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Rethinking dark tourism: practitioner perspectives, and future research directions

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ABSTRACT

This study invited dark tourism practitioners to comment on the salient academic discourses concerning dark tourism and propose new ways forward for research. Through a genre analysis of dark tourism literature and semi-structured interviews with an internationally diverse sample of dark tourism practitioners, this paper challenges current academic framings of dark tourism. The findings reveal that many practitioners reject the label *dark tourism*, preferring alternative signifiers that emphasize life and remembrance over death and suffering. The paper argues that dark tourism remains a predominantly academic construct, necessitating greater sectoral input to refine its conceptualization. By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, our analysis highlights the dissonance between academic frameworks and industry realities. While grounded in academic discourse, we argue that practitioners—those shaping visitor experience and interpretation—are well positioned to challenge and enrich conceptual debates. Their insights reflect the lived tensions of how dark tourism is defined and enacted. We advocate a shift toward co-created ideation, prioritising practitioner engagement over rigid classifications.

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Dark tourism; stakeholder consultation; ontological repositioning; academic discourse

Introduction

Dark tourism applies to tourism and tourist attractions that deal with death and disaster, including crime, genocide, morbidity and suffering. While systematic literature reviews (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Light, 2017) have identified future research opportunities, no attempt has been made to solicit responses from practitioners on academic discourses of dark tourism. This paper responds to that gap, drawing from a recent international symposium (Wight & Schwan, 2022) where practitioners expressed discomfort with and a lack of alignment to the concept of dark tourism. In doing so, practitioners (visitor attraction managers, curators, owners, directors) were invited to engage with and reflect on key academic discourses within the dark tourism literature, organized around form (what is dark tourism?), function (who is it for?), and focus (the direction of dark tourism academia) with the intention of fostering co-created ideation and ontological repositioning (i.e. a shift in how dark tourism is understood at its conceptual core, shaped by practitioner perspectives rather than imposed academic definitions). In this study, 'practitioners' refers to those involved in the day-to-day management, interpretation, and strategic direction of visitor attractions. While broader definitions may include supply chain actors, our focus is limited to those directly shaping how dark tourism narratives are constructed and presented. This aligns with our aim to explore how meaning-making is curated for public engagement.

Interrogating academic discourse is essential for challenging epistemic authority and revealing how language and power shape our understanding. It enables ontological repositioning, supports more inclusive definitions, and bridges the gap between theory and practice. As a hermeneutic process, it fosters richer understanding through dialogue between interpretive frameworks. This study uses such interrogation to challenge assumptions and open new possibilities for conceptualising and practising dark tourism.

Some inroads to this type of enquiry have been hinted at previously as scholars, such as Ashworth and Isaac (2015), have underscored an academic preoccupation with devising alternative titles for dark tourism, including black spot tourism, atrocity heritage and thanatourism. Illuminating a tendency to examine the experiential aspects associated with visitation to dark tourism

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attractions and specific management challenges, including heritage dissonance (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) and narrative-selectivity (Wight & Lennon, 2007), Ashworth and Isaac (2015) note the extent to which the putative dark tourism sector has been objectified and ignored in the literature. This leaves room for the possibility that the label *dark tourism* is, through academia, routinely applied to a divergent, unacquainted yet unique community of visitor attractions in the absence of their scrutiny or consent (Wight, 2009). In addressing practitioners' views of dark tourism, this paper not only responds to calls for greater inclusion of practitioner perspectives in future research (Wyatt et al., 2023), but it also extends the literature with fresh insights into how the concept of dark tourism is applied—or rejected—within the sector it seeks to define.

Dark tourism has largely been defined through academic frameworks and imposed on practitioners. Despite its widespread academic use, this study shows that practitioners often reject the term, favouring alternatives that better align with their operational or ideological contexts. By centring practitioner perspectives, this paper challenges academic authority, questions the coherence of dark tourism as a sector, and advocates a shift toward practitioner engagement and visitor experience analysis.

This paper is supported by semi-structured interviews with a dark tourism practitioners from the UK, USA, Germany, and Kazakhstan based on convenience sampling. These were informed by a genre analysis, which critiques academic language as an authoritative, social practice. Ideation around the *form*, *function* and *focus* of dark tourism was discussed in the interviews to foster critique, refinement and ontological repositioning. Drawing on participatory ontology, which posits that reality is co-constructed through social interaction among stakeholders (Heron & Reason, 1997), our study critically examines the epistemic authority of academic discourse in defining dark tourism, highlighting the dissonance between scholarly frameworks and practitioner realities. In doing so, we demonstrate how dark tourism is not a cohesive sector but a fragmented landscape of attractions with diverse missions and identities.

Genre analysis of dark tourism literature

Genre analysis is used to approach academic discourse as a social practice that constructs and distributes authoritative knowledge (Nayef, 2019), shaping rhetoric, attitudes, and disciplinary identity (Hyland, 2009). Building on Swales' (1990) foundational work on genre, this analysis examines how dark tourism scholars establish research gaps, position their contributions, and engage with existing knowledge. This approach aligns with previous studies, such as Wang et al. (2023), who analysed the structural and rhetorical features of academic texts to reveal how knowledge is constructed and communicated within disciplines. Genre analysis offers a systematic lens for understanding academic discourse as a form of social practice. It reveals rhetorical patterns, disciplinary norms, and knowledge-making conventions that shape how dark tourism is conceptualised (Hyland, 2009; Swales, 1990). We used genre analysis to trace recurring discourses and examine how the field constructs authority—often without practitioner input. From this, we developed a tripartite framework: 'form' (how dark tourism is defined), 'function' (its societal or visitor purpose, e.g. education or entertainment), and 'focus' (the field's thematic and epistemological priorities). These dimensions structured our literature analysis and informed our interview framework, enabling direct comparison with practitioner perspectives. In following this approach, we align with the goals of participatory ontology and challenge the top-down construction of knowledge often found in tourism scholarship.

