources of inequalities, contributing to a progressive force for societal reconciliation.

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