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Dark Tourism Destination Sustainability: Assessing Visitors' Motivation and Experience towards Disaster Sites in Malaysia

Mazni Saad [1], Nur Fatihah Ishak [2]*, Alaa Nimer Abukhalifeh [3], Norhaslin Abu Hassan [4]

* Nur Fatihah Ishak

[1,2] Department of Tourism, Kulliyyah of Sustainable Tourism and Contemporary Languages, International Islamic University of Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia;
[3] SIHOM Department, Sol International School, Woosong University, Korea;
[4] Department of Tourism & Hospitality, Polytechnic Muadzam Shah, Pahang, Malaysia

Email of All Authors: maznisaad@iium.edu.my, nurfatihahishak286@gmail.com, alaa.abukhalifeh@sis.ac.kr, norhaslin@pms.edu.my
Tel: 601121112052

Abstract

The primary purpose of this research is to understand how the dark tourism business related to disasters can be sustained by providing evidence from the visiting experiences. Specifically, the objective is to answer two-fold research questions. Opinions of 182 visitors who had experienced visiting the disaster were obtained through a survey questionnaire. Descriptive analysis verified the visitors' dark tourism motivation and emotional experiences for further decision by responsible authorities and tourism operators to improve the shortcomings of dark tourism sites based on tourists' experience of dark tourism in Malaysia. The results are, however, constrained by the snowballing sampling approach.

Keywords: Dark Tourism; Travel Motivation; Emotional Experience; Revisit Intention
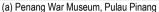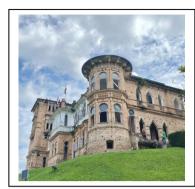
1.0 Introduction

Dark tourism focusing on the tourism market's long-lasting success will benefit tourists and the local communities. In Malaysia, dark tourism is becoming a trend among tourists as it has various destinations and sites such as cemeteries, museums, and war relics. Also known as niche tourism, tourists are interested in visiting sites of notable death or tragic events (Chang, 2017). While dark tourism is referred to as thana tourism, black tourism, grief tourism, and negative sightseeing (Magano et al., 2023), disaster dark tourism combines tourism, tragedies, and heritage (Hussain et al., 2018). The "disaster" often attracts people because it may cause emotional turmoil to some people who may have that experience and a person's curiosity (Dunkley et al., 2011).

(a) Penang War Museum, Pulau Pinang   (b) Kellie''s Castle, Perak
Fig. 1. (a) Penang War Museum (b) Kellie's Castle
(Source: The Dark Disaster site that have been visited)

Disaster dark tourism has gained popularity, but it faces ethical concerns. Critics argue that disaster sites should be respected and not turned into profit-driven attractions. Moreover, there are worries about the impact of tourism on the well-being of local communities who have experienced these tragedies. Studies indicate that visitors, mainly those interested in dark tourism, can cause distress and retraumatization for survivors and their families (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Hence, the primary purpose of this research is to understand how the dark tourism business related to disasters can be sustained by providing evidence from the visiting experience. Aiming to provide ideas for tourism operators to sustain their dark tourism businesses, the two-fold objectives are: (1) identifying the motivation of tourists to travel for dark tourism in Malaysia and (2) studying the emotional experience that tourists gain after visiting dark tourism in Malaysia.

Nomenclature 9 AN	
A	radius of
B	position of
C	further nomenclature continues down the page inside the text box

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Tourist Motivation

Disaster dark tourism has gained popularity, but it faces ethical concerns. Critics argue that disaster sites should be respected and not turned into profit-driven attractions. Moreover, there are worries about the impact of tourism on the well-being of local communities who have experienced these tragedies. Studies indicate that visitors, mainly those interested in dark tourism, can cause distress and retraumatization for survivors and their families (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Motivated tourists are more likely to visit a destination, stay longer, and even return in the future, which means more money coming into the destination and could be used to improve infrastructure, create more jobs and build a better economy (Fabros et al., 2023). Raine (2013) stated that visitors visit dark tourism sites because of their desire to understand the authenticity or their interest in death.