Crucially, the extent to which the academic framings of dark tourism are recognised by practitioners is not yet known, and so the aim of this paper is to bridge that gap for the first time. This is not simply to illuminate the *existence* of salient debates and fixed ideas in dark tourism academia, but to examine, and ultimately challenge these as forms of academic knowledge-capital which strongly influence the trajectory of academic research and debate. Therefore, this paper examines the key discourses of dark tourism embedded in academia by analysing their form, focus, and function. While our analysis centres on widely cited and rhetorically dominant texts, we acknowledge more recent contributions that approach dark tourism through affect theory, spatial politics, and emotional geographies (e.g. Buda, 2015; Buda & McIntosh, 2013; Martini & Minca, 2021). Although not yet dominant in citation terms, these works offer valuable directions for future scholarship. Our focus remains on texts that have most shaped the field's definitional and rhetorical framing, while recognising the literature's ongoing evolution.

Forms of dark tourism

The academic construct of dark tourism has several antecedents in the literature, emerging in the early 1990s (see e.g. Rojek, 1993) to explore the popularity of sites associated with death, dying, suffering and tragedy (Light, 2017) that have a seemingly dark theme in common (Light, 2017). From these discussions came the first definitions, which framed dark tourism as 'thanatourism' (Seaton, 1996), 'sensation sites' (Rojek,

1997), 'morbid tourism' (Blom, 2000), 'grief tourism' (O'Neil, 2002), 'atrocity heritage' (Ashworth, 2004), and 'black spot tourism' (Stone, 2006) – to name a few. The range of terms have in common the signifying of tourism encounters with death, prisons, genocide, warfare, and disasters. These 'deviant forms of leisure consumption' (Stone & Sharpley, 2013), were positioned outside the idea of conventional tourism as pleasant diversion to pleasant places (Fonseca et al., 2016; Wight, 2006). Uniqueness through deviance is pervasive in the literature, suggesting that consuming death and disaster as tourism is a result of a 'willingness to tackle inherently ambiguous and problematic interpretations' (Stone & Sharpley, 2013, p. 3) and that deviant 'dark-leisure' signals cool individualism.

Alongside the proliferation of typologies in dark tourism literature, several scholars have questioned the coherence and utility of the term. Seaton (2009) described the field as increasingly 'self-referential' and detached from tourist experiences. Biran et al. (2011) argued that emotional and memorial motivations are often mischaracterised by academic framings. Light (2017) highlighted the conceptual ambiguity of dark tourism and its overlap with heritage and educational tourism. Sharpley (2009) warned that the term can essentialise death-related sites without attending to context, visitor intent, or local narratives. These critiques suggest that theoretical clarity has sometimes come at the expense of empirical nuance—an imbalance this paper addresses through practitioner engagement.

Descriptions of dark tourism supply and demand are often structured through categories and classifications, including Foley and Lennon's (1996) 'chronological distance', Stone's (2006) 'dark tourism spectrum', Stone and Sharpley's (2013) 'thanatological perspective', and 'mortality mediation' (Stone, 2012). More recent constructs like 'dystopian dark tourism' (Podoshen et al., 2015) and 'emotional contagion' (Podoshen, 2013) emphasise experience. As academic discourse, dark tourism is frequently linked to recent death, offering proximity to the sequestered place of death. In Stone's (2006) introduction to the spectrum, the word 'death' appears 88 times, signalling its rhetorical centrality. This emphasis continues in later work: Raine (2013) connects dark tourism with contemplation of death, especially at burial sites, while Bowman and Pezzullo (2010) highlight experiential intersections of death and tourism. Constructed in academia, the dark tourism sector commodifies death and functions as a social filter (Stone, 2012) between life and death, inviting mortality reflection.

Dark tourism is also a discourse of behaviour, with tourist motives being central. Key to these motives is the thematic representation of death in dark visitor attractions. However, contrasting views are presented by Wight (2006) and Iliev (2021), who suggest visitor motives may be unrelated to the 'darkness' of sites. Instead, visitors may be driven by curiosity or by the coercive language of tourism (Dann, 1996), which guides them towards 'must-see' attractions. In academic discourse, dark tourism sites are viewed as spaces for interpreting death, with interpretive approaches aimed to educate or entertain. However, these theories have been espoused through academia, and are unendorsed by practitioners.

Functions of dark tourism

A central theme in the literature has been what dark tourism is and who it is for. The consensus is that dark tourism provides educational, entertaining, and emotional experiences, often in combination (Kang et al., 2012; Podoshen, 2013; Sharpley, 2005). Adherents to Stone's Spectrum identify variation in the function of dark tourism sites based on factors such as authenticity and whether the site is a location of death and suffering, or associated with it. The former serves primarily an educational function, while the latter provides entertainment. Grey areas exist where sites providing 'edutainment' are located, but this model applies a binary (education/entertainment) categorisation, which has gained traction in the literature (see e.g. Wyatt et al., 2023). Dark tourism also serves a therapeutic function (Raine, 2013; Stone, 2012) for survivors (of crimes and tragedies) and their relatives seeking emotional healing (Kang et al., 2012).

Visitor motivations identified in the literature include compassion, patriotism, pilgrimage, event validation, social responsibility, and personal identity (Ashworth, 2004; Biran et al., 2011; Dunkley et al., 2011; Tarlow, 2005). While earlier studies noted uncertainty due to limited generalisable data (Farmaki, 2013; Sharpley, 2005), more recent work outlines a o of motivations—from curiosity and remembrance to educational and emotionally resonant experiences (Biran et al., 2011; Dar & Kaur, 2024; Light, 2017). These findings suggest visitors are often driven by complex, non-dark motives.

