SOUGHT EXPERIENCES AT (DARK) HERITAGE SITES

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Abstract: Current literature on dark tourism largely follows a supply perspective, almost ignoring the tourist experience. Focusing on Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp (hereafter Auschwitz), the epitome of dark tourism, the present study sheds light on the nature of this tourism experience by clarifying the relations between the symbolic meanings assigned to the site and core elements of the tourist experience (motivation and sought interpretation benefits). The findings suggest that Auschwitz hosts a heritage experience rather than a merely dark tourism one, and that alongside site attributes, tourists’ perceptions of the site should be considered in the conceptualization of the tourist experience. The findings challenge the current understanding of dark tourism as a distinct phenomenon to heritage tourism.

Keywords: dark tourism, experience, motivation, interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have highlighted the growing fascination of tourists with sites of death, disaster, and atrocities (e.g. Cohen, 2010; Logan & Reeves, 2009; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Research on such sites largely focuses on the display (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Wight, 2005), exploring which history is presented and which is hidden or even obliterated. Surprisingly, Seaton and Lennon’s (2004) claim that consumer-oriented research of visits to sites of death, disaster and atrocities “has hardly even begun” (p. 81) is still valid. Equally valid is Wight’s (2005) argument that while a conceptual approach is dominant, empirical research of visits to sites presenting death is lacking. These may explain why the understanding of this social phenomenon “remains limited” (Stone & Sharpley, 2008, p. 574) as indeed the tourists’ experiences...
in such sites are yet to be explored. Focusing on Auschwitz, perhaps the epitome of dark tourism (Stone, 2006), this study seeks to enhance the current understanding of dark tourism.

The current study highlights aspects of the tourist experience which are important to the conceptualization of dark tourism, namely motivation for the visit and sought benefits of on-site interpretation. Additionally, the meaning attached to sites of death and atrocity by the tourist, though often ignored in dark tourism literature, is at the core of this study. Following Stone and Sharpley’s (2008) view of the centrality of the construction of death in contemporary society, this study espouses the experiential approach (Apostolakis, 2003). This approach captures the experience as an interactive process involving the tourist and the resources, and highlights the symbolic meaning of the site. This symbolic meaning, as presented here, is valuable to the understanding of dark tourism as a social phenomenon, shedding light on the heterogeneity of sought experiences at sites presenting death and atrocity.

DARK TOURISM AND VISITS TO DARK SITES

Black spots tourism (Rojek, 1993), thanatourism (Seaton, 1996) and morbid tourism (Blom, 2000) are only some of the names suggested for describing visits to death-related sites. Dark tourism (Lennon & Foley, 2000), is the term most commonly used. Yet, common usage does not imply that there is an accepted definition of dark tourism, and the term “continues to remain poorly conceptualized” (Jamal & Lelo, 2009, p. 6) and “theoretically fragile” (Stone & Sharpley, 2008, p. 575). A review of the literature reveals three different (and at times contradicting) approaches that have been adopted in dark tourism studies. These are, the supply and demand perspectives which adopt a descriptive understanding, and an integrated supply-demand perspective, which adopts an experiential understanding of dark tourism.

The first approach and the prevailing one is a supply perspective (Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Lennon and Foley (2000), for example, perceive dark tourism as visitation to sites associated with death, disaster, and depravity. Similarly, Stone (2006) defines it as “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (p.146). The supply perspective adopts a descriptive understanding (Apostolakis, 2003), emphasizing the individual’s presence in spaces associated with death. This line of thought has led to an eclectic collection of studies exploring a diversity of death-related sites, ranging from lightest to darkest. The lightest sites are “dark fun factories” (Stone, 2006, p. 152)—entertainment and commercial sites associated with death, such as Dracula tourism in Romania (Light, 2007) or Jack the Ripper walks in London (Stone, 2006). The darkest sites include sites of death characterized by higher political and ideological influence, offering an educational experience (Stone, 2006). Among the darkest sites are genocide camps in Cambodia and the death camps of the Holocaust period (e.g. Auschwitz).
The supply perspective ignores the diversity of the individual’s inner experience and motives, leading, in turn, to a simplified understanding of dark tourism, one which arbitrarily combines possibly unrelated experiences. It should be noted that the adaptation of a descriptive approach is a common characteristic of research into new tourism niches (e.g. Uriely, 2005 on general tourism, Collins-Kreiner, 2010, on pilgrimage tourism, and Apostolakis, 2003, on heritage tourism).

The second approach employs a demand-oriented perspective, where dark tourism is defined in terms of the motivation for the visit. Seaton (1996), for example, proposes that dark tourism is “travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death” (p. 240). Yet, in line with the descriptive understanding of dark tourism, the demand oriented approach follows the hidden assumption that the presence of tourists at death-related sites reflects at least some degree of thanatouristic motives (Slade, 2003). As such, all tourists to battle fields or Auschwitz, for example, are seen as dark tourists. This approach overlooks the possibility that the reasons for visiting and the sought experiences might be completely devoid of interest in death. However, several studies indicate that this may be the case. Slade (2003), for example, suggests that Australians and New Zealanders visiting Gallipoli are engaged in a profound heritage experience and are not interested in death itself. Similarly, Teye and Timothy (2004) and Timothy and Teye (2004), did not reveal fascination with death and morbid experiences as part of their study of African and White Americans visiting slavery sites in Ghana. Additionally, Hughes (2008) exploring Tuol Sleng Museum of genocide crimes in Cambodia, notes that tourists may visit simply because this is a “must see” site.