Lewis et al. (2022) considered that personal beliefs matter more than outside influence from others. Wang et al. (2023) empirically found that tourist's perspectives and attitudes towards ruins sites, which the results showed that disaster memorials' perception positively influences the positive evaluation of dark tourism. Fabros et al. (2023) identified seven tourist motivations for visiting dark tourism sites that have emerged in the study: education, remembrance, sightseeing, recreation, family bonding, curiosity, and event venue. Some of the tourists of dark tourism motivations are morbidly curious or thrill seekers visiting cemeteries to confront and experience death. Whether a mourner, pilgrims or morbidly interested thrill seekers, the travellers had a deep connection to the dead they were visiting, which may classify them as looking for a dark experience (Lewis et al., 2022). The unique nature of each attraction causes tourist attractions to have unique market segments where each displays a different set of motives, indicating that different sites attract visitors with different motivations.

2.2 Tourists' Emotional Experience

Dark tourism studies revealed that visiting dark tourism influences transformational emotional experiences and behaviour within a person (Wang et al., 2023). Tourists' emotional experience has multiple dimensions, including the physical environment, safety and security, service quality, customer service, and the overall experience (Hosany et al., 2020). Some studies have explored tourists' experiences in natural and heritage environments (Genc & Genc, 2022) and high-risk adventure leisure activities (Hall & Brown, 2022; Lin et al., 2022).

Several studies attempt to understand the role of emotion in tourism and hospitality. For instance, Ermagun et al. (2022) found that tourists experience various positive emotions, such as comfort and pleasure, as they plan their vacations, demonstrating that people respond emotionally to their immediate environment. Hwang et al. (2022) found that tourists' emotional responses toward dark tourism destinations vary, with the intensity level depending on the tourists' perspective.

3.0 Research Methodology

This research design is a mixed-method, combining data from close-ended and open-ended responses. The data was collected online through Google Forms from the tourists who visited disaster dark tourism such as Penang War Museum, Highland Tower, Kellie Castle, Kundasang War Memorial, Villa Nabila, and abandoned Ayer Molek prison. Online data collection was chosen because it has the advantage of broader coverage.

Before collecting data, this research developed a questionnaire to gather information on demographic variables, tourist motivation, and emotional experience. Six question items were adopted and adapted from Loncaric et al. (2019), Chang (2017), and Isaac and Cakmak (2013) for the dark tourism motivation construct. Nine items for dark experience questions were developed by Liu (2017) and Chang (2017). All questions were measured on a 6-point *Likert* scale, omitting the midpoint choice according to scholars like Croasmun and Ostrom (2011). Furthermore, the open-ended section was designed to seek richer information for research objectives. The questions were from Hussain et al. (2018): "What makes dark tourism interesting? "What are the best feelings you can describe when visiting a disaster site? "Is there any involvement of the respondent himself or his family with the disaster site?" and "How do we improve dark tourism sites in Malaysia? A pretest was administered through four lecturers who are experts in marketing and language and two respondents who had visited a dark disaster tourism destination if the questions were understandable. This research reworded the question items based on experts' suggestions. This research used descriptive analysis to explore tourists' motivations and experiences visiting disaster-dark tourism sites. Open-ended responses were thematically coded to validate findings from closed-ended questions.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The investigation of disaster dark tourism is to shed light on the quality of existing dark tourism products in Malaysia. This research collected inputs from 182 tourists who experienced disaster tourism visits. Data collection shows that Kellie Castle was mainly visited, followed by Penang War Museum, Highland Tower, and Kundasang War Memorial. Based on the frequency, 52% had visited dark tourism at one time, 13% had visited twice, and the rest had visited more than two times. The survey also found that tragedies occupied 40% of the respondents' interest (31%), followed by war and horror (24%). Demographic data captures other profiles of the respondents that are mainly interested in tragedy sites (39.9%), followed by war (31.2%), horror (23.6%) and genocide (5.4%).