Beyond dominant discourses, a few primary studies highlight unique motives linked to dark tourism. Buda and McIntosh (2013) identify voyeurism and the allure of danger in politically volatile destinations. Jordan and Prayag (2021) suggest dark tourism can serve as a coping strategy in post-disaster contexts, facilitating catharsis and emotional contagion (Podoshen, 2013). Martini and Minca (2021) highlight how narratives of hope and resilience are often prioritised over victimhood. These studies suggest international variation in how politics shapes visitor interpretation at dark tourism sites (Light, 2017).

To conclude, the push and pull factors in relation to dark tourism are well documented, as is the purpose of engaging in, as well as providing dark tourism experiences. Yet, these assertions remain uncorroborated in the sense that a representative sample of dark tourism site-based practitioners—those responsible for managing interpretation and visitor experience—has not yet been approached to invite a response.

Focus on dark tourism

The final strand of analysis is the *focus* of research that over the last five years. Recent trends in dark tourism research include a focus on moral-transgression and unacceptable visitor behaviours at dark tourism visitor attractions. These are themes that are beginning to occupy a growing proportion of published studies into dark tourism (see Sharma, 2020; Wight & Stanley, 2022). Several observations have been made, particularly in studies of social media reviews of Holocaust tourism (Wight, 2020) about the acceptability of visitor behaviours, such as selfie-taking at dark tourism sites, which merit further discussion and scrutiny through interviews with visitor attraction managers and stakeholders.

Elsewhere, the idea that varying degrees of emotional engagement (Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2021) matter when it comes to making sense of dark tourism has been introduced to the debate, and these are linked to earlier studies on emotional contagion (Podoshen, 2013). The definitional quandary around what counts as dark tourism is, itself, a salient discourse within the academic literature. Stone's (2006) spectrum continues to underpin research, as scholars including Lv et al. (2022) and Wyatt et al (2023) refer to it in defining dark tourism experiences. Yet, discourse surrounding dark tourism on social media has also gained substantial attention in recent years (see e.g. Bolan & Simone-Charteris, 2018; Hodalska, 2017).

As shown in Table 1, findings from the preceding genre analysis informed the design of semi-structured practitioner interviews. While not a systematic review, the themes were developed through close analysis of influential literature and cross-checked against key reviews (e.g. Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Light, 2017; Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2021). Our aim is to highlight dominant discursive strands shaping the conceptual framing of dark tourism.

Materials and methods

This paper employed hermeneutic interviews and content analysis. Hermeneutics, a scholarly tradition, is applied in research to understand experiences, contributing to existing knowledge and raising new questions

Table 1. The ontological construction of dark tourism in academic literature.

Forms of dark tourism	Function/s of dark tourism	Focus of dark tourism
Visitor engagement with death/dying is central to dark tourism. This may involve encounters with actual death, historical suffering, or simulated representations of death, such as those found in ghost tours or vampire-themed attractions (Seaton, 1996; Sharpley, 2009; Stone, 2006).	Some dark tourism experiences may play a therapeutic role, allowing visitors to reflect on mortality or experience emotional release. However, not all sites are structured to support catharsis, and outcomes vary based on context, interpretation, and visitor disposition (Kang et al., 2022; Light, 2017; Stone, 2012).	Selective interpretation is common; voices and facts are often backgrounded (Light, 2017; Seaton, 2009).
Dark tourism is a 'cool-deviant' leisure form and part of a wider trend in leisure consumption (Biran et al., 2011; Lennon & Foley, 2000)	Performs educational and entertainment functions, which vary by authenticity; grey areas include 'edutainment' (Light, 2017; Wyatt et al., 2020)	Visitor behaviours in situ and on social media are problematic; selfie-shaming is common (Dunkley et al., 2011; Farmaki, 2013)
Categorisation is varied and depends on criteria as identified in various spectrums and constructs (Sharpley, 2005; Stone, 2006)	Facilitates self-discovery; motives include obligation, curiosity, and education (Biran et al., 2011; Sharpley, 2005)	Emotional engagement matters for successful interpretation (Biran et al., 2011; Poria et al., 2006)
Dark tourism acts as a social filter between life and death, and visitors often seek to get 'closer' to death (Stone, 2012; Walter, 2009)	Conceptualisations of function dominate literature; visitor motives remain underexplored (Farmaki, 2013; Light, 2017)	More clarity is required: is dark tourism a sector or fragmented attractions? (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015)
Visitors are motivated by the popularity/ reputation of the attraction (Biran et al., 2011; Isaac & Ashworth, 2012)	Dark tourism plays an interpretive role, shaped by politics and place (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Logan & Reeves, 2009)	Research has traditionally prioritized demand-side concerns such as definitions, visitor motives, and interpretation (Sharpley, 2009; Stone, 2006). However, supply-side factors—including stakeholder participation, site management, and community or resident support—are also critical and increasingly acknowledged as essential to the evolution and sustainability of dark tourism (Isaac & Ashworth, 2012; Farmaki, 2013).
Voyeurism, danger and 'rubbernecking' are part of the appeal (Sharpley, 2009; Tarlow, 2005)	Dark tourism sites elicit strong emotions and catharsis, key to their impact (Kang et al., 2022; Stone, 2012)	Selective interpretation foregrounds certain narratives at the expense of others (Light, 2017; Seaton, 2009)
Only relevant visitor attractions that interpret histories within living memory can be classed as dark tourism (Lennon & Foley, 2000)		Research should focus on broader aspects beyond voyeurism or death (Biran et al., 2011; Light, 2017)