The third approach, integrated supply-demand perspective, highlights the need to consider the nature of both supply and demand, narrowing the scope of dark tourism. Sharpley (2005, 2009), for example, calls for clarifying the links between the site’s attributes and the experience sought, based on a “continuum of purpose” (Sharpley, 2009, p. 19) and recognizes four “shades” of dark tourism (1) Black tourism, representing a “pure” dark tourism experience in which fascination with death is satisfied by purposeful supply (intentionally created to satisfy this fascination and profit from it); (2) Pale tourism, describing tourists with minimal interest in death who visit accidental dark sites (sites not originally formed as for-profit tourist attractions); (3) Grey tourism demand, relating to tourists motivated by fascination with death visiting unintended dark tourism sites, and (4) Grey tourism supply where sites initially established to exploit death, attract tourists with little interest in death. Ryan and Kohli (2006) support Sharpley’s framework in their study of the buried village of Te Wairoa in New Zealand. They suggest that rather than defining this site as merely dark tourism (based on its attributes) this site represents a Grey tourism supply, so that while it is a site of death and atrocity—and is being promoted as such—tourists’ experience is one of peaceful natural scenery and cultural heritage.
Of particular importance to this study is Smith and Croy’s (2005) conceptualization of dark tourism. In line with the experiential approach adopted in the current study, Smith and Croy argue that it is the perception of the site as dark (rather than site’s attributes per se) which determines whether tourists are motivated to visit by dark motives. As such, the third approach and particularly Smith and Croy’s (2005) conceptualization, draws attention to the possibility that not all tourists to sites presenting death are indeed engaged in a dark experience. Furthermore, studies of dark sites reveal that some tourists are not familiar with the site’s attributes (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2004). As awareness is a precondition to perception (McClellan, 1998), based on the third approach those tourists are not dark tourists while scholars adopting the first and second approaches will classify these individuals as engaged in a dark experience. Thus, the third approach suggests that tourists to dark sites may engage in other non-dark experiences. For example, several studies highlight educational experience (Austin, 2002; Teve & Timothy, 2004) and enjoying the scenery (Poria et al., 2004) as key motives of visits to sites of dark attributes. The experiential approach is consistent with the post-modernist move in tourism research, which emphasizes the subjective over the objective and the individual’s experiences of tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Uriely, 2005). The move from a descriptive to an experiential conceptualization is claimed to represent the development of the tourism body of knowledge (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008).

**Dark Tourism and Heritage Tourism Literature**

The descriptive conceptualization of dark tourism encompasses tourist attractions that are most often considered and classified as heritage sites. This is particularly true for what Stone (2006) termed darker conflict sites (e.g. battlefields of the two World Wars) and darkest camps of genocide (e.g. Auschwitz, camps in Rwanda and Kosovo), which are the focus of the current study. Hence, it is suggested here that an alternative approach to the understanding of the tourist experience at sites of death should draw on heritage tourism studies. Seaton and Lennon (2004) support this idea when they note that dark tourism sites—like heritage sites—involves ideological and political issues. The rational for drawing on heritage tourism studies also relies on the fact that sites presenting death and atrocity have been previously studied as dissonant heritage (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), heritage that hurts (Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998) or difficult heritage (Logan & Reeves, 2009). Literature centering on visits to heritage sites may allow a more meaningful understanding of tourist experiences at dark sites. Specifically, such literature recognizes the multifunctional nature of sites presenting death, rising from the various symbolic meanings of the death on display. For example, sites presenting death are captured as a place for remembrance, mourning, a space for a spiritual experience, demonstration of national identity, educational experiences, or simply a random stop (Austin, 2002; Logan & Reeves, 2009; Slade, 2003). These
functions are largely overlooked by dark tourism literature, as the commonly adopted descriptive approach assumes tourists to such sites are merely interested in death.

The experiential approach to heritage tourism, which emphasizes the tourist’s perception of the heritage presented as a key element in understanding the tourist experience (Apostolakis, 2003; Timothy & Boyd, 2003), is relevant to the present study. Specifically, Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) point to a link between one’s perception of the site as personal heritage and a variety of behaviors, such as motivation to visit, satisfaction with the visit, and preferences towards on-site interpretation (also Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006). The importance of the personal meaning assigned to the site is also evident in studies focusing on death-related sites. For example, in studies of Fort Siloso in Singapore (Muzaini, Teo, & Yeoh, 2007) and of Ground Zero in New York (Lisle, 2004), the researchers highlight the need to distinguish between “ordinary” (Muzaini et al., 2007, p. 29) tourists and those with a personal connection to the site (e.g. families of victims). Beech (2000), focusing on Buchenwald concentration camp, identifies two types of tourists seeking different experiences. The first type of tourists are those who have no personal attachment to the site and perceive the visit as leisure. The second type are tourists for whom the site carries personal meaning (e.g. relatives of inmates and those identifying with the heritage presented). This personal connection is the primary motive for their travel and they do not regard the visit as a leisure activity. Timothy and Teye (2004) further suggest that learning is a key theme in the experience of White American tourists in Elmina Castle (Ghana), whereas for African-Americans this is a profound emotional experience of “coming home” (Timothy & Teye, 2004, p. 119). The above studies emphasize the need to consider the individual’s perception of the site in the conceptualization of dark tourism.