4.1 Motivation for Disaster Tourism Interest

On a 6-point Likert scale, Table 1 shows the range of mean scores for tourists' motivation, which is between 3.77 and 5.01, indicating the agreement on tourists' motivation. The most agreeable question with the highest mean was "I came to understand what happened there" (mean = 5.01, SD = 1.115). Almost 91% agreed that they were motivated to come to the disaster sites due to recognizing what took place there, indicating that by visiting the destination, tourists quickly understand the stories and histories of the destination with the information provided. This research reconfirms Isaac and Cakmak's (2013) argument that people acquire to know the story of the disaster sites. Seeing the disaster's evidence alone could be a thrill to some, besides taking pictures at disaster sites for lasting personal memories.

On the other hand, the lowest mean was from question item four, "I come to pay tribute to the victims" (mean = 3.77, SD = 1.301). This result indicates that paying tribute is not a priority because tourists focus more on their self-gain by visiting the destination rather than commemorating the affected people. About 40% of respondents do not agree with the motivation to come to disaster tourism sites because of showing respect to the victims. These opponents might seem that paying respect to the victims was not the primary motivation for them to visit there, which is related to the third open-ended question, which is the involvement of the respondent himself or his family with the disaster site. No respondent has a history or story related to the disaster sites, making them disagree on the motivation to visit them due to the pay attribute. The results are unsurprising, as Raine (2013) found similar findings.

Table 1. Tourists' Motivations

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
I come to find thrills in the scary environment	4.27	1.390
I come to see the evidence of the disaster	4.85	1.160
I come to understand what happened there	5.01	1.115
I come to pay tribute to the victims	3.77	1.301
I came to see the disaster site for myself	4.76	1.233
I came to take pictures at the disaster site	4.24	1.443

Note: 6-point Likert Scale; 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Slightly Disagree, 4= Slightly Agree, 5= Agree 6= Strongly Agree

Through a question: What makes dark tourism interesting? The majority (59.34%) answered that the story and history of the destinations and the story behind the site led to their interest in dark tourism. For instance, "their stories behind the building, how it

was built, how it became a dark disaster tourism destination". Respondents also said the history made would make us think and realize that a lot might be happening if this happens. In conclusion, the story and history of the site influence or inspire them to come to that destination, where history might make an area exciting and make them visit. The result reconfirms the argument of Sarkar et al. (2022) that the story's background has become the spotlight and the primary purpose for the tourist's arrival.

Besides, about 15% of the respondents also said that the site is interesting regarding the mystery behind the site. They mentioned "the mysteriousness of the site that makes me curious" and "the mysterious dark story about that place." The destination became attractive because of its mystery, and to fulfil the curiosity, the visitors made an effort to come and explore by themselves. As Hussain et al. (2018) supported, curiosity also makes dark tourism attractive to tourists. The descriptive and content analyses prove the consistency of the results about the motivation of tourists to visit the dark tourism site

4.2 Discussion on the Emotional Experience of Disaster Tourism

Respondents mentioned that they felt sad and sympathized with what had happened and what the victims had experienced. The emotional experience of tourists can be either negative or positive, depending on the Malaysian tourist's perception of online information sources. As shown in Table 2, the mean scores of emotional experiences range between 3.20 and 4.93. Respondents' most agreeable emotional experience was that tourists tend to sympathize with people involved in a tragedy. The question got the highest mean of 4.93 (SD = 1.070). This result seems to indicate that by visiting the destination, tourists tend to feel sad about what had happened and experienced by the related victims of the disaster area. Almost 90% of respondents agreed on the emotion of sorrow to describe when visiting a disaster site. The result is consistent with the study conducted by Tang et al. (2017), which found that reflection and pity are the dominant emotions felt most by people visiting disaster sites. However, the answer for question 6 recorded that only 11.55% of respondents did not agree with the statement, "I felt sympathy for people who were involved in a tragedy". This expression may be due to Malaysian tourists' different insights or passions. These opponents might think there is no need to be sad when visiting the disaster site because visiting there is to learn and get to know new things. The results also indicate that though their emotions may be affected by the visited site, very little said that the experience caused fear or discomfort with the experience.