about both complex and familiar phenomena (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). As a key qualitative data source, this approach seeks to reveal the essence of the phenomenon through interviews that allow participants to share stories and experiences (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). In doing so, the interviewer aims to understand what is revealed through storytelling, with interpretation beginning as soon as the stories are communicated.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted with curators, operators, and facilitators of dark tourism attractions across the USA, Kazakhstan, Germany, and the UK. Purposeful sampling ensured diversity and relevance, targeting participants with decision-making roles in interpretation, narrative development, and strategic site management. Those involved solely in operations (e.g. ticketing, maintenance, or non-interpreting guides) were excluded. The sample reflected diverse perspectives across the dark-to-light spectrum. Thematic saturation was reached by interview fifteen, with additional interviews added for geographic and thematic breadth. Interviews were structured around the academic discourses of form, function, and focus—core dimensions in dark tourism research: how it is defined (form), who it serves (function), and the field's epistemological direction (focus). These themes were identified inductively through conceptual works (e.g. Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Seaton, 1996; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Stone, 2006) and shaped the interview framework. We used open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflect freely and introduce new topics beyond the thematic structure. The initial target of 15 participants was exceeded to ensure robustness, with no new significant insights emerging in later stages of data collection, suggesting the sample size was sufficient for a thorough exploration. This approach aligns with qualitative research practices, where smaller, focused samples are used to generate rich data, particularly with specialized or hard-to-reach populations (Guest et al., 2006). While our sample included attractions from the UK, USA, Germany (Global North) and Kazakhstan (Global South/post-Soviet), the aim was not to compare regions systematically, but to reflect a range of practitioner voices across diverse socio-political and tourism development contexts. Governance, sectoral maturity, and cultural norms around commemoration differ markedly across these geographies, shaping how dark tourism is interpreted and practised. In Kazakhstan, for instance, interpretive decisions reflect distinct political and memorial traditions. These contextual differences, while not the study's focus, inform how practitioners engage with—or resist—the label of dark tourism.

While our focus is on critiquing academic discourse through practitioner perspectives, we acknowledge that these views are shaped by context. Tourism development stage, market maturity, and positioning within destination branding strategies all influence how practitioners interpret their work and frame future research needs. In politically sensitive regions, participants may be constrained in discussing controversial histories; in more commercial contexts, they may prioritise marketability or visitor engagement. This study aims to elevate sectoral voices as a counterpoint to academic authority, but not as neutral. Rather, these perspectives are embedded in complex socio-political and economic settings that shape interpretive and operational priorities.

To preserve anonymity, participants are identified by site type, reflecting the diversity of dark tourism contexts in the study. These include Holocaust heritage, former prisons, battlefield tours, and purpose-built attractions. Table 2 outlines each site type with a brief description explaining its relevance to dark tourism, offering contextual clarity without compromising participant or site anonymity.

Participants were initially contacted by email, and while face-to-face interviews were planned, limited availability led to some remote interviews via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with prior consent from participants. The semi-structured interviews were informed by discourses identified in the genre analysis, including the centrality of death, dissonance, ethics/morality (Stone, 2012), the dark tourism spectrum (Stone, 2006), motivations, visitor interpretation, and authenticity. Our findings, presented below, highlight how practitioners challenged and revised the dark tourism paradigm as presented in the literature.

In analysing the identities of dark tourism attractions, we acknowledge that the practitioner voices presented here hold equal validity to the academic discourses in our genre analysis. Our aim is not to create a dichotomy, but to highlight contrasts between the previously muted sector voice and academic discourse. We emphasize epistemological contrasts without advocating for one version over another, following Collis's (2017) logic in her analysis of industry definitions of the entertainment sector. We organize our interview data analysis around the themes of form, function, and focus using thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Walters, 2016), identifying underlying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, transcripts were read repeatedly, with inductive codes manually grouped into themes using Microsoft Word. Coding was structured around the study's three dimensions

Table 2. Dark tourism site descriptions.

Site Type	Description
Holocaust Site	A museum housed in a historic villa interpreting the planning of genocide under the Nazi regime.
War / Political Site	An expansive outdoor site commemorating a political regime's use of architecture and spectacle to propagate ideology and consolidate power.
Memorial Site	A major memorial site interpreting a contemporary mass-casualty event, with a focus on remembrance, trauma, and resilience.
Gulag Heritage	A former Soviet forced labour camp site in Central Asia, now interpreted as a museum focused on political repression and imprisonment.
Macabre Museum 1	A museum featuring exhibits centred on death, tragedy, and the grotesque, including artefacts related to crime, medicine, and funerary customs.
Macabre Museum 2	A second museum of similar theme, focusing on the cultural and historical dimensions of mortality through macabre collections.
History Museum 1	A museum documenting state surveillance, political violence, and oppression in twentieth-century Europe.
History Museum 2	A historic prison site interpreting carceral history and its evolution across time.
History Museum 3	A museum exploring the history of disease, death, and public health through interactive and theatrical exhibits.
Battlefield Tour	A guided educational tour for school groups to former battlefields and war memorials in continental Europe, focusing on remembrance and the cost of conflict.
Dark Walking Tour 1	A theatrical ghost-themed city tour visiting graveyards and historic sites associated with death and supernatural folklore.
Dark Walking Tour 2	A bus-based ghost tour incorporating humour and horror to explore infamous urban legends and historical deaths.
Prison Museum 1	A heritage attraction housed in a former jail, offering tours focused on prison life, executions, and punishment.
Prison Museum 2	An operational heritage site interpreting penal practices through immersive, actor-led experiences.
Prison Museum 3	A dark-themed attraction blending performance, simulation, and history to explore criminal justice and execution.
Prison Museum 4	A museum at a decommissioned prison that documents the experiences of inmates and staff in a historical correctional setting.
Haunted Site	A historic hotel known for its paranormal reputation, featuring themed decor and immersive experiences related to haunting and the supernatural.
In-situ Dark Heritage (5)	A preserved subterranean street in a historic city, interpreted through themes of plague, poverty, and early modern urban life.
Purpose-built / Themed 1	A purpose-built immersive attraction using theatrical performance and set design to recreate historical episodes of violence and crime.
Purpose-built / Themed 2	A second purpose-built attraction offering darkly themed entertainment focused on execution, torture, and punishment across British history.

(form, function, focus), with subthemes emerging iteratively.

This process involved organizing unstructured data through conceptual content analysis of semi-structured interviews. During the interview process, researchers presented academic discourses identified in our analysis of AL to participants and invited their feedback. The analysis reveals both congruence, where participants accepted certain identity constructions from academic discourse, and resistance, where they contested or rejected these constructions.