**Experience, Motivation, and Interpretation**

This study will focus on the motivation for the visit and the sought benefits of on-site interpretation. Understanding the motives for travelling contributes to the understanding of tourism and is commonly used as a means for defining and differentiating tourism subgroups (McCain & Ray, 2003). Similarly, the investigation of motives is pivotal to clarifying the nature of visitations to death-related sites (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Sharpley (2005) further argues that in order to clarify whether “dark tourism” indeed exists, motivation research is required. The decision to focus on sought benefits of the interpretation rise from the key role it plays in constructing the tourist experience (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008).

The wide range of sites classified as dark, and the diversity of perspectives on visits to such sites gave rise to a variety of reasons for dark-site visitations. Dann (1998) suggests a comprehensive list of motives, including the desire to overcome phantom, search for novelty,
nostalgia, celebration of crime and deviance, basic bloodlust and interest in challenging one’s sense or mortality. Seaton and Lennon (2004) identify two main motives, schadenfreude (the pleasure in viewing others’ misfortune) and the contemplation of death (which Seaton (1996) called thanatopsis). Ashworth (2002) emphasizes motives such as satisfying curiosity about the unusual, being entertained by the horrific occurrences and the suffering of others, empathic identification (either with the victims or perpetrators) and, as in heritage tourism, seeking self-identification and self-understanding. In a later study, Ashworth (2004) notes that motives range from pilgrimage, search for identity, quest of knowledge, and a sense of social responsibility (i.e. “Lest we forget,” “Never again”) to darker motives such as interest and indulgence in violence and suffering.

Yet, Stone and Sharpley (2008) state that motives for visiting death-related sites have not yet been fully or systematically investigated, providing only a weak conceptualization of this phenomenon. This paucity of knowledge can be attributed to several issues. First, tourist motivation has been explored in relation to a diverse collection of sites, among them Holocaust sites (Lennon & Foley, 2000), Graceland (Rojek, 1993), prisons (Wilson, 2008), and sites of slavery and Apartheid (Austin, 2002). Not surprisingly, the range of motives identified is as broad as the range of sites explored. Second, current studies largely adopt a descriptive approach, following the assumption that one’s presence in a death-related site necessarily reflects thanatouristic motives (Slade, 2003). Finally, the motives identified are often not based on empirical research but are largely drawn from theoretical research (Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Wight, 2005). These limitations combine with the suggestion brought forth in this study that the understanding of the tourist experience at dark sites should also draw on heritage tourism studies.

The interpretation of death-related sites has gained much academic attention (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Wight, 2005). However, a review of the current literature on interpretation suggests that researchers and practitioners tend to overlook the tourists. Moreover, tourists are often regarded as a homogeneous group and as passive receptors that should be educated (Wight & Lennon, 2007). Studies ignore the fact that tourists have different levels of knowledge and familiarity as well as diversity of views in relation to the display (Goulding, 2000; Waitt, 2000), all of which may affect their preferences of on-site interpretation. While some tourists may be interested in interpretation that is educational, others may be seeking an emotional, spiritual, or sentimental experience. It is suggested here that investigating the expectations of the interpretation and its link with the perception of the death presented on site, may assist in clarifying tourists’ experiences of dark heritage sites.

Research Objectives

As is evident from the literature, alongside the growing fascination with visits to death-related sites, scholars have emphasized the limited
understanding of “dark tourism”, attributing this to gaps in current research. Specifically, previous studies have been criticized for adopting a theoretical approach, whereas empirical investigation of tourist practices and experiences is lacking (e.g. Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Wight, 2005). For example, Seaton and Lennon (2004) go as far as suggesting that “all of this is speculation” (p. 69). Other scholars have stressed that while studies mainly focus on the supply of dark tourism, limited attention has been given to the tourist experiences of dark sites (e.g. Sharpley, 2005; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Accordingly, the first objective of this study is to further clarify the nature of this phenomenon through empirical research focusing on the tourist experience. Following the experiential approach, the second objective of this study is to explore core components of the experience in relation to the individual perception of the site. Specifically, the study aims to clarify the relationships between perception of the site as one’s own heritage, motivation for the visit, and sought interpretation benefits. Addressing these research objectives is of potential contribution to a better understanding of the nature of visitation patterns to death-related sites as well as the management of such sites.