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Table 2. Tourists' Emotional Experience

Items 8AN	Mean	Standard Deviation
I feel fear after this trip	4.27	1.390
My visit to this site has shocked me	4.85	1.160
I feel this trip is adventurous	5.01	1.115
I feel sad after this trip	3.77	1.301
I had a feeling of uncomfortable	4.76	1.233
I felt sympathy for people who were involved in a tragedy	4.24	1.443
Visiting these sites made me traumatized by the tragedy	3.20	1.458

Note: 6-point Likert Scale; 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Slightly Disagree, 4= Slightly Agree, 5= Agree 6= Strongly Agree

On the other hand, the lowest mean was from question item seven, "Visiting these sites made me traumatized by the tragedy", with a mean of 3.20 (SD = 1.458), indicating that it is not a priority for the respondents to be traumatized by what happened because they do not have a background involving the disaster. So, all the respondents in this research have never experienced a disaster site, as declared by the answers given by all 182 respondents in the subsequent question if the respondent himself or his family was involved with the disaster site and all respondents said "no". They and their families have never been involved and have experience with disaster sites. Most respondents, 58.79%, disagree that the emotion they gained after visiting the disaster site was traumatized. Despite the yielded result, tourists' emotional experience is essential to create long-term sustainable tourism. By promoting positive emotions to travellers, tourism sites can be better perceived. Tourists understood the emotions of others and appreciated the lessons learned. Aligned with Hwang et al. (2022) and Wang et al. (2023), this research also revealed that the tourists embodied and transformed their emotions through their visiting experiences in the dark tourism sites.

This research asked: What are the best feelings you can describe when visiting a disaster site? The most specific feelings, with 17.58% of the respondents, were sadness and sympathy. The majority of respondents said they felt sad and sympathized with what had happened and experienced by the related people in the disaster area. One of the responses was, "Sometimes it can make me in tears whenever I imagine we are in that situation" and "I feel unfortunate and sympathize with the victims and family members" align with Tang et al. (2017) whereby the visitors are more touched and feel sympathy rather than anger and hate.

About 14% of respondents expressed empathy as they understood what happened and people's feelings. In the following question, the respondents said they will share a story with others once they return from the visits. However, they all answered that their families, relatives, or friends have yet to be involved or have experience with disaster sites. These results are consistent with (Tan & Lim, 2018). Positive emotions encountered in the tourism context can create an enjoyable and memorable experience, resulting in customer loyalty and more frequent visits. As supported by Zheng et al. (2019), there were positive emotional experiences also felt by tourists who visited the dark area. Positive emotional experiences such as empathy, which is appreciation and understanding of a tragedy or event and the place of the disaster, have a direct positive effect on spiritual meaning. Additionally, increased customer satisfaction leads to higher customer experience, building customer loyalty and increasing tourists' returns.

4.3 Improvement for the Dark Tourism Sites in Malaysia

Aiming to improve dark tourism sites in Malaysia, this research gets visitors' views and suggestions on improving dark tourism destinations in Malaysia. The most concern of the respondents, 54.65%, was how to improve the sites by increasing promotion and improving advertising strategies for dark tourism. One of the respondents said, "...disaster dark tourism in Malaysia needs more recognition and promotion. People in Malaysia need to know or be exposed to what is dark tourism." Another statement suggested that: "The promotion of dark tourism should be increased because dark tourism has a large potential to be included as a cultural and heritage attraction in Malaysia" and "Do some promoting by doing a thread on Twitter about dark tourism destinations, by spreading it, I am sure people will be more aware and want to visit the place". These statements demonstrate where promotion is essential for the improvement of the destination so that more people will come and know about the existence of the destination. Promotion and advertising for this area of dark tourism need to be improved, as said by the respondents, and some need to learn about this type of tourism. Authorities can take the initiative further to promote this dark tourism on social media and television. Such media is an undeniable reality that has enhanced the interactions between people and targeted destinations and their tourism experiences (Seccardini & Desmoulins, 2023).