Results and discussion

Forms of dark tourism

Our analysis of interview data confirms some areas of congruence with the academic literature in relation to *form*. Central to this theme are definitions of dark tourism (i.e. tourism sites associated with death/dying and disaster) which were discussed at the outset of each of the interviews, and which most participants understood and accepted. Linking dark tourism to 'locations were something terrible happened' (Prison Museum) and 'places with macabre histories' (Purpose-built attraction), some participants recognised the theme of death within dark tourism. As reflected in the below comments, some viewed dark tourism as not explicitly death-related, and one revealed they had never heard the label before.

> I feel like that (dark tourism) kind of covers a wide range of different types of dark … there can be some true crime stuff involved and some tragedy … but also spooky skeletons and fun stuff too. So, I feel like … I don't know, dark covers a lot of it. (Macabre Museum)

> I've never heard that expression (dark tourism) before, but I instantly think, 'Oh. That's a good summation of what I do and what a lot of my friends do, or what I would seek out.' (Haunted Site)

Such comments were supported by others who recognised the range of subject matter that underpins dark tourism. Yet others challenged the notion of dark tourism and even resisted the idea of *belonging* to the death-themed niche tourism category, for example:

> Dark tourism is talking about (places like) Auschwitz and the killing fields (of Cambodia). These are completely different (to us) (Gulag Heritage Site)

> There is a voyeuristic / ghoulishness about dark tourism, and it is distasteful. Calling it DT is just so inappropriate. It is twisted to say it's learning about death. (Holocaust Site)

This resistance was widespread across all attractions. For example, one of the in-situ dark heritage attraction stakeholders argued 'dark tourism addresses taboo subjects which we don't want to celebrate … we're here to celebrate life', while another from a purpose-built themed attraction viewed it as being 'insidious' and called it a 'kind of tourism that may impact people negatively'. Similarly, a participant from a memorial attraction

commented '*(this) memorial is not dark tourism but it is something different. I think people want to bear witness at an authentic site of where an atrocity happened*'.

The seemingly negative perceptions of dark tourism from across the dark-to-light spectrum was addressed by several participants. As reflected in the comment below, some practitioners perceived of a lack of understanding as to what dark tourism really is, and the breadth of experiences it encompasses.

> Its very title 'dark tourism' does obviously lend itself to those preconceptions … I actually think that's a challenge that the tourism industry needs to overcome … I think when dark tourism was initially categorised, it dealt with places of human suffering … and now I think it's further reaching. (Prison Museum)

Overwhelming, the participants linked the concept of dark tourism to locations that might be situated at the darker end of the spectrum, thereby overlooking many of the grey and lighter experiences that the literature has explored. For example, when asked if their attraction was a form of dark tourism, one participant from an in-situ heritage attraction said, 'I don't think we will ever be like Auschwitz', while another referred to plantations in America and the British Museum 'given the origin points of artifacts there, how they were retrieved, how they ended up there, and the notion of theft and colonialism that is entrenched within those environments' (Purpose-built themed attraction). Such thinking was not restricted to 'lighter' attraction participants, as participants from a memorial site and a war/political site also referred to locations of genocide when distinguishing themselves from dark tourism. Beyond this, a select few noted the growing presence of dark tourism references in paranormal media and therefore linked the concept to ghost tourism.

Still, some argued the labelling places like Auschwitz as dark tourism is 'voyeuristic, ghoulish, and distasteful' (Dark walking tour), while others questioned even labelling such sites as visitor attractions:

> I do not feel comfortable classifying those places as a visitor attraction because I don't think that is the right terminology for them. You should not go there as a visitor and think of it as an attraction. You should be going there to pay your respects to what happened or to understand the tragedy that happened. (In-situ heritage attraction)

Despite the fact that most participants referred to Auschwitz when discussing their understanding of dark tourism, some argued that comparing it and other 'darker' places to, for example, ghost tours, is 'inappropriate' and that 'they are not on the same spectrum at all, never mind being compared' (Dark walking tour). Similarly, a participant from a war/political site commented that the locations implicated in the Dark Tourism Spectrum do not belong in the same conversation, let alone on a diagram.

Yet, many of the interviewees recognised the value in classifications, but purely for academia. A city bus tour participant commented: 'there are clearly sub-genres within [dark tourism], and some [experiences] might fit into both [dark and light], or some might be 70% of one and 30% of the other'. This perspective aligned with a several other comments in which participants suggested their location might fit within different points of the spectrum, depending on how the history and how it is presented. Thus, the idea of labelling a location as dark or light was found to depend not on factors like originality, commerciality, or tourism infrastructure, as suggested in the literature. Rather, it rests explicitly within the context of the history and how that history is framed. One participant explained:

> We are a place of execution, but that's not how we frame ourselves. Our main selling point is the darker side of history, how we treated each other historically, the nature of the crimes committed, the social changes, and all are reflected in the prison and of course the paranormal. So, there is that misconception among some practitioners and the public that dark tourism only deals with the very darkest of the dark. (Prison Museum)

In view of the discussions concerning context, concepts like 'selective interpretation' and 'chronological distance' (see Wight & Lennon, 2007; Wyatt et al., 2023) were highlighted. Most participants recognised the importance of developing full and honest storytelling in their interpretation to ensure a sense of authenticity and support visitor learning. A dark walking tour participant argued 'interpretation must be honest, the past must be accepted and owned'. However, several of the prison museum participants noted they are careful when selecting stories of inmates of recent memory. Such discussions revealed an understanding and appreciation of temporal distance—the time between an event and its contemporary interpretation. Interviewees suggested that the further back in time an event occurred, the more socially acceptable it becomes as a subject for tourism. As one participant noted:

> The distance in time between the present and the deceased tends to reduce people's unwillingness to engage with those topics. It makes people a bit more comfortable. (History Museum)

This aligns with previous research on heritage dissonance (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), where historical narratives become less contentious over time.