Study Methods

Auschwitz, considered to be “the darkest edges of the dark tourism spectrum” (Stone, 2006, p. 157), was chosen as the focus of this study. From 1942 to 1945, Auschwitz (located near Oswiecim, a Polish city annexed to the Third Rich), was the center for the mass extermination of European Jewry, mostly in gas chambers. It is estimated that between one and one and a half million people were murdered in Auschwitz, about 90 percent of them were Jewish (Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, 2009). The reason for selecting this site is its common “use” as an example for dark tourism (e.g. Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). For example, two books on the subject—Lennon and Foley’s (2000) Dark Tourism and Tunbridge and Ashworth’s (1996) Dissonant Heritage—feature the camp’s gate on their cover, echoing the lure of the site. An additional reason is that as this study adopts the experiential approach, a key requirement of the site studied was that it would carry different meanings to different people. In addition to it being a World Heritage Site (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010), studies indicate that Auschwitz holds different meanings to people of different ethnicities and religious beliefs (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs & Bialecka, 2008). This is reflected in the wide appeal of this site to a variety of people. In 2008, over one million people visited Auschwitz. About a third of these visitors were Polish (36.3%), but the vast majority (63.7%) came from some 30 different countries (Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, 2008).

The Auschwitz museum website advises visitors to spend about three hours at the site, visiting both Auschwitz I, where the camp first opened and Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the site of mass extermination (Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, 2010). Admission is free, and for a fee, tourists may
view a film of the camp’s liberation. The exhibition at Auschwitz I has two main sections—a permanent exhibition and the national exhibitions. The permanent exhibition includes documentary photographs, documents, and items seized from Jewish deportees (shoes, eye glasses, suitcases and toothbrushes, as well as human hair). The national exhibitions, are devoted to national memorials of the dead of the various nations and ethnic groups murdered in Auschwitz (among them Roma and European Jews from Russia, Poland, France and Belgium). The grounds of Birkenau include the wrecks of the gas chambers, crematoria and the prisoners’ barracks.

This study is composed of three main stages. First, the exploratory stage included semi-structured interviews aiming to reveal motives for visiting atrocity sites in general and Auschwitz in particular, and the sought benefits from the visit and the interpretation. The interviews \((n=30)\) were conducted with tourists who intended to visit Auschwitz and other death camps, before the actual visit. The choice of participants relied on purposive sampling to achieve greater diversity of responses. Potential participants were contacted and invited to participate, through tourist guides to Poland (in Poland and Israel). Additionally, tourists to Krakow (a major tourist city located about an hour’s drive from Auschwitz) were approached at the city center and hotel lobbies. Interviews took place in Poland \((n=20)\) and Israel \((n=10)\). The interviews, which lasted 30–90 minutes, were conducted by one of the authors. The main issues rising from the interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using the Spider Type Diagram technique which aims at identifying themes in the interviews and the links between them. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, little disagreements were found between the three judges during the analysis.

In the second stage, a structured questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire opened with a series of questions addressing tourists’ perception of the site (adopted from Poria et al., 2006). This was followed by a set of questions regarding tourists’ motives for visiting Auschwitz and a set of questions designed to clarify sought benefits of the interpretation. The questions on motives for visiting Auschwitz were based on previous research (e.g. Sharpley, 2005; Timothy & Teye, 2004) and the semi-structured interviews. Due to the aforementioned limitations of current motivation research in dark tourism, the motives identified in the interviews carried more weight. Similarly, the questions focusing on sought benefits of the interpretation were derived from previous studies (e.g. Austin, 2002; Timothy & Boyd, 2003), and mostly from the exploratory stage. Specifically, during the interviews the researchers noted that participants tend to speak of two distinct aspects of learning and education at the site. One aspect was informational, learning more about the site and the events that took place there (i.e. what happened there? who and how many people were murdered there?). The other was deeper, an attempt to understand past events (i.e. why did it happen? why did it happen specifically to Jews? why did no one stop it?). Participants were asked to provide their answers on a 7-point scale \((1—\text{disagree}, 7—\text{agree})\). The questionnaire had two versions, one in English and the other in Polish. To establish
accuracy the questionnaire was written in English, translated into Polish, and back-translated to English. A feasibility study (of both versions) aiming to assess the clarity of the questionnaire and the distribution of answers was conducted in March 2008, in Poland, among 25 international tourists to Krakow.

The third stage, the main data collection, was conducted in April 2008. Data were collected through personal interviews, although some participants preferred to complete the questionnaire on their own. The sample comprised both domestic and international tourists to Poland, over the age of 15. In order to reflect diversity of tourists’ perceptions and attitudes, it was decided to include in the sample: 1) tourists to Krakow who already visited Auschwitz before \( (n = 14, 7.1\%) \); 2) tourist to Krakow who did not visit Auschwitz before but are familiar with the site \( (n = 32, 16.2\%) \); 3) tourists waiting to enter the site who did not visit Auschwitz before, namely first time visitors \( (n = 121, 61.4\%) \); and 4) tourist waiting to enter the site who already visited Auschwitz before, i.e. returning visitors \( (n = 30; 15.2\%) \).