About 14% of respondents also felt that there is a need to improve the sites by upgrading and increasing the level of security and safety of the site. Respondents mentioned the "need to improve the site's safety" and "to improve security so that more people feel secure and confident to come to this place". Another respondent stated them "need a guarantee and increase the safety at the dark tourism sites as there are so many people who would like to go there, but they are too worried about the condition there". Where dark sites are scary and dangerous, security is essential; respondents will probably feel safe if security in the dark destination is controlled and guarded. So they will feel confident about coming to the area. The findings are consistent with Hussain et al. (2018) that the place's safety needs to be maintained in good condition by ensuring that the infrastructure of the sites is suitable for tourists to come. Safety plays a critical role and should be formulated by managing dark tourism sites by placing reasonable prices appropriate to the place.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications

This research sought interesting facts about the disaster tourism destination that has motivated tourists. Motivated tourists also mean more involvement: they become ambassadors for the destination, enjoying their time there and spreading the word about it to others. This increased visibility helps attract more visitors and keeps the destination in the spotlight. Motivation also means that visitors connect to the destination and think of it as open and welcoming, helping to create a safe and rewarding tourism experience and benefit the destination's long-term sustainability. A positive emotional experience can help develop brand recognition and recognition of the destination, leading to an increasing amount of customer visitation. To be distinctive, there is a blend of spiritual and empathetic emotions in tourists, intermingled with distress and outrage stemming from both natural occurrences and human wrongdoing. The findings from the open-ended responses reaffirmed that tourists' motivations and experiences primarily revolve around the requirement for accessible public facilities, such as adequate lighting, preservation of disaster sites, and the inclusion of compelling storytelling elements, all of which play a crucial role in attracting repeat visitors.

Other than the usage of online data collection limits the control of respondents in terms of age, another limitation is the interpretations of the results, which reflect the dominance of females and Gen-Z opinions due to online data collection. As a young generation, they are born in a peaceful environment and can only see a movie or read history for some information. Visiting the disaster tourism site would make them feel more authentic with past site events. Existing findings revealed that the local authorities and dark tourism operators must ensure the repeat tourists and sustainability of the business in dark tourism by monitoring the safety features and overpricing. Notably, much dark tourism, like abandoned places, needs to be taken care of, causing the popularity of the places to rely heavily on word of mouth and probably be limited to local tourists only. Volunteering and involving the local community in the program add value to the initiatives of sustaining the identified disaster sites with great potential. Tourism authorities, particularly the state government and tourism industry players, should identify and restore the dark tourism sites for the benefit of knowledge, appreciation, and income-generated purposes. More budgets should be allocated to fund the preservation and promotion of the places.

To enhance positive emotions and increase customer spending, destinations ought to promote themselves through comprehensive packages that integrate storytelling with advanced technologies such as augmented reality or artificial intelligence. It is vital to allocate additional funds for preservation and promotional efforts. Bringing to light untold stories from older generations enriches the overall touring experience, solidifying dark tourism as a distinctive destination in Malaysia. Giving prominence to storytelling aspects when selecting disaster sites and comprehending the depth of motivation and experience can serve as a guide for future researchers assessing the enduring impact of dark tourism on supply and demand drivers for sustained business.10AN space
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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Concerning market trends and dynamics, the examination of patterns in death dark tourism can enhance comprehension of wider

changes in tourist preferences and the tourism industry's ability to adjust to evolving demands.

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