Practitioners identified a distinction between sites interpreting historical death and suffering (e.g. medieval medicine, crime) and those addressing recent tragedies (e.g. war, genocide, disaster). This suggests that perceptions of dark tourism shift with temporal distance, challenging the assumption that all dark tourism sites are viewed through the same ethical lens. Finally, the idea that, definitionally, dark tourism only describes sites that interpret events within living memory (Lennon & Foley, 2000) was challenged by several interviewees who noted that nothing they cover is from living memory.

Beyond tourism scholarship, sociological literature has problematised binary framings of 'dark' versus 'light' experiences, particularly at sites of trauma. Rather than focusing solely on death or atrocity, such analyses foreground survivors, community responders, and processes of resilience and recovery (e.g. Erikson, 1994; Tierney, 2007). These approaches emphasise continuity and healing, countering the morbidity-centric framing of 'dark tourism.' This view resonates with participants who rejected death-centric labels in favour of remembrance, community, and ethical storytelling—suggesting that academic framings risk marginalising narratives of survival and hope.

The findings challenge assumptions that practitioners universally reject the term dark tourism (Light, 2017). Some saw value in its use, noting it helps users 'find them, or other similar sites' online (Macabre Museum). Others acknowledged its role in structuring academic discourse, even if they preferred alternative terms in practice. Suggested alternatives included 'dark history tourism' (Purpose-built attraction), 'dark heritage tourism' (Prison Museum), and more specific categories such as 'prison tourism,' 'penal heritage tourism' (Prison Museum), 'social history tourism' (In-situ heritage attraction), and 'memorial tourism' (Memorial site). While participants recognised that dark tourism fits within broader categories (Biran & Poria, 2012; Miles, 2014), they questioned the value of subdividing it into rigid subtypes (e.g. Iliev, 2021; Liberato et al., 2019). Several argued the label should be retained, as it provides a recognisable foundation. As one noted, 'I think if you completely change "dark tourism", you're kind of in danger of just losing everyone' (In-situ heritage attraction). Others across site types agreed: the problem lies not with the label or its subcategories, but with the vagueness of its definition.

> As a label, is that giving you all the information? Because if it's that barometer of everything fitting under that one, are we in the same bracket as some of that horrific, horrible, uncomfortableness? Or is there a lighter side that is informative, and for some, maybe a little bit squeamish? It's a broad term that has a lot of things under it. Maybe there isa need for a film certification barometer – PG, universal, 18+. (Purpose-built themed attraction)

These views extended to how interviewees perceived public understanding of dark tourism. Despite its presence in popular culture—such as the Netflix series *Dark Tourist* (Zerva, 2021) and on social media—uncertainty remains about what dark tourism is and what it entails. One participant noted he only learned the term at university, adding that 'it's very much a term used between marketers, commercial operations and university academics' (In-situ heritage attraction). Others (Macabre Museum, Dark Walking Tour) suggested visitors are drawn by prior exposure to films or guidebook listings, not because a site is recognised as a dark tourism attraction. As one put it, '[dark tourism] is not mainstream enough. We would reference prison tourism—that is more mainstream than dark tourism' (Prison Museum). Interviewees from a memorial site, political site, and in-situ heritage attraction also noted that visitors likely do not identify these places as dark tourism due to their educational focus—implying that dark tourism is not always perceived as educational. For instance, a Battlefield Tour Operator commented:

> I wouldn't describe (us) as part of dark tourism, I would align (us) more with culture and (learning for) the school curriculum. (We are) more about civic responsibility and the cultural experience than dark tourism.

Yet, perspectives like these contradict several comments from other interviewees across prison museums, macabre museums, in-situ heritage attractions, and purpose-built themed attractions who recognized how their locations fit within the existing parameters of dark tourism, whilst at the same time being primarily focused on delivering an educational experience about their site and/or darker history. For these locations being labelled as a dark tourism attraction was operationally irrelevant.

Functions of dark tourism

The function of dark tourism (i.e. what it is *for*) according to the academic literature was interpreted for the interviewees, and some contestation and ontological drift was apparent. Many academic tropes about the purpose of dark tourism were unfamiliar or unrecognised by practitioners. For instance, the idea that such attractions offer opportunities to contemplate death and mortality (Stone, 2009; Stone & Sharpley, 2013) was acknowledged but largely rejected as a core function. A Macabre Museum interviewee saw death-related tourism as a subconscious way to confront

mortality, while a Dark Walking Tour participant framed it as a platform for historical reflection and social learning. Similarly, a purpose-built attraction participant noted that dark tourism helps visitors understand past cruelty and reflect on the present. Others added that …

> [Dark tourism] puts [mortality] into perspective … it just brings it home how fortunate we are to be at the point we are today because we've had to navigate through some really tough times. (In-situ heritage attraction)

> *I think the more we talk about [death and mortality], the more it enables other people to talk about it. That can only be a good thing, and the British ability to take the mickey out of it – gallows humour – really does enable a freer dialogue and conversation.* (Prison museum)

These insights invite a recontextualisation of Stone's (2012) mortality mediation model, which frames dark tourism as a space for personal, existential reflection on death. Rather than refuting this model, our findings suggest such reflection is not always central—or even present—in visitor experiences. Participants instead described broader societal functions, including critical engagement with historical violence, injustice, and collective memory. Several noted that focusing on life after tragedy can be therapeutic, extending Kang et al.'s (2022) arguments. As one participant put it, 'we focus on the strength, guts, and courage of the people who helped and were courageous—that's what people connect with most.' A Dark Walking Tour guide added that while they may not offer 'closure,' they 'do talk about survivor guilt' and aim to foster understanding of the enduring impacts of dark histories.

Much of the discussions concerning entertainment and deepening engagement introduced the notion of immersion and a growing demand for immersive experiences. One prison museum interviewee felt that their attraction presented stories in a theatrical way in line with current trends and visitor expectations. Extending this, a purpose-built themed attraction interviewee noted younger audiences enjoy learning about history if they can experience it and become immersed.