Data were collected in two locations: at the entrance to the site \( (n = 151, 76.3\%) \) and at the city center of Krakow \( (n = 47, 23.7\%) \). At each location, a Quasi-random Sampling (also known as Systematic Sampling), which is based on a random sampling frame was applied. Every \( n \)th participant at each of the locations was approached, where \( n \) was determined by the number of visitors and crowdedness (ranging from 15 to 20). Among those approached at the entrance to the site, approximately 20% refused to participate (responding that participation would delay their entrance to the site); in the city center the refusal rate was lower—10%. Krakow residents were excluded from the study by using screening questions. The underlying assumption for the exclusion of Krakow residents was that the proximity of the city to Auschwitz may affect residents’ perception of the site and their visitation patterns. Additionally, participants were asked whether they are familiar with the site of Auschwitz and individuals who stated that they are unfamiliar with the site were later excluded from the sample \( (n = 7) \). This is due to the common understanding that awareness is a precondition to attitudes, perceptions, and behavior (McClellan, 1998). Thus, the final sample is composed of 198 participants.

FINDINGS

Of the sample \( (n = 198) \), 77.3% of the questionnaires were completed in English and 22.7% in Polish. The gender distribution was 51.3% female and 48.7% male. Among the respondents, 30% completed secondary or primary school, 46.3% had completed an undergraduate course, and 23.7% had completed a postgraduate course. In terms of education distribution, this finding is in line with previous studies suggesting that heritage tourists tend to be of higher educational level (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Among those who indicated their age group, the mode was 20–39 years (59.7%). Most of the participants \( (77.2\%) \) were Christian, 6.5% were Jewish, and 16.3% identified themselves as
members of other religions. The largest number of participants came from Poland (24.7%), followed equally by participants from the United States and United Kingdom (12.6% from each).

Tourist Perceptions

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with three statements aiming to capture perception of the site as personal heritage. Cronbach’s alpha was relatively high (\( \alpha = 0.82 \)), suggesting that the statements measure the same theoretical concept. These statements serve as a basis for classifying participants. Previous studies suggest two different methods to distinguish between tourists to heritage setting in terms of their perception of the site, namely classification into two or three groups (Poría, Biran, & Reichel, 2009; Poría et al., 2003). These studies, however, suggest a classification which is based on an arbitrary division of the scale. Therefore, a cluster analysis was carried out using one clustering variable, the mean score of the three statements measuring participants’ perception of the site.

The analysis was conducted in two stages: first a hierarchical method was implemented followed by a non-hierarchical cluster analysis, in order to attain the benefits of each of them (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2005). A hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward’s method was applied to obtain the agglomeration schedule. This method was preferred as it minimizes the increase in the total sum of squares across clusters (Hair et al., 2005). The criterion for selecting the initial cluster solution was the agglomeration coefficient. As the largest increase (191.47%) occurred in the step between three clusters to two, the three-cluster solution was selected. In the second stage a non-hierarchical method using \( K \)-mean algorithm was conducted. The clusters’ cancroids derived from the hierarchical analysis were used as initial seed points. The results of the \( K \)-mean cluster yielded three groups (the term groups is used rather than clusters to facilitated ease of reading) of tourists varying in their perception of the site. The first group, \( (n = 63, 31.8\% \text{ of the sample}) \) display the lowest mean score \( (M = 1.65, SD = 0.60) \) and represents those who do not see Auschwitz as part of their own heritage, whereas the third group \( (n = 53, 26.7\%) \) is composed of those who do perceive the site as part of their personal heritage \( (M = 6.30, SD = 0.59) \). The largest group identified, Group Two \( (n = 82, 41.4\%) \), includes those who are somewhat ambivalent about this site, displaying no specific sense of owning or disowning towards the heritage presented \( (M = 3.81, SD = 0.69) \). Significant differences were found between the three groups in their perception of the site \( (F = 746.63, p < .01) \) and the post-hoc Sheffé test revealed significant differences among all three groups \( (p < .01 \text{ in all cases}) \).

Motivation for the Visit

To identify common dimensions of motives, a factor analysis was conducted. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, principal
component analysis was the method chosen (Field, 2009). Assuming that factors could be correlated, an oblique rotation was used, and following Field (2009), only items loading with an absolute value higher than 0.4 were included in the factors. No items were excluded from the analysis and all items were loaded on one factor only. The results (see Table 1) indicate that the motives for visiting Auschwitz can be grouped into four factors. The first, “see it to believe it” relates to participants’ interest in seeing the site out of a need to believe that such atrocities really happened. The second factor, “learning and understanding” highlights participants’ interest in being educated about World War II and the atrocities that took place in Auschwitz. This factor indicates that participants aspire to gain an understanding (rather than simply being provided with information) as well as bequeath their knowledge. The third factor, “famous death tourist attractions,” is composed of motives relating to the site being a famous site, general interest in sites of death, and willingness to see the real site. Interestingly, visiting the site in order to feel empathy with the victims is also loaded on this factor. The fourth factor, termed “emotional heritage experience,” is composed of motives linked with one’s desire to connect with his/her heritage and have an emotional visiting experience.

Table 2 presents differences among the three groups of participants based on their perception of the site and the four motivation factors identified above (Table 1). The results reveal several interesting findings. First, the mean scores of each factor indicate that, overall, educational motives are the foremost reason for visiting the site. Paired-sample t tests reveal that participants’ desire for an educational experience is significantly higher than all other motives (Pairs 1, 4, and 6). Participants display moderate interest in visiting Auschwitz because it is a famous death site or to “confirm” that such atrocities had happened (no significant differences were found between these two factors, Pair 2). Additionally, the results suggest that emotional motives are the least important reason for the visit. A paired-sample t test reveals significant differences between emotional motives and all other motives (Pairs 3, 4, and 5).

Second, significant differences are found between the three groups in their motives to visit the site in order to “see it to believe it,” have an educational experience, and an “emotional heritage experience.” Specifically, those perceiving the site as their personal heritage display the highest motivation to visit due to these three reasons in comparison to the two other groups. It is noteworthy that in the context of “see it to believe it” and educational motives, significant differences were found only between the third group and one of the two other groups (either Group One or Group Two). In terms of “emotional heritage experience,” significant differences were found between all three groups suggesting that the stronger the perception of the site as personal heritage the higher participants’ wish for an emotional experience. No significant differences were found among the three groups in their desire to visit out of interest in famous atrocities sites.

Looking at the differences across motives within each group, it can be seen that for all three groups “learning and understanding” is
the main motive for visiting Auschwitz. The mean scores of each group suggest that those who do not see the site as their own heritage, and those who are ambivalent display the lowest interest in visiting the site for an emotional experience. For Group One, a comparison of “emotional heritage experience” with each of the other motives reveals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I want to visit Auschwitz . . .</th>
<th>See it to believe it</th>
<th>Learning and understanding</th>
<th>Famous death tourist attraction</th>
<th>Emotional heritage experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I need to see it to believe that such mass murder happened</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I want “see it in order to believe it”</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the Holocaust real for me</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To learn more of what happened in Auschwitz</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I want to better understand what happened in Auschwitz</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To learn more about World War II</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be able to pass the story of the Holocaust to others</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is a well known tourist attraction</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is a famous site</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I am interested in seeing sites linked with atrocity and death</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help me feel empathy with the victims of Auschwitz</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the site where “things really happened”</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel closer to my own heritage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I want to have an emotional experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eigenvalues 3.39 2.22 1.73 1.18
% of variance 24.25 15.87 12.36 8.46
Cronbach Alpha 0.71 0.73 0.64 0.61

Total variance explained: 60.95%
Extraction method: Principal component analysis
Rotation method: Promax with Kaiser normalization
Rotation converged in 6 iterations
significant differences (Pairs 3, 4, and 5). For Group Two, a paired-sample \( t \) test indicates no significant difference between the emotional motive and “see it to believe it” (Pair 5). Yet, for this group significant differences are found between the emotional motive and the educational motive (Pair 4) and interest in visiting famous death sites (Pair...
3). Both Group One and Group Two display moderate interest in visiting because Auschwitz is a famous attraction and to “see it to believe it,” there is no significant difference between these two motives (Pair 2). Among those perceiving the site as their personal heritage, emotional heritage experience is the second most important motive for visiting. Yet, no significant difference is found between their interest to visit for emotional motives and educational ones (Pair 4). Finally, those regarding the site as their own heritage are significantly less motivated by the site as a “famous death tourist attraction.” Paired-sample t test reveals significant difference between this motive and all other motives (Pairs 1, 2 and 3) for this group.

Sought Interpretation Benefits

To examine underlying common dimensions of sought benefits, a factor analysis was undertaken. As reflected in Table 3, the sought benefits are grouped into three factors. The statements in the first factor, “emotional involvement and understanding,” indicate participants’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Factor Analysis of Sought Benefits of On-site Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you were to visit Auschwitz, you would like the interpretation to . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you better understand the killing process that took place at this site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you understand how something like the Holocaust could have happened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you feel empathy for the victims of Auschwitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you feel emotionally involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you feel connected to your own heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow you to learn something about your own heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrich your knowledge about the Jewish Holocaust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrich your knowledge about World War II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of variance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach Alpha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total variance explained: 73.63%
Extraction method: Principal component analysis
Rotation method: Promax with Kaiser normalization
Rotation converged in 5 iterations
expectation that the interpretation will explain the Auschwitz killing mechanism and the events that led to these killings, in addition to eliciting emotional involvement and empathy towards the victims. The second factor, “experiencing personal heritage,” reflects participants’ interest that on-site interpretation will enrich their knowledge of one’s own heritage and allow them to feel connected to it. The third factor identified is “knowledge enrichment,” indicating participants’ wish that the interpretation will extend their knowledge of the Holocaust and World War II. Similar to the pattern noted during the exploratory interviews, participants appear to differentiate between mere provision of knowledge (the third factor) and gaining understanding of past event, which is reflected in the first factor.