Visitor motivation is a recurring focus in dark tourism literature. Early studies cited obligation, curiosity, and pilgrimage as core motives (e.g. Seaton, 1996), but recent research highlights far greater complexity. Motivations span education, remembrance, empathy, authenticity, emotional connection, entertainment, and thrill-seeking (Chen, 2023; Ivanova & Light, 2017; Lewis et al., 2022; Magano et al., 2022). Some are rooted in personal or cultural identity; others stem from novelty-seeking or emotional engagement. Typologies such as Raine's (2013) identify purposeful, self-aware visitation, while others highlight incidental or media-driven visits (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Wight, 2020). Our findings reflect this variation. Interviewees cited motivations including 'bearing witness at an authentic site' (Memorial Site), 'searching for something to do' (Macabre Museum), 'honouring and paying respect to the dead or personal connections' (Memorial Site), and even 'FOMO and showing off to say look, I've been here' (Prison Museum). Participants overwhelmingly agreed that visitor motivations are layered and diverse, resisting generalisation.

These findings affirm the commonly cited motivations of obligation, curiosity, and pilgrimage, while highlighting the diversity of dark tourism supply and the difficulty of forming generalised typologies. Our data suggest that modelling visitor intent holds limited analytical value and may only be meaningful at the level of individual attractions. Notably, explicitly 'dark' or death-seeking motivations were rarely mentioned by practitioners. Rather than refuting concepts like thanatopsis—reflective or existential experiences during visits—our findings suggest such responses are neither consistently anticipated nor deliberately fostered. Several interviewees observed that most visitors are unfamiliar with the term 'dark tourism,' let alone guided by its themes. While a few acknowledged that macabre curiosity may influence some visitors, more sensationalist motives like voyeurism or rubbernecking were generally dismissed as core drivers.

A further common assertion in the literature is that dark tourism attractions deploy interpretive strategies to frame history 'in the present', with today's culture and politics shaping storytelling strategies in dark heritage settings. While some interviewees accepted their history for what it was, arguing that that attractions must not hide away from it, others embraced this practice of manipulating the past for the present, as the excerpts below illustrate:

> Taking account of current politics and culture is our strength … We talk about [our visitor's] world … the me-too movement, the trans movement and racism … (Dark Walking Tour)

> We are working to use more inclusive language and how we interact with guests … removing certain parts of our script that could be deemed offensive by certain people, because it doesn't reflect where we are in society today … we can tell [those stories] from a more knowledgeable perspective. (Purpose-built themed attraction)

Focus on dark tourism

The final topic covered within interviews was the issue of current and future research priorities in dark tourism. Through this, practitioners were able to share their

views of what is needed within dark tourism research and to elicit ideas that might be useful for bridging the gap between academics and practitioners. As well as referencing our own genre analysis, Light's (2017) summary of future research directions was a useful reference point during this part of the discussion. Combining these analyses to draw contrasts, we presented a broad, comprehensive picture of established academic research priorities. Overwhelmingly, participants called for a greater understanding of what dark tourism is and what it represents. This appeared to supersede the literature's recommendations for further research into nuanced subjects, such as interpretive selectivity and/or visitor behaviours. Several comments about this were made, for example:

> I think dark tourism is exactly the right label, but what's important is that somebody explains it, and do it in a way that you don't just label it as 'death'. You need to label it as 'this is the full spectrum from here to here'. (Prison Museum)

> A better definition is needed. I don't think dark tourism can cover such a broad aspect right now. The term 'dark tourism' doesn't quite do what it says on the tin … I'm not even sure what it is in the tin. So, that definition piece needs to distil it down because it's quite broad in terms of the spectrum of experiences. (In-situ heritage attraction)

Others were less focused on how dark tourism is defined and rather concerned with what dark tourism research does for their visitors' learning and society more broadly. For example, one in-situ heritage attraction interviewee called for future studies to explore how we learn from darker histories to ensure that those things don't get repeated. Similarly, a prison museum interviewee argued:

> Academics have a responsibility for the stories and what the best method of delivery is. We [practitioners] understand our industry. But I'm not sure whether we're always adequately trained to [tell those stories] in the same way as academics, especially how we talk about them in interpretation spaces.

Participants' emphasis on better understanding dark tourism and its role in learning aligns with calls for research into the tourism–death relationship and its societal implications (Light, 2017; Stone, 2012). Many noted dark tourism's potential to support mortality mediation and healing. These findings highlight the need to explore how attractions and visitors engage with memory and reflection. Visitor motivation and commerciality matter less than how they can be harnessed to deepen engagement and learning.

Beyond visitor engagement, participants called for more research into how 'dark' sites are used today and their wider community impacts. While heritage dissonance often centres on visitor expectations, less attention has been paid to local communities and how they experience or repurpose these spaces. Though a few studies highlight the sustainable reuse of contested heritage (e.g. Wyatt, 2024), participants noted the impact that certain narratives can have locally. One in-situ heritage interviewee noted ongoing emotional effects for some locals, while a memorial site participant stressed the need to study post-event generations to keep messaging relevant. Others highlighted everyday, non-dark uses of these sites: a war/political attraction was described as a popular hangout and even wedding venue; a prison museum participant noted their space is often used for community events. Such examples challenge the idea that dark tourism sites exist solely for death-related reflection.