Table 4 presents differences between the three groups of participants based on their perception of the site and their sought benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group One (n = 63)</th>
<th>Group Two (n = 82)</th>
<th>Group Three (n = 52)</th>
<th>Overall mean</th>
<th>One-way ANOVA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differences between groups (ANOVA)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge enrichment</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>5.29 (1.24)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional involvement and understanding</td>
<td>5.12_a</td>
<td>5.07_ab</td>
<td>5.81_c</td>
<td>5.28 (1.26)</td>
<td>(F = 6.61^{**})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing personal heritage</td>
<td>1.92_a</td>
<td>3.24_b</td>
<td>5.72_c</td>
<td>3.48 (2.20)</td>
<td>(F = 78.22^{**})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Differences within groups (Paired Sample t Test)** |                     |                   |                     |              |              |
| Pair 1: Emotional involvement and understanding-Knowledge enrichment | NS | \(t = -2.21^{*}\) | \(t = 2.35^{*}\) | NS | |
| Pair 2: Experiencing personal heritage-Emotional involvement and understanding | \(t = 13.99^{**}\) | \(t = 8.70^{**}\) | NS | \(t = 11.63^{**}\) |
| Pair 3: Experiencing personal heritage-Knowledge enrichment | \(t = -13.45^{**}\) | \(t = -9.74^{**}\) | NS | \(t = -10.40^{**}\) |

Group One: Do not perceive the site as part of their personal heritage
Group Two: Ambivalent in their perception of the site as part of their personal heritage
Group Three: Perceive the site as part of their personal heritage

Note: Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Mean scores with different letters are significantly different with post-hoc Scheffé analysis at \(p \leq .05\) or better probability level.

* \(p \leq .05\); ** \(p \leq .01\).
of the interpretation, according to the factors identified (Table 3). Some findings emerging from Table 4 are noteworthy. First, the mean scores of the three factors indicate that overall, participants value on-site interpretation as a tool to enrich their emotional involvement and knowledge of World War II and the Holocaust. Furthermore, in terms of the overall scores, paired sample t test reveals no significant difference between these two sought benefits factors (Pair 1). Finally, though participants rank experiencing personal heritage as the least sought benefit, the higher standard deviation (2.20) suggests that participants’ expectations vary.

Second, no differences are found between participants with respect to their preference for the interpretation to enrich one’s knowledge. However, significant differences are found between the three groups in their desire that the interpretation will yield emotional involvement and understanding. Participants perceiving the site as their own heritage, show greater preference for the interpretation to help them understand the occurrences that took place in Auschwitz, and facilitate an emotional involvement. Significant differences are also found between the three groups in relation to “experiencing personal heritage.” Specifically, the post-hoc analysis suggests that the more participants tend to see the site as their own heritage the more they wish to learn about their personal heritage and feel connected to it.

Finally, referring to the differences within each group, the findings reveal that those who see the site as their personal heritage show high interest in all the three sought benefits identified (all mean scores are higher than 5). The mean scores suggest that this group displays the highest interest for the interpretation to facilitate an emotional experience. Particularly, this group displays significantly higher preference for an emotional experience than for a knowledge-enriching experience (Pair 1). However, there is no significant difference between their interest in emotional experience and personal heritage experience (Pair 2). No significant differences are found between this group’s desire that the interpretation provide a personal heritage experience and their desire that it will enrich their knowledge (Pair 3). Furthermore, the results suggest that those who are ambivalent as well as those who do not see the site as personal heritage share a similar pattern. Both display high preference for gaining emotional benefits and knowledge enrichment (mean scores higher than 5) and the lowest preference for personal heritage experience. A comparison between this sought benefit and interest in emotional involvement or knowledge enrichment reveal significant differences for both groups (Pairs 2 and 3).

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to enhance the current understanding of tourism to sites presenting death and atrocity, employing the experiential approach to examine elements which are at the core of the tourist experience. Auschwitz, considered “the pinnacle of European dark
tourism” (Tarlow, 2005, p. 58), was chosen as the focus of this study. The findings challenge the current understanding of visits to Auschwitz as dark tourism. In terms of motivation, dark-tourism literature emphasizes fascination with death as the main (and even sole) motive for visiting sites in which death is presented (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). The findings suggest that tourists’ motives are varied, and include a desire to learn and understand the history presented, a sense of “see it to believe it,” and interest in having an emotional heritage experience. Furthermore, the relative importance attributed to the motives revealed, indicates that interest in death is the least important reason for the visit. The findings indicate that tourists are mainly motivated by a desire for an educational or emotional experience. Thus, supporting Slade’s (2003) argument that people’s presence at places associated with death does not necessarily mean that they are thanatourists. Following Sharpley’s (2005) framework of shades of dark tourism, and the minimal interest in death noted in the context of Auschwitz (an accidental dark site), it can be argued that “pale tourism” may actually be heritage tourism.

The findings demonstrate that the motives for visiting Auschwitz are similar to those for visiting a ‘‘regular,’’ not dark, heritage site. Educational motives are often emphasized as a major reason for engaging in heritage tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Desire for emotional involvement has also been identified as a key factor for visiting heritage sites (Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006), as are identity formation and construction (Buzinde & Santos, 2008; Prentice & Anderson, 2007). Similarly, in line with previous studies of heritage tourism motives, the current study points to tourists’ desire to maintain their identity by connecting to their own heritage and “seeing themselves” (Golden, 1996). Finally, seeking an authentic experience or the “real thing” is often mentioned as an important motive for heritage tourism (Apostolakis, 2003). These findings are in line with motives identified in the context of heritage sites of dark attributes, such as Anne Frank House (Poria et al., 2006), slavery sites (Austin, 2002; Timothy & Teye, 2004) and sites of natural disaster (Ryan & Kohli, 2006). Corresponding with Sharpley’s (2005) assertion of the need for motivation research to clarify whether “dark tourism” indeed exists, these findings suggest that a variety of experiences exist in dark sites.

With regard to participants’ preferences of interpretation, the findings further support the idea that participants perceive the visit to Auschwitz as a heritage experience. The sought benefits revealed here indicate that rather than a tool for satisfying curiosity over death and dying, participants value on-site interpretation as a tool for enhancing their educational experience and knowledge, and as a source for emotional experience and connection to one’s personal heritage. These types of benefits are in accord with studies which highlight the importance of the quest for emotional and educational experiences at heritage sites (Austin, 2002; Poria et al., 2009). These findings also correspond with studies highlighting the importance of on-site interpretation in yielding meaning and emotional experience as well as providing knowledge (Guter & Feldman, 2006).
Finally, the findings reveal significant differences in the motivation for the visit and sought interpretation benefits between those who perceive the site as their personal heritage and the two other groups (i.e., those who do not perceive the site as personal heritage and those who are ambivalent). Whereas those who perceive the site as personal heritage display greater interest in an emotional experience and feeling connected to their own heritage, the two other groups mainly seek an educational experience. Furthermore, the three groups identified here are consistent with those identified in studies of heritage attractions. Those perceiving the site as personal heritage can be captured as identity reinforcers (Prentice & Anderson, 2007). They are characterized by a high desire for emotional experience and connection to their heritage. Corresponding with the understanding of heritage spaces as central to identity construction (Ashworth, 2002; Buzinde & Santos, 2008), this group can be understood as interested in maintaining their pre-existing identity, as they are interested in feeling connected and experiencing their own heritage. In line with Slade (2003), this group can be said to engage in a profound heritage experience. Those who do not see the site as personal heritage and those who are ambivalent are knowledge seekers, who are more interested in a knowledge-enriching experience (Prentice & Anderson, 2007) than an emotional one. It is important to note that none of the groups shows interest in an experience in which death is its core.

To conclude, the finding that tourist’s experiences at Auschwitz, the symbol of dark tourism, are similar to those at heritage sites provides several insights regarding the theoretical framework currently used to conceptualize visits to dark sites. The findings underline that the tourist experience should be understood in light of the experiential approach as a “dialogic meaning making” (Buzinde & Santos, 2009, p. 440) between the individual and the death on display. This raises the need to reconsider the understanding of dark tourism as a distinct subgroup of tourism based on the site’s attributes only. Moreover, the study challenges the current research practice which almost automatically adopts a descriptive supply perspective to the understanding of dark tourism, suggesting that it is not death or the dead that should be considered, but living peoples’ perception of them.

Sharpley (2005) argues that dark tourism “is a relatively rare phenomenon” (p. 226). This observation, combined with the fact that many heritage sites include elements of death and atrocities (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Dann & Seaton, 2001), and with the current findings raise the need to re-conceptualize dark tourism. Such conceptualization should be able to differentiate it from other types of tourism experiences, particularly heritage tourism. Based on Stone and Sharpley’s thanatological framework (2008; also Stone, 2009) it is suggested that dark tourism should be conceptualized along the place of death in society as well as the motivation for the visit. Specifically, it is suggested that dark tourism is peoples’ purposeful movement to spaces displaying acts and sights that are commonly absent from the social realm, which involves a sense of unease in seeing or participating in them. This framework further suggests that such sights and acts may not necessarily involve death, and that death
may not necessarily be dark. This theoretical supposition, like any other supposition, requires an empirical investigation.

In terms of managerial recommendations, the results suggest that if the aim of the site is to be made attractive to diverse audiences, the interpretation should be customized in accordance with tourists’ perception of the site. For example, for those not perceiving Auschwitz as their personal heritage, the interpretation should facilitate emotional involvement, yet emphasize the educational experience. For those who attach a personal meaning to the site, along with knowledge enrichment the interpretation should reflect their special connection to the site and allow them to pursue an intense emotional experience. Similarly, the heterogeneous nature of tourists’ motives can be incorporated into the marketing efforts of Auschwitz. Also of interest is the finding that tourists differentiate between knowledge enrichment and gaining a deeper understanding. Thus, the current finding indicates the need to consider both these aspects in the conceptualization and management of the tourist experience.

Limitations and Future Research

Auschwitz is an iconic site of paramount symbolic meaning and may be seen as a “must see” tourist attraction. For example, the Lonely Planet (2010) lists Auschwitz among its “top picks for Poland.” Clearly, there is a need for additional research in other less iconic or prominent sites, or which display different types and forms of death to further clarify the tourist experiences at dark sites. Additionally, while this study included both tourists who visited the site as well as participants who had not yet visited, a study which will focus solely on either one of these groups, may provide further understanding of the sought experiences at dark sites as well as the constraints for the visit. Finally, as in any motivational research, it could be claimed that fascination with death was not revealed because people are reluctant to reveal or admit to “less socially acceptable” (Ashworth, 2004, p. 96) emotions and motivations. A study fully based on qualitative epistemology might be able to explore these aspects further.

REFERENCES


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