Finally, and in support of Light's (2017, p. 295) calls for 'greater engagement with the professionals responsible for managing such places (to find) models of best practice, or guidelines for practitioners,' some of the interviewees highlight called for further academic-practitioner discussions in a formal setting. Such comments were linked to issues relating to how they each perceived their level of darkness and how those perceptions might compare to other practitioners, both in and outside of their dark tourism sub-genre. One participant went as far as to suggesting a practitioner-attended symposium:

> It would be interesting to see what a dark tourism conference would look like if you had sites represented there. How would they talk about how they present themselves, and why is or isn't important as part of their branding? You know the 9/11 Museum, Auschwitz, Mary King's, Shrewsbury, Dungeons, and Oxford Castle – all those sorts of places we've talked about, and sort of trying to understand how they all position themselves. Where do they find their space within [dark tourism], and whether the terminology is appropriate. Do they use it or not? (In-situ heritage attraction)

Such comments were reinforced by others who suggested the potential commercial benefit dark tourism offers it if is curated appropriately and effectively. Taking this further, one participant argued it was the responsibility of practitioners to advance dark tourism.

> Dark Tourism is in its embryonic state. As an academic term, it started off as a categorization of places that people went to. But I think it it's slowly changing and metamorphosing as more people look for alternative experiences. Therefore places, such as ours, become part of that broader reach. Can we help it grow? Yes, I think we [practitioners] can, by repositioning dark tourism and our dark fascination with the past, and indeed also the present. (Prison Museum)

Conclusion

While academic and practitioner discourses often develop independently, dark tourism presents a case where practitioner engagement is essential. This stems from the ethical sensitivity of the subject, the interpretive responsibility involved, and the public-facing nature of such sites. Practitioners are not passive operators but active interpreters of trauma, memory, and death. Their insights expose the practical consequences of academic theorising. While scholarly legitimacy does not require practitioner endorsement, sustained disconnection risks conceptual detachment, ethical misalignment, and irrelevance. Practitioner engagement fosters a more grounded, reflexive, and dialogical theory-building process—without collapsing into advocacy or applied research.

Academic discourse stabilises ontological assumptions (what something is) and epistemological frameworks (how we know it), shaping how phenomena are defined. Yet it is not neutral; it reflects dominant intellectual traditions that can marginalise sectoral perspectives. This study adopts participatory ontology to challenge such framings, prioritising practitioner voices across three academic discourses of dark tourism: form, function, and focus.

In terms of form, while stakeholders understood the concept of dark tourism, they largely rejected or problematised its application to their sites. Many preferred terms such as cultural heritage, memorial tourism, or remembrance tourism, viewing 'dark tourism' as reductive, sensationalist, or misaligned with their commemorative or educational aims. A few were open to the concept in theory but found its terminology imprecise and its scope overly broad. None identified with a theoretical dark tourism sector centred on death or deviance, instead positioning their sites as diverse, context-specific, and driven by distinct goals and visitor expectations. This discomfort also reflects broader concerns in tourism studies over proliferating niche typologies. Ashworth and Isaac (2015) critique this trend, warning that excessive sub-categorisation risks conceptual instability and may obscure the diversity of tourism experiences. They argue that typologies often favour academic neatness over empirical reality. These concerns are echoed in our findings, where participants resisted being subsumed into a monolithic category and instead emphasised their unique values, narratives, and visitor dynamics.

While most participants accepted a societal role in education and commemoration, few acknowledged their impact on mortality mediation (Stone, 2012). Instead, they emphasised civic education, historical awareness, and social critique. Several positioned dark tourism as a tool for reflecting on contemporary injustices, situating it within broader societal discourse rather than as a commodification of the past. These insights suggest dark tourism sites serve functions beyond death and voyeurism, fostering dialogue on ethics, memory, and history. Participants linked these roles to visitor engagement, highlighting the emotional impact of interpretation and the ethics of curatorial choices. Many valued immersion and enjoyment, challenging rigid academic distinctions between education and entertainment. Some prioritised edutainment to enhance emotional connection and learning. Recent studies examine this tension, particularly in lighter dark attractions, where educational goals must be balanced with immersive delivery (Wyatt, 2022, 2023; Wyatt et al., 2020, 2023). These works show that, when handled sensitively, edutainment can support critical reflection without trivialising content. They also reinforce critiques of deterministic models like the Dark Tourism Spectrum, which no longer reflects the diversity of provider experiences or visitor expectations.

Challenging the authority of academic discourse

This study reveals that academic conceptualisations of dark tourism are not only detached from practitioner realities but often problematic for the industry. Practitioners are ascribed identities they do not recognise or embrace, creating an epistemic gap between scholarship and practice. This is not unique to dark tourism but reflects broader critiques of how academia imposes meaning onto lived realities (Canagarajah, 2022). Participants frequently described the term as 'irrelevant' or 'just an academic term,' underscoring its disconnect from operational realities. The absence of community or shared purpose—essential traits of any authentic sector—further suggests dark tourism is an imposed academic construct rather than a lived category. Effective tourism sectors thrive through clustering, cooperation, and complementarity (Weidenfeld et al., 2011), all of which were absent among participants, who pursued distinct missions and values that diverged from academic tropes. This study calls for a re-examination of how scholars define and engage with dark tourism, advocating co-creation over rigid classification. Future research should prioritise engagement with practitioners to co-develop conceptual frameworks. Rather than reinforcing alienating categories, scholarship should explore how practitioners use darker histories to shape ethical, emotionally resonant visitor experiences grounded in meaningful storytelling.

By applying genre analysis, this study offers a novel methodological contribution to dark tourism research. Unlike systematic reviews, which compile thematic trends, genre analysis reveals how dominant academic discourses construct and reinforce understandings of dark tourism over time. This approach exposes rhetorical patterns, definitional boundaries, and epistemological silences often overlooked in traditional reviews. In doing so, we extend current debates by illustrating how academic framings have evolved largely independently of practitioner perspectives—and how this disconnect may hinder ethical and conceptual development. This study has limitations. While we included geographically and thematically diverse sites, Kazakhstan may appear an unusual choice due to its early-stage tourism development. Its inclusion, however, provides valuable insight from a post-Soviet context shaped by contested heritage and political sensitivities. More broadly, our findings reflect the perspectives of site-level practitioners. Future research should expand to include other stakeholders such as policy-makers, marketers, and tour operators.